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TALES IN SOCIAL PRACTICES OF NATURE WORSHIPPERS OF WESTERN SLOVENIA

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ABSTRACT

*In this scientific article, the historical counterculture of Nature Worshipers in Western Slovenia is explained with emphasis on social functions of their oral tradition i.e. tales. The latter, recorded and published primarily by Pavel Medvešček – Klančar, were an important part of Nature Worshipers' educational concept. Cosmogonic myths, etiological explanations, animal tales and anecdotes introduced young children to the ethical norms and spiritual life of the community and played an important role in preserving the identity of Nature Worshipers. Detailed contextual and sociological analysis of Nature Worshipers' tales focuses on Pavel Medvešček's 1991 collection *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* and his 2015 book *From the Invisible Side of the Sky. Revealed Secrets of the Old Belief*.*

Keywords: Nature Worship, Western Slovenia, tales, education, Pavel Medvešček – Klančar

I RACCONTI NELLE PRATICHE SOCIALI DEI NATURALISTI RELIGIOSI DELLA SLOVENIA OCCIDENTALE

SINTESI

*In questo articolo scientifico si analizza la controcoltura storica dei naturalisti religiosi nella Slovenia occidentale, approfondendo specialmente le pratiche sociali legate alla narrativa di tradizione orale come riportata e pubblicata soprattutto da Pavel Medvešček – Klančar. I racconti, in dialetto pravce (sost. fem.), costituivano una parte importante del concetto educativo dei naturalisti religiosi. I miti cosmogonici, le interpretazioni eziologiche, i racconti di animali e gli aneddoti introducevano i bambini già da piccoli alle norme etiche e alla vita spirituale della comunità, contribuendo così a conservarne in modo significativo l'identità naturalistica religiosa. Una dettagliata analisi contestuale e sociologica delle pravce (naturalistico-religiose) è incentrata su due lavori di Pavel Medvešček: la collezione di racconti popolari *Na rdečem oblaku vinograd rase* [Su una nuvola rossa cresce un vigneto] pubblicata nel 1991 e il libro *Iz nevidne strani neba. Razkrite skrivnosti staroverstva* [Dal punto cardinale invisibile. I segreti dell'antica fede svelati] del 2015.*

Parole chiave: naturalismo religioso, Slovenia occidentale, pravce, educazione, Pavel Medvešček – Klančar

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO NATURE WORSHIP IN WESTERN SLOVENIA¹

In late 2015, the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences (ZRC SAZU) published a book entitled *From the Invisible Side of the Sky. Revealed Secrets of the Old Belief (Iz nevidne strani neba. Razkrite skrivnosti staroverstva)* by Slovenian ethnographer and collector Pavel Medvešček – Klančar². The book immediately resounded with the public, while the scientific community has not yet paid it attention in proportion to its importance. Instead, Medvešček's ethnography rose doubts with some ethnologists on authenticity of published data that I consider having been dispersed by now on convincing grounds (Hrobat Virloget, 2022, 16–21; Toplak, 2022, 48–52).

On almost 600 pages, Pavel Medvešček revealed exclusive and well documented ethnographic records, mainly composed of interviews conducted with residents of remote hilly areas of Western Slovenia in the period from 1950 to 1978. The contents of these interviews could not be revealed earlier due to the oath of secrecy required of Pavel Medvešček by his interviewees after they had confided in him and partially co-opted him into their secret community.

The now widely spread use of the term Old Believers for this historical counterculture³ is a problematic exonym for several reasons. I will therefore be referring to its members in this text as Nature Worshipers, which is one of their endonyms and a choice I have thoroughly explained in another recent publication (Toplak, 2022, 53–4).

When discovered by Pavel Medvešček in mid-20th century, the Nature Worshipers' community had been reduced to a few dozen elderly single male members, called *uncles*. According to their oral tradition, however, prior to the First World War at least several hundred people all together may still have been part of it in the Soča River valley. The existence of the community was concealed due to constant persecution perpetrated by the clergy and intolerant members of the Catholic majority. It was this utmost secrecy and geographic isolation in very remote subalpine and Dinaric areas of Western Slovenia as well as efficient leadership and organised defence against outer threats that decisively contributed to the survival of the community which, again according to their tradition, lasted centuries.

Nature Worshipers' was a religious way of life thoroughly aligned with awe-inspiring nature or, in words of Pavel Medvešček's principal informer Janez

1 This paper is the result of research carried out in the research project "Social Functions of Fairy Tales" (J6-1807) founded by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS).

2 Klančar was the name of the homestead where Pavel Medvešček was born (»At Klančar's«). He may have wished to emphasize his roots and attachment to his home region by using Klančar as second surname at times. In official documents, he was Pavel Medvešček.

3 Term 'counterculture' applies to subcultures that are not only different from the mainstream culture, but in many aspects of their practices and values opposite to the mainstream culture (Yinger, 1960, 626).

Strgar, “Religion is finite. Our ancient belief, however, is fundamental and eternal like nature which constantly renews itself and changes and therefore survives” (Medvešček, 2015, 275). Nature Worshipers’ value system was based on radical biocentrism,⁴ loyalty to ancestral land (rather than abstract and alienated state), tradition, honesty, reciprocity, modesty, tolerance, generosity, solidarity, and dignity.

Nature Worship ideology centred on primeval Creatrix, Nikrmana,⁵ who was referred to as “she” but appeared to individual community members as clouds, lightnings, rainbows, various animals etc. A purportedly older Great Mother (Nature) cult was also remembered at places; however, only one member of the community equalled the Great Mother to Nikrmana (Medvešček, 2015, 114). Sun, the giver of light and warmth needed by all living beings, was also worshipped, particularly at solstices, which were the Nature Worshipers’ most important holidays. The moon was, however, even more venerated celestial body by them for its obvious power over nature and above all, over water. Protective and fertilizing power of concrete or abstract triads called *tročans*⁶ was managed via ritually empowered stones with embedded eyes called *snake heads*, and sacred megaliths called *matjars*⁷. Spatial *tročans* consisting of areas between sacred hilltops, riverbeds and underground caves were connected into a network once reportedly covering the entire “Nature Worshipers’ land” and turning the latter into a Foucauldian heterotopia with respect to Nature Worshipers’ non-suspecting Christian neighbours.⁸

Nature Worship included elements rather typical of nature religion belief-systems such as animism, totemism, worship of omnipresent ancestors, veneration of sacred riverbeds, mountains, and subterranean caves, as well as of sacred trees and sacred animals. Taboos and ritual use of hallucinogens were also part of it. Nature Worshipers believed in transmigration of the “soul” (*zduhec*⁹) after death into a new body of individual choice. They rejected Christian religious features, such as anthropomorphising deities, sin, guilt, atonement, hell and heaven, idolatry, priestly mediation between man and God, and mass rites, or fundamentally transformed them such as prayer or pilgrimage.¹⁰ Still, numerous elements of Nature Worship

4 Biocentrism is an ideology opposite to anthropocentrism; from biocentric perspective humans are but one species in the ecosystem within which every species and every individual possesses inherent value and has the right to pursue their interests (Taylor, 1986).

5 The word Nikrmana (also pronounced Nekrmana or Nejrmana by some) lends itself to many possible translations and interpretations. Pleterski (2015, 23) claimed that it may have been invented by the Nature Worshipers for security purposes. I would argue at this time in my ongoing research of Nature Worship that Nikrmana could possibly stem from Lat. Necromantia (‘speaking to the dead’) and, like Old Belief, may be an exonym rather than endonym.

6 Pl. of *tročan*. From *trojica*, *trojka* – a group of three units.

7 Pl. of *matjar*. The etymology of this word is currently unclear.

8 Literally “other space”, a heterotopia is a territory where a nonhegemonic social paradigm is enacted; it is “a space in relation to all other spaces, but in a way that suspends, neutralizes or distorts the whole of the relations that space creates, reflects, and thinks” (Foucault, 1967, 3).

9 From dim. for *duh* – spirit or from arch. *vzduh*, air.

10 On prayers cf. Medvešček, 2015, 70, 136. On pilgrimage cf. Medvešček, 2015, 50.

appear reflections of corresponding Christian beliefs and practices (or vice versa) which poses interpretative challenges as to the historical and ideational origin of Nature Worship. I argue that coexistence with intolerant Catholics prompted Nature Worshipers to practice deliberate and intentional “dual faith” (*dvoeverie*¹¹) as an infra-political strategy, which must have contributed to significant modifications of original Nature Worship over time despite Nature Worshipers’ strong cultural defence reflex.

Nature Worshipers’ community was mostly biological although individuals born in Catholic families were sometimes co-opted, especially those with seer abilities. The members of the secret community sought no converts and let their members convert to Catholicism if they so desired. The Catholic majority’s attitude towards Nature Worshipers was mostly one of persecution, desecration, and violence inciting (dis)simulation, survival compromises, mimicry, boycott, infra politics¹² and active resistance on the side of the threatened minority. Outmost secrecy maintained by oaths was one of important Nature Worshipers’ defences; it included use of pseudonyms in communication among community members as well as denial of any knowledge on community leaders and their assistants to their surroundings.

Nature Worshipers’ community had a secret territorial administration running parallel to official administrative structures. Every autonomous administrative unit, called *hosta*,¹³ had a religious and political leader, *dehnar*.¹⁴ The latter was selected by the ruling *dehnar* according to meritocratic principles and after a prolonged training. The *dehnar* ruled autonomously over a *hosta* with the assistance of three *sworn-in* [men].¹⁵ The *dehnars* pursued communal economic policies (barter, seed banks, mutual loans, distribution of food stocks) and enforced survival strategies in the interest of all community members. They coordinated an efficient healthcare network for people, animals, and plants, maintained by itinerant healers of both genders. They judged by principles of reciprocity andlottocracy, and headed a repressive apparatus, called the Black Watch (*Črna*

11 Dvoeverie is a polemical concept in Slavic studies denoting among other things co-existence of two different belief-systems and a form of resistance to Christianity (Vukelič, 2012, 343–7).

12 Scott (1990) identified the infra-political as the cultural and structural substratum of those more visible forms of action which attract scholarly attention. It allows political actors to retain, uphold or perpetuate their capacity for agency when political context precludes any serious chance of making tangible political gains (Chvasta, 2006, 5–6). Deprived of access to legitimate channels for expression, people cannot and will not articulate their claims via the conventional political channels but will resort to action ‘below the radar’ to reclaim their dignity, be it individually or collectively.

13 Vern. for forest. Hosta may also represent a primordial social form, predating, parallel and/or incorporated in the historical basic social organisational unit of Ancient Slavs, the *župa* (Toplak, 2019, 31–2).

14 Possibly from Dechant, Old High German term for a minor official in charge of ten households or settlements.

15 Two of the *sworn men* came second best to the *dehnar* in the long training for leadership, while the third was appointed by the members of the *hosta* (Medvešček, 2015, 66).

vahta),¹⁶ for security purposes. The extremely secretive Black Watch, composed of three unmarried men, performed tasks of investigators, intelligence service, persecutors, and executors on those threatening community members and on offenders within the community. The *dehnars* regularly met at the regional level and possibly coordinated their actions.

During the 20th century, the Nature Worshippers' community gradually disintegrated due to environmental destruction and human loss, especially that of their leaders *dehnars*, caused by both World Wars. Modernisation processes (infrastructure construction, industrialisation, and urbanisation) severed the inter-generational ties and depopulated remote rural areas.

NATURE WORSHIPPERS (RE)PRODUCTION OF TRADITION

Nature Worshippers' was a patriarchal, but also "tender" culture (Hofstede, 2001, 297) focused as its members were on interpersonal relations and communal wellbeing.¹⁷ The nucleus of Nature Worshippers' society was the family symbolised by the "blood *tročan*" of father, mother, and child, and considered vital to the survival of the community (Medvešček, 2015, 455).

The Nature Worshippers' community maintained a non-institutionalized and non-dogmatic life-long knowledge (re)production and education system. While the *dehnars* took on secular as well as spiritual leadership and offered advice and instruction to any member in need, seers (*vidoni*)¹⁸ and the learned (*veduni*)¹⁹ of both genders focused on the production of knowledge by observations and experiments. In absence of writings,²⁰ Nature Worshippers transferred knowledge by oral tradition and placed great value in their word, especially in promises and oaths.

Nature Worshippers did not maintain schools of the kind introduced by local authorities from the 19th century onwards, and the children of Nature Worshippers also had to attend public schools after elementary education had been made mandatory. Since the educational content in public schools was heavily influenced by Catholicism and often contrary to what the Nature Worshippers themselves taught their children, the latter were protected from harmful confusion thus produced by a special amulet, called *krint*, which every Nature Worshippers' child secretly wore on them to school.²¹ Children were warned that they might hear strange teachings from the "non ours" and were told to "think as you feel and believe not as you are being preached

16 Vern. for guard (from Ger. Wacht).

17 For details on Nature Worshippers' social structure and organisation cf. Toplak, 2022, 47–70.

18 From *videti* – to see.

19 From *vedeti* – to know.

20 Rare written sources were reportedly produced primarily by the *dehnars* but none has been identified yet.

21 The *krint* was a small flat pebble with the surface divided into four partitions, or four triangles, by natural lines in the stone that had a common centre point. "Krint radiated great power and thus repelled what was imposed on [the children]" (Medvešček, 2015, 93).

to” (Medvešček, 2015, 93). Nature Worshipers taught their children tolerance that was not reciprocated by their Catholic school mates (Medvešček, 2015, 493) and was well resumed in words of one of my informers: “Help the Other or leave them alone!”. Another traumatic difference between the Catholic school environment and Nature Worshipers’ counterculture was corporal punishment commonly practised in schools, while Nature Worshipers opposed violence against children (Medvešček, 2015, 463) and took example in upbringing from wild animals that do not punish or abuse their offspring.²² Also, children born out of wedlock, stigmatised by Catholics, were for Nature Worshipers rather a consequence of reckless and immature behaviour (Medvešček, 2015, 92). Another difference that must have been difficult to comprehend for children was Nature Worshipers’ much more tolerant attitude toward the body and bodily functions embodied in the semantics: while Catholics called genitals ‘shame’,²³ for Nature Worshipers genitals were simply *natura*.

Natural Worship schooling began with tales that introduced small children to the spiritual life of the community without coercion and dogmatism and gradually instilled in them the community’s ethical norms. Most tales invited children to relate to nature, especially to Nature Worshipers’ sacred animals and plants. The children’s tales did not directly teach Nature Worship, yet they contained its elements, which thus early became familiar to the children. Nature Worshiper Janez Strgar explained the use of tales in children’s upbringing quite aligned with Walter Benjamin claim that fairy tale was “the first tutor of children” (Benjamin, 1936, 11):

You will probably be disappointed. But there were no lessons, as in other religions. Everything happened at home and very slowly. We explained things to the children in such a way that they understood. Only when they were old enough to help in the house and on the farm, a particular issue was brought up and explained to them as thoroughly as possible. During breaks and in the evenings, they were treated to special explanations related to many stories about ghosts, Babja Cave, Jazbenk,²⁴ snake heads and more. This initiation was carried out in the same way as it is done with the cultivation of trees. In the end, to our delight, the fruits ripened (Medvešček, 2015, 70).

Medvešček also learned from his interlocutors that tales were told primarily in winter in kitchens when shortage of light and work also kept adults inside

22 The Call That Won’t Go Out is a poignant tale that Pavel Medvešček recorded in Grudnica on the Banjška plateau and renders a particularly good insight in Nature Worshipers’ attitude towards children: “The calls that travel the longest and deepest are those connected with love or fear. Then come the calls by children, although many of these calls remain in their chests, because they are unable to speak out in the world of adults to get help. If this is the case, the adults are to blame because they bully them instead of loving them” (Medvešček & Skrt, 2016, 129).

23 Slov. *sram*. Cf. Medvešček, 2015, 532, 202.

24 The Babja Cave was the most important Nature Worshipers’ sacred site on the left bank of the Soča River. Jazbenk was a sacred chasm on the Banjška Plateau nearby.

(Medvešček, 2015, 131). The custom of telling and listening to stories died out with the introduction of radio and television. In words of another important Pavel Medvešček's informer Tone Kopoviščar, the Nature Worshipers "used to spend evenings and workfree days talking. We listened to what some among us knew or had lived through. At present however, when I walk past houses in daytime or at night, I hear echoes of the same voices everywhere" (Medvešček, 2015, 109).

When children got older, the initiation to Nature Worship continued with *bratinja*²⁵, an up to one-week intensive instructive gathering conducted by the *dehnar*. Most Nature Worshipers attended at least three *bratinjas* in their lifetime. According to Pavel Medvešček, the *bratinjas* "represented a kind of preparation for life for Nature Worshipers' youth", where they learned community rules on how "to live and behave towards fellow human beings and nature" (Medvešček, 2015, 561). During the *bratinjas*, the *dehnar* was able to assess the abilities of young individuals to eventually select his successor. Adults seeking advice also often came to *bratinjas* held by the *dehnar*.²⁶

As practically all Nature Worshipers, the *dehnar* was primarily a farmer, but in the "distant past" he was also the only literate (Medvešček, 2015, 75). For example, the *dehnar* in the remote area of Volčanski Ruti near Tolmin read books on history, fruit growing, poetry, the national emancipation struggle and alcohol addiction; he must have mastered at least German language in addition to Slovenian (Medvešček & Skrt, 2016, 13–18). With all his extended knowledge, the *dehnar* did not teach or learn *per se*; rather, he transmitted information and wisdom through conversation and example. He himself constantly received knowledge from his inner teacher *zduhec* and the ancestors and transferred it on to those who were receptive to it. There was no absolute authority in this way of (re)producing knowledge; the teacher did not have to be always right. Learning lasted indefinitely and was not judged by grades. It took place gradually and was adapted to the circumstances in a safe home environment, without dividing students by age, assessment, comparison, and competition. The social framework of this education system was not a group of foreigners of the same generation as in public schools, but was rather inter-generational within the extended family, and community.

Since according to Nature Worshipers' ideology, everything in the world was interlinked and interdependent, connections between pieces of information were freely established and learning could not be strictly divided onto distinct areas of content. The goal of education was not the promotion of the individual, but the survival and well-being of the community.

25 From *bratenje* – friendly gathering (*brat* – brother).

26 Janez Strgar probably also had the *bratinjas* in mind when he warned Pavel Medvešček about his deficient Nature Worship education upon Medvešček's co-optation into the community: "It is as if someone does not go to school and therefore remains illiterate. True, you can learn later, but this is not real schooling, which at the same time gives you much more" (Medvešček, 2015, 63).

The tradition remained important throughout Nature Worshipers' lives:

If you wanted to learn important life rules and duties, you had to, were you lucky enough, learn all this at home, from the old tree trunk consisting of grandfathers and grandmothers, along with uncles, aunts, and parents. It was the only way of living and surviving in this "rocky paradise". Your [Christian] neighbour, often dwelling far away from you, could not be a reliable support or adviser, let alone teacher (Medvešček, 2015, 154).

Tales were thus a self-evident and continuous element of Nature Worshipers' lives from early age when they were their recipients, to adult and old age when many also became their transmitters. Nature Worshipers mainly referred to them as *pravce*,²⁷ *štorje*,²⁸ or tales without distinguishing among these terms as to their content. Besides the *dehnars* and older relatives, tales were also told by the *čelebrins*²⁹ (Medvešček, 2015, 205) who seemed to be (itinerant) storytellers and who took on to entertain children and adults in exchange of food and accommodation (Medvešček, 2015, 343). Tales for adults were also told by afore mentioned *uncles* who, out of boredom and often under the influence of alcohol, in wintertime when there was not much else to do than sit around the fire, enjoyed simultaneous invention of tales. Such a tale was called *izmišljija* or *zmišljica*³⁰ and was made up by passing the word from one eager storyteller to another (Medvešček, 2015, 281–3). Unfortunately, the admission of this custom also threw initial doubts of authenticity over the entire Medvešček's ethnography pertaining to Nature Worship (Pleterski, 2015, 23).

(CON)TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF NATURE WORSHIPPERS' TALES

For the contextual and sociological analysis of Nature Worshipers' tales two sources above all will be referred to: *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows – Tales and Stories from the Matajur to the Korada* (Medvešček, 1991) and *From the Invisible Side of the Sky. Revealed Secrets of the Old Belief* (Medvešček, 2015).

On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows is a transcript of 117 tales told to Pavel Medvešček in the period 1950–1957 by the inhabitants of the Idrija River valley and the immediate surroundings. The Idrija River has been the historical border between Slovenia and Italy with a significant Slovenian dialect speaking minority living also on the Italian side of the border in the region Veneto-Friuli and adhering to the same local culture.

27 Vern. for *pravljica* – fairy tale.

28 From It. *storia* – story.

29 Perhaps from It. *celebrare* – to perform.

30 From *izmišljati* – to invent, to make up.

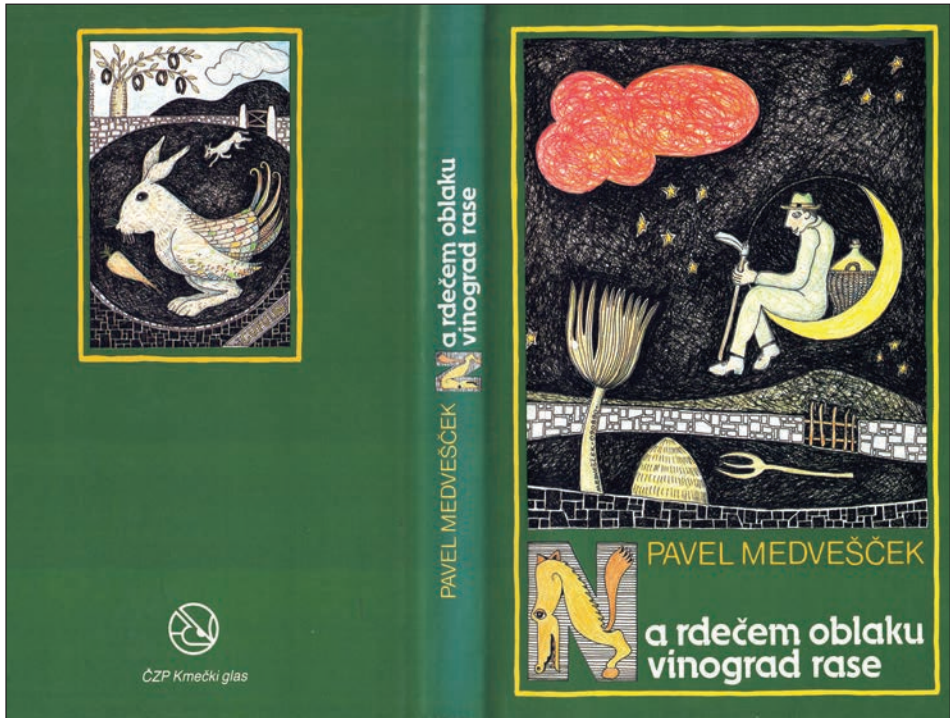


Fig. 1: Book cover of *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows*, collected, written and illustrated by Pavel Medvešček (Medvešček, 1991).

By publishing *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* in 1991, decades after having recorded the tales, Pavel Medvešček possibly tried to draw attention of the public to the forgotten underdeveloped and depopulated border region of the Idrija River valley. In his foreword, he described how he had got acquainted with the region as a child and how he later covered all its territory on foot. He detailed regional economic, political, and social history, depicting its close historical ties with the immediate vicinity on the Italian side of the border. He argued the peak of prosperity in the region to have been in the 19th century judging by the highest ever number of inhabitants back then and by the quality of architectural heritage from that era.³¹ Medvešček emphasised how inhabitants of the Idrija valley suffered under Italian mid-War occupation and how devotedly they supported anti-Fascist Resistance during Second World War despite their poverty. Their ultimate vindication came only in 1947 when the Idrija River valley was made part of Slovenian/Yugoslav territory.

31 At the time of visiting in the early 1950s Pavel Medvešček was studying graphic design and in 1961 he started working for the regional authority on cultural heritage conservation.

However, the Idrija River valley people felt let down by the Socialist regime that put a lot of economic and propaganda pressure on them. The disappointed, Medvešček assumed, probably developed “a sort of defence mechanism that others advantageously interpreted as a betrayal of homeland” (Medvešček, 1991, 7). Subsequently, many young locals emigrated abroad. The “wartime preachers” on prospects of the brave new Socialist world never returned and the Idrija River valley had slowly been dying ever since. In Cold War circumstances, researching and even only circulating along the border separating two global ideological paradigms was very difficult, Medvešček remembered. Amidst all hardship, especially elderly people were all the keener to reminisce of old times with nostalgia and continued to cling to their ancient traditions. When almost four decades later, Medvešček returned to the Idrija River valley prior to the publication of *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows*, he witnessed depopulation, subsequent reforestation and rewilding, and ancient traditions having sunk into oblivion. Without any revival initiative from state or local authorities, Medvešček finally accused, “this holy Slovenian soil, soaked in sweat and blood of our grandfathers and grand grandfathers is condemned to shame and isolation at the extreme margin of our homeland” (Medvešček, 1991, 7).



Fig. 2: Pavel Medvešček's map of the Idrija region (Medvešček, 1990, inside cover).



Fig. 3: Pavel Medvešček – Klančar (Photo: Jože Suhadolnik).

It may have been a set of personal and other circumstances (financial obstacles, work overload, oath of secrecy to the Nature Worshippers) that led to the publication of the collection *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* in 1991. Yet, it was also precisely the time when Slovenia was undergoing the process of secession from Socialist Yugoslavia and acquiring independence; thus it may also have been that Pavel Medvešček decided that national political situation was appropriate to remind of the forgotten and stigmatised Idrija River valley. The foreword to the collection is charged with implicit current political content and explicit local patriotism, while hardly any attention is paid to collection itself. More, Pavel Medvešček is critical toward his own recording effort, calling it “very amateur”, inconsistent and reckless (Medvešček, 1991, 10). And still, he decided to publish it at the historical moment that would have

turned *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* into a vehicle to reinforce the idea of integrity of Slovenian ethnic territory and political entity. Unfortunately, the exact reason why the collection only came out in 1991 cannot be known since Pavel Medvešček – Klančar passed away in 2020, an irreparable loss for Slovenian culture.

On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows was divided by Pavel Medvešček into six chapters each introduced by a folk poem. According to Stanonik, “most of the tales [in the collection] are not pure examples of a certain genre; this is rather an intertwining of mythical and fairy tale elements [...], however, the composition does not appear eclectic, rather, it creates a page-turning tension” (Stanonik, 1991). The classification of tales by Pavel Medvešček appears broadly founded on fairy tales, magical creatures, and superstition; tales on plants; tales on animals; “philosophical” tales; historical tales and myths of origin; and anecdotes. It may be assumed that it was, rather than methodical and analytical, a result of author’s intuition and viewpoints which is often the case with fairy tale collections (Lévi Strauss, 2005, 223).

Indeed, Pavel Medvešček confirmed that to some extent by the following description of his working methods when recording the tales:

I was visiting villages and settlements at random and without any planned program. Back then I had no intention either to systematically edit or process what I collected from people and was of interest. For that, I had no prior training or instructions whatsoever, [I therefore] recorded only those tales that I found interesting, or I had not heard before. That is why many tales remained unrecorded and probably lost (Medvešček, 1991, 10).

Albeit they should not be applied rigidly (Kropej Telban, 2021, 39), classifications do provide a useful analytical foundation. Tales in general may be historical, heroic, etiological, mythical, legendary, funny, and scary tales (Kropej Telban, 2021, 44).³² In accordance with the basic classification of folk tale genres (Kropej Telban, 2021, 31–47), *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* includes a little bit of everything: myths (of origin), legends (on lives of saints), fairy tales, animal tales, horror stories, funny stories, anecdotes, and personal memories (*memorata*). However, there are hardly any fairy tales *per se*. According to Kropej Telban’s classification criteria, the most fairy tale-like are *Utana*, *How the Princess Married the Stone Mason* and *The Goshawk with a Golden Beak* (Medvešček, 1991, 44, 59, 103). The rest of items in the collection are folk tales or stories that depict an unusual, supernatural, or historic event presented as a true story (Kropej Telban, 2021, 42).

32 This and other available definitions/classifications designed by folklore theorists such as Max Luthi, Annti Arne and Stith Thompson were taken up by Slovenian folklorists such as Ivan Grafenauer, Milko Matičetov, Marija Stanonik, and most recently Monika Kropej Telban (2021).

An important number of tales in the collection refer to magical creatures, such as *lintuar*, *ludro*, *mrkucin*, *vedolja*, *kozlink*, *duja baba*, *dobrinika*, *vodovnica*, *mavra*. *Štrija*, appearing in four tales, was a witch with magical powers, quite like *duja baba* or wild woman.³³ While *dobrinika* and *vodovnica* were good fairies, *tantaua* or temptation comes across as a version of the devil. *Kozlink* was half man-half goat. These imaginary beings are often described in contexts that let transpire how real they were to the teller: the reader gets an impression that these beings are a fact of local community's everyday existence. In some tales, concrete instructions are explained how to deal with these creatures when one ventures upon them. That is why they may be considered tales rather than fairy tales. Some of the tales on spirits and magical creatures could also be considered cautionary scary tales or *strašnice*³⁴.

Over 30 items out of 117 in the collection are etiological “how and/or why” stories, i.e. they provide a simple and easily memorable explanation for some natural or cultural phenomenon and could certainly be made of use in children upbringing to satisfy their curiosity and to warn them of life's challenges and dangers.

Animal tales predictably include animals from local natural environment such as horse, crow, goshawk, pig, lizard, silkworm, wolf. Out of these, only cats had been given a negative connotation (when possessed by the magical creature *lintuar*). Imaginary animals also abound such as *kvaternik*, *kačon*, *cufulin*, *duja riba*, three-headed bear and golden goat. The Golden Goat (Medvešček, 1991, 135) tells a variation of a common Slovenian folk tradition on mythical Attila's treasure buried somewhere in Slovenian soil. Attila's army that crossed current Slovenian territory in the 5th century from east to west to invade the Friuli plain had been memorised in folklore well despite the time distance which made ethnologists hypothesize that Attila may have been confused with later invading armies such as the Ottomans (Šmitek, 2011, 271–2). Similar tales on the golden goat also appear in other tale collections, even an eponymous one (Stress et al, 2008) but they are not connected with the iconic item of all-Slovenian folklore, the legend of Zlatorog (The Chamois with Golden Horns).

Beside the golden goat, there are very few motives in *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* that remotely refer to what has been selected by ethnographers and ethnologists from the recorded oral tradition as “Slovenian folk tales”: Wild Woman (*Duja baba*) vaguely reminds of St. Nicholas's doings, Tamurgasti recalls carnival customs, while King Matevž is a version of another iconic Slovenian folk tale, King Matjaž. Among magical creatures, some like *lintuar* have been made part of all-Slovenian folk tale repertoire (Dapit & Kropelj, 2004, 8–9), while the elusive *ludro* for example seems an exclusively local tradition.

33 Wild (wo)man or *ajd* (from Ger. *Heide*, pagan) was in folk tradition a common reference to mythical remaining pagan population in remote areas.

34 From *strašiti* – to scare.

Of the few tales in the collection referring to Slovenian folklore in any way, King Matevž is the closest to the all-Slovenian folk tradition. On the other hand, the tale of Desetnica, the Tenth Daughter, which is also a very popular Slovenian fairy tale, is an entirely different story in *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows*.³⁵

Considering parallels and synchronicities between *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* and what is nowadays deemed Slovenian folk tale tradition, let me reiterate that Pavel Medvešček composed the content of the collection arbitrarily, according to availability of tellers, his own interest and what ethnographic material he had been able to preserve in more than four decades between recording and publication. Also, what we now consider Slovenian folk tale tradition has been a product of constant selections: by those who chose or not to transmit oral tradition, by those who decided or not to record a particular tale and finally by those who decided to popularize or omit a particular tale in collections that contributed to keeping folk tale tradition alive and spreading tales among Slovenian-reading public until certain local tales have been accepted as “Slovenian”. This process, aptly described by D. B. Rotar as “picking from the past” in his eponymous critique of Slovenian historiography (Rotar, 2007) is typical of not only creation of national folk tradition opus, but also of national history as such, especially within processes of national political emancipation in which historiography played an important role of an ethnic community’s cohesion-inducing narrative. Thus, tales now considered Slovenian folk tales had all been recorded as local tales and have been “upgraded” to a national status by arbitrary selection or even conscious political agenda of their recorders. Despite being a living treasure of communities’ pasts, “national” folklore as it has been passed down to the present is therefore also “invented tradition” that nationalist ideology relies on (Hobsbawm, 1983).

Another common category of tales that is barely present in *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* are tales of origin. The few tales in question do not provide explicit explanation on creation proper, as do numerous Nature Worshipers’ tales included in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* (Medvešček, 2015, 116, 128, 273, 363 sq.). Rather, they explain settlement of the Idrija region such as The Blonds, the Black-haired and the Brown-haired (Medvešček, 1991, 52) that recounts cultural contact and interaction in the regional past dominated as it was by the Soča river. The other tale of origin, Idra and Kamber, introduces a

35 Unlike the conventional Desetnica, who was born in a well-off family and was randomly chosen to leave home, Desetnica is the tenth child in a very poor family and was sold away to work as a small child. The tale then describes her as doomed to also give birth to ten children and is, rather than a fairy tale populated by magical creatures like the conventional Desetnica, a story about inescapability of faith and the strength of women facing life’s challenges, perhaps meant for adults as well as children. In theory, Deset(i)nica also stands for a cautionary tale on the deceptiveness of homonyms in comparative cultural analysis brought forward by contemporary subaltern studies (De Castro, 2009, 39–40).



Fig. 4: Pavel Medvešček's illustration of the tale The Blonds, the Black-Haired and the Brown-Haired (Medvešček, 1990, 53).

giant fish *Idra* as a metaphor for river and a giant eagle *Kamber* as a metaphor for the *Kambreško* hill range (Medvešček, 1991, 171). Historic tales in the collection include common Slovenian motives such as Ottoman invasions, wars, migrations, and epidemics.

Finally, Pavel Medvešček included in the collection several anecdotes on groups of people and memorable individuals. Some of these individuals truly stand out and, along with some of the etiological narratives in the collection, invite the research question that titles the next chapter.

IS *ON A RED CLOUD A VINEYARD GROWS* A RECORD OF NATURE WORSHIP TALE TRADITION?

Considering Pavel Medvešček's ethnographic opus on Nature Worship in Western Slovenia, a pertinent analytical challenge regarding *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* is whether could this collection be considered a source on Nature Worshipers' folk tale tradition. In general, especially historic tales in the collection were recognized as "so connected with concrete life that can be considered an important source, even a document of the past" (Stanonik, 1991). Reviewing the collection soon after publication, Kogej also argues that *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* could be used as historical source (Kogej, 1992, 441). In 1992, there was no public knowledge on the existence of Nature Worshipers. Did Pavel Medvešček include some hints in *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* to alleviate the burden of secrecy he was to carry on for the following 17 years the same way he did in his 1992 ethnographic collection *The Secret and Sacredness of Stone (Skrivnost in svetost kamna)* and the 2006 *Flight into the Shadow of the Moon (Let v lunino senco)*? Present but also absent elements to be discussed below indeed point in that direction.

Only 6 items out of 117 tales in the collection refer to not God, but Creator.³⁶ The Slovenian countryside having been pious and devoted to the Catholic Church, especially since Counter-Reformation era, the absence of Catholic markers and Christian legends in general is noticeable. While phrases like "God forbid" or "God have mercy" do appear a few times, only one tale undoubtedly refers to the Catholic God (Medvešček, 1991, 125) and three tales explicitly to the devil (Medvešček, 1991, 56, 68, 169), also mentioned casually elsewhere. Angels only appear in three tales.³⁷ There is only one legend, referring to deeds of locally popular St. Anton (Medvešček, 1991, 88), and a general absence of miracles in tales' contents. Nature Worshipers did not believe in miracles as their lifeworld, in Habermasian sense of the term, was a making of natural processes, not of some miraculous divine will.

36 Tales 20, 94, 21, 28, 38, 47. It should be noted that Nature Worshipers' creator *Nikrmana* was referred to as "she" yet was described as multi-form and was thus possibly a multi-gender or non-gender deity (Pleterski, 2022, 135).

37 Tales 32, 43, 105. References to angels could also allude to Nature Worshipers' *zduhec*.

The silence over typical Catholic content is interestingly consistent with a particular impact of Nature Worship on Western Slovenia that can also be identified by what is missing and not only by what is present space-wise; the telling “absence of presence” of Christian roadside crosses, columns, and chapels in the territory historically acculturated by Nature Worshipers I addressed in detail in another text (Toplak, 2022, 81–2). However, the absence of Catholic content in tales may also be Medvešček’s (un)conscious choice and thus cannot weigh importantly in this inquiry.

Another notable absence that would make sense, if tales were part of Nature Worship tradition, is that of tales of origin. The latter abound in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* but their content is very different or opposite to the rich all-Slovenian tradition in that genre due to the counter-Christian religious foundation of Nature Worship.³⁸ Even if Pavel Medvešček recorded more explicit such tales in the Idrija region in the 1950s, he probably would have abstained to include them in the collection in 1991 when he was still under oath of secrecy on Nature Worship.

The geographical area covered by the collection corresponds to the Nature Worshipers’ dwelling territory, as was later revealed in further Medvešček’s publications. Dispersed throughout tales are references to settlements and farmsteads that feature in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* as Nature Worship strongholds: Vogrinki, Kuščarji, Lukač, Kopovišče etc. The Matajur and the Korada mentioned in the title of the collection feature prominently in Nature Worship tradition as sacred sites. Matajur, especially, was the most important hilltop to Nature Worshipers on the right bank of the Soča, and was sometimes referred to as the Great Mother.

Tale collecting in the Idrija valley and the immediate surroundings took place in the early years of Medvešček’s ethnographic efforts. He may or may have not yet been aware then of the existence of Nature Worshipers’ community, although, judging by the information on recording time of interviews in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*, he could have recorded tales published in *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* at the same time as pertinent information on Nature Worship later published in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*, at least in case of informers Antonija Faletič, Štefan Krajnik and Martin Klemenčič (Medvešček, 2015, 543–8). Altogether, out of 40 storytellers recorded with names and addresses in *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows*, 12 also appear as informers on Nature Worshipers’ secret community in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*. Tales told to Pavel Medvešček by these 12 informers include contents of Nature Worship, but these same informers also contributed tales on superstition, historical tales, anecdotes, and funny tales. Funny tales on differences between the valley dwellers and the hill dwellers provided exclusively by cross-referenced informers, do remind of the attitude of the Nature Worshipers, mainly inhabit-

38 Cf. for example Medvešček, 2015, 116, 128, 173, 189, 236, 273 sq.

ing remote hilly areas, towards the *dolinci*, or valley people, which may even hint at the historical migration dynamics in this part of Slovenia (Medvešček, 1991, 165–8). However, no clear distinction between both geographic categories that would correspond to religious affiliation was ever made, and this argument thus cannot be deemed conclusive.

In the collection, we also find tales on Nature Worshipers' most sacred plants such as cornel, pomegranate, box tree, and laburnum, but they are based on a different, sometimes even opposite aetiology than the relevant Nature Worship tradition in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*. Again, some of these tales were provided by the cross-referenced informers and others were not. To sum up, there is no straight corroboration between the 12 informers in the know of Nature Worship and the contents provided by them in *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows*. Possibly, some Medvešček's informers for *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* were indisposed or had passed away when Medvešček was collecting material for *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*. Also, some may have deemed Medvešček untrustworthy then and did not want to share sensible contents but did so later for *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*.

It appears clear by now that *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* cannot be considered an exclusive record of folk tale tradition produced by Nature Worshipers alone. However, that does not mean that quite explicit Nature Worship contents cannot be detected in the tales comprised in the collection if one knows what to look for. And to strengthen my argument, a comparative analysis of tales collected in the same Idrija region, but from Veneto Slovenians on the other side of the border, include no such references and topical elements as the ones I am about to present below (Tomasetig, 1981).

The tales in the collection that contain most explicit references to Nature Worship tradition are Why Ančilo Cut Down a Linden Tree, Zakreman, and How the Stake in the Haystack Grew Green. Let us take a closer look at them.

In Why Ančilo Cut Down a Linden Tree Gunj planted a linden tree in front of his house and his wife Varda as well as his son Vogrin and daughter Očna took very good care of it, per father's instructions. The dying Gunj promised to ensure the tree spirit's protection for his descendants if the linden tree prospered. Vogrin and Očna obeyed their father's last wishes and even put seven stones around the tree for village elders to deliberate there. Vogrin charged his son Artov and daughter Zaršča to continue caring for the linden tree. Zaršča ended up marrying the middleman Ančilo who cut down the tree in Artov's absence. Upon return home, Artov mourned the tree and then beheaded his brother-in-law. Artov buried the body in the forest so that it would be soaked into tree roots, while the tree grown out of the burial mound he contemptuously named "on manure" (*nagnoj*, Laburnum).

Gunj is a vernacular expression for horse blanket,³⁹ but ‘gun’ was also Nature Worshipers’ ritual drink (Medvešček, 2015, 138). Varda means ‘guard’ and could perhaps be a hint at Nature Worshipers’ “police” Black Vahta. Vogrin reminds of the actual settlement Vogrinki in Volčanski Ruti, a Nature Worshipers’ stronghold. Očna is another Nature Worshipers’ sacred hilltop where they used to worship sun. Artov may refer to Artovlja, a nearby hilltop where a sacred rock *matjar* used to stand (Medvešček, 2015, 571). Zaršča could be a reference to Zarščina, a settlement under the Korada also featuring in Medvešček’s ethnography on Nature Worshipers. Ančilo is a much lower hilltop some 30 km to the south of the mentioned locales. None of the first names in the tale is a common local first name. Linden tree is the symbol of Slovenianness, but also one of Nature Worshipers’ most sacred trees (Medvešček, 2015, 75, 291, 399). Medvešček (2015, 392) reports on the local tradition of elected village congregations in stone circles around linden trees that deliberated on local affairs, although the stones of a feudal *dvanajstija*⁴⁰ were twelve, not seven. Seven however, a common magic number in folk tale tradition, was also a sacred number in Nature Worshipers’ tradition, often related to healing practices. Tree spirit is absent from classical collections of Slovenian tales on spirits and ghosts such as Kelemina’s (1930) but features explicitly in Nature Worshipers’ tradition (e. g. Medvešček, 2015, 401). The middleman Ančilo may be, by the altitude and distance of the homonymous hilltop and as an itinerant professional, a symbol of foreigner, the disrespectful Other. Sacred trees were considered sentient beings and friends by Nature Worshipers and indeed Artov mourns the linden tree like a human being. By murdering the tree cutter, he ultimately equals tree’s existence to human life, which is also typical of Nature Worshipers’ attitude towards nature but much less typical of Christian anthropocentrism. Finally, laburnum was one of the most sacred Nature Worshipers’ plants and they used its seemingly indestructible wood in making of numerous ritual objects. Why Ančilo Cut Down the Linden Tree may thus well be an example of that above noted Nature Worshipers’ didactics via children’s tales: the children became familiar with localities and elements and terms related to Nature Worship without preaching. The tale also taught on the proper attitude towards (sacred) trees capable of absorbing human energy through the roots (Medvešček, 2015, 205) and introduced the mighty tree (forest) spirit (Medvešček, 2015, 550).

Zakreman is a tale of a strange man who did everything different or opposite than the rest of people. When others prayed to St. Vitus in church, he went to the entrance of the Dehna cave and said out loud everything that was weighing on him. He always came back relieved and happy, so others started to follow

39 For ‘gunj’ cf. the virtual dictionary of Slovenian language Fran.si. Pavel Medvešček recorded another meaning of ‘gun’ in local dialect – crossroads, as well as a toponym nearby the village of Šmihel that is not detectable on the maps (Medvešček, 1992, 91).

40 From *dvanajst* – twelve.

him and even said they were sorry they had not followed Zakreman earlier to the Dehna cave. Some people worried that more and more would follow him into the canyon from where long-ago similar weirdos had been chased by force. When Zakreman once visited the cave again he noticed that smoke and noise was coming out and soon stones started to fly out as well. One of them hit him and eventually made him bleed to death. When he passed away, people were fighting over where to bury him. Some wanted to just throw him in the Dehna cave. The last bad omen associated with the cave was blood red light that was visible in there one night and that changed into a rainbow. The following day the First World War began. After the war, the Dehna cave in Podpolica could no longer be found. People living nearby thought it may have been destroyed by grenades and shrapnel. Perhaps another Zakreman would find it one day.

Saint Vitus is a common saint in Slovenia associated with early Christianity and persecution of paganism. The original St. Vitus church in Dolenje Nekovo where the tale had been recorded stood on a hill outside the village which is suggestive of location on a pagan worship site; it had been built only in the 17th century. The Dehna cave's name is telling as *dehnar* was the Nature Worshipers' leader. Zakreman went to the Dehna cave in what seems a possible variation of *kačnica*,⁴¹ a sort of pilgrimage that Nature Worshipers performed alone to come to terms with their personal issues (Medvešček, 2015, 43). These "pilgrimages", as explained to Medvešček, were usually destined at hilltops where snake heads were placed yet snake heads could also be found in underground caves.

Nature Worship was obviously more attractive than Catholicism to many and Catholics understandably worried about possible converts, especially where paganism had once already been extirpated. Smoke, noise, and stones coming out of the cave is possibly a depiction of desecration by Catholics of a Nature Worshipers' sacred site; in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* we find numerous examples of such deeds. Many Nature Worshipers also got harmed and killed because of persecution by Catholics and that may have happened to Zakreman. That there was a dilemma about him being buried in the cemetery is a strong argument that Zakreman may have been a Nature Worshiper for heretics and non-believers could not be buried in blessed soil. The last paragraph refers to the importance of First World War: it was a life-changing disaster for all people living close to the Isonzo front, but for the Nature Worshipers' community it also meant the beginning of the end of its existence as so many devout community members had perished, and many Nature Worshipers' sacred sites had been destroyed in the war. If the secret Dehna cave is ever to be found again, the tale ends, it will by another Zakreman, i.e. Nature Worshiper in the know of its location.

41 From *kača* – snake. It should be kept in mind that the Nature Worship tradition was inconsistent and varied in many respects due to the non-systematic recording of exclusively orally transmitted information, idiosyncrasy of isolated *hostas*, and Nature Worshipers' general tolerance of diversity.

Like Zakreman, Depictions of Rožalinka and Pekljač Samsuoj in eponymous tales also correspond to individuals that appear in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* as Nature Worshippers, Rožalinka being a lone herbal healer and Pekljač Samsuoj, a handicapped homeless beggar and *celebrin* (Medvešček, 1991, 69, 181).

How the Stake in the Haystack Grew Green tells of a goat shepherd who made a haystack for his goats for winter. One spring the stake in the middle of the haystack, cut from a linden tree, started to grow green. The shepherd interpreted that as a good omen coming from the earth. He kept his goats close to the stake and they gave plenty of milk and had many more young ones than they usually did. The goats born there were different: they had white hair and a black line going from head to tail. Also, they had no horns. A jealous shepherd from a nearby hill cut down the linden tree, however. The tree took very long to dry and when it finally did, a water came out of it and formed a well, called Kozjak (Goat Well).

This tale is set in “times when people knew no hatred yet” and thus may refer to a past in which there was no conflict among Catholics and Nature Worshipers yet because there were no “Others”. The shepherd is referred to as ‘hostnar’. Hosta was the basic Nature Worshippers’ administrative unit and Nature Worshippers themselves were sometimes called *hostars*. The sacred linden tree directly increases fertility in this tale by enabling goats to have more milk and billy goats. Once fallen, it symbolises life by producing cries of the dying and turning finally into a fresh water well. Goats with white hair and black line along the back are described by Medvešček’s principal informer Janez Strgar in *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* as follows:

For our ancestors, male goat was a sacred animal and was therefore owned by almost every homestead. It was white and had a black hair line from head to tail. Breeding male goats were selected by the dehmar and there were only three of them. Each had to have the characteristics of that breed. When the First World War ended, only two surviving goats were found in a canyon under the village of Srednje. Since there were no male goats left to breed, they were bred with other goats and consequently, the breed was forever lost (Medvešček, 2015, 66).

In the collection, implicit references can also be detected pertaining to practices and values held by Nature Worshippers as we know of them from *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* that were not shared by their Catholic neighbours. For example, the importance of species conservation is at the centre of the tale Cufulin. The tale is set in “fair, merry and rich” past times when meat grew on trees and traditional pastries could be found in bushes, a reminder of a widely spread Slovenian mythical motive of Indija Koromandija (Šmitek, 2011, 248–51). All doors were without locks then and wide open. I am noting this because Pavel Medvešček told me that Nature Worshippers, atypically for countryside half a

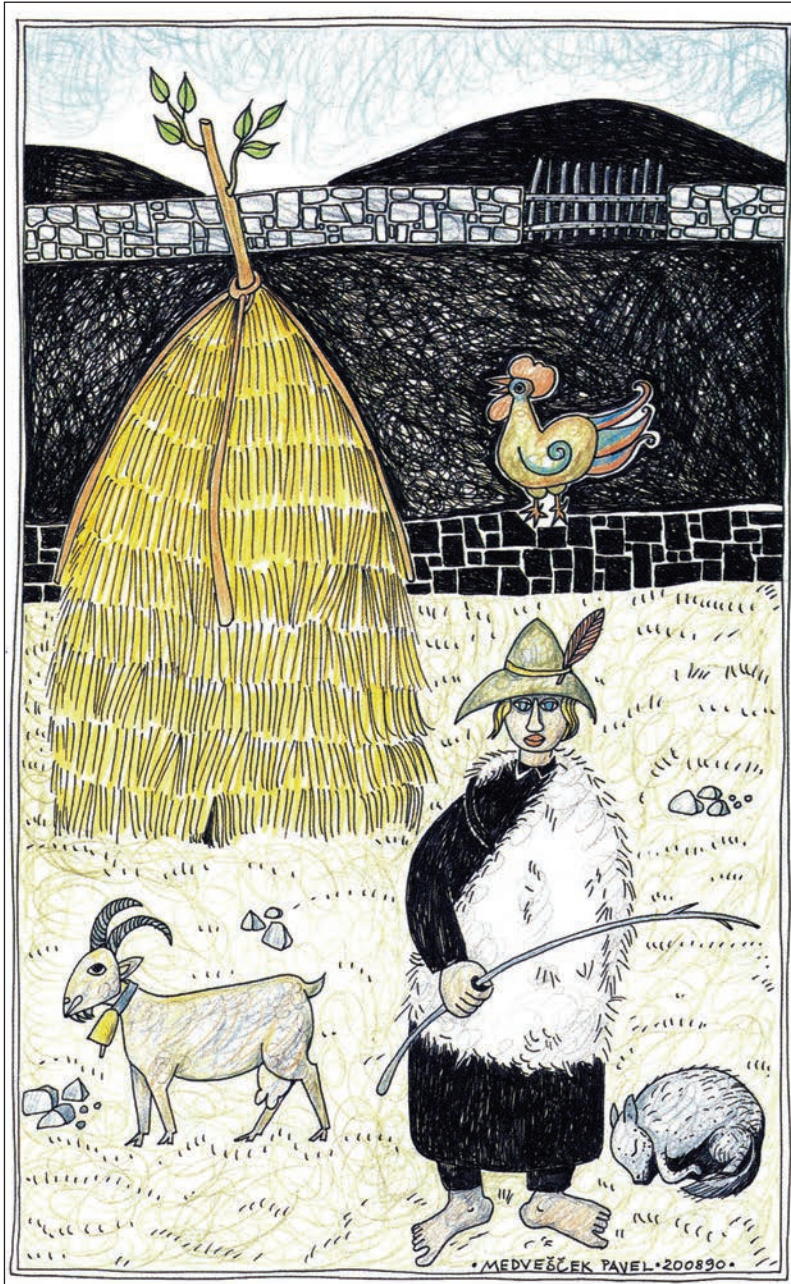


Fig. 5: Pavel Medvešček's illustration of the tale How the Stake in the Haystack Grew Green (Medvešček, 1990, 83).

century ago, kept their doors locked in fear of disclosure of their secret practices behind the walls of their homesteads. Cufulin could thus refer to a remote past when Nature Worshipers were not yet hiding. Cufulins were half birds-half rabbits that people suddenly accused of bringing bad luck and misery. Despite abundance of food, people started chasing and killing cufulins for their tasty meat. Cufulins were fast, but predictable. Their loud singing betrayed them, and deafness made them vulnerable. Finally, people killed the last standing Cufulin king on top of the Korada. Consequently, the sky went dark for three days with a horrific storm. Lightnings started wildfires everywhere and all fields and villages were flooded. When the storm was over, magic trees dried up and carefree life was over. People had to start all anew. Slovenian classical fairy tales do not include references to biocentrism in this manner, while the Nature Worshipers were very concerned with the preservation and survival of animal and plant species important to them (Medvešček, 2015, 104).⁴²

Nature Worshipers' appreciation of farm animals is expressed in the tale *The Cunning Piggy*. In *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*, we learn that farm animals were a sort of insurance for poor farmers in the community and butchering them was a last resort before starvation (Medvešček, 2015, 91). In original Slovenian folk fairy tales, pigs are largely absent and portrayed rather negatively; they are most certainly not candidates for special friends of people. The Type Index of Slovenian Folk Tales, Animal Tales and Fables includes only one such reference (Kropej Telban, 2015, 92) and no pig made it into the representative Slovenian fairy tale canon (Kropej et al, 2010) or into more local collections such as the one from the Goriška Brda region (Stres et al, 2008) immediately to the south of the territory covered by Pavel Medvešček in *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows*, or even a collection of fairy tales recorded in the exact same geographic area in the same period as Medvešček's (Tomasetig, 1980). In the one exception, *The Count Pig*, similarly to *The Frog Prince*, the pig stands for a metaphor of undesirability. Moreover, wild animals most often vilified in Slovenian fairy tales such as snakes or wolves are given here an explicit positive connotation, in accordance with Nature Worshipers' veneration of snakes and wolves, such as the *Tale About the Good Wolf* (Medvešček, 1991, 98).

To answer the question that generated this chapter: *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* is by no means an exclusive collection of Nature Worship folktale tradition. However, it does include hints at and references to Nature Worship and informs on Nature Worship in a way that makes it plausible that Nature Worshipers were among the storytellers Pavel Medvešček came across. Detection of these specific contents in the collection would not have been possible without the later publication of *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*.

42 Conservation of species is also addressed in the tale on the he-snake Kačon (Medvešček, 1991, 26) that mentions ouroboros, the tail biting snake symbolizing eternity; this ancient symbol relates to early Christian Gnosticism with which Nature Worship shares certain features.

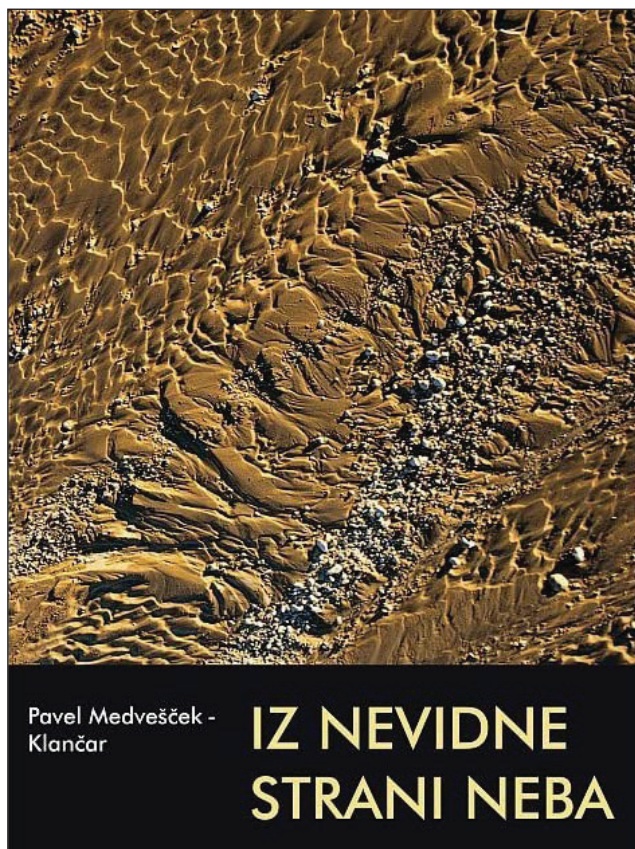


Fig. 6: Book cover of Pavel Medvešček's book *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* (Cover photo: A-media).

CONCLUSION

The 2015 Medvešček's book *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* is arguably one of the most important publications in contemporary Slovenian social sciences. The revelation of existence of the complex counterculture of Nature Worship in western Slovenia, still alive in mid-20th century, calls for hermeneutic reading of a number of publications: first and foremost, of Pavel Medvešček's opus of texts and artworks prior to 2015; of historiography pertaining to the west of Slovenia; of novels and poetry topically located in the geographic area populated by Nature Worshippers or written by authors from that area. It also calls for interpretation of several relevant historical processes such as the peasant rebellions or the TIGR organisation and accepted narratives on them. *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*

provides a code by which we can read chapters of Slovenian history anew and add to our common narrative what has not been picked from the past before. The unpicking or selective picking from the past makes Slovenian history and culture an ongoing and ever incomplete effort.

In this text I tried to elucidate a particular aspect of Nature Worship tradition, i.e. tales and their importance in Nature Worshipers' social practices. I hope to have argued convincingly that some of the content of the collection *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* may be plausibly attributed to Nature Worship oral tradition. It is the numerous, varied, and beautiful tales included in the *From the Invisible Side of the Sky* that should be further analysed to identify and contextualize all aspects of tales' role in Nature Worshipers' society.

According to Propp and Lévi Strauss, folk tales cannot be differentiated from myths (Lévi Strauss in Propp, 2005, 235). The notably veridical collection *On a Red Cloud a Vineyard Grows* immediately drew attention in this respect (cf. Stanonik and Kogej above). What may be a fairy tale for one society, may be a myth for another. The same must be all the truer for a composite society of majority and minority cultures. Nature Worshipers' myths were fantasies for their Catholic neighbours while Nature Worshipers held no belief in formative biblical myths. Still, they did share some historical tales reminding of past societal milestones such as wars, invasions, hungers, and epidemics that turned everyone into a victim regardless of religious convictions and produced collective traumas that linger on in collective memory. For Slovenian society and its canonised oral folk tradition it would also be interesting to establish which tales we indisputably share with our neighbours and are therefore our common myths and which Slovenian myths are mere fairy tales to Others. Those tales precisely, also make us who we believe we are.

»PRAVCE« V DRUŽBENIH PRAKSAH NARAVOVERCEV
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POVZETEK

Avtorica znanstvenega članka uvodoma predstavi in opiše historično kontrakulturo naravovercev v zahodni Sloveniji. Jedro besedila je osredinjeno na naravoverske vzgojne in izobraževalne koncepte s poudarkom na družbenih funkcijah naravoverskih pravc oz. pripovednega izročila. Zgodbe in pripovedi, namenjene otrokom in odraslim, ki so jih posredovali različni člani skupnosti, so prispevale k ohranjanju naravoverske identitete in k razlikovanju od katoliške večine v lokalnem okolju. Sledi podrobna analiza (naravoverskih) pravc v zbirki Pavla Medveščka – Klančarja Na rdečem oblaku vinograd rase iz leta 1991 in knjigi istega avtorja Iz nevidne strani neba. Razkrite skrivnosti staroverstva iz leta 2015. Slednja šele omogoča odkrivanje značilnih vsebinskih elementov naravoverstva v Na rdečem oblaku vinograd rase. To zbirko, objavljeno leta 1991, je mogoče celovito interpretirati torej šele desetletja po izdaji, katere motiv je morda bil osamosvojitveni proces Slovenije. Vendar pa avtorica glede na razpoložljive vire in rezultate kontekstualne in sociološke analize ugotavlja, da je Na rdečem oblaku vinograd rase subjektivno sestavljena zbirka, ki daje uvid v lokalno kulturo odročnega mejnega območja reke Idrije in skoraj nedvomno zajema naravoversko izročilo, a slednje ni izključna vsebina zbirke.

Ključne besede: naravoverstvo, zahodna Slovenija, pravce, vzgoja, Pavel Medvešček – Klančar

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