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The Tale of "Blue Bead": Traversing Controversy and Nationalism
WORKING PAPER

Abstract:

The Fairy Tale "Blue Bead" is one of the most elaborate fairy tales in Azeri folklore. It tells a story of a supernatural boy, who is born as a result of his mother accidentally ingesting a blue bead, and his revenge against his uncle's killer. This fairy tale gives a glimpse into the familial relationships and duty in the Azeri culture of the time and features a non-traditional familial bond between an ogre (dev) and humans. It was first published by the Soviet-Azeri folklorist, who was a pioneer in his field, Hanefi Zeynalli in his book "Azerbaijani Turkic Fairy Tales" in Russian in 1935, where he draws similarities to the Armenian fairytale of "Kosa". The Azeri reprint of the fairytale with certain additions was published in 2006. "Blue Bead" is controversial both in Azerbaijan and Armenia due to its violent contents and profane language drawing widespread criticism from the media outlets in both countries. In Azerbaijan, it came under fire for being too profane and too cruel, while in Armenia it was criticized for the same reasons and was used to showcase the "immorality" of Azeri culture, despite the tale "Kosa" having a similar premise.

The analysis and rebuttal of this rhetoric are important to better understand the politics of folklore of post-soviet Azerbaijan and Armenia so as to conduct unbiased and credible research. It will significantly contribute to the understanding of the Transcaucasian folklore and the common identity between its peoples.

BODY

Introduction

Azerbaijan is one of the countries with the strictest folklore laws in the world. The reproduction of its folklore, including fairytales, is an offense that constitutes a fine. Yet, the folklore of Azerbaijan is deeply tied with the folklore of neighboring Armenia and Georgia, so much so, that any attempt to nationalize the folklore is bound to fail. One of the examples of tales that found themselves in the middle of controversy was an Azerbaijani tale by the name of “Goy Minjih” (“Blue Bead”). It first appeared in the book called “Azerbaijani Turkic Fairytales”, compiled by the pioneer in Azerbaijani folkloristics Hanefi Zeynalli and translated, edited by Alexander Bagrii 1935, just two years prior to Zeynalli falling victim to the Great Purge, conducted by the Soviet Government. Most of the tales that made it to this book were collected during the so-called “Golden Age” of Soviet folkloristics, when the research of folklore met with little resistance from the state¹. By the time the book was published, the Soviet state had established totalitarian control over the field, which is evident in the beginning of Zeynalli’s book, which pays homage to “building socialism”.² While the politics of this book are interesting and constitute their own research topic, in this paper I will be focusing mostly on the history and politics of a specific tale, Blue Bead.

Background

The first recorded version of Blue Bead was told by Jabar Movla Kulu oglu from the then village, now town of Horadiz of what is now Fizuli Rayon in the Azerbaijani controlled side of

¹ Oinas, Felix J., and Indiana University, Bloomington. Folklore Institute. *Folklore, Nationalism, and Politics*. Monograph Series (Indiana University. Folklore Institute) ; v. 30. Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1978. Pp 77-93

² Bagrii, Aleksandr and Hanefi Zeynalli. *Azerbaïdzhanskïe tïurkskie Skazki*. Moskva ; Leningrad :Academia, 1935.

Karabakh. It was recorded by Kulu Kuluzade.³ The original manuscript of the tale is most likely still in the Azerbaijani Academy of Sciences, in the section indicated by Hanefi, and a recent publication of the tale very likely is derived from this manuscript, but this is a matter of speculation. In Hanefi's book a very gruesome scene, involving infanticide in the tale was edited out, but more on that later.⁴

Unlike the current nationalistic discourse of post-soviet times, Hanefi recognized the interconnectedness of folklore on the Caucasus and the regions surrounding it. This is most likely due to Propp's (very recent at the time) theory of "wandering plots."⁵

As Finnish folklorist P. Anttonen mentions: "However, folklore is not necessarily a collectively defined representation of a group identity, a manifestation of a coherent self-image of a preconceived group. Instead, folklore is a name for a type or act of communication produced in a situation or a process in which groups and collectives are made through the exercise of social power. Instead of arguing how united a group may be because of its folklore...an alternative approach challenges the folklorist to discuss how folklore is employed in the making of groups, in the processes of categorizing people, in building boundaries in certain places and crossing them in others, and in defining relations between the categories thus created."⁶

This alternative approach described by Anttonen can be observed throughout Hanefi's book. Despite naming the book "Azerbaijani Turkic Fairytales", he references the similarities of the tales found in other cultures, including Russian and Armenian. These references are completely

³ Bagrii pp 648-649

⁴ Bagrii 563

⁵ Propp, V. ĭa., Pirková-Jakobsonová, Svatava, Wagner, Louis A., and Dundes, Alan. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Second Edition, Revised and Edited with a Preface by Louis A. Wagner [and A] New Introduction by Alan Dundes. ed. Publications of the American Folklore Society. Bibliographical and Special Series ; v. 9. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

⁶ Anttonen, Pertti. *Tradition through Modernity : Postmodernism and the Nation-state in Folklore Scholarship*. Studia Fennica. Folkloristica ; 15. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2005. P 105

absent from the modern day, multiple volumes of collections of “Azerbaijani Fairytales” produced by the Azerbaijani Folklore Institute, which is influenced by the rise of nationalism and a culture of “collective victimhood,” which arose in Azerbaijan in the 1990s due to the Karabakh conflict with Armenia⁷. After this point, the study of folklore becomes more ethnocentric any connections with Armenian folklore are denied. Modern Azerbaijani folklorists would not dare undertake what Zeynalli had undertaken in the 1930s due to the height of nationalism in the country.

In fact, Azerbaijan has one of the World’s strictest laws regarding its folklore. The modern discourse for the Azeri culture in general is best described by the president (dictator) of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev:

Throughout history, we have never set our eyes on the national values or national heritage of another people. But unfortunately, such attempts have always been made against us. I am saying again that the main reason for this is the talent and rich culture of the Azerbaijani people.⁸

“Azerbaijan Law

Azerbaijan folklore expressions (hereinafter referred to as “folklore expressions”) – shall mean word art works, folk music, games and dances, works of folk handicraft and applied arts (existing and not existing in a material form) created in a verbal form as well as other products of folk creative work created and protected by Azerbaijani people, its

⁷ Altstadt, Audrey L. *Frustrated Democracy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*. Washington, District of Columbia ; New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press : Columbia University Press, 2017.

⁸“Ilham Aliyev Attends the Annual General Assembly of the National Academy of Sciences.” Official Web-site of President of Azerbaijan Republic - NEWS » Events. April 26, 2011. Accessed 11th of October 2018. <https://en.president.az/articles/2026>

individuals and reflecting traditional artistic values, worldview, hopes and wishes, characteristic features of artistic heritage of Azerbaijani people;”⁹

This law aims to regulate folklore and specify the “proper use” of folklore, which severely restricts the commercial use and imposes fines for “up to 50,000” times the earned amount when “proper authorization” is not granted.¹⁰

The Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences currently has an operating “Folklore Institute” that collects folklore, but the agency that is responsible for protecting the “folkloric expressions” of Azerbaijan was given to The Copyright Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan, that was established in 2005 by Ilham Aliyev.¹¹

On the front page of the website of The Copyright Agency, folkloric expression is mentioned in the mission statement of the agency, that was set via decree by the current president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev:

“According to 1.1 paragraph of “Charter of Copyright Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan” affirmed with Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan “on Providing activity of Copyright Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan” dated to 6th September 2017, Copyright Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan is already “legal entity of public law established according to 2nd part of Decree number 1125 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan dated to 24th November 2016 “on Some Measures regarding Improvement of State Administration in the Republic of Azerbaijan”, in accordance with this Charter providing development of intellectual

⁹ Aliyev, Heydar. "The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan On Legal Protection of Azerbaijani Folklore Expressions." World Intellectual Property Organization. Accessed October 11, 2018. <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/az/az101en.pdf>.

¹⁰ Aliyev, Heydar

¹¹ "The Copyright Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan." The Copyright Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Accessed October 12, 2018. <http://www.copag.gov.az/copag/en>.

property rights to copyright, related rights, Azerbaijani folklore expressions (traditional cultural expressions) and other intangible cultural heritage expressions, topographies of integrated circuits and data collections, implementing single regulation and control and coordinating activities in this field.”

The absurd folklore decree that appears in the directory of WIPO was signed in to effect by then leader and dictator President Heydar Aliyev, which is aimed in protecting the source of the folklore as well as its commercial use.¹²

Blue Bead

The Fairy Tale "Blue Bead" is one of the most elaborate fairy tales in Azeri folklore. It tells a story of a supernatural boy named Blue Bead, who is born as a result of his mother accidentally ingesting a blue bead (which is a turkic name for charms to protect from evil eye) and his revenge against his uncle's killer. This fairy tale gives a glimpse into the familial relationships and duty in the Azeri culture of the time and features a non-traditional familial bond between an ogre (dev) and humans. The text has preserved the original dialect of the original story teller.

Unlike a large number of Azerbaijani fairytales, Blue Bead is a morally gray character, who acts out of revenge and befriends an ogre, which are viewed as evil in other tales.

It is important to note that in the Zeynalli version of the tale in comparison with the reprint of Azerbaijani Fairytales in post-soviet Azerbaijan lacks this episode. In this passage Blue Bead is in the process of getting revenge on the man who killed his uncle:

“Now, this man had a small son, who suddenly started crying during the feast. No matter what the man did, the child wouldn’t stop.

¹² Aliyev, Heydar

“Blue Bead,” The man said, “take him outside and make him stop crying.”

Blue Bead took the baby outside. Holding him by his legs, Blue Bead pulled and split him in two. He threw one half to one dog and one to the other. When he went back inside, the dogs started fighting.

“Blue Bead, why are the dogs fighting?” the man asked.

Blue Bead replied, “Because one dog didn’t get enough of the baby.”

“What baby? What are you talking about?” the man demanded.

Blue Bead answered, “You told me to make him stop crying, so I did.”

The man was silent for hardly a moment and said, “Go bring its corpse. Let us bury it.”¹³

The fact that it is missing from the Zeynalli book makes fairytale lose its continuity, which leads me to believe that it was an intentional omission, rather than a later addition by the post-soviet Azerbaijani folklorists¹⁴

This episode is also present in the Armenian version of the tale called “Keosa” to which Zeynalli draws parallels in his book. Indeed, the tales have a lot in common plot wise. Other than the death of the infant, a core moment in the plot when Blue Bead tricks the villain of the story:

“They went to the man’s home, ate bread, and went to sleep. In the morning, the man woke the boy and said, “Come, get up! You have to work! But first I have one condition for you; listen to all my orders: Sow seeds where my dog goes, plant where my bull comes to a stand, eat your

¹³ Zeynalli, Hanefi. *Azerbaijan Nagillari (Azerbaijani Fairytales)*. Vol. 1. 5 vols. Baku, Azerbaijan: Sherg-Gerb, 2005. P31

Post-Soviet republication of Zeynalli in Azeri. http://anl.az/el/latin_grafikasi/axe/an1.pdf

Quote translated from Azeri

¹⁴ Bagrii

yogurt so that it does not move, and eat your bread so that the crust does not move.”

A similar moment is present in the Armenian tale “Keosa”.¹⁵

This tale within itself has a unique story in both Azerbaijani and Armenian media groups, generating wide controversy as recently as August of 2018. While tales like Malik Mammad (Armenian equivalent of Golden Apples) are used as an example of “national pride” in Azerbaijan and Armenia, “Blue Bead” is viewed as a source of national shame in Azerbaijan, and relentlessly attacked by the public and media.

While conducting this research, in addition to media frenzies that happened in 2017 related to the contents of the tale, I found a much bigger and more serious media attack on “Blue Bead” in August of 2018. The concern was centered around mostly the tale not being suitable for children, but there were other problems within this tale that were criticized. The Azerbaijani media decried the “orthographic” mistakes and the graphic scenes found throughout the tale. What the media claimed to be “orthographic” mistakes was the dialect recorded from Horadiz, preserving the original language of the story teller. News reports of “Blue Bead” spread around reputable sites as an “unethical” tale being shown to children. The website hosting a large quantity of Azerbaijani tales removed “Blue Bead” from its list. The site news12.az claimed that “there is no sign of Azerbaijani literary language” in the tale.¹⁶

In May of 2017, Azerbaijani TV channel Xezer Xeber interviewed Seyfaddin Rzasoy, the head of the mythology department of the Folklore Institute of Azerbaijan (the governing body for Folklore in Azerbaijan), who claimed that the tale involved “supernatural birth” that is very

¹⁵ Bagrii A. V. 1930. *Fol'klor Azerbaïdzhana I Prilegaïushchikh Stran*. Azerbaïdzhanskii Gosudarstvennyi Nauchno-Issledovatel'skii Institut, Otdelenie Tazyka, Literatury I Iskusstva, Fol'klornaia Seria, No. 3. Baku: Izd-vo AzGNII. P 107

¹⁶ ""Göy Mıncığı Udan Qız Hamilə Qaldı..."" News12.az. August 31, 2018. Accessed October 12, 2018. <http://news12.az/gundem/4834-goy-mnc-udan-qz-hamil-qald-birinci-siniflr-kitabda-babirciliq-foto.html>.

typical for fairy tales and that the tale was categorized as a tale for adults, rather than for children.¹⁷

This tale was also attacked by a prominent Armenian news site Panarmenian.net, reacting to the media frenzy surrounding “Blue Bead”.¹⁸ They cite Haqqin.az’s report on the tale, showcasing the “bloody” and “cruel” Azerbaijani tales that is not suitable for children and include the excerpt with the death of the infant. This was also widely discussed in Armenian forums online. What is failed to mention in both the Azerbaijani and Armenian medias is that this tale has similarities to many different tales in the region, including the above-mentioned Keosa.

Conclusion and Further Research

The post-soviet nationalistic undertones, authoritarian control over Azerbaijani academia, refusal to recognize the links between Transcaucasus folklore created this rather unique problem: on the one hand there is a desire to preserve folklore that showcases Azerbaijani values, but on the other hand there seems to be an almost puritanical regarding its content. While some tales are a symbol of “national pride”, others seem to be rejected as such due to their “cruel” content. Yet Hanefi Zeynalli admitted not only that these tales are a part of Azerbaijani culture, but also the common connections to tales of surrounding nations. There is also seems to be a lack of understanding both in Azerbaijan and Armenia about the general cruel nature of fairy tales in every region of the world. Based on this, I believe it would be beneficial for Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani Folkloristics to re-adopted the methods set forth by Hanefi. Further research of this project is

¹⁷ "Nağıl Qalmaqala Səbəb Oldu - TƏFƏRRÜATLAR - VIDEO." XezerXeber.az. May 30, 2017. Accessed October 12, 2018. http://xezerxeber.az/son_xəbər/162344.html.

¹⁸ "«Иди и убей эту су*ку»: Чему учат детей азербайджанские книжки и учебники," PanARMENIAN.Net, October 13, 2017, , accessed October 12, 2018, <http://www.panarmenian.net/rus/news/247590/>.

dependent on the obtaining the original manuscript and a deeper analysis of the symbolic contained within the text, as well as analyzing it through Propp's "Morphology of the Tale".