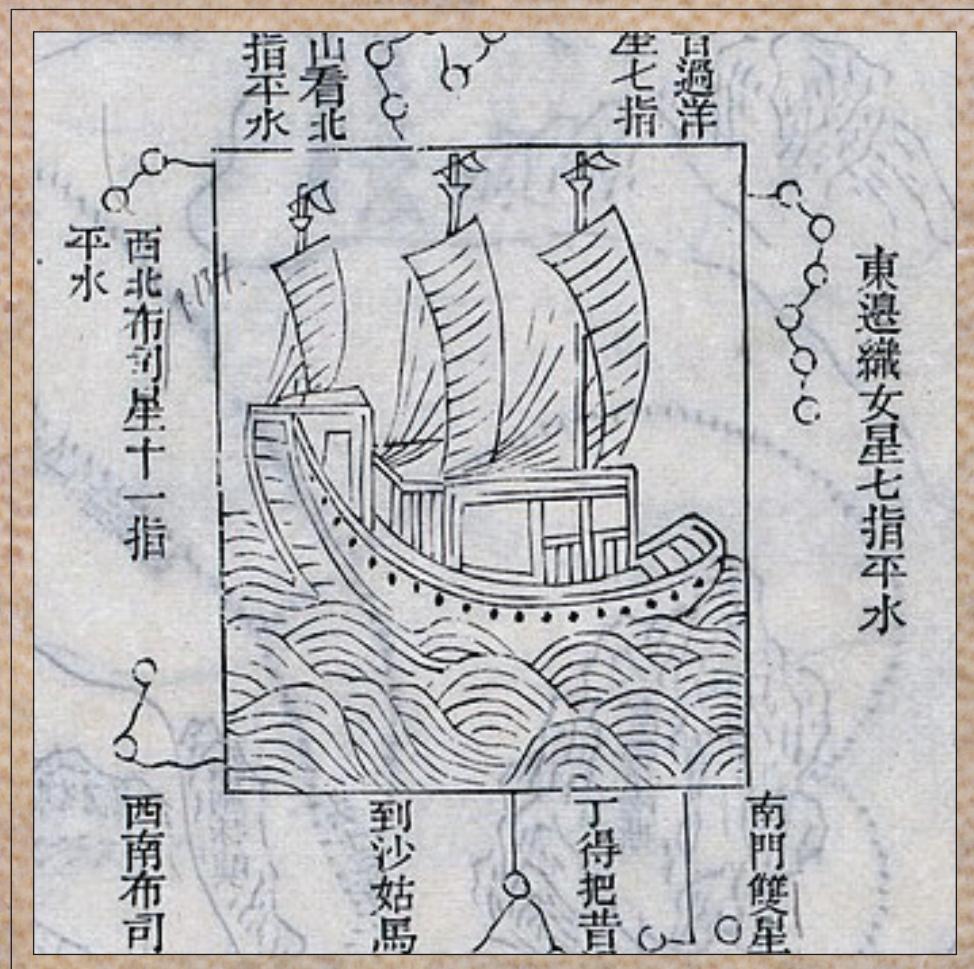


# ACTA HISTRIAЕ

33, 2025, 1



UDK/UDC 94(05)

ISSN 1318-0185  
e-ISSN 2591-1767



Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper  
Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria

**ACTA HISTRIAЕ  
33, 2025, 1**

KOPER 2025

ISSN 1318-0185  
e-ISSN 2591-1767

UDK/UDC 94(05)

Letnik 33, leto 2025, številka 1

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Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper / Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria® / Inštitut IRRIS za raziskave, razvoj in strategije družbe, kulture in okolja / Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment / Istituto IRRIS di ricerca, sviluppo e strategie della società, cultura e ambiente®

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**Tisk/Stampa/Print:**

Založništvo PADRE d.o.o.

**Naklada/Tiratura/Copies:**

300 izvodov/copie/copies

**Finančna podpora/**

Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost

**Supporto finanziario/**

Republike Slovenije / Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency

**Slika na naslovnici/**  
**Foto di copertina/**  
**Picture on the cover:**

»Zvezdni diagram« na Dženg Hejevi pomorski karti / 'Diagrammastellare' nel carta nautica di Zheng He / A 'stellar diagram' in Zheng He Chart (Wikimedia Commons).

Redakcija te številke je bila zaključena 30. marca 2025.

Revija Acta Histriae je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze / Gli articoli pubblicati in questa rivista sono inclusi nei seguenti indici di citazione / Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in: CLARIVATE ANALYTICS (USA); Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Social SciSearch, Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), Journal Citation Reports / Social Sciences Edition (USA); IBZ, Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriftenliteratur (GER); International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) (UK); Referativnyj Zhurnal Viniti (RUS); European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS); Elsevier B. V.: SCOPUS (NL); DÖAJ.

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## ENTANGLEMENT OF NATURE WORSHIPPERS FROM POSOČJE WITH STONES

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### ABSTRACT

*This article argues that the beliefs and belief system of nature worshippers from Posočje differ significantly from the Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian hierarchical anthropocentric perspectives, which classify the ecosphere according to its usefulness. The mythical thinking of nature worshippers from Posočje is examined from an ecofeminist perspective. They viewed non-living entities not only as autonomously functional, i.e., without human domination, but as agencies that organize life around them. The intertwining of humans with the ecosphere, including the inanimate world, as found in the mythical thinking of Posočje nature worshippers, is analyzed in terms of accounts of media ecology and machine-oriented ontology, and treated considering some recently discussed posthumanist notions, such as “machinic assemblages” and “folding with the world.” Posočje nature worshippers understood trees and stones with special powers as shaping the actions and social relations of humans. Therefore, these entities should be seen as media, machines, or apparatuses that organize human life.*

*Keywords:* nature worshippers, Ancient-Believers, apparatus, die Umwelt, media ecology, ecofeminism, stone

## LA CONNESSIONE DEGLI ADORATORI DELLA NATURA DEL POSOČJE CON LE PIETRE

### SINTESI

*Questo articolo dimostra che la fede e il sistema di credenze dei fedeli del Posočje erano significativamente differenti dalle prospettive gerarchiche antropocentriche greco-romane o giudeo-cristiane, che classificano l'ecosfera in base alla sua utilità. Il pensiero mitico degli adoratori della natura del Posočje è esaminato da una prospettiva ecofemminista. Essi consideravano le entità non viventi non solo come autonomamente funzionanti, cioè non sottomesse al dominio umano, ma come agenti che organizzavano la vita attorno a loro. L'intreccio di uomini ed ecosfera, incluso il mondo inanimato, come si*

*nota nel pensiero mitico degli adoratori della natura di Posočje, è analizzato in termini di resoconti di ecologia dei media e di ontologia orientata agli oggetti, considerando alcune recenti nozioni post-umaniste, come “machinic assemblages” e “folding with the world”. Gli adoratori della natura di Posočje credevano che gli alberi e le pietre fossero animati da poteri speciali e potessero influenzare le azioni e le relazioni sociali degli uomini. Perciò queste entità dovrebbero essere considerate come dei media, macchine o apparati che organizzano la vita umana.*

*Parole chiave: adoratori della natura, antichi credenti, apparato, die Umwelt, ecologia dei media, ecofeminismo, pietra*

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Given the reality of the Anthropocene—a term that emphasizes the irreversible impact of humanity on the Earth’s ecosystems—it is becoming increasingly urgent to reframe our relationship with the ecosystem and other living beings. Rather than viewing humans as rulers over nature, it is crucial to recognize our interconnectedness as part of a larger ecological community. In response, the humanities have developed various frameworks to examine the complex relationships between human and non-human beings within their ecosystems. Environmental ethics, for example, has championed biocentrism, asserting that all living species have equal intrinsic value and belong to an interdependent ecological network (Taylor, 1986). Ecofeminism extends this perspective and calls for an egalitarian society free from hierarchical domination (Braidotti, 2021) and an environmental ethic with a new ecological paradigm to replace the dominant mechanistic paradigm of the last three hundred years (Merchant, 2005). The first and second generations of critical studies have re-examined the concepts of otherness and animality within feminist studies (Haraway, 1989; 2003; 2007) or in the broader field of critical studies (Agamben, 2004; Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018). Critical posthuman studies have explored the relationships of humans to the environment (environmental humanities) and between human and non-human beings, especially artificial intelligence (Braidotti, 2019). While ecofeminism has discussed relationality and various non-anthropocentric

<sup>1</sup> This article was written within the research project N6–0268 *Political Functions of Folktales* and the research program P6–0435 *The Practices of Conflict Resolution between Customary and Statutory Law in the Area of Today’s Slovenia and Neighboring Countries*, co-funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS). The author thanks Daša Medvešček, Radivoj Zavadlav, Boris Čok and Rafael Podobnik as well as Darja Skrt from the Regional Museum Goriški Muzej for their kind permission to reproduce the photographs.

perspectives, it has largely overlooked the importance of relationships between humans and other living beings with “non-active” inanimate entities. This article attempts to fill this gap by examining the ecofeminist tenets found in the beliefs, belief system, and practices of nature worshippers, particularly from the Posočje region of Slovenia, in which both living and non-living entities played an essential role in their non-anthropocentric worldview.

In 2015, the Slovenian ethnographer and folklore collector Pavel Medvešček-Klančar published a comprehensive book entitled *Iz nevidne strani neba: razkrite skrivnosti staroverstva* (*From the Invisible Side of the Sky. Revealed Secrets of the Ancient Beliefs*), which is full of ethnographic material that speaks about the culture of nature worshippers from the westernmost part of Slovenia, particularly from the mountainous region of Posočje along the Soča River (Medvešček, 2015), who inhabited the region with their Catholic neighbors. They called themselves “Ours,” while others called them Ancient-Believers, explained one of them, Janez Strgar from Strgarija in Volčanski Ruti (Medvešček et. al, 2014, 143), who was also Medvešček’s main source in his ethnographic research. The terms Ancient-Belief or Old Faith, and the related term Ancient-Believers,<sup>2</sup> which refer to the attitude of these people to the world and faith, became established among the Slovenian public after the first public exhibition of Pavel Medvešček’s extensive collection of artifacts, which took place in 2014 at the Regional Museum Goriški Muzej. Two catalogs accompanied the exhibition. In the same year, an association of Ancient-Believers called “Slovenski staroverci” (Slovenian Ancient-Believers) was also founded, which is interested “in the Slovene pre-Christian faith, Slovene/Slavic mythology and other pre-Christian beliefs that appear on the Slovene ethnic territory throughout history” (Slovenski staroverci, 2024). It seems that this association has a somewhat broader interest than just Ancient-Belief. However, the terms Ancient-Belief or Old-Belief<sup>3</sup> could be misleading, because on one hand, the Old Belief in Slovenia refers also to the Slavic mythology, and on the other hand, Old Believers, called Old Ritualists, were a completely different religious community of Eastern Orthodox Christians. Compared to the Catholic community, the relationship of the Ancient-Believers to “nature” is different:

*They, too, are farmers, and thus incorporate “nature” into their production, yet they show greater respect toward all things natural. For them, “everything,” regardless of form—plants, animals, hills, stones, water, etc.—is alive. Not only do humans have a soul, called zduhec; and after death, a soul can reincarnate into a different body than it previously occupied. Natural forces—and therefore life itself—are revered at prominent outdoor locations, such as mountain peaks, caves, and gorges. The supreme representative of natural forces is the goddess Nikrmana* (Kozorog, 2020, 112).

2 In the catalogue of the Regional Museum Goriški Muzej, the Slovenian term *staroverstvo* was translated to English as Ancient-Belief (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 143).

3 The Slovene term *stara vera* could be translated as Ancient-Belief or Ancient-Faith or Old-Belief or Old-Faith.

For nature worshippers from Posočje, man is not the master of the world, but is essentially not only intertwined, but entangled with everything that surrounds him, the living and non-living entities. Accordingly, archaeologist and ethnologist Andrej Pleterski (2016, 16) as well as political scientist Cirila Toplak (2023, 33) came to use the term nature worshippers to refer to this community (cf. the testimonies of Frlin and Štajen in Medvešček, 2015, 258, 267). This term will also be used to refer to the community from the Posočje region, exhibiting beliefs and practices addressed in the continuation of this discussion.

The culture of nature worshippers was largely unknown to or denied by the academic community. It coexisted as a counterculture to the dominant Christian culture until the early twentieth century and was allegedly subject to religious persecution. Testimonies, folk tales, and material remains tell of a way of life and a community that was interwoven with the world around it. This predominantly patriarchal culture had a cult of the Great Mother (Nature) and practiced various rituals at sacred sites. Of particular importance were sacred stones and sacred trees, which the people worshipped. Nature worshippers turned to certain trees, such as those that stood alone and were a symbol of perseverance and humility, as well as very old trees that had survived for centuries and had accumulated a lot of energy, because they believed that these trees possessed special powers that people could draw on to obtain healing or that were a source of comfort. The belief system of these people differed significantly from the Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian hierarchical anthropocentric view that classifies the ecosphere according to its utility. Instead, Posočje nature worshippers viewed non-living beings not only as autonomously functional, i.e., without human domination, but as agencies that organize life around them. The intertwining of humans with the ecosphere, including the inanimate world, as found in the mythic thinking of nature worshippers, is addressed in this article through the consideration of concepts from media theory and machine-oriented ontology, such as media and machine, “machinic assemblages of nature” (Bryant, 2014), and “folding with the world” (Deleuze, 1993; Parikka, 2010).

## RITUALS WITH STONES AND OTHER RITUALS

The Posočje region is a very mountainous alpine karst area, rich in rivers, streams, and caves. The nature worshippers lived in deep connection with the local landscape, especially with stones, water sources, mountains, and trees. They believed in the sacredness of nature and regarded it as inherently alive and spiritually powerful. They respected and were connected to the spirits of the ancestors, whom they regarded as protectors and guides. Certain natural places (stones, rivers, springs, mountains) were considered spiritually charged and had magical or healing powers (cf., e.g., *Belinov tron* in Medvešček, 2015, 106). Stones, especially those naturally shaped and found in certain places, had a special spiritual significance. They were believed to contain special energies that could be used to protect, heal, increase fertility, or influence personal happiness. The community of nature

worshippers knew rituals that were usually simple and intimate. They emphasized personal and communal connection to nature rather than formalized or institutional ceremonies (Medvešček, 2015, 554–555):

*The purpose and meaning of a ritual act are to influence the conditions and events in the world. It can be an imitation of an event told by a myth at the time of the ritual so that the desired consequence is created in the world. A special space and time may also be part of the ritual. Such a space is usually called a sanctuary. [...] The power of ritual to influence conditions and events is ritual power (magic) (Pleterski, 2016, 17).*

The water and spring rituals of nature worshippers included ritual ablutions or baths in springs and rivers during certain phases of the moon or seasonal turning points (solstices, equinoxes). Seasonal festivals were associated with seasonal cycles, such as *mlajanje* (Jože Čančar in Medvešček, 2015, 146). They also performed ritual offerings in sacred places, often caves or abysses (Medvešček, 2015, 102, 549, 551, 557). The Snake Cave is one of the sacrificial caves in which

*the most important ceremony took place during the winter fire, when a ritual purification fire was lit inside it in the presence of nine selected men chosen by the community. The sword that all dehnars [spiritual leaders] used when taking the oath also originated from this cave. [...] The winter fire that burned in the darkest night was intended also for the snake that slept at the bottom of Snake Cave. The fire was supposed to help it wake up in time in spring and protect the crystal stones that the healers once used for healing and predicting the future (Štajcn in Medvešček, 2015, 267).*

Nature worshippers collected stones with special powers from rivers, mountains and special places. Some stones were ritually charged, for example through the ritual of *ozbenanje*. Stones were also used for therapeutic purposes by placing them on certain parts of the body or around a person during healing rituals as a form of healing or spiritual cleansing. Stones symbolized stability, permanence, memory, and the continuity of community traditions. In the worldview of nature worshippers, stones were not passive objects but active participants in rituals.<sup>4</sup> Stones were believed to have the ability to ward off negative influences, illness, or misfortune. Stones could be used to contact the spirits of ancestors. Certain rituals with stones supported fertility (both in agriculture and human), prosperity, or good luck.

4 Through their tacit, performative resonance, the stones functioned as silent carriers of meaning. As Katja Hrobat Virloget (2023) has shown in her study of memorial silence, silence itself is not absence, but a form of agency that organizes memory and social response in affective ways. Similarly, the power of the stone lies precisely in its silence—its resistance to representation—which invites touch, ritual, or secrecy, and commands reverence without speech.

The ritual called *ozbenanje*, through which the stones called *snakeheads* became sacred, took place before the First World War in the Doblarec River basins (Tone Javor in Medvešček, 2015, 123), or in cauldrons filled with river water (Medvešček, 2015, 538). “Snakehead is a stone that was transformed into a sacred object through a special ritual (*ozbenanje*)” (Medvešček, 2015, 563). “The *ozbenanje* ceremony was performed by the sworn in with yellow and white chadron<sup>5</sup>, boxwood, and water in the Doblarec riverbed” (Medvešček, 2015, 565). *Ozbenanje* used to be performed at a sacred place next to the Soča River, called Dobnik, overgrown with old oak trees, called *dob* (*Quercus robur*), felled by Napoleon’s army. The ritual was described in a testimony by a nature worshipper, Štajcn:

*The oak, which was several hundred years old, was a sacred tree. One of its root-stocks grew down the bank and reached a basin from which it drew water, where it formed a root crown, under which the water spirit lived. Larger stones were placed in a circle around the tree where the community met. Water was drawn from the second basin, which, like all the others, constantly carried water, in the dry season using a special device made “by weight”* (Štajcn in Medvešček, 2015, 266).

During the construction of the Doblarec power plant, a large rock was also blown up, on which ancient signs were carved. After that, the Ancient-Believers abandoned Dobnik and performed their rituals further upriver. In the village of Ukoplje on the right bank of the Soča, where the Doblarec stream flows in and where the “women’s water” (Soča) mixes with the “men’s water” (Doblarec), ritual ablutions used to be performed, but only until the construction of the power plant began (Štajcn in Medvešček, 2015, 266).

## THE CULT OF THE TREE AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE POSOČJE REGION

Between 1950 and 1978, Pavel Medvešček Klančar (1933–2020), as an employee of the Nova Gorica Institute for Monument Protection, conducted a series of interviews with the inhabitants of the remote Eastern Alpine mountain regions of Primorska, Slovenia. After his interviewees began to trust him and accept him into their secret community, they demanded that Medvešček not reveal their secret. Medvešček kept his promise, but published some materials with contents related to the nature worshippers, such as fairy tales collected in the Idrija region (Medvešček, 1991), and together with Rafael Podobnik published a monograph on the secrets and sacredness of stone (Medvešček & Podobnik, 1992) and stories about ancient beliefs in which the stones play the main role. With these two monographs, Medvešček and Podobnik covered the area from Bovec in the Posočje region to the Slovenian-Croatian border in Istria.<sup>6</sup> The existence of this community and their faith was to remain secret due to their persistent persecution by the Christian major-

5 A local folk term *čadron* denotes stone lichen (Medvešček, 2015, 123), yet the exact botanical identity remains uncertain.

6 Medvešček also published numerous articles (cf. Toplak, 2023, 20).

ity (Vrabec, 2020). While Posočje has been integrated into the broader Adriatic and its hinterlands for millennia, the mountainous areas of this region are still difficult to access. “It is the extraordinary secrecy and geographical isolation in the inaccessible subalpine and Dinaric areas of western Slovenia that may have contributed decisively to the survival of the community, which is said to have survived for centuries” (Toplak, 2023, 20).<sup>7</sup>

While the wider (Slovenian) public was fascinated by the book *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*, as evidenced by the great interest in it,<sup>8</sup> the reaction of the academic community was rather ambivalent. The ethnologist Miha Kozorog was particularly critical of the legitimacy of an ethnographic source.<sup>9</sup> According to Kozorog (2021, 206), it would be more appropriate to speak of scattered folk practices, for which only Medvešček created an entire framework of ancient beliefs. However, one of the best-known historians who studied the history of the region, Simon Rutar (1851–1903), mentioned the existence of an ancient faith in his writings. In the region around Bovec on the Soča River, the Christian religion was propagated in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages by the Patriarchate of Aquileia. However, Christianity spread very slowly in this mountainous region. “The Slovenes clung to their old faith, customs and habits” (Rutar, 2001, 31). According to Rutar, the remnants of the old faith could be found in the fairy tales and local names, such as Triglav—the sun god, Baba, Bohinj, etc.,<sup>10</sup> as well as in local customs. There were remnants of the “old idolatry” in Kobarid, on the main road, even in 1331 (Rutar, 2001, 31). These reminders of the old beliefs in this region reminded Rutar of the old Slavic mythology, with the worship of the sun, and mythological figures, such as dwarfs, white women,<sup>11</sup> and others (Rutar, 2001, 32). Due to Christianization, but also because of military unrest, the people of the Tolmin region fled to the mountains and forests.<sup>12</sup> The following quotation of Rutar in France Bevk’s historical tale speaks of the conflict between the Christian church and the vernacular culture:

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7 Concerning the history of settlement of the Middle Soča region between Gorica/Gorizia and Tolmin, cf. Bizjak (2022).

8 By 2023, the fifth edition of the book was published. The complete edition in Slovene is available at: [https://zalozba.zrc-sazu.si/sites/default/files/medvescek\\_iz\\_nevidne\\_2015.pdf](https://zalozba.zrc-sazu.si/sites/default/files/medvescek_iz_nevidne_2015.pdf).

9 “A comparison of Medvešček’s ethnological material and older material shows an important difference in the representations of the culture in question: whereas in the older material there are indications of merging heterogeneous traditions and of a hybrid cultural form, Medvešček reports about ordered and complete cultural wholes. The latter is very unusual in ethnology, which is why Medvešček’s material may raise doubts as an ethnographic source” (Kozorog, 2020, 111). Kozorog as an ethnologist is suspicious of the “discovery of the new culture,” which is extremely rare in ethnology, and always creates a spectacle, while it is often not genuine. Kozorog can hardly imagine the Ancient-Believers living so secretly with their customs while living in the same villages, visiting the same pubs, underway in the same forests, paths and elsewhere with others. He asks, why no one spoke publicly of the existence of another community, if they were persecuted (Kozorog, 2020, 113). Cf. the response to Kozorog by Katja Hrobat Virloget (2021; 2022).

10 Baba does not refer only to an old woman, but also to a slender, stony tine rising from the ground or rocks, an unusually thick stone, a detached rock, even a mountain peak, a summit, or a head-shaped formation. The origin of the geographical name Bohinj remains etymologically unresolved (Snoj, 2009, 50, 67–68).

11 White woman or white lady was a fairy in Slovenian folklore (Kropej, 2012, 146).

12 In 1319, the count of Gorizia had to hand over the region of Tolmin to Aquileia (Rutar, 1994, 50–51), when Patriarch Pagano della Torre was formally granted authority in Istria as well as in Carniola (Štih, 2010, 273).

*In 1331, on August 16, the religious inquisitor for Venice and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Francesco de Clugia, began to preach a crusade against the people of Kobarid. The Slovenes of the time prayed to the tree and the well below it. The war rose from Cividale del Friuli under the leadership of Clugia and came to Kobarid, cut down the tree, blocked the well, and uprooted what was left of the old faith (Bevk, 2021, 5; cf. Pleterski, 2016, 21).*

This record locates the phenomenon of the sacred trees in the Posočje region in the fourteenth century. Sacred trees, as well as the Christian practice of felling them, were recorded at several locations across medieval and early modern Europe (cf. Toivo, 2016, 111; Young, 2022, 7). Yet, the strong connection the people of the Posočje region had to trees has been witnessed up until modern times.

The profound relationship of the inhabitants of the mountainous region on the eastern bank of the Soča River with the surrounding environment, i.e., with “nature,” was described in several writings by the Slovenian writer France Bevk (1890–1970). Bevk himself originated from this region, from the village of Zakojca near Cerkno, and spoke a lot with the locals as part of his own research. In his historical tale *The Dying God Triglav*, which is about the crusade in Posočje in 1331, predicated on Rutar’s writings, he wrote about the entanglement of humans with the rest of the world and trees in particular:

*At that time, people felt at one with the trees; they were like living beings. Man observed and eavesdropped on them. They saw and heard more than people see and hear today, because they were still connected to nature; they understood the whispering of the leaves and branches. He was aware that he was a part of nature. The tree was sacred to him. If someone felled the tree, the man took pity on it as if it were an animal. When one spoke to the evil spirits and gods, his mediator was a tree (Bevk, 2021, 13).*

Recent testimonies report of the belief in the existence of trees with magical powers in the region. In 1964, a retired teacher Murovec from Nova Gorica testified several times of the existence of sacred trees in Črnovška planota, Trebuša, Kanomlja, and elsewhere. One of them was a linden tree that was taken to be 365 years old when it was cut down because it was old and full of mushrooms and mistletoe. When it was felled, people took the mushrooms and mistletoe home with them at night. When it was standing, it was a ritual place. People lit a bonfire next to it and on the fifth full moon, when the tree turned green, they danced around it (Medvešček & Podobnik, 2006, 69). In 1968, Silvester Ražem, with the local pseudonym Silko Kralj, told the story of a more than two-hundred-year-old oak tree that grew in Gropada and possessed magical powers.

The story tells of an old man from Gropada who once felt very ill and decided that if he had to die, he would die under this village oak. He sat down on the roots of the tree and leaned back against the trunk, taking a nap, and after a while felt a strange tingling sensation all over his body. The discomfort disappeared and strength



*Fig. 1: A more than two-hundred-year-old oak tree near Gropada, also known as the Napoleon Oak, is said to have magical powers. It stands in the middle of the intersection of three old roads that once connected the neighboring villages of Bazovica, Sežana and Orlek (photo: Boris Čok) (Čok, 2016, 85–86).*

returned to his body. He stood up like a young man and walked home happily. The family was surprised that their grandfather had become twenty years younger. After this event, the word spread of the oak's magical power, and sick people from near and far came to recover under the oak. But now that people have doctors and modern medicine, the younger generations no longer come under the oak tree. Nevertheless, testimonies from 2016 report that some villagers still visit the tree to hug it and that it helps them with its alleged magical energy (Čok, 2016, 85–86).

According to Simon Rutar, the Catholic Church in the Tolmin region accepted a pragmatic compromise with a pre-Christian tradition, as the population itself elected its parish priests, who were then confirmed by the Church (Rutar, 1994, 66). The Tolmin region was divided into parishes, and these into tithing districts, which meant ten houses. According to the old custom in the region, the head of the municipality was the village leader or *župan*, who presided over the council of twelve municipal elders, *dvanajstija*, from Slovene *dvanajst* for twelve (Rutar, 1994, 147). The existence of ritual meetings of the *dvanajstija* board was attested by Andrej Hvala in 1968.

The meetings took place in the sinkhole Zagomila under a mighty linden tree. Twelve stones were arranged around the linden tree, on which the members of the *dvanajstija* council sat. The *župan*'s stone was located to the west of the circle so that it was illuminated by the morning sun (Medvešček, 2015, 392).

The belief system of nature worshippers as summarized by Cirila Toplak—if one can speak of an elaborate system—was supposed to base on a primordial force of creation called *Nikrmana*, which occasionally appeared to people as clouds, lightning, rainbows, various animals, and the like. The sun, as the source of light and warmth needed by all living things, was worshipped on the solstices, the most important holiday. The moon was revered for its power over nature, especially water. The *tročani* (a neologism coined from the words *troje* and *trojica* meaning three and trinity) had a very important role for nature worshippers. These were spatial or abstract triangles/triads that promised protection and fertility and were administered with the help of ritually empowered pebbles with embedded eyes, the so-called snakeheads, as well as self-standing sacred megaliths, the *matjars* (Toplak, 2023, 21).

The old faith began to disappear, according to Medvešček's informant Pepo Pangerc from Dolgi Laz in an interview from 1967, with the arrival of the Christian faith, which was supposed to be “better, albeit foreign. But it was rich, organized and educated and, above all, connected to the authorities” (Medvešček, 2015, 455). Thus, the community of nature worshippers used various survival compromises and strategies, such as social mimicry. Toplak claims that social mimicry, i.e., the preservation of apparent similarity, was used in the context of the inequality of beliefs in the state—a defensive religious mimicry was a means of the nature worshippers' political struggle for their survival as an oppressed community (Toplak, 2023, 25). The community also established a troop of *črna vahta* (black guard) of a protective and defensive character (Medvešček, 2015, 62). The community of nature worshippers had their own informal and undogmatic system of lifelong learning. They did not have such schools as were established by the government in the nineteenth century. Their education began with fairy tales and various types of narratives that introduced young children to the community's spiritual life in an undogmatic way and inculcated them with ethical norms of the community (Toplak, 2022). People learned mostly from life practice at home within the family. However, the *dehnar* was the teacher of the community who transmitted the knowledge he received from his inner teacher—*zduhec*, the spirit or soul, and from the ancestors of those who wanted to learn, through conversation and by being a model to emulate. He was also responsible for moral education (Toplak, 2023, 28–29).

## THE SAFEGUARDING, RESISTANCE, FORTUNE-TELLING, AND OTHER MAGICAL FUNCTIONS OF STONES

Although the community of nature worshippers had its educational system, the children went to elementary school according to compulsory education. But since some educational content in the public schools was often contrary to what nature worshippers taught their children, they protected their children from potentially



Fig. 2: The *krint* is a flat pebble that the children of nature worshippers carried to school to ward off what was imposed on them (photo: Radivoj Zavadlav) (Medvešček, 2015, 93).

harmful content with amulets called *krinits*, which the children wore secretly around their necks (Toplak, 2023, 26). A *krint* is a flat pebble (Fig. 2) intended to ward off what was imposed on the children of nature worshippers. The surface of this pebble was divided on at least one side into four parts or *tročans* with a common center. “A *krint* radiated great power and thus repelled what was being forced upon you” (Strgar in Medvešček, 2015, 93) and was used especially during Fascist rule and the Italian ban on the public use of the Slovene language. Children took it to school to preserve their identity, language, and culture.<sup>13</sup>

Stones, especially pebbles, had several important roles in the lives of the nature worshippers. Most often, they were used as safeguards (*varovalo* in Slovene). The objects from Pavel Medvešček’s ethnological collection show several functions of stones. They safeguarded people from evil spirits, and people wore them around their necks<sup>14</sup> or people simply carried them with them. A small pebble called *cinč* or *bulč* was worn exclusively by women, sewn into their clothing under the left armpit to safeguard against evil spirits and spells.<sup>15</sup> The stones, *tročan*, placed over the fireplace also served as safeguards for the houses (Fig. 3)<sup>16</sup> and the people living in them (three stones were placed next to the fireplace to safeguard the house and the people;<sup>17</sup>

13 Object no. 405 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2016, 95–96).

14 Objects no. 20 and 45 (Medvešček et al., 2014, 19–20, 28–29, 78–79).

15 Object no. 97 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 59).

16 Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 78–79.

17 Object no. 203 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 112–113).



Fig. 3: The tročan (small stone in the middle below) is a pebble that was placed over the hearth to safeguard the house, while a “snakehead” (large stone on the right) safeguarded the house and a person, being worn around the owner’s neck (photo: Radivoj Zavadlav) (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 78).

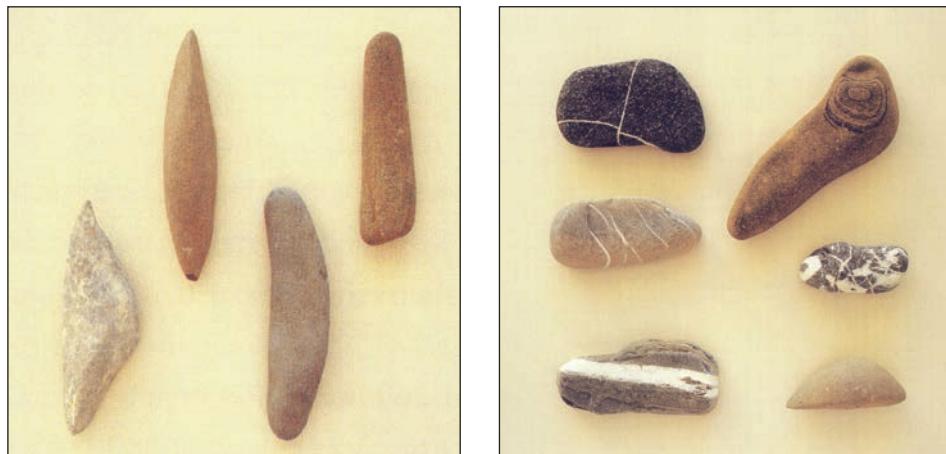


Fig.4: The bezlaks were pebbles used in folk medicine (Pavel Medvešček’s collection) (Medvešček & Podobnik, 2006, 152).

a *snakehead* (Fig. 3) safeguarded the house and was also used for personal safeguarding, worn around the owner's neck<sup>18</sup>), or they were simply generally regarded as *safeguards*.<sup>19</sup> Some stones were referred to as *house spirits* and also served as *safeguards* for the house against evil spirits<sup>20</sup> or a lightning<sup>21</sup> strike. Some pebbles were used to *safeguard* treasures.<sup>22</sup> A stone called the *forest spirit* safeguarded the forest.<sup>23</sup> A stone called *rajtar* was used to *safeguard* a tree from lightning and ensure fertility.<sup>24</sup> Pebbles *safeguarded* the seeds<sup>25</sup> and livestock<sup>26</sup>. Some pebbles—*snakeheads*—were used in the ritual called *samoč*.<sup>27</sup> When cooking a ritual meal called *žompa*, instead of salt, a stone called *stunik* was cooked together with the dish in the cauldron.<sup>28</sup> Stones were used in *fortune-telling*.<sup>29</sup> A pebble called *bezlak* (Fig. 4) was used in medicine.<sup>30</sup> A stone full of crystals called *Belinova kapa* (Belin's cap) weighed down the collected herbs until the end of fermentation. They believed *Belinova kapa* gave the herbs healing power.<sup>31</sup> *Lintverni kamen* (the lindworm<sup>32</sup> stone; Fig. 5–6) of triangular shape with traces of activity of marine organisms was supposed to bring good luck,<sup>33</sup> while the dark gray stone called *skorjaš* (a neologism that could be translated as “cruster”), half smooth and half damaged, was a bad stone and was supposed to bring bad<sup>34</sup> luck.

Stones called *veziči* (a neologism that could be translated as “knitters”) were used to establish and preserve ties among the nature worshippers; there are ten objects in Medvešček's collection.<sup>35</sup> A special stone called *svetlik* (a neologism that

18 Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 78–79.

19 Objects no. 162, 187, 227, 236, 252 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 86–87, 105, 124–125, 129–130, 138); object no. 378 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2016, 75).

20 Objects no. 32, 56, 63, 79, 202, 230 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 20, 23, 33–35, 45, 112–113, 126–127).

21 Object no. 182 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 100–101).

22 Object no. 77 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 43).

23 Object no. 177 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 98–99).

24 Object no. 199 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 110).

25 Object no. 54 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 33).

26 Objects no. 61 and 409 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 34–35, 98).

27 Objects no. 48, 234–235 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 30–31, 128–129).

28 Object no. 41 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 27).

29 Object no. 148 was used in fortune-telling by Frlin's aunt (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 82–83). Object no. 177 had several different functions. Before the First World War it stood on the top of Jelenk and was called *Videc* (the Seer). It had a function of a calendar. After the war it stood in front of the Buhnja or Babja Jama and was called *Kozlova glava* (the Goat's Head). Women used to visit it because they believed it helps in fertility. The fortune tellers who predicted the future for women found their place in this cave (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 97–98). Object no. 189 is a series of pebbles called *bulcne*, which was used in fortune- and fertility-telling (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 106–107). Objects no. 209 and 210 are two sets used in fortune-telling in Buhnja or Babja Jama. Objects no. 244 and 246 are stones used in fortune-telling by foreteller Hajdna (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 115, 134–135).

30 Object no. 220 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 119); object no. 379, the *Spirit of Belin* (Medvešček & Skrt, 2016, 76–77); image 93, a pebble called *dujc* (Medvešček, 2015, 333).

31 Object no. 223 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 121).

32 A sort of (Germanic) dragon in the shape of a giant serpent monster (German *Lindwurm*) (Lindworm).

33 Object no. 224 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 122).

34 Object no. 225 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 122–123).

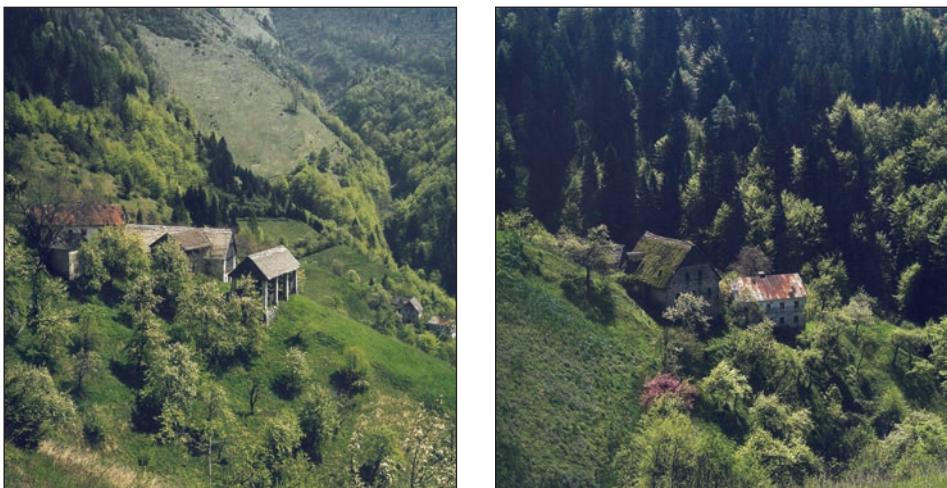
35 Object no. 198 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 109).



Fig. 5: The *lintverni kamen* (the lindworm stone) of a triangular shape with fossilized traces of marine organisms was supposed to bring good luck (photo: Radivoj Zavadlav) (Medvešček & Skrt, 2014, 122).



Fig. 6: Another lindworm stone was found among the coal in the Vremška Valley. It is associated with the belief that a lindworm hatches from the egg of an old black rooster in the coal layers. The stone was supposed to bring good luck and health to the finder (Pavel Medvešček's collection) (Medvešček & Podobnik, 2006, 211).



*Fig. 7: The farms of Obid and Mušč (left) and the Muščeva farm in Zakojske Grape. Both pictures were taken by Rafael Podobnik on May 19, 1974. Every nature worshipper's house used to have its binkel. When they decided to build a house, a granary, or a stable, they would first find three stones and establish a tročan out of them. Two served as the foundation, and the third was used as a safeguard, called a binkel. It was kept secretly so that only the builder knew its location (Medvešček & Podobnik, 2006, 56–57).*

could be translated as “shiner”), a white-gray piece of marble with shiny minerals of mica, which did not originate from this region, was to serve as a pedestal for the statue of the Great Mother. It is said that once lightning struck and shattered the stone. Supposedly, the stone’s power attracted lightning that gave it heavenly power. As everyone wanted a piece of its power, parts of it were carried to all the houses in the area. The Great Mother is supposed to remain in the Snake Cave where the statue was taken. The Great Mother was still known in 1965 (Toni Javor from Kuk) as an ancient deity, but who was no longer worshipped.<sup>36</sup>

When Aldo Trnovec was teaching in Zakojska, the birthplace of France Bevk, in 1958–59, he met the farmer Janez Krivec from Zakojske Grape (Muščeva farm), who kept a stone in the middle of the field, although he had to dig around the stone by hand. The reason for this was a house secret, which, as he lay on his deathbed, he confided only to his son, like his ancestors confided this to their sons (Medvešček & Podobnik, 2006, 55). In 1965, Janez Obid from Bukovo talked about *tročan*, which meant a way of life. When they decided to build a house, a granary, or a stable, they first looked for three stones. Two served as

36 Object no. 404 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2016, 94–95).

the foundation, and the third was considered the guardian, called the *binkel*, its location known only to the builder. The secret was passed on to the next master of the house on the dying master's deathbed. Every house used to have its *binkel* (Medvešček & Podobnik, 2006, 55).

### THE MYTHICAL ENTANGLEMENT OF HUMANS WITH STONES

In his testimony, Frlin told of the soothsayers who regularly went into the riverbeds after the floods had uprooted or overturned trees, to predict the future, but also divine from the past, from the stones, roots, and other objects. Frlin kept a pebble (Fig. 8) that had a special meaning for him. He found it in the Bača River in the roots of an old tree that had been washed up on the gravel bank.<sup>37</sup> For Frlin, this pebble symbolized the permanent connection between the tree and the stone. He found it interesting simply because the tree had kept it and because it had been by his side for many decades, experiencing the tree's growth and falling together with it. Frlin took it to a fortune teller who told him that he was meant to find this stone. Based on the white line surrounding the stone, she recognized Frlin's life path until his end (Medvešček, 2015, 535).



Fig. 8: Frlin's pebble was collected in a riverbed of the Bača River in the roots of an old tree that had been washed up on the gravel bank. For Frlin, this pebble symbolized the lasting connection between the tree and the stone. It was also used for prophecies (photo: Radivoj Zavadlav) (Medvešček & Skrt, 2016, 96).

Many cited examples of the considerations and functions of stones for nature worshippers tell of their intense attitude towards stones. The people and stones are inseparable in a mythical sense. Significantly, these people lived in an alpine, karstic world in which stone is the primary material that determines everything that exists

37 Object no. 407 (Medvešček & Skrt, 2016, 96).

in this world. This strong attachment to stone is therefore not surprising. The attitude of nature worshippers towards stones was mythical. Mythical consciousness sees the connection of things in the world to the extent that they can also merge into one another. The Indologist Hermann Oldenberg explained the networks of fantastic arbitrary relationships in the context of magical and sacrificial practices, where they are embraced by all beings believed to explain the structure of the sacrifice and its effect on the world. They affect each other through contact. They permeate each other, they merge with each other, they become the other, they are the form of the other; they become the other. When two representations are in such proximity, it is impossible to separate them (Cassirer, 1955, 45). In this case, Oldenberg speaks of mythical metamorphosis as a change from one individual and concrete material to another. In the case of Frlin's pebble, Frlin felt so strongly connected to the stone that he believed his life was embodied in it. The stone was his life.

The myth “sees real identity. The ‘image’ does not represent the ‘thing’; it is the thing; it does not merely stand for the object but has the same actuality so that it replaces the thing’s immediate presence” (Cassirer, 1955, 38). In myth, “[t]he object does not exist prior to and outside of synthetic unity but is constituted only by this synthetic unity; it is no fixed form that imprints itself on consciousness but is the product of a formative operation effected by the basic instrumentality of consciousness” (Cassirer, 1955, 29). In other words, the symbol is coalescent with what it signifies (Frankfort & Groenewegen-Frankfort, 1946, 12). “The imagery of myth is therefore by no means allegory” (Frankfort & Groenewegen-Frankfort, 1946, 7). It is a cloak for abstract thinking. “Myth, then, is to be taken seriously, because it reveals a significant, if unverifiable, truth—we might say a metaphysical truth” (Frankfort & Groenewegen-Frankfort, 1946, 7). For mythical consciousness, the world “is not merely contemplated or understood but is experienced emotionally in a dynamic reciprocal relationship” (Frankfort & Groenewegen-Frankfort, 1946, 5). Accordingly, mythical consciousness knows no inanimate world (Frankfort & Groenewegen-Frankfort, 1946, 5). For mythical thinking, the distinction between subjective and objective knowledge is meaningless. Equally meaningless is the distinction between reality and appearance. “Whatever is capable of affecting mind, feeling, or will has thereby established its undoubted reality” (Frankfort & Groenewegen-Frankfort, 1946, 11). The principle of mythical causality is established based on spatial and temporal proximity. Mythical thought does not know the impersonal, mechanical, and lawlike functioning causality. It looks for the “who” and not for the “how.” Mythical thought “looks for a purposeful will committing the act. [...] When the river does not rise, it has refused to rise” (Frankfort & Groenewegen-Frankfort, 1946, 15).

Based on the testimonies of Medvešček's interlocutors, Miha Kozorog recognizes the coexistence of at least two parallel but unconnected ontologies in the Posočje region. He bases this on the classification of the contemporary French anthropologist Philippe Descola, who distinguished four basic ontologies, i.e. different basic relations of humans to themselves and to non-humans, such as animals, plants, parts of the environment, objects, etc., which are established according to the human perception of similarities or

differences between human and non-human “interiority” (soul, mind, consciousness) and “appearance” (body). According to Kozorog’s interpretation, the ontology that emerged under the influence of Christianity is analogistic, because beings are divided into orders that differ in terms of their “interiority” and their “exteriority,” but at the same time, these orders of beings are also similar to each other; they are analogous. Humans were created in the image of God, and saints are like humans but have supernatural qualities. Non-human animals have no soul, although some of them have certain similarities to humans. Further down the scale of living beings, this resemblance to humans becomes weaker and weaker until it is completely lost. Unlike the Catholic analogists, Kozorog continues, the nature worshippers are animists. It is typical for them to regard living beings—people, animals, plants, and some parts of the environment—as physically different but spiritually the same. Kozorog believes that in addition to these two, we can recognize at least one other ontology that coexists in Posočje: naturalism, which combines analogism and animism with schooling. According to this ontology, all living beings are created based on the same biological or “natural” principles, but differ in their “interiority,” i.e., in their spirit (Kozorog, 2020, 112).

Three terms that have been used in connection with nature worshippers need to be discussed. These are animism, religion, and nature. Animism is found in explicit form in the testimony of Janez Strgar about Javor, a nature worshipper from Posočje, who rejected the concept of “inanimate matter” because for him everything that surrounded him was living matter. The body disintegrates after death, while the deceased’s spirit (*zduhec*) passes into another life form and thus lives on (Strgar in Medvešček, 2015, 56). However, Strgar also says that Javor was the only one “among them” who was “often connected to the other world” (Medvešček, 206, 56), which makes him a kind of an exception. The cases of the functions of stones presented above speak of different conceptualizations of stones that are not exactly animistic. For animism, it is significant to attribute a soul to non-human beings. For animism, the characteristic is

*the attribution by humans of an interiority identical to their own. This attribution humanizes plants and, above all, animals, since the soul with which it endows them allows them not only to behave in conformity with the social norms and ethical precepts of humans but also to establish communicative relations both with humans and among themselves* (Descola, 2013, 129).

In the case of the nature worshippers’ beliefs about stones, particular stones could heal, safeguard, and give strength to people. Some stones were considered spirits, but perhaps a different way of conceptualizing them would better describe the power of stones in nature worshipper culture, which is offered below. Furthermore, Javor’s case speaks of the inconsistency of the nature worshippers’ worldview, which proves questionable if it is thought to be a clear and coherent belief or even religious system. The fact that the knowledge of nature worshippers does not form a coherent whole is also one of the main arguments of Kozorog’s criticism of the ethnological reception of what he calls the Ancient-Believers (Kozorog, 2020, 117).

The religious scholar Lenart Škof considers the belief system of the nature worshippers to be a religion. He also sees the existence of a hidden cosmic correspondence “between man, nature and its forces” in what he considers a “religious” tradition of the Ancient-Believers (Škof, 2022, 87). Thus, Valentin Hvalica says in his testimony that “if you ‘cradle’ the green snake’s head with a special intention, you may hear the prehistoric time, how it was born in a consecrated river that springs from the heart of the holy mountain Triglav, in which our faith is rooted” (Hvalica in Medvešček, 2015, 236). In his testimony, Valentin Šmončev spoke about Bizet, who emphasized that it is necessary to live in such a way that one “identifies with all living beings that live around us and with us” and that “among us also exists what we do not see or understand, and yet it works” (Šmončev in Medvešček, 2015, 179). Bizet also explained that he could communicate with animals and plants and receive messages from the world of the dead and the distant stars. This was supposed to give him special powers to heal people. Some people mocked him and thought he was crazy (Medvešček, 2015, 179).

Miha Kozorog distinguishes between the animistic ontology of the worshippers, which is mythical, and the analogistic ontology of the Catholics, which is religious. The beliefs of the nature worshippers differ from the belief system of the Catholics. The nature worshippers had no idols (Medvešček, 2015, 47). The consciousness expressed in the testimonies is mythical. A person with mythical consciousness is immersed in a world that he experiences subjectively. The world around a nature worshipper is his subjectively perceived surroundings, *die Umwelt*. When the behavioral biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) studied the lives of animals, he confirmed a similar observation to the mechanistic theorists, namely that an animal’s tools of perception and action are linked by a control mechanism, so that the animal functions in some ways like a machine (Uexküll, 2010, 42). But von Uexküll resisted viewing animals as mere objects. Instead, he emphasized a key factor in understanding how the animals function, namely that they must be understood as subjects. In doing so, he believed he introduced Kant’s Copernican Revolution into the field of biology. Everything that is perceived by the subject belongs to its world of perception, and everything that is produced by the subject belongs to its world of action. These two worlds, the world of perception and the world of produced effects, form a closed unit, namely the environment of the subject or *Umwelt*.

Von Uexküll linked the activity of the animal with its interests, which are focused on the fulfilment of certain functions. In the environment, there is an object with a perceptive sign that the animal perceives with its perception organ. A perceptive sign is a particular feature of an object that is important to the animal. The subject and the object are connected in such a way that they form an ordered whole, which von Uexküll called the functional cycle. It is conceivable that subjects can be connected to the same object or to different objects through a series of functional cycles. When an animal performs the

function for which it has connected with an object, it produces an effect with the help of an effect organ. Von Uexküll emphasized that this is not a purely mechanical action, but that the subject plays a decisive role. The subject must perceive every stimulus (Uexküll, 2010, 46), for which it can wait a long time, and every subject, like a spider, unravels the threads of its relationship to certain properties of things and spins them into a tight web that supports its existence (Uexküll, 2010, 53). Neither time nor the environment can be perceived independently of the subject, but both depend on the subject; time and space are subjective dimensions. Every subject is therefore not a passive product of the environment, a reflection of the milieu, but is the master of its *Umwelt* (Winthrop-Young, 2010, 216). Its attributes are not the product of random mutations and evolution, as Darwin explained, but the organism adapts to the possibilities available to it in the environment in which it lives by adapting its perception and effect organs. *Die Umwelt* can be visualized as the bubble in which the animal lives. When we enter such a bubble, the subject's previous circumstances change completely, certain features of the environment or objects disappear completely, and others lose their coherence with each other, but new connections are created, and a new world emerges in each bubble. The nature worshippers of Posočje are connected to their environment, *die Umwelt*, in their subjective functional cycles.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, influenced by von Uexküll, explained man's immersion in the world meant in universal terms:

*Space is not what it was in the Dioptrics, a network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a third party, witnessing my vision, or by a geometer looking over it and reconstructing it from outside. It is, rather, a space reckoned starting from me as the null point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me* (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, 138).

Although such immersion is not exclusive to pre-modern people, it is explicitly experienced in mythical consciousness. Nevertheless, man's experience of the world has changed "historically." Why, for example, should the Greeks have questioned their myths (Veyne, 1988) if they had a mythical consciousness? It was not only with the industrial revolution and technological progress that man became disconnected from his environment. The turning point in man's perception of the world came with the Axial Age between the eighth and third centuries BCE, when major epistemological changes took place and rationality and rationally explained experience began to fight against myth (logos versus mythos) (Jaspers, 1965, 1). Although mythical consciousness has historically been abolished with certain social changes, it has nevertheless survived in parallel in some places to the present day.

Furthermore, Škof (2022, 8) writes about the correspondence “between man, nature and its forces,” excluding man from nature, which enables man to get in contact with it as with a kind of external being. If we accept this notion, nature does not exist as a *trompe l’œil* (the metaphor borrowed from Descola) in front of humans but is all-encompassing and includes humans as part. Moreover, Philippe Descola called for the binary opposition between nature and culture advocated by his teacher Claude Lévi-Strauss to be abandoned (Descola, 2013).<sup>38</sup>

## MACHINIC ASSEMBLAGES OF STONES AND PEOPLE

A nature worshipper named Puš predicted people’s good or bad luck by boiling eggs. He also had several pebbles (Fig. 9) collected on the stone table in front of his house. Puš covered the eyes of everyone who wanted to choose his pebble with a handkerchief and told them that he would feel a kind of tingling in their fingers if they touched his stone. If that did not happen, he should stop. When he touched the stone, he should not think about the stone itself, but about the person or thing he loved most at that moment. Only in this way would the chosen stone give the person new strength. The stone would also be able to ward off an evil spirit. However, the stone could lose all its powers at some point. When that happens, the person must get rid of it as soon as possible (Medvešček & Podobnik, 2006, 22).

The essential characteristic of Puš’s stones, as well as other stones and trees discussed earlier, is that they have the power to influence people. Certain stones and trees exerted an extraordinary power on nature worshippers, even though it could not be measured by any instrument. Although very subjective, this intertwining of humans with the environment and non-human entities could perhaps be explained in a kind of mechanistic way. Contemporary philosopher Levi R. Bryant introduced a broad concept of a machine in his machine-oriented ontology, according to which “a tree is no less a machine than an airplane” (Bryant, 2014, 16). In short, a machine is an entity that dynamically operates on inputs by transforming them to produce outputs (Bryant, 2014, 9). There are several different worlds, and “worlds are ecologies of machines.” Space consists of paths, which in turn consist of machines. The “topological structure

38 Lévi-Strauss warned his students of the need to explore the Amazon rainforest because, in the mid-1970s, South America was the least known continent ethnographically. At the urging of his teacher, Descola went to the Achuar people before they were culturally assimilated, but he also wanted to go into the jungle. He had already conducted a short field study with the Celta people in the Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas. The farming Celtas were not used to the forest, so they established agricultural colonies in the vast scrublands and avoided the jungle. In the forest, the natives gathered, hunted, and “gardened” by slash-and-burn. Ethnographers have hypothesized that the forest environment was not a natural but a cultural landscape for the indigenous people. A cultural landscape is an environment transformed by human labour, an agricultural landscape as created by agriculture (Baskar, 2018, 662). Descola, however, gradually realized that the contrast between nature and culture had no meaning for the locals. The forest dwellers are at home in the forest, they know the forest, which is full of “memorials” that help the locals preserve and shape their collective memory. The people who lived in the forest have accepted the forest as their habitat, which they have mastered.



*Fig. 9: Two pebbles from Puš's collection, which Puš offered to his visitors, and which were supposed to ward off evil spirits (Medvešček & Podobnik, 2006, 23).*

of paths plays a key role in how power is organized within assemblages" (Bryant, 2014, 9). To overcome the anthropocentric notion of "power," Bryant introduced the term "gravity" to describe how machines bend spacetime. He believes that by using the term "gravity" he is "drawing attention to the ways in which non-human machines such as plants, animals, bacteria, technologies, infrastructures, and geographical features also contribute to the shape that social assemblages take" (Bryant, 2014, 10). As a materialist social and political philosopher, Bryant is interested in how the geographical features of the material world play an important role in social relations and the organization of societies. For example, if there is a river, it provides a kind of barrier for people or it

allows them to travel and transport past it. A river and a mountain organize life around them.<sup>39</sup> And this also applies to a tree. Bryant's philosophy opens up the possibility of considering non-living entities as functional without humans controlling them.<sup>40</sup>

Drawing on one of the first media theorists, Marshall McLuhan, and his famous 1964 idea that the "medium is the message" (McLuhan, 2003, 17–35), Bryant posits that for a craftsman it is not a matter of imagining a model in his mind and then designing matter according to that form, but that matter contributes to the final products, non-human machines or materials contribute to the design. In posthuman media ecology, "a medium is understood as any entity that contributes to the becoming of another entity and provides and constrains possibilities for movement and interaction with other entities in the world" (Bryant, 2014, 9). According to this formulation, stones are media in several of the cases presented, such as the stone called *krint*. In contrast to Martin Heidegger, who claimed that machines always need a creator and an operator, Bryant argues that media or machines "are formative of human action, social relations, and designs in a variety of ways that don't simply issue from humans themselves" (Bryant, 2014, 22). The nature worshippers collected certain stones modeled by a river and believed they had the power to dry fruit, so they built them into the drying house constructed of "common" stones to ensure the harvest. Since stones can be understood as shaping the actions and social relationships of nature worshippers, according to this view, they should be considered as media or machines.

Four years before Bryant's machine-oriented ontology, the media theorist Jussi Parikka discussed swarm systems as media in a very similar way and spoke of media ecologies based on a dynamic concept of nature. Parikka starts from media archeology and Gilles Deleuze's connection of the ethology of ticks (after von Uexküll) with the concept of assemblages (Parikka, 2010, 63). The previous theories of Jacques Loeb and John B. Watson explained the relationship between bodies and milieus in a mechanistic fashion so that the milieu was seen as determining the organism's pose as part of the milieu and conceptualized as a physical continuation of its surroundings. In the 1920s and 1930s, von Uexküll introduced a radical posthumanist perspective that unfolds "a panorama of perceptions and ways of approaching the world that are closed to us humans but continuously lived by other life forms" (Parikka, 2010, 66). There "was no objective time and space but a reality consisting of various differing ways of contracting time and space" (Parikka, 2010, 64), which also reflected the same views in physics, cubist art, and philosophy. "What an animal perceives (Merkwelt) becomes structurally integrated into its action-world (Wirkwelt). Hence, the world of an animal is characterized by this

39 In his world history, Hegel considered the geographical and climate features as significant for the establishment of cultures and civilization. "Contrasted with the universality of the moral Whole and with the unity of that individuality which is its active principle, the natural connection that helps to produce the Spirit of a People, appears an extrinsic element; but inasmuch as we must regard it as the ground on which that Spirit plays its part, it is an essential and necessary basis" (Hegel, 1956, 96).

40 On a similar note, Marko Štuhec (2017) describes a case in which non-human nature gradually reclaims a cultural environment, as living trees and ivy slowly overpower the ruins of a once imposing building. Here, non-human nature emerges not as background but as a self-organizing, encroaching force, pushing the dead—stone, ruin, memory—aside, and reterritorializing space in a silent, material way.

functional circle, which integrates an entity into environment (or milieu to other milieus)” (Parikka, 2010, 65–66). Instead of the given objects of nature, von Uexküll introduced the “subject-object relations that are defined by the potentiality opened in their encounters” (Parikka, 2010, 66). Based on von Uexküll’s understanding of milieus with structural couplings in functional circuits and Deleuze’s concept of assemblages, Parikka discussed the “machinic assemblages of nature.”

*The leaves of an oak form a coupling of melodics with raindrops, the leaves acting as a channeling and a distribution machine while the raindrops engage in a compositional becoming with the “living machine” of the oak and its cells. In the animal kingdom, an apt example is the living machine formed by an octopus and seawater, with the water becoming a “carrier of significance” (Bedeutungsträger) for the animal, which uses it for its movements (Parikka, 2010, 70).*

In the same way, such “couplings,” or “foldings” with the world (a term borrowed from Deleuze) constantly take place in the world of insects, as noted by Parikka (2010, 70). The stones that Puš gave to people also formed connections with the people to whom they gave power. Similar connections or intertwining of stones and people were made for nature worshippers with *krint* and other safeguarding stones. The sacred or special stones were essential factors in the lives of nature worshippers from Posočje, especially because they functioned as machines that organized people’s lives. The safeguarding stones were safeguarding people’s homes so that they could live there, they were safeguarding the harvest, the forest, the children, etc. These stones organized life like the mountains, the trees, and the water. The river and the mountain create obstacles, but also provide water and food. The tree makes connections with mushrooms and bees. On the one hand, all these “machinic assemblages of nature” represent a rather mechanistic or even “objective” world, as the dynamics take place independently of the perception of the individual. On the other hand, the connections of nature worshippers with the empowering or safeguarding stones are made in the milieu of nature worshippers’ perception. However, this fact has not diminished the power of the stones over the people who believe in them.

## THE STONES AS CAPTIVATING APPARATUSES

In an experiment that Martin Heidegger later discussed, von Uexküll observed the bee’s relationship with the honey within the bee’s *Umwelt*. Heidegger noticed that the bee was completely *taken* by the honey. Von Uexküll called this element of the *Umwelt* that is captivating the animal the “carrier of significance” (*Bedeutungsträger, Merkmalsträger*). Heidegger named it the *disinhibitor* (*das Enthemmende*), and instead of the *Umwelt* Heidegger spoke of the *disinhibiting ring* (*das Enthemmungsring*) (Agamben, 2004, 51). Heidegger drew the difference between an animal and a human precisely as regards the mode of existence of the animal, which is determined by the *animal being taken by the disinhibitor*, wherein he claimed, “*the animal is poor in [the] world*” (Heidegger, 1995, 273). The experiment with the bee being placed in front of a cup, full of honey, was a case

used by Heidegger to describe the state of captivation of the animal by the disinhibitor. In the experiment, the bee began to suck the honey, then its abdomen was cut away. The bee continued to suck, while the honey poured out of its open abdomen. Heidegger recognized an instinctual drivenness “toward,” which prevents the animal from establishing a distance toward the disinhibitor in its disinhibiting ring: “It is precisely being taken by its food that prevents the animal from taking up a position over and against” (Heidegger, 1995, 242). The bee is captivated by the scent and honey. This peculiar captivation related to the honey is a driven activity, which Heidegger called *behaving* (*sich benehmen*) (Heidegger, 1995, 243). It is this relationship with its environment, that particular relationality that determines the behavior of an animal, as the animal is *driven forward* and *driven away*, which means it is in a state of *captivation* by the disinhibitor, which determines the essence of *animality* (Heidegger, 1995, 240). Humans, on the contrary, can comport themselves (*sich verhalten*) and act (*handeln*) in the world. According to Heidegger the fundamental relationship of human Dasein toward beings, i.e. man towards beings—such as humans and other living beings, as well as lifeless beings—is determined differently than the essence of animal relationality, which is captivation in the disinhibiting ring, as humans “are capable of being awakened” (Heidegger, 1995, 276). In contrast to the animal, the human being is “world-forming” (Heidegger, 1995, 285).<sup>41</sup>

Based on an examination of Heidegger’s reflections on the difference between humans and animals, Giorgio Agamben has discussed the “animalization of man,” which coincides with the humanization of the animal (Agamben, 2004, 77). Heidegger’s discussion of humans as a being distinct from other beings refers to man in universal terms. In this respect, he does not distinguish between modern and mythical consciousness. When Agamben states an “animalization of man,” one could argue that he is referring to a “contemporary” man or posthuman condition when animals are “humanized.” So we see that Agamben is aware, to a certain extent, that there are differences in the conceptualizations of animals and humans that are “historically” conditioned, or rather, that depend on the epistemological conditions of human consciousness. This is also how we can distinguish between modern and mythical consciousness.

In this respect, the application of Heidegger’s conceptualization of the animal’s captivation by the disinhibitor becomes interesting when one considers the entanglement of the nature worshippers with the empowering or safeguarding stones. The nature worshippers did not distance themselves from the chosen stones or take a position “against” and “over” these stones. People were driven to the stones, and they were captivated by the stones. This essential “animality” that was typical of mythical consciousness and to which Agamben perhaps appeals in the context of posthumanities could be contrasted

41 In mythical thought, it is not the human that is world-forming, but non-human nature that acts upon humans. Figures of Alpine mythology, such as the Goldenhorn (*Zlatorog*)—the chamois with golden antlers who dwells in the alpine heights above the Soča valley—articulate a moral order embedded in the landscape, where non-human nature punishes human greed and intrusion (Crowther, 2022). Much like the sacred stones of the Posočje region, the *Zlatorog* myth presents non-human nature not as passive terrain subject to human control, but as a sentient force capable of protecting, avenging, and restoring balance. It is another instance of nature functioning not as scenery, but as a sovereign agent.

with the modern instrumental rationality that Heidegger described as the essence of the human relationship to the world.

For this discussion, it is helpful to draw attention to another concept discussed by Heidegger, which is technology. When Heidegger discussed the question concerning technology, he initially considered technology as a contrivance, an instrument (Lat. *instrumentum*). This defines the human relationship toward technology, which is instrumental, as the initial definition of technology supposes technology is “a means to an end.” To be more precise, we could add that Heidegger speaks of technology as being a means to a *human* end. Heidegger discusses technology as regards the human will to master it. “The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control” (Heidegger, 1977, 5). The traditional work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field, since the peasant only sows the grains and places the seeds, then he watches over their increase. But with technology, even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of “setting-in-order, which sets upon [*stellit*] nature” (Heidegger, 1977, 15). Man is “challenged to exploit the energies of nature” (Heidegger, 1977, 18). The animal in its captivated activity, in contrast to man, cannot relate itself to “what is present at hand as such” (Heidegger, 1995, 248). Man, on the other hand, encounters things as “present at hand”. The “mere presence” or “presence-at-hand” (Ger. *Vorhandenheit*) means a “simple awareness of something present-at-hand in its sheer presence-at-hand” (Heidegger, 1962, 48), while “readiness-to-hand” (Ger. *Zuhandenheit*) implies that man sees things as useful. In the first case, a person has a disinterested view of a thing, whereas in the second case, a person’s interest depends on the usefulness or utility that a person recognizes in the thing. When considering the question concerning technology, Heidegger acknowledged that things exist in the world for humans as “standing-reserves.” “Thus when man, investigating, observing, ensnares nature as an area of his own conceiving, he has already been claimed by a way of revealing that challenges him to approach nature as an object of research, until even the object disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve” (Heidegger, 1977, 19). Here we find Heidegger’s application of von Uexküll’s idea of what we can call “a variety of subjective worlds” to the instrumental rationality as to be found in Heidegger’s comprehension of the essence of technology, as according to Heidegger, man, equipped with technology, sees the river as a standing-reserve:

*even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command. [...] What the river is now, namely, a water power supplier, derives from out of the essence of the power station. In order that we may even remotely consider the monstrousness that reigns here, let us ponder for a moment the contrast that speaks out of the two titles, “The Rhine” as dammed up into the power works, and “The Rhine” as uttered out of the art work, in Hölderlin’s hymn by that name (Heidegger, 1977, 16).*

In this passage, Heidegger addresses the difference between pre-industrial and industrial society and presents two different conceptions of the Rhine—the Rhine for the industrial man and the Rhine for the Romantic poet. Heidegger speaks of the world becoming a standing reserve with “technology,” or rather, in the industrial age. For Heidegger, the

essence of technology is determined by the essence of the goal towards which technology is directed. Technology is not a mere means of reaching the objective, but the mode of human existence, since it profoundly changes man's relationship to the world.

According to Heidegger, the world does not exist *per se* for humans, especially with technology, i.e. industrialization. For industrial man, the world exists in front of him and is at his disposal. The various entities in the world are not simply things, for some “things” never show themselves proximally as they are for themselves” (Heidegger, 1962, 97–98). The things in the world are not “merely present”, but also “ready-to-hand” (from the German verb *zuhanden*). The equipment of a room—inkstand, pen, ink, paper, furniture, etc.—has their equipmentality, in the sense of belonging to other equipment. These things have an assignment or a relationship of something to something—the “in-order-to.” The equipment is thus only revealed in its use, which is tailored to its own measure. The “in-order-to” is therefore constitutive of the equipment we are using at that moment. The hammering reveals the specific manipulability (Ger. *Handlichkeit*) of the hammer. The kind of being that the equipment possesses is what Heidegger called “readiness-to-hand.” If one only looks, one cannot discover and understand the readiness-to-hand by its outward appearance. But “when we deal with them by using them and manipulating them, this activity is not a blind one; it has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided and from which it acquires its specific Thingly character” (Heidegger, 1962, 98). Heidegger discussed the readiness-to-hand in relation to tools, as they direct man to use them. However, the concept of standing-reserve that Heidegger discussed in relation to technology shares the characteristic usefulness that man find in the things that surround them. In Heidegger's philosophy, man's relationship to the world is not only defined by the fact that he considers the things existing in the world to be useful, but man also strives to master his actions as well as the tools and technologies he uses to utilize things. According to Heidegger, machines, like other things in the world, should also be instrumentalized by humans, as opposed to

*Hegel's definition of the machine as an autonomous tool. When applied to the tools of the craftsman, his characterization is correct. Characterized in this way, however, the machine is not thought at all from out of the essence of technology within which it belongs. Seen in terms of the standing-reserve, the machine is completely unautonomous* (Heidegger, 1977, 17).

The pioneering media theorist Vilém Flusser offered a further distinction, not only between tools and machines, but also between tools, machines, and apparatuses. According to Flusser, tools are extensions of the human body that serve to reach further into the world to perform work, wherein work means investing labor to change the form of things. Performing work, then, means manipulating the world and changing the shape of things or the state of beings. Tools simulate the organ from which they are extended: the arrow simulates the finger, the hammer the fist, and the pick the toe. A brush is a tool. Ontologically speaking, tools belong to pre-modern man. Machines also perform work and change the state of things, i.e., they change the world. However, machines are not extensions of human organs but operate autonomously. In this case, machines do the work and human subjects connect

with the machines so that they are at the service of the machines. Machines emerged with the industrial age and are relatively autonomous operating systems that perform labor and subjugate humans (as in the Marxist critique of capitalism). In this respect, Flusser presents a more Fordist, mechanistic concept of machine. Flusser introduces a third concept, the apparatus. If tools are replaceable when people use them, then people are replaceable when machines are in operation. In the case of machines, the machines are constants and the people are variables. There is a fundamental distinction between industrial and postindustrial society, between the functioning of tools and machines on the one hand and the apparatuses on the other. Both tools and machines define the ontological status of man, who is a working man, a worker or *homo faber*. According to Flusser, in postindustrial society the category of “work” must be replaced by the category of “information:” “The basic category of industrial society is work. Tools and machines work by tearing objects from the natural world and informing them, i.e. changing the world. But apparatuses do not work in this sense. Their intention is not to change the world, but to change the meaning of the world” (Flusser, 2000, 25). According to Flusser, apparatuses belong to postmodern society. They do not work. They interact with people. The relationship between humans and apparatuses is different from the relationship between humans and machines. The person in the apparatus is a functionary of the apparatus. Man is exhausting the potentiality of the program of the apparatus with every single operation of the apparatus that produces outcomes. The outcome in this case is not the world transformed. The apparatuses do not change the states of beings, but the meaning of things. They produce information. Ontologically speaking, a person who is in a relationship with the apparatus is a “playing man,” a player or *homo ludens*.

Flusser’s concept of the apparatus can be applied well to postmodern technologies. However, it is also interesting for this discussion because it implies a certain degree of captivation of man within the apparatus. Man is an operating subject within the apparatus, but not an autonomous subject, because he is a functionary of the apparatus, which places him in a relationship of dependence to this *Umwelt*. And vice versa—the apparatus cannot function without a person. Although the empowerment and safeguarding stones are not types of postmodern technologies, they involve man in a similar relationship as postmodern devices involve contemporary man. The nature worshipper functions together with the stone, and the stone functions together with the nature worshipper.

Agamben also discusses the concept of the apparatus. He recognizes that the apparatus is the crucial strategic concept in Foucault’s thought when he speaks of “governmentality” or the “government of men” (Agamben, 2009, 1). What is the apparatus according to Foucault, summarized by Agamben:

- a. *It is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non-linguistic: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements.*
- b. *The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation.*
- c. *As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and knowledge relations* (Agamben, 2009, 3).

Agamben then traces the genealogy of an apparatus and links it to a theological genealogy of economy, for the Greek term *oikonomia*, which meant the administration of the *oikos* (home) and management in general, was translated in Christian theology into the Latin term *dispositio*, where it was applied to God, who administers and governs the created world. In Christian theology, the term *dispositio* (or *dispositif* in French, apparatus in English) is thus also linked to the concept of creation, as it produces its subjects. “The term ‘apparatus’ designates that in which, and through which, one realizes a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, they must produce their subject” (Agamben, 2009, 11). Agamben even finds a connection to Heidegger’s concept of the *Gestell* (frame, *Ge-stell*—en-framing), which “means some kind of apparatus” (Heidegger, 1977, 20). “Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering [*bestellen*] as standing reserve. Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology” (Heidegger, 1977, 20). Agamben notes a proximity of Heidegger’s notion of *Gestell* with the theological notion of disposition as well as to Foucault’s notion of apparatuses, as they all refer back to *oikonomia* as “a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (Agamben, 2009, 12).

In the extreme phase of capitalist development, we experience “a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses” (Agamben, 2009, 15). One of these common devices that function as apparatuses is the cell phone. The apparatus incessantly “captures” the subject (Agamben, 2009, 13)—to use Heidegger’s words—in the “disinhibiting ring.” Apparatus captures and subjectifies the desire (Agamben, 2009, 17). According to Agamben, apparatuses are thus captivating systems that first de-subjectivize their subjects to then produce them as subjects with desire. Furthermore, as we have seen, Agamben adds the dimension of supposed or apparent usefulness to the definition of apparatus. For Heidegger, however, the word *stellen* (to set upon) in the name *Ge-stell* (enframing) means challenging (Heidegger, 1977, 21) and is related to the instrumental mind, which seeks to find the use of things utilizing technology. The apparatus, as part of technology, thus supports the relationship of man to the world, which consists in seeing its elements as “standing-reserves,” i.e., as sources that are to become useful for humans with the aid of technology. In this sense, apparatuses help people to make use of the world. Agamben and Foucault, on the other hand, speak of (especially capitalist) apparatuses that capture people, a multitude of *Umwelten* with “carriers of significance” that attract people’s attention and arouse desires, that have strategic functions and are located in power relations, i.e. they manage, govern, control and orient their subjects.

The *Umwelt* of nature worshippers seems to be something quite different from this conceptualization of an apparatus in the context of capitalist society, because it belongs to a different ontology. However, the concept of apparatus as discussed by Agamben and Flusser shows certain similarities between ancient mythical consciousness and contemporary consciousness. The captivation of humans in

postmodern apparatuses speaks of a mythical entanglement of contemporary man with “intelligent” technologies. A reference to *oikonomia* could also be found in the entanglement of nature worshippers with stones. The given entities attract the attention of nature worshippers to such an extent that they orient and determine their lives. Certain entities found in the world, such as stones that give strength or safeguard them, do not exist as “standing reserves” available to man waiting to be transformed into something else—as Heidegger speaks of industrial man equipped with technology—but have the power to direct the lives of nature worshippers. Nature worshippers are seized, *taken* by the empowering or safeguarding stones that have the function of disinhibitors, capturing people who believe in them into the disinhibiting ring. Nature worshippers do not tend to change the world with the help of empowering or safeguarding stones. Nevertheless, these stones are a kind of “standing-reserves” to be used in the lives of nature worshippers.

## CONCLUSIONS

The belief system and practices of Posočje nature worshippers provide a profound ecological and philosophical framework that challenges dominant anthropocentric views. Their worship of living and non-living entities reflects a worldview in which humans are inextricably linked to their environment. Through rituals and symbolic practices revolving around sacred trees, stones and other natural elements, nature worshippers demonstrate an intimate connection with the organic and inorganic world around them that emphasizes interdependence and mutual respect. These insights are closely related to contemporary ecofeminist and posthumanist discourses that seek to deconstruct hierarchies between human and non-human entities and advocate for a more egalitarian relationship with the earth.

The nature worshippers’ understanding of static but empowering or safeguarding non-living entities as agencies that organize life around them invites a reassessment of how we engage with our ecosystems. It highlights the potential for a more inclusive relationality that embraces all forms of existence and reflects the demands of environmental ethics to recognize the intrinsic value of all beings. By integrating these ecofeminist teachings into modern ecological and feminist thought, we can continue to dismantle exploitative systems and move towards a more harmonious coexistence with other beings in the ecosystem, guided by respect and recognition of the interconnectedness that sustains life.

## PREPLETENOST NARAVOVERCEV IZ POSOČJA S KAMNI

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### POVZETEK

*Leta 2015 je slovenski etnograf in zbiratelj Pavel Medvešček-Klančar izdal obsežno knjigo z domoznanskim gradivom, ki govorji o kulturi častilcev narave iz zahodnega dela Slovenije, zlasti Posočja, z naslovom Z nevidne strani neba: razkrite skrivnosti starega verstva. Kultura teh starovercev, popolnoma nepovezanih z vzhodnimi pravoslavnimi kristjani, ki so tudi opredeljeni kot staroverci, je bila prej večinoma neznana ali zanikana s strani akademske skupnosti. Soobstajala naj bi kot protikultura prevladujoči krščanski kulturi do začetka 20. stoletja in je bila predmet verskega preganjanja. Pričevanja, ljudske pripovedi in materialna dediščina pripovedujejo o načinu življenja, ki je bil esencialno prepletet s svetom, ki je obkrožal ljudi. Posebno pomembni so bili posebni kamni in drevesa, ki so jih ljudje častili. Članek obravnava mitsko misel naravovercev iz Posočja z ekofeminističnega vidika. Avtorica zagovarja trditev, da se njihova verovanja in sistem prepričanj bistveno razlikuje od antropocentrične grško-rimske ali judovsko-krščanske hierarhične antropocentrične perspektive, ki razvršča ekosfero na podlagi uporabnosti. Posoški naravoverci so neživa bitja razumeli kot avtonomno delujoče entitete, ki organizirajo življenje okoli sebe. Članek obravnava človekovo prepletjenost z ekosfero, vključno z neživim svetom, kot jo najdemo v mitološki misli posoških naravovercev, z vidika medijske ekologije s premislekom pojmov »mehanski sklopi« in »prepogibanje s svetom«. Naravoverci so drevesa in kamne s posebnimi močmi imeli za oblikovalce delovanja in družbenih odnosov ljudi, zato jih je treba obravnavati kot medije, stroje oziroma aparate, ki organizirajo človeško življenje.*

*Ključne besede: naravoverci, staroverci, aparat, die Umwelt, medijska ekologija, ekofeminizem, kamen*

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