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Translation from the “first language”: the censored folktales of Edessa in 21st century Greece

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Summary

The text refers to a contemporary, questionable edition of folk tales from Edessa. After a brief historical review of similar publications as well as the persecution of the speakers of the Macedonian language in Greece, the silencing of the original language of the fairy tales is recorded and through this the adverse (self)censorship of the publishers some years after the Prespa Agreement.

Keywords: folktales, Macedonian language in Greece, Nikolaos Politis, magazine “Laografia”, Edessa/Voden

Μετάφραση από την “πρώτη γλώσσα”: Τα λογοκριμένα παραμύθια της Έδεσσας στην Ελλάδα του 21^{ου} αιώνα

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Περίληψη

Το κείμενο αναφέρεται σε μια σύγχρονη, ατυχή έκδοση λαϊκών παραμυθιών από την Έδεσσα. Μετά από μια σύντομη ιστορική αναδρομή σε παρόμοιες εκδόσεις αλλά και στις διώξεις των ομιλητών της μακεδονικής γλώσσας στην Ελλάδα καταγράφεται η αποσιώπηση της πρωτότυπης γλώσσας των παραμυθιών και μέσα από αυτήν η (αυτο)λογοκρισία των εκδοτών λίγα χρόνια μετά από τη Συμφωνία των Πρεσπών.

Λέξεις-Κλειδιά: παραμύθια, Μακεδονική γλώσσα στην Ελλάδα, Νικόλαος Πολίτης, περιοδικό «Λαογραφία», Έδεσσα

The ban on the Macedonian language in Greece is one of the most blatant cases of extreme repression and violation of human rights in Europe¹. It must merely be noted that to the multiple persecutions and tortures of the Macedonian language speakers (with the most characteristic examples being the measure of the public, humiliating ingestion of retinoic acid implemented during the Metaxas dictatorship in the 1930s and the public oaths of villagers to stop using their mother tongue in 1959) an absolutely false and outrageous official denial of the existence not only of Slavic idioms in Greece, but of the official Macedonian language itself was added – a denial that for decades was shared by all political parties in the Greek parliament and which brought the crowds of protesters along in the early 1990s, and

¹ The excellent book by Tasos Kostopoulos *Η απαγορευμένη γλώσσα (first edition 2000)* -- *The forbidden language* is very enlightening on the many successive persecutions of their speakers in Greece mainly from the 1930s onwards.

later, to the organized protests by extreme nationalist circles and the church. This undoubtedly shameful "national consensus" was partly triumphantly stopped by the signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018, which at last recognized the Macedonian language as the official language of North Macedonia.

The prohibition and silencing of the Macedonian language in Greek Macedonia were accompanied over time by a series of measures aimed not only at discouraging the speakers and at making them give up their language, but also at preventing its adoption by children and young people. For the opponents of the Macedonian language in Greek Macedonia, the recourse to popular tradition that made use of the language in public events (songs, dances) but also in raising children (fairy tales) was disturbing. Folk tradition is most of all disturbing because it refers to the emotional world of the speakers, to their memories and origins, to their family and friendship ties, in other words it touches their feelings, the connection with the past and their roots. Recently, speaking with a bilingual friend from Aridaia, she excitedly told me about her precious memories of Macedonian fairy tales from her grandmother's narrations. Her grandmother's fairy tales, told in the "forbidden language", constituted an important inheritance and treasure for her. The grandmother in my friend's case functioned and functions as a connecting link with the valuable memory of her childhood, sparking nostalgia for lost innocence and preserving with her fairy tales the love for the forbidden language. An indeed: Grandmothers, addressing their grandchildren in Macedonian, were a major obstacle in eliminating the use of the language. That is why one of the most important measures taken by the Greek governments to achieve the elimination of the language was the removal of small children from the custody of their grandmothers and the establishment of nurseries and kindergartens with exclusively Greek-speaking teachers who were transferred specifically for this purpose from southern Greece. The establishment of kindergartens was planned and started already in 1914, very soon after the expansion of the Greek territory in the region in 1912, it came back in 1959 and during the junta from 1967 onwards. Apocalyptic is an explanatory statement quoted from a related report (Kostopoulos 2000, 233) from 1959: "With the establishment of kindergartens, we warrant that the children stay in the kindergarten all day long, if breakfast is also provided to them. In this way, the infants will be with their families only for the night's sleep, and they will not have time to hear and converse adequately with their relatives in the foreign language, which will gradually decrease until it ceases being their mother tongue"². So, we know today that the concern of the Greek authorities referred to the contact of the children with their exclusively Slavic-speaking grandparents, since the parents were absent for agricultural works. In this context, the fairy tales told by the grandparents to the children at home were of great importance for the survival of the spoken language.

² «Με την ίδρυσιν των νηπιακών κήπων εξασφαλίζεται η παραμονή των παιδων εν τω νηπιακώ κήπω όλη την ημέραν, εφ' όσον θα παρέρχεται εις αυτούς και πρόγευμα. Κατ' αυτόν τον τρόπον τα νήπια θα μεταβαίνωσιν εις τα οικογενείας των δια τον ύπνον της νυκτός μόνον, και δεν θα έχουσι τον καιρόν να ακούωσι και να συνδιαλεχθώσιν επαρκώς με τους οικείους των εις την ξένην γλώσσαν, ήτις ολίγον κατ' ολίγον θα φθίνη μέχρις ότου παύση να είναι μητρική γλώσσα».

The literature related to the suppression of Macedonian in Greece focuses mainly on music and songs. Already Kostopoulos in 2000 offers a series of essential information about the attempts to hellenize the songs, with the translation of their titles, the changes of the lyrics, their banning in celebrations and gatherings. Regarding dance and song in Eastern Macedonia, Marika Rombou-Levidis' 2016 study *Επιτηρούμενες ζωές* ("Surveyed Lives") proved exceptionally revealing. In this research, Rombou-Levidi unveils the peculiar silencing of the songs' language by the speakers themselves and the translation of their words into Greek with fatal outcomes for the songs' rhythm and their dancing.

But how can fairy tales be "suppressed"? The first collections of Slavic fairy tales from the region of wider Ottoman Macedonia were already attempted in the 19th century. An important collection of

fairy tales was published by Stefan Verkovic' in the second half of the 19th century, while collectors of tales in the Macedonian language in general were Marko Cepenkov, the Miladinov brothers (Zagreb 1861), Kuzman Šapkarev (Sofia 1891-94). Verkovic's collection of 133 tales was republished in Skopje in 1977 "South Slavic folk tales". Kiril Penušliski (1992) mentions the following attempts to record the Slavic folk tradition in Greek Macedonia:

In the two years 1916-1917, the French philologist André Mazon spent

ten months in Florina, where he collected fairy tales, myths, and anecdotes. He continued this research with a further stay in the region in 1920. In April 1950, six years after the establishment of the Federal Republic of Macedonia, the Institute of Folklore was established in Skopje by political exiles from Greece, in which there is a significant books and articles' collection related to fairy tales. In 1959, Paskal Paskalevski's study, *Makedonski narodni umotvorbi od Egejska Makedonija*, was published. Another excellent publication on the Slavic folktales of the region of Greek Macedonia is Aleksandra Popvasileva's book, *Macedonian folk songs and tales from the region of Kastoria*, published 1996.

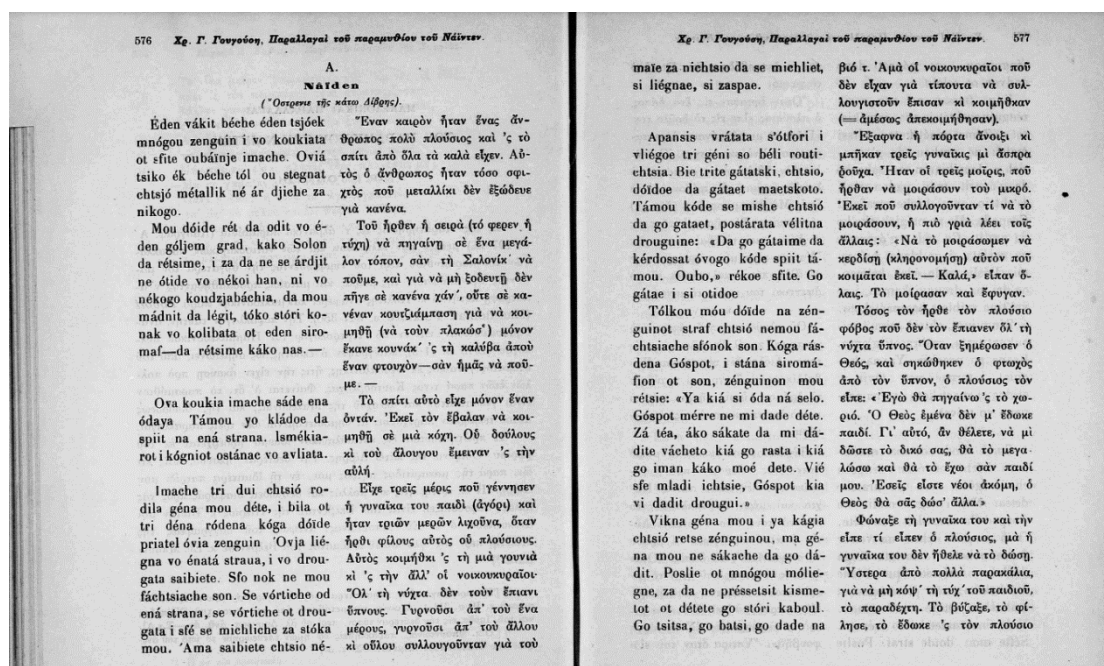
Greek scholarly literature on Slavic fairy tales in Greek territory is minimal to non-existent at one point or another. The trigger for the current presentation is a publication of fairy tales from the region of Edessa in the year 2021, by the so called "Progressive Association of Edessa Alexander the Great" («Φιλοπρόοδος σύλλογος Έδεσσας 'Μέγας Αλέξανδρος'») which belongs to the municipality of Edessa. The book entitled *Fairytales from Edessa and its region* is masterfully illustrated by the painter Ioannis Proios



(Ιωάννης Πρώτος) and signed by Kaiti Tzoga-Vetta, who recorded and selected the total of fifty fairy tales in the collection. At the end of the book, the folklorist Aigli Brouskou, in her afterword, undertakes a classification of the specific fairy tales based on the international catalog Aarne-Thompson-Uther.

In her work, Aigli Brouskou points out the importance of translation of fairy tales from language to language as a basic process of spreading the world's folktales. However, this afterword, although updated bibliographically and with the ambition of a comparative approach, proves misleading and subcutaneously deeply political in a negative sense. What I mean is that Brouskou chooses to do two things in this otherwise special edition: (1) not to mention the Slavic origin of the fairy tales and (2) to explain the necessity for comparison of folktales by referring to a recording of Albanian songs by the founder of Greek folklore, Nikolaos Politis, in the first issue of the magazine *LAOGRAFIA* (Folklore) in 1909.

The example of Albanian songs in the 1909 magazine *Folklore* does not take into consideration that in this same magazine, in its second issue, in 1910, Christos Gougoussis had published a fairy tale, in a study entitled "Macedonian variants of Naiden's tale" (of the one found) which is listed in three variants, one of which is written in the "South Slavic idiom" of Ostrenie (Kato Dibri). In other words, a publication of 1910 presents Macedonian text in Latin script and a Greek variant of it in a northern Greek idiom whereas a publication of 2021 completely silences the original language of the folktales. In 1910 Macedonia was still Ottoman and the Macedonian language an accepted reality. Gougoussis' article was published before the Greek state decided to eliminate the language with persecutions, silencing, kindergartens, oaths, imprisonments, and displacements.



In this same issue of 1910, Nikolaos Politis published his speech at the University of Athens under the title *Folklore of Macedonia*, where he denounced the "negligence" of the Greeks in terms of studies on

Macedonia. (Politis 1910). Two years before the Greek conquest of the region he mentioned Verkovik' and his work and emphasized that "the homaimon and the homonymous" (same name, same blood imperative) may not always coexist in a Nation" (ibidem, 249)³. In the same issue, judging a study that had been submitted to a folklore competition and referred to foreign-language folklore material in the not-yet-Greek Macedonia, mainly in songs, Politis was annoyed by the fact that the author did not mention the original language of the presented songs: "and yet he did not consider necessary to mention which is the language of this song, noting merely that it was sung by Gypsy women 'in the local Macedonian idiom'. It seems that he means the bulgaro-macedonian idiom, because he has made the same statement about the long mythological song which he also presents in its original form". (ibidem, 256)⁴. On the other side, he praised the author, because "he did not ignore the Kutsovlach and the Slavic idioms spoken in Macedonia, he managed to overcome many difficulties which faces any researcher undertaking a systematic folklore exploration of this country", adding: "the inclusion of non-Greek Macedonian songs and other news from the folklore of the non-Greek-speaking inhabitants of Macedonia is welcome, even if not requested". (ibidem, 254)⁵. The specific passages are quoted here to demonstrate that before the annexation of Macedonian lands by the Greek state, the observed self-censorship of the Edessa edition and thus the denial of existence of Slavic did not occur.

The edition of the fairytales of Edessa seems strange for other reasons as well: In many of them there are footnotes with translations of scattered Macedonian names and terms that unreasonably remain

44. Οι δύο ψεύτες

Τα παλιά χρόνια ήσαν δύο φίλοι που αποφάσισαν να κερδίζουν χρήματα με μεγάλες ψευτιές. Ξεκίνησαν, λοιπόν, οι δύο νέοι να επισκέπτονται ένα-ένα τα χωριά αραδιάζοντας ψέματα.
Πήγαινε πρώτα ο ένας και έπειτα ακολουθούσε ο άλλος. Όταν έφτασε ο πρώτος στο χωριό Βλάντοβο⁹⁷, οι χωρικοί τον καλωσόρισαν και ζήτησαν να μάθουν τα νέα από την πόλη, γιατί τότε εφημερίδες δεν υπήρχαν. Τους χαϊρέτησε ο επισκέπτης και τους είπε ότι όλα πάνε καλά, αλλά του έκαναν εντύπωση οι κότες στον δρόμο.
— Τέτοιες μικρές κότες εμείς στα μέρη μας δεν έχουμε, οι κότες μας είναι μεγάλες σαν το μπόι της αγελάδας. Τον κοιτάζουν, τον κοιτάζουν.
— Βρε παλιοψεύτη, εμάς τους χωριάτες βρήκες να κοροϊδεύεις;... και δώσου ξύλο γερό. Τον κλείσαν σ' ένα αχυρί.
Σε λίγη ώρα φτάνει ο δεύτερος μάγκας στο χωριό.
— Γεια σας, χωριανοί μου.
— Καλώς τον κύριο, να ένας ντόπιμος άνθρωπος.
— Τι συμβαίνει, ρωτάει.
— Να... πριν λίγη ώρα ήρθε ένας αλητής και μας είπε ένα χοντρό ψέμα, ότι τάχα οι κότες αυτές στα μέρη του είναι πολύ μεγάλες σαν τις αγελάδες.
— Εγώ, είτε ο ξένος, δεν πρόσεξα τέτοιες μεγάλες κότες, όμως κάποτε πέρασα από τα μέρη εκείνα και είδα σ' ένα χάνι δύο ανθρώπους με τα φτυάρια τους να κατρακυλάνε ένα αυγό, άλλο τίποτα δεν είδα.
Οι χωριανοί τότε συμπέραναν ότι, για να υπάρχουν τόσο μεγάλα αυγά, υπάρχουν και μεγάλες κότες, έτσι πείστηκαν για το λάθος και τον απελευθέρωσαν. Του δώσανε χρήματα, του ζήτησαν συνώνυμη, και έφυγε ο ξένος. Στο δρόμο οι δύο μάγκες συναντήθηκαν και μοιράσανε τα λεφτά που πήρε ο πρώτος.
Τώρα ήρθε η σειρά του άλλου φίλου. Φτάνει στο Γκούγκο⁹⁸, μπαίνει μέσα, τον υποδέχονται οι χωριανοί.
— Τι νέα μας φέρεις;
— Όλα καλά, φέρνει.
Εκείνη τη στιγμή περνάει ένα γαϊδούρι από μπροστά τους. Το κοιτάζει το γαϊδούρι, παράξενα και λέει:
— Πού είναι τα φτερά του; Στην πόλη οι γαϊδούρι πετάνε.
Τον κοιτάζουν θυμωμένοι οι χωρικοί και τον στρώνουν στο ξύλο.
— Εμάς βρε βρήκες να κοροϊδεύεις; και τον κλείνουν μέσα σ' ένα μπουντρούμι.
Σε λίγη ώρα ήρθε ο δεύτερος, μπαίνει στο χωριό, τον υποδέχονται στο καφενείο και τον ρωτούν τα νέα από την

97. Το χωριό Άγκρας του Δήμου Έδεσσας
98. Το χωριό Βρυτά του Δήμου Έδεσσας

in their original form written in Greek letters. Some words are translated, some are not. In the fairy tale "The Wife of Krale Marko", for example, the term "krale" -- "king", which is in the title, is not translated, but several other Slavic words are listed with their Greek translation at the bottom of the page: "mala" means "small", "platno" -- "sail". On the contrary, in the fairy tale "Katska Kalitska" the title is translated - "petted little turtle". At the end of the tales, the informants are

³ πως «το όμαιμον και το ομόγλωσσον δύνανται να μη συνυπάρχουν πάντα εις εν Έθνος»

⁴ Ρ. 256: "τις η γλώσσα δ' όμως του πρωτοτύπου, ή πού επιχωριάζει το άσμα τούτο δεν έκρινεν αναγκαίον να δηλώση, αρχεσθείς να σημειώση, ότι άδεται υπό Αθιγγανίδων 'εις το επιχωριάζον μακεδονικόν ιδίωμα'. Φαίνεται δ' ότι εννοεί το βουλγαρομακεδονικόν ιδίωμα, διότι την αυτήν δήλωσιν έχει και περί του (...) μακροτάτου μυθολογικού άσματος, του οποίου παραθέτει και το πρωτότυπον».

⁵ «...γιγνώσκων δεν την κουτσοβλαχικήν και τα λαλούμενα εν Μακεδονία σλαβικά ιδιώματα, κατόρθωσε να υπερνικήσει πολλές δυσχερείας, εις ας αναγκαιώς προσκόπτει ο επιχειρών συστηματικήν λαογραφικήν εξερεύνησιν της χώρας ταύτης», and further: «ευπρόσδεκτος είναι, καίπερ μη ζητηθείσα, η παρεμβολή των αλλογλώσσων μακεδονικών ασμάτων και των άλλων ειδήσεων εκ της λαογραφίας των μη ελληνοφώνων κατοίκων της Μακεδονίας».

mentioned by name and surname, date of birth and place/village of origin. But again: Nowhere is there any reference to the language in which the informants spoke, to the language in which the tale was narrated.

Another notable element of this edition refers to the toponyms, which are kept in their original form, to be mentioned in the footnotes with their Greek equivalent, i.e. with the name into which the authorities chose to change the original Slavic toponyms into.

It seems here that there is a peculiar self-censorship which governs the entire publication of the book. Its creators want it and at the same time seem not to want it. They want to make a neat version, but they don't want to reveal the secret of the origin of the fairy tales. In what language were the fairy tales collected? From which language have they been translated into Greek? Yannis Hatzipeyou, the president of the association that undertook the publication, in his preface entitled "The fairy tales and their timeless value" also writes in a misleading and cryptic way:

"Fairytales are adapted from region to region. The same tale is told differently in different regions and even in neighboring villages. This is where the diversity comes in with the local idioms –dopiolalies— which exist from region to region. The linguistic variations of the fairy tales force the translation into modern Greek colloquial language. In the fairy tales of this collection, characteristic words or phrases are preserved in the first language of the fairy tale's recording". (Hatzipeyou 2021, 10)

What are these local idioms – dopiolalies? Which is this first language? And what forces the translation of fairy tales? The fact that they are narrated in different dialects, but –again— of which language? "In the first language of recording the fairy tale" is an interesting metonymy for the Macedonian language.

Even more alienating is the preface of the fairy tale collector, Kaiti Tzoga-Vetta. Being a teacher herself, she chose a rather lyrical title for her text – "Always the place, the people and the memory" is the title of her foreword – "Narratives and narratives, personal testimonies, accurate memories of forgotten place names..." and a little further down: "And then the continuation and recording, with absolute respect, in the way and style they have been told to us". But further on, the teacher in her turn attempts to mislead the reader: "The historical and social adventures of this region marked the language of fairy tales that includes the linguistic specificity of the community of this geographical division, so that even today in the names and in the narrative of fairy tales, there are Turkish, Kutsovlach and Slavic words". (Tzoga-Vettou 2021, 12) This is a big contradiction: the president of the association talks about "translation into modern Greek vernacular", the collector lets us understand that the peculiarity of the narrative lies simply in the use of a series of foreign language words that the editors take care to translate in the footnotes, something completely inaccurate.

In this book there is a typical attempt to falsify the linguistic and folklore heritage of fairy tales in Macedonian. In the case of the songs, this was previously done with the translation of the titles and lyrics

of the songs - a translation that led to terrible results in the dance (as demonstrated by Rombou-Levidi) or to a forced Hellenization of them - when, for example, the dance "Puscheno" is translated "Lytos" by a similar association of Florina with the characteristic name "Aristoteles".

But how do the speakers themselves react? Talking to friends from Macedonian-speaking families I noticed a mixture of joy for the publication and bitter acceptance of the silencing of the fairy tale language. The friend I already mentioned told me about the strong, positive feeling she had when she saw her grandmother's fairy tales published, even in another language. Another friend pointed out to me that it would not be easy at all to publish the fairy tales in their original language, because for the publishers and for those who contributed to the publication there would be serious socio-economic consequences, such as defamation, professional exclusion, etc. None of my friends reacted negatively to the obvious rejection and thus the silencing of their beloved mother tongue. Marica Rombou-Levidi mentions characteristically: "One of the consequences of surveillance and language prohibition was silence, and speaking about silence has been for me a major methodological issue in itself both during fieldwork and while writing my ethnography". (Rombou-Levidi 2021, 93) Already in 1992 Anastasia Krakassidou (Karakassidou 1994) had described the emergence of a the so named "sacred scholars" who, in view of the founding of the state of the Republic of Macedonia dedicated themselves to the defending of the idea of Greece's historical, cultural, and linguistic unity throughout the centuries, by censoring in partly very aggressive way all other opinion and information. This "unity" obsession does not seem to occur here. There are clear notions on some other languages apart from Greek in the original versions of the folktales, it seems though that contrary to arvanitika or vlach, the mentioning of any kind of Slavic vernacular is still a prohibited issue.

The last, most tricky question remains: Why is this perpetual hostile treatment of the Macedonian language repeated in Greece in 2021? What could be the cause of yet another attempt to silence and distort the truth even now, after the Prespa Agreement? Folklore has two important strands – songs/dance and fairy tales. For the former, the distortion and persecutions were many, the "songs without words" as the release of a related record in 1988 was called, were imposed for years. The nationalistically oriented cultural association of Edessa had yet no collection of fairy tales to present. So, it seems, the time has come for folktales of no language to exist beside songs without words. However, no national sensitivity, no fear of extortion should affect the scientific discourse, leading it to distort or silence the truth. The *Fairy Tales of Edessa* could be a remarkable book, but for the above enumerated reasons it should decisively be republished in a new edition, where the original language of the informants would be clearly named and described. Otherwise, valuable material would be unavailable and thus lost to the scholar community, to the readers and the speakers of Macedonian in Greece.

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