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Meaning of Folklore

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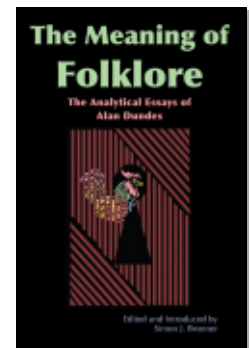
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HOW INDIC PARALLELS TO THE BALLAD OF THE “WALLED-UP WIFE” REVEAL THE PITFALLS OF PAROCHIAL NATIONALISTIC FOLKLORISTICS

Introduction

Dundes frequently emphasized the need for cross-cultural research, with the goal of forming an international folkloristics. He complained of a tendency among scholars to divide folklore into national categories, which might lead to problematic claims that traditions belong to a unique location. In cross-cultural comparisons, Dundes identified key features that remain consistent across cultures, as well as those distinctive details that are part of “oicotypes” (also called ecotypes), a term he borrowed from Swedish folklorist Carl von Sydow, to describe differences in narratives owing to the cultural and geographical environment in which they are told. In the ballad of the “Walled-Up Wife,” for instance, the feature that makes it distinctive among foundation sacrifice narratives is the position of a woman as the sacrificed victim. Dundes noted, however, that in contrast to European versions of the ballad, where the wife has to be duped into entering the partly built construction, in India “the young bride knows ahead of time that she is the intended victim to be sacrificed.” Another difference is that the structure being built in India is a well or water tank, while in Europe it is typically a bridge, castle, or monastery. Dundes attributed these differences to diverging worldviews and value systems, but saw an important continuity in the woman’s role as sacrifice so the structure will remain erect. The family connection is in the detail of an adversely affected child being left behind, or an infant seeking to nurse from the immured woman’s breast. Within European versions, Greeks predominantly place the sacrifice in a bridge, while Romanians refer primarily to the construction of a monastery. The consistent motif is that despite the best efforts of a group of men to construct the magnificent structure by day, it falls at night (Thompson motif D2192, *Work of Day Magically Overthrown At Night*). The sacrifice insures that the structure will stand, but at a tremendous human price for the male builder.

Dundes turned his attention to the ballad and legend of the “Walled-Up Wife” because in over two hundred years of scholarship, it has gained status as one of the most famous poetic texts in the world. It gained renown in 1824, when Jacob Grimm translated into German a version sent to him by Serbian folklorist Vuk Karadžić, and then sent it to the

revered writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. As a result of public interest in southeastern Europe in the wake of the Crimean War (1854–1856), with the British allied with the Ottoman Empire against the Russians in southeastern Europe, versions of the ballad, as an example of Balkan tradition, appeared widely in English publications. It also inspired literary adaptations, such as English poet W. M. W. Call's "Manoli: A Moldo-Wallachian Legend" in 1862 (see Tappe 1984).

Emphasizing the key symbolic role of the woman in this narrative, Dundes typified the narrative as the "Walled-Up Wife," but it is known in different countries by a host of different names. Serbian folklorists have concentrated on "The Building of Skadar," while Hungarians have been primarily concerned with "Clement Mason." In Romania, "Meșterul Manole" holds sway (280 variants in the study by Ion Taloș [1997]), and Greek folklorists have given attention to "The Bridge of Arta" (328 variants, according to Georgios A. Megas [1976]). Dundes pointed out that even for comparativists, the ballad had been associated with the Balkans, and was often presumed to originate there, although he found evidence for an Indic origin because of the relation of "A Feast for the Well" (*Keregehara*) to the foundation sacrifice motif. Other theories of origin hold that it has a classical source, in Greek myths of the passage over a bridge from life to death, or a Biblical connection to the story of Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter for victory in battle (Judges 11:30–40).

The most common origin theory applied to the widespread ballad was that it had roots in an ancient custom whereby female victims were ritually killed as a form of foundation sacrifice. It advanced the thesis that details of the ritual were preserved, in the expressive forms of song and story, after the ritual was no longer practiced. Dundes objected that the myth-ritual theory was not an "ultimate origins explanation." Although it posited a historical connection as a source for the text, it did not answer the questions of why the ritual was practiced or where it came from. It was also frequently at a loss to explain why particular rituals persisted in folklore and others did not. Dundes criticized the theory for its fallacious assumption of a causal link between a ritual that occurred in the distant past, and the performance of the ballad.

Another issue in the history of scholarship on the ballad was, how did it diffuse across borders if it was not the sole creation of a single country? Dundes pointed to the influence of mobile Gypsies as a conduit of the tradition, and others have also considered a Jewish diasporic possibility (see Shai 1976). Folklorist Paul Brewster has suggested that the ballad reached American playgrounds in the form of the well-known rhyme "London Bridge is Falling Down," with its lines about a falling bridge and a trapped "fair lady" (1971). A narrative connection with motifs of the ballad are also apparent in American legends of haunted bridges, such as material collected by folklorist Linda Dégh about a "big, modern bridge" with a woman or child in the foundation (1968). The feature that suggests a link is the action of the woman/child unwittingly becoming entombed when going to retrieve a metal object (in the ballad it is often a ring). Other cognates have been identified in Germany and Africa (see Schmidt 1995). Dundes resisted the historic-geographic idea that the feature of the bridge or dam is blindly inserted into the story because it was heard that way along its path of diffusion. For instance, in this essay, he asked why the edifice that fell was so often a dam, bridge, castle, or well. He discerned symbolism in these objects, related to womb enclosures by shape or water content. In material culture, they are also visible technological achievements, often associated with male occupations, that defy feminine nature or stand out on the landscape and invite narrative commentary. Dundes

discussed further the psychoanalytic idea of a tomb/womb equation in relation to the vampire legend (1998).

Plot similarities of ballad texts of the "Walled-Up Wife" in a number of countries raises the question of symbolic meanings that could apply *across* cultures, and might therefore explain the appeal of the ballad through time and across space. (For another example in which Dundes found that adding texts to the Eurocentric data used to analyze a narrative suggested an interpretation differing from previous scholarship, see his discussion of "Little Red Riding Hood" [1989e].) In the present essay, Dundes pointed out that these meanings varied according to the perspective taken—in this case, whether male or female. The text could have multiple meanings, and the folklorist could also evaluate whether some meanings arose more prominently than others because the story was told more frequently from a particular perspective. Dundes applied a feminist psychoanalytic interpretation from symbolic evidence in the ballad, at least from a woman's perspective, of entrapment in married life. He adapted Freud's male-oriented "Oedipus complex" into what he called the "male edifice complex" in the story, a working out of guilt by a man prioritizing career over family. The male "erection" by day, according to Dundes, was contrasted to family time at night, when the structure falls. Male hubris brings death in the story, he observed. Dundes predicted that as attitudes toward non-egalitarian marriage and the suppression of women change, the ballad will likely not be needed psychologically.

After the "Walled-Up Wife" essay appeared, Romanian folklorist Nicolae Constantinescu took up Dundes's challenge to observe the meanings that derive from different-gendered perspectives. He noticed that performances of the Romanian *colind*, or Christmas carol, containing the walled-up wife motif were usually plaintive songs that were sung by women to other women. According to Constantinescu, its apparent "funeral function," bemoaning the death of female freedom upon marriage in Balkan social organization, supported Dundes's contention. But he observed a complication in that ballad versions were performed by male professional singers for a male audience in designated settings, such as wedding parties and coffee shops. Constantinescu accounted for this masculine appropriation of what appears to be a feminist symbolic song by noting that the central themes changed according to the gender of the performer and the associated genre. In the carol, women altered the emphasis from the master mason's deeds, in the men's ballad, to the wife's acts: her determination to bring her husband's lunch against all obstacles, and her responsibility to the infant left behind (2003).

Dundes devoted a volume to different collections and interpretations of the ballad in *The Walled-Up Wife*. In light of the themes of sacrifice and marriage that he considered in the present essay, readers may want to know that he "lovingly dedicated" his book to his "wife, Carolyn, whose many sacrifices made my career as a folklorist possible" (1996b). Dundes implied that his interest in the ballad was not just because of its long history of scholarship and its lessons about comparativist work, but also as a result of his relating to the theme he identified in this essay, the "difficulties of balancing career and marriage for males." This is a viewpoint he did not include in a prior study of the ballad, "The Building of Skadar" (1989b).

How Indic Parallels to the Ballad of the “Walled-Up Wife” Reveal the Pitfalls of Parochial Nationalistic Folkloristics

THE GOVERNING INTELLECTUAL PARADIGM IN 19th-century folkloristics was the historical reconstruction of the past, modeled in part on the parallel disciplines of archaeology and philology. There were, to be sure, competing forms of diachronic searches for origins, but most involved some type of historical-comparative-diffusionistic bias. Synchronic concerns with structure, function, context, performance, and the like would not emerge until the next, that is, the 20th, century.

Among the most prominent 19th-century folklore theories of origins was the so-called Indianist hypothesis. One of the acknowledged starting points of the argument that much of European folklore had originated in India was Theodor Benfey's (1809–1881) introduction to the first German translation of the *Panchatantra* in 1859. Champions of the “Indianist” school of folkloristics included William Clouston (1843–1896), Joseph Jacobs (1854–1916), and Emmanuel Cosquin (1841–1919), among others. The influence of Max Müller (1823–1900), a leading Indologist (despite the fact that he never once set foot in India) and the Aryan-migration notions that he espoused gave further credence to the Indianist school inasmuch as it was believed that “the Aryan peoples emigrated from India and carried their language and myths with them” (Dorson 1968:178). The Indianist theory has gone the way of most 19th-century folklore theories. In other words, it has been relegated to a long footnote in the history of 19th-century folkloristics. It is not my purpose here to attempt to resuscitate the Indianist theory, but I cannot forbear noting that the theory was primarily applied to folk narrative with special emphasis on myths and folktales. The ballad genre seems to have been pretty much ignored by those advocating Indic origins.

The Walled-Up Wife

One of the most famous ballads in the world in terms of the amount of scholarship devoted to it is surely “The Walled-Up Wife.” Found widely reported throughout the Balkans, it has intrigued and bedeviled East European folklorists for more than one hundred and fifty years. Romanian folklorist Ion Taloş, who has devoted a book-length monograph to the ballad (1973), has this to say about it: “The song about the mason’s wife is a ballad of rare beauty, perhaps the most impressive in world folklore” (1987:400). This echoes the sentiment of Jacob Grimm, who called the ballad “one of the most outstanding songs of all peoples and all times” (Dundes 1989:156).

The basic plot involves a group of men who seek to construct a castle, monastery, or bridge. Through supernatural means, whatever is constructed during the day is undone at night. A dream revelation or some other extraordinary means of communication informs the would-be builders that the only way to break the negative magic spell is to sacrifice the first woman (wife or sister) who comes to the building site the next day. When the chief architect’s own young wife arrives, she is duly immured. Often the process is thought to

be a joke or game by the female victim until a poignant moment in the ballad when she suddenly realizes that she is being sacrificed by her husband and his colleagues. In some versions, she begs for an aperture to be left so that she can continue to nurse her baby. Sometimes a milky spring marks the site of the alleged event, a site where infertile women or mothers suffering from a lack of lactation later come in the hope of obtaining a folk medical cure. This brief synopsis does not by any means do justice to this powerful ballad (and legend), but it should be sufficient to identify it for those not familiar with it. Since the ballad is apparently not in the English and Scottish canon and does not appear in Western Europe generally, it is not particularly well known among folklorists in Western Europe and the United States.

In Eastern Europe, in contrast, however, it is extremely common and well known. In Serbia, it has the title of "The Building of Skadar"; in Hungary, it is often called "Clement Mason"; in Romania, it is "Master Manole"; in Greece, it is "The Bridge of Arta"; and so on. The numbers of collected texts of this ballad are truly staggering. Greek folklorist Georgios Megas based his study of the ballad on 333 Greek versions (Megas 1976:5) for example. Bulgarian folklorist Lyubomira Parpulova analyzed 180 Bulgarian versions of the ballad (Parpulova 1984:425). When one adds the numerous Hungarian, Romanian, Serbian, and Albanian versions to the Greek and Bulgarian texts, we are dealing with a ballad for which we have more than seven hundred texts available.

The ballad of the walled-up wife has fascinated some of the leading folklorists of the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the earliest versions was a Serbian text of "The Building of Skadar" collected by Vuk Karadžić's (1784–1864), the founder of Serbian folkloristics. He began publishing his *Narodne srpske pjesme* in Vienna in 1814. At that time, Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) was serving as a delegate to the Vienna Congress (from October 1814 to June 1815), and he eventually wrote a review of Karadžić's first volume of folksongs (Wilson 1986:112). In 1824, Karadžić's sent a new edition of the folksongs to Grimm, who was so delighted with "The Building of Skadar" that he began to translate it. He sent his translation to Goethe in May of the same year, but Goethe was appalled by what he considered to be the heathen-barbarity of the ballad (Dundes 1989:156; Milović 1941:51). Grimm would later discuss the ballad as a prime example of "foundation sacrifice" in his *Teutonic Mythology* (1966:III, 1143). But that was just the beginning of the enormous mass of scholarship devoted to the ballad. Among the dozens—note the use of the plural—of monographs on the topic, there are major studies by such distinguished scholars as Cocchiara, Eliade, Megas, Taloş, and Vargyas. Much of the earlier scholarship has been ably surveyed by Vargyas in his magisterial essay "The Origin of the Walled-up Wife," which is chapter III of his excellent *Researches into the Medieval History of Folk Ballad* (1967:173–233). Vargyas, arguably one of the leading ballad authorities of the 20th century, continued his detailed and meticulous investigation of the ballad in his *Hungarian Ballads and the European Tradition II* (1983:18–57). Vargyas considers virtually all texts available in print and reviews their contents, not to mention summarizing the incredible number of essays and monographs on the ballad written, I might add, in a bewildering variety of languages.

If one wished to describe the bulk of scholarship treating the ballad, one could say that two principal features characterize the literature. From Jacob Grimm on, there has been a host of essays using the ballad to illustrate a conventional myth-ritual thesis that the story represented a survival from an actual practice of the past of offering a human sacrifice in order to appease supernatural spirits who were believed to be involved in or threatened

by the proposal to build some kind of structure, for example, a bridge. An example of the logic adduced: the river goddess will be deprived of “food” by a bridge that will permit all passengers to cross the stream safely. Hence a human sacrifice must be offered to appease the goddess (Mitra 1927:41). Famed comparatist Reinhold Köhler’s 1894 paper (first published in 1873) is representative, but one could easily cite many others including Gittée 1886–1887, Krauss 1887, Feilberg 1892, Sartori 1898, Sainean 1902, De Vries 1927, O’Sullivan 1945, Cocchiara 1950, and Brewster 1971 (see also Taloş 1973:25). The second observable trend in the scholarship is the persistent attempt to establish a national origin for the ballad. Through a modified form of the comparative method, folklorists have sought to “prove” that the ballad originated in one locale rather than another. Zihni Sako ends his discussion of Albanian versions with the unequivocal statement: “it seems to us that the original source of the ballad is Illyria, that is, Albania” (1984:165). Similarly, Georgios Megas ended one of his several essays on the ballad this way: “I hope that it is clearly demonstrated from the publication of my full-fledged investigation that Greece must be considered as the cradle and homeland of our ballad” (1969:54, my translation). Megas reiterated this position at the very end of his 1976 monograph on the ballad when he (rightly) rejected the idea that polygenesis could be responsible for the different versions of the ballad found throughout the Balkans, and (wrongly) concluded that the single origin of the ballad *must* have been the Greek territory in early Byzantine times (1976:179). It is not difficult to see a high correlation between the hypothetical country of origin and the nationality of the researcher! (For a convenient chronological summary of the long-standing origins debate, see Vargyas 1967:178–179 and its continuation 1983:55–57; for other comprehensive accounts of previous scholarship devoted to the ballad, see Dundes 1989:153–155, Megas 1976:125–179, and Taloş 1973.) I am by no means the first to underscore the extreme nationalistic bias in ballad origin scholarship. Ballad specialist David Buchan, in his essay “British Balladry: Medieval Chronology and Relations,” has this to say about Child 73, “Lord Thomas and Fair Annet”: “Grundtvig thought its origin Danish, Gerould thought its origin British, Doncieux thought it French, which perhaps tells us more about the ethnocentricity of ballad scholars than about ‘Lord Thomas’” (Buchan 1978:104). As to why the ballad as opposed to other genres of folklore should have been the focus of nationalistic proprietary “wars,” one can only speculate that the ballad’s hallowed status vis-à-vis other folklore genres—either as the detritus of glorious epics of the past or alternatively as a relatively late medieval elitist creation, not related to any primitive origins—might account for why ardent nationalistic scholars were so anxious to claim exclusive “ownership” of such treasures. Also since two or more neighboring nations appeared to have the “same” ballad, it was perhaps almost inevitable that it would become a natural bone of contention.

For more than a century, there has been a brisk many-sided debate among Balkans folklorists as to which country had the right to claim “credit” for originating the walled-up wife ballad. It may be difficult for some modern folklorists to appreciate just how heated the debate was over which of the numerous nationalistic competing claims was “correct.” One illustrative example may suffice to indicate the intensity of the furor. In 1863 the noted Hungarian collector of folksongs, János Kriza (1811–1875), a Unitarian minister from Transylvania influenced in part by Herder and Percy, published a collection of folksongs. He called the songs “the collection of the flowers of the mind of the Székeley people—its wild roses, if I may so describe them” (as quoted in Ortutay 1973:498). In that collection, entitled *Vadrózsák* (Wild Roses), Kriza included a Hungarian version of the

walled-up wife ballad: Kömives Kelemenné. Almost immediately upon publication of the collection, one Julian Grozescu (whose name clearly suggests Romanian origin) accused Kriza of having plagiarized this ballad and one other from a Romanian source. These accusations became the basis of a famous court trial in Budapest. Although Kriza was not guilty of plagiarism, the *Vadrózsák* lawsuit saddened him for the rest of his life. Ortutay's comment on the matter is of interest in the present context: "It has come to light on the basis of more recent collections and European comparative ethnographic research that the charges of plagiarism brought against Kriza were unfounded, and that the two ballads in question, like the others, constitute an integral part of both Hungarian and European folk-poetry, including the Romanian. It is obvious today that the accusations were groundless; they were inspired by the awakening Rumanian nationalism, Hungarian nationalism defended itself against them" (Ortutay 1973:501).

An Indianist Origin via the Gypsies

None of the many scholars involved in the dispute over the origin of the walled-up wife were aware of the fact that the ballad was extremely popular in India as well. (For references to published texts in Telegu and Kannada, see Dundes 1989:165, n. 25.) The first hint of a possible Indic origin of the ballad came from Francis Hindes Groome (1851–1902), who included the "Story of the Bridge" in his 1899 *Gypsy Folk-Tales*. Groome had translated into English a somewhat-garbled Gypsy version reported by Alexandre G. Paspati (1870:620–623). Of particular interest is Groome's endnote, which begins with an apology: "I hesitated whether to give this story; it is so hopelessly corrupt, it seems such absolute nonsense. Yet it enshrines beyond question, however confusedly, the widespread and ancient belief that to ensure one's foundation one should wall up a human victim" (Groome 1899:13). Later in the same note, Groome makes the following observation: "The Gypsy story is probably of high antiquity, for two at least of the words in it were quite or almost meaningless to the nomade [sic] Gypsy who told it" (cf. Paspati 1870:190–191). Groome continues: "The masons of southeastern Europe are, it should be noticed, largely Gypsies; and a striking Indian parallel may be pointed out in the Santal story of 'Seven Brothers and Their Sister' (Campbell 1891:106–110). Here seven brothers set to work to dig a tank but find no water, and so, by the advice of a yogi, give their only sister to the spirit of the tank. "The tank was soon full to the brim, and the girl was drowned.' And then comes a curious mention of a Dom, or Indian vagrant musician, whose name is probably identical with Doum, Loin, or Rom, the Gypsy of Syria, Asia Minor, and Europe" (Groome 1899:13). To my knowledge, this is the only suggestion in print that there might be a connection between the Balkans ballad of the walled-up wife and a cognate story in India.

In 1925, B. J. Gilliat-Smith published another Gypsy version of "The Song of the Bridge" in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*. The text was accompanied by a learned comparative note by W. R. Halliday. Halliday summarily dismisses Groome's suggestion of a possible Indic parallel: "Actually the parallel does not extend further than the building of a tank by seven brothers and the drowning of their sister (not the wife of one of them), in order that the tank may fill with water. The similarity, in fact, is derived merely from the common origin of the two stories in the belief in the necessity for Foundation Sacrifice, which we have noted to be world-wide. *I have personally no doubt whatsoever* that the *Song of the Bridge* is a localized form of story arising out of this wide-spread custom and belongs

properly to the Balkan area" (1925:111, emphasis added). Halliday was dead wrong in failing to see that the Indic narratives were cognate with the Balkans ballad. But then again, every scholar who has written on the ballad has also failed to consider the many Indic versions of the narrative. (Vargyas too dismissed the two Gypsy texts [1967:194] as being of little or no consequence.)

Objective readers who take the time to read through the hundreds of Balkans texts and the Indic versions can easily see for themselves that they are unquestionably part of a common Indo-European tradition, although the ballad apparently never became popular in Western Europe. (It is worth noting that folklorist A. H. Krappe (1894–1947) posited an Indic origin for a legend involving the foundation sacrifice of a child (rather than a wife-bride), a legend that may or may not be cognate with the walled-up wife (Krappe 1927:165–180). Given the possible/probable Indic origin of the ballad, the Gypsy texts, garbled though they may be, support this hypothesis inasmuch as the origin of the Gypsies is presumed to be India. A Bulgarian Gypsy text of the ballad reported in 1962 (Čerenkov 1962) tends to confirm the traditionality of the narrative among Gypsy groups. If this is so, then all of the petty arguments between Balkans folklorists about which country's versions are the earliest become more or less beside the point. The moral of this exemplum is that the comparative method can be effective only when *all* available versions of a ballad or folktale are taken into account.

Consider one of the issues raised in Halliday's dismissal of a possible Indic parallel. The Indic text involves the drowning of a "sister" of the water-tank builders rather than "the wife of one of them." But as Vargyas observes, "The victim is not always a wife: in the Serbian, Albanian, and Roumanian she may be the sister of the builder. This appears to be a secondary element" (1967:202). It should also be noted that in many modern Indic texts the victim is a daughter-in-law, that is, a wife. So both the wife and sister appear as victims in the Indic texts. The "sister instead of wife" argument therefore cannot constitute a legitimate objection to the cognation hypothesis.

Formulaic Evidence

Not only are the Balkans ballad and Indic song-tale plots cognate, but there are formulaic features that provide indisputable evidence of the genetic relationship between the two sets of texts. In the Balkans, the entombment of the female victim is often described in a moving series of lines in which the poor girl is ever so gradually covered, typically from the lower body to the upper body, from toe to head so to speak. The girl speaks of being walled up to the knees, to her breast, to her throat; or knees, breast, eyes; or knees, waist, breast, and throat (Vargyas 1983:46–48). In the Rumanian text analyzed in such depth by Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), "the wall rose over higher, burying her, up to the ankles, up to the calves, up to the ribs, up to the breasts . . . up to the eyes" (Eliade 1972:168).

Let us briefly consider three Santal folktales. In the first, "The Magic Fiddle" (Campbell 1891:52–56), the sister is sent to get water, but the water vanishes when she tries to scoop some up in her pitcher. Gradually the water "reaches to my ankles . . . to my knee, to my waist, to my breast, to my neck . . . to a man's height" and the girl drowns. In a second tale (Campbell 1891:106–110), the girl goes to fill her pitcher "but she could not do so, as the water rose so rapidly. The tank was soon full to the brim, and the girl was drowned." In a third Santal tale, entitled "How Sabai Grass Grew" (Bompas 1909:102–106), the sister is sent to the tank to draw water. "Directly the girl drew near to the bank the water

began to bubble from the bottom; and when she went down to the water’s edge, it rose to her instep.” Gradually the water rises to her ankle, knees, waist, and neck. “At last it flowed over her head and the water-pot was filled, but the girl was drowned.” In a modern Kannada text published in 1989, the water touches the daughter-in-law’s feet, knee, and waist:

She climbed a step and the water came up
 She climbed two steps and the water touched her feet
 She climbed three steps and the water touched her knee
 She climbed four steps and the water touched her waist
 She climbed five steps and the water drowned her
 The youngest daughter-in-law Bhagirathi
 She became a feast for the well [*Aniketana* 1989:371]

In an unpublished version from northern India collected in 1991 (Kirin Narayan, personal communication, 1994), the beleaguered female victim begs her brothers: “Don’t brick up my feet . . . my midriff . . . breasts . . . neck . . . mouth . . . eyes . . . head.” This version is even closer to the southeastern European texts inasmuch as the woman in this instance is bricked up into the foundation of a waterway under construction.

The demonstration of this formulaic parallel alone—even without the obvious plot similarity—would obviously offer strong support for the proposed Indic origin of the Balkans ballad.

What is especially fascinating in the light of the likely Indic source for the ballad is the fact that a number of the Balkans texts end with the formation of a magical spring that contains either pure water or nourishing milk (Vargyas 1967:203). In the Romanian version cited by Eliade, Manole, the master builder, is so saddened by the sacrificial death of his beloved young wife that he killed himself: “and from the woodwork high on the roof, he fell, dead; and where he was shattered a clear fountain sprang up, a trickle of water, salt with his tears” (Eliade 1972:169). The “spring” motif could well be an instance of what folklorists call peripheral distribution or marginal survival. Certainly the “spring” motif is reminiscent of the water-tank image so common in the Indic versions. For that matter, even the suicidal jump may not be a Romanian innovation. In a Kannada text, for example, the bereaved husband wept and “jumped into the well” (*Aniketana* 1989:38).

The Pitfalls of Parochial Nationalism

It is truly sad to think of so many eminent folklorists writing lengthy essays and learned monographs on this ballad in total ignorance of the Indic texts. It is especially distressing for those scholars who tried so hard to find the “origin” of the ballad and were misled by (1) wrongly limiting the areas of their comparative efforts—that is, failing to consult available Indic texts in print, and (2) by yielding to an excessively emotional and ideological nationalistic bias. The methodological lesson to be learned seems simple enough. The comparative method cannot possibly succeed if whole sets of cognate versions of an item of folklore are ignored. Folklorists who insist upon working in narrow parochial nationalistic mindsets are no better than unsophisticated anthropologists who are utterly convinced that a tale or song they collect from “their” people or “their” village is absolutely unique when in fact it is but one version of a narrative to be found among many peoples. The impressive veneer of comparativism found in the numerous monographic treatments

of the walled-up wife ballad cannot cover the egregious error of having failed to take Indic cognate texts into account.

To be sure, Indian folklorists are no less parochial. They are just as unaware of the massive Balkans scholarship on the ballad as Balkanologists are unaware of the ballad's existence in India. Accordingly, Indian scholars analyze "their" local version of the ballad (see Govindaraja 1989; Srikantaiah 1989) without reference to any other versions just as, say, Romanian scholars, analyze only the Romanian text of the ballad (see Anghelescu 1984; Filiti 1972).

Another instructive illustration of the consequences stemming from excessive nationalistic zeal concerns aesthetics. Invariably, investigators claim that their "national" version of the ballad is the most beautiful. Romanian scholar L. Sainean contended, for example, "From the point of view of beauty and comparative originality, the Serbian and Romanian versions take first place; the Bulgarian songs, because of their loose form, give the impression of being detached fragments; the Albanian traditions are pale imitations of the Greek or Serbian ballads . . . the Hungarian variants seem to echo the Romanian ballad" (1902:360–361, as translated in Eliade 1972:174). Not surprisingly, Hungarian scholars disagreed with this assessment. Vargyas notes, "I think the examples shown make it clear on the uniform evidence of several details that the Hungarian formulation shows the purest form," although to be sure, he does suggest a Bulgarian rather than a Hungarian origin (1967:222, 228; 1983:37). Of course, it is the height of ethnocentric subjectivity to claim that one national version of a cross-culturally distributed folksong is more "beautiful" or "aesthetically pleasing" than that of another nation. The texts from India are surely every bit as poignant and eloquent as those from the Balkans—and remember, these were not even known to the myriad of Balkanologists making aesthetic assessments of the relative merit of ballad versions. Again, it can hardly be coincidence that the national version adjudged best or purest just happens to come from the same nation of which the scholar making the judgment is a citizen!

Parochial nationalism also turns out to be a critical factor in the few attempts to interpret the ballad. Greek scholars, seizing upon the "bridge" motif in "The Bridge of Arta," have suggested that the ballad may have originated from the mythological hair bridge over which the souls of the dead are required to pass on their way to the afterlife (Beaton 1980:122–124; Megas 1976:72). The problem here is that other versions of the ballad involve a castle, monastery, or water tank, rather than a bridge. So while the mythological "hair bridge" may appear plausible to those who know only the Greek "Bridge of Arta" tradition, it is highly implausible in the light of the total range of ballad variants. (It would also require that the Bridge of Arta be the original form of the ballad, which seems unlikely given the many versions from India.)

Another striking instance of a nationalistic interpretation of the ballad is Zimmerman's suggestion that "The Founding of Skadar" with its "immurement" can "represent the subjugation of the Serbian peoples at the time" of the Turkish domination. Moreover, "the survival of the infant" would accordingly represent "the ultimate survival of the nation" (Zimmerman 1979:379). It is certainly possible that the ballad could have such allegorical significance to nationalistic-minded Serbs, but this reading could scarcely apply to the Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Hungarian, Romanian, and Indic versions of the ballad.

Cross-Cultural Interpretation

What is needed in international folkloristics—as opposed to nationalistic folkloristics—are interpretations of items of folklore which could in theory apply to most if not all of the versions of that item of folklore. This is not to deny the importance of identifying oicotypes and analyzing those oicotypes in terms of national or regional personality characteristics. But it does stress the inevitable limitations of nationalistic readings of folklore items with cross-cultural distribution. (One can compare Geertz's classic reading of the cockfight in Bali with a cross-cultural interpretation of the same event [Dundes 1994:94–132, 241–282].) Clearly the comparative method continues to be essential for establishing the distribution pattern of any particular item of folklore. But merely demonstrating historic-geographic trait distributions is no substitute for searches for the meaning(s) of folklore. It is one thing to note that the ruse of sending the wife-victim into the foundation to retrieve an intentionally dropped wedding ring is "encountered in the Bulgarian, Greek, Albanian and Serbian versions" (Vargyas 1983:37), but what is the significance, if any, of this motif? And how does it relate to the possible overall meaning(s) of the ballad?

Over the past one hundred and fifty years of thinking about this ballad, the only "cross-cultural" theory to be consistently applied is that of myth-ritual. Specifically, it has long been assumed that the ballad is a survival-remembrance of human sacrifice, a ritual required to appease otherwise hostile supernatural spirits who for various reasons oppose the building of some ambitious construction. What this theory utterly fails to illuminate is why the victim to be sacrificed must be *female*. In theory the supernatural spirit could just as well be appeased by the sacrifice of a male victim. In fact, the myth-ritual theory of foundation sacrifice explains very few of the actual details of the ballad plot. How, for example, does the myth-ritual theory account for the ring-dropping device to induce the wife-victim to enter the foundation? The myth-ritual theory also suffers from being a *literal* one; that is, it is predicated upon the notion that the construction ritual is historical. This is why so many Balkans scholars have spent so much time trying to locate the actual monastery or bridge that supposedly inspired the story (see Sapkaliska 1988:170; Zimmerman 1979:374). If the ballad did originate in India as now seems probable, all those efforts would appear to be in vain. (They do, however, show how ballads and legends in their paths of diffusion tend to become localized in a particular place, tied to a particular topographic feature in the landscape.)

A few women scholars have sought to find metaphorical meaning in the ballad. Zimmerman proposes a Christian reading of the ballad in which "the traditional Christian beliefs in an ultimate reward for suffering and the triumph of good over evil" are emphasized (1979:379). It is not entirely clear how these values are reflected in the sacrifice of a woman in a wall. Zimmerman also refers to "guilt-ridden cultural memories about foundation sacrifices" indicating that she has not completely abandoned the standard myth-ritual theory (1979:379). In her analysis of the Bridge of Arta, Mandel argues a Lévi-Straussian opposition of nature and culture. Specifically, uncreative male culture "relies on the appropriation of female nature" (Mandel 1983:180). Although Mandel identifies women with nature, she also insists that women are liminal "between nature and culture" and act "as the mediator[s] between the worlds of the living and the dead" (1983:182). It is not immediately apparent how women can be both nature and mediating figures *between* nature and culture. However, Mandel's suggestion that the ballad deals with the men's attempt to "exercise power and control over the woman's sexuality and fertility" has merit (1983:182). But when she speaks in similar terms of the "bridge"

as a liminal construction—"contiguous to both banks of the river" but belonging to neither (1983:181), she falls into the nationalistic parochial pitfall of thinking only in terms of the Greek versions of the ballad. The bridge may well be liminal, but what about a castle or a water tank? Once again we see the theoretical difficulties arising from interpreting an item of folklore in terms of just one culture (or one set of versions), when that same item of folklore is found in many different cultures. It is noteworthy that Mandel, in typical anthropologist fashion, dismisses all of the many published studies of the song because they only address "questions of diffusion and origin" and hence are deemed "not relevant to the argument presented here" (1983:175, n. 4).

Another interesting interpretation is offered by Lyubomira Parpulova when she has recourse to Van Gennep's celebrated rites of passage. Parpulova gives the myth-ritual theory a new life when she argues that the ballad reflects a ritual of transition. But she, too, cannot escape the older theoretical bias. She suggests that, rather than looking for a rite that underlies the ballad, "why not assume . . . a myth lying at the root of both the rite and the ballad." And she speaks further of "the different forms of constructional human sacrifice, probably practiced in the past and preserved as legend" (Parpulova 1984:427). She hints at a possible connection of ritual separation of girls (e.g., after childbirth) with the ballad, although she maintains that there may not necessarily be a direct link (1984:435). One serious problem with the linkage to childbirth is that not all of the ballad texts refer to either a pregnant victim or an infant to be nursed through the wall. Still, Parpulova does cite a Bulgarian song in which a prison "is decoded as married life" (1984:433), and she insightfully suggests that the walling up may express "the inevitability of a woman's fate: to be transformed into the foundations of a new construction, a new world, a new family" that "is not always very pleasant" (1984:434).

Toward Multiple Interpretations

As I have previously argued, we can view the walled-up wife ballad as a metaphor for married life in all those societies in which it is sung (Dundes 1989). By entering marriage, the woman is figuratively immured. She is kept behind walls—to protect her virtue and to keep her confined. The ring-dropping ruse—which none of the earlier critics have addressed—would certainly support this feminist metaphorical interpretation. The husband drops the ring into the foundation and persuades the faithful wife to go in after it. It is the act of searching for a wedding ring which seals her fate literally and figuratively. The fact that a man is willing to sacrifice his wife in order to build a bigger and better castle, bridge, water-tank shows the second-class status of women in such societies. In that male chauvinist world, women's role is to stay protected from the outside world and to concentrate upon nurturing her infants (preferably sons)! The fact that women living near Skadar in modern times seek the chalky liquid from the walls to mix with drinking water in order "to restore milk to women who cannot nurse" continues to underscore women's nurturant role (Zimmerman 1979:380). The ideal wife nurtures males—either by bringing food to her husband working on a construction site or by giving suck to her newborn son.

Whereas myth-ritual totally fails to explain why it must be a female victim in the ballad, the present hypothesis would explain why it must be a woman who is sacrificed. Marriage is a trap—for women. That is the ballad's message. She must sacrifice everything, her mobility—she is transfixed—and even her life. The only aperture—in some versions—is a tiny window through which she can continue to suckle her infant son.

I believe this is a plausible metaphorical reading of the ballad of the walled-up wife, but is it the only possible reading? Certainly not. And this brings us to a final issue in our brief consideration of the ballad's significance. Nineteenth-century folklorists, if they thought about the meaning of folklore at all, invariably proposed some monolithic hypothesis. While they understood perfectly well the multiple existence of folklore texts, they did not realize that meanings could also be multiple. As variation is a hallmark of folklore texts, so is it also to be found in folklore interpretations.

Ever since Propp delineated the various dramatis personae in the magic tale (Aarne-Thompson tale types 300–749) in 1928, folklorists have had the methodological tools to explore the possibility of investigating the crucial matter of perspective or point of view in folktales or ballads. Any given folktale or ballad may give priority to one of several vantage points. Perhaps the most obvious distinction concerns whether the tale is told from the perspective of the hero or the victim, assuming they are two different characters. (Propp made an important differentiation between hero-victims—who saved themselves—and hero-seekers who saved victims [1968:36].) Although, in theory, a tale could be told from the villain's point of view, this is more common in written literature than in oral tradition.

In my analysis of the folktale source of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, I tried to demonstrate that an originally girl-centered folktale was retold by Shakespeare from a male parent's point of view (1976). In the same way, A. K. Ramanujan revealed that the Indic Oedipus tale was told from the mother's viewpoint rather than the son's (1983). Similarly, Jack Zipes has brilliantly shown how the female-centered tale of Little Red Riding Hood was recast by male collectors, namely, Perrault and the Grimm brothers, so as to satisfy the agenda of male ideology. (In the original oral tale, the heroine saves herself through her own cleverness—an example of Propp's hero-victim—whereas in the Perrault and Grimm "rewrites," the heroine is either eaten up by the wolf or else saved by an intervening male woodsman [Zipes 1993:30–34, 375–378].) Finally, Jim Taggart in his splendid *Enchanted Maidens* (1990) proved from his own field materials from Spain that there were distinct male and female versions of the same tale type, a differentiation that could frequently be correlated with the gender of the tale-tellers. Bengt Holbek in his magnum opus devoted to the European fairy tale also sought to distinguish "Masculine" and "Feminine" tales (1987:161, 417).

What this suggests in terms of the ballad of the walled-up wife is that there are at the very least two distinct possible perspectives: one would be that of the victim, the wife who is immured, and the second would be that of the male builder. It is obviously a matter of opinion as to whose story the ballad tells. Is it the tragic fate of the female? Or the tragic grief of the builder-widower? Just as there is no one correct "text" of an item of folklore, there is no one correct "interpretation" of an item of folklore. Folklorists must accustom themselves to accepting multiple interpretations just as they have learned to accept the existence of multiple versions of texts.

As mentioned above, I have proposed a feminist reading of the ballad which argues that the plot provides a deadly metaphor for marriage from India to the Balkans in which a wife is forced to give up her freedom and mobility by the demands of her husband and his family (e.g., in patrilocal residence). But if we look at the ballad text from the builder's perspective, we may get quite a different reading. All versions of the ballad involve one or more males involved in some kind of construction enterprise. This is true whether the goal is the building of a bridge, a castle, a monastery, or a dam (to hold water). I have somewhat facetiously called this a male edifice complex (Dundes 1989:161). But the key motif is that

whatever is constructed during the day is deconstructed at night. Folklorists know this as Motif D2192, Work of day magically overthrown at night. Now it is perfectly obvious that we are dealing with fantasy here inasmuch as buildings do not disappear night after night after repeated daily attempts to put them up. Thus if we consider the motif in metaphorical or symbolic terms, we must ask what could it mean to have something raised during the day to be razed at night? If we use the verb *erect* instead of *raise*, perhaps the symbolism might be clearer. Men fear that they may not be able to sustain an *erection*, especially at night, a time for love-making. In terms of males versus females, males may try to express their masculinity by denying any dependence upon women. Boys become men by means of rites of passage (normally administered by males, not females) in which they formally repudiate any hint of maternal control. The most surprising feature of such rites of passage as Bettelheim (1962) and others have suggested is that the men frequently imitate or emulate female procreative behavior. In the ballad, men force a sacrificial woman to be enclosed in a man-made construction—just as men were originally enclosed in a female womb. That the male symbolism is not completely successful is hinted at by those versions of the ballad where the woman, though immured, is permitted to succor her *male* baby through an aperture. Still, the male message in the ballad concerns the importance of creating a *permanent erection*, and one that, in imitation of the female, can contain a human being within it. The fallacy of the “phallicity” is that the male womb results in the death of its occupant whereas female wombs—if all goes well—contain new life. In that sense, the ballad represents wishful thinking on the part of males, that they can create remarkable edifices just as women procreate, but the sad reality is that the male hubris brings only death to the female. Male death is opposed to female life, and the male insistence upon erecting his edifice complex or complex edifice means that his obedient, subordinate female must sacrifice her life for that male enterprise.

Keep in mind that one need not choose between the female or male interpretations of the walled-up wife. The ballad as sung in India more often reflects the female victim’s point of view as opposed to the Balkans where the story is seemingly most frequently told from the male builder’s perspective. In any event, perhaps neither the female nor the male interpretation may be deemed valid, but they are surely a welcome alternative to the simplistic, literal myth-ritual building sacrifice theory that has dominated the scholarship devoted to this extraordinary ballad up to the present time. Both these interpretations also are, unlike the earlier parochial nationalistic readings of the ballad, applicable to the ballad in *all* of its versions, not to just the versions found in Serbia, or Hungary, or Romania. Moreover, rather than tying the ballad to an unproven myth-ritual hypothesis of human sacrifice, these interpretations link the ballad to the ongoing traumatic relations prevailing in the battle of the sexes, which would help explain why the ballad continues to be a painful and poignant reminder of the difficulties of balancing a career and marriage for males, and of achieving freedom of movement and opportunity for females in India and in the Balkans.

The future of the ballad’s popularity in India and the Balkans may be in question. The “liberation” of women—the very word liberation refers to the basic complex of ideas which generated the ballad in the first place, a complex that insisted that women were *not* free, *not* liberated—may in time make the ballad’s message obsolete. As more and more women become builders of bridges, castles, and dams, perhaps it will be men who will be forced to become the “victims” of their wives’ ambitions.

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