

The Legend of Arta Bridge Chameria (Çamëria)



Archeology

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Abstract

The following text is one of my own studies that started as a selfish desire to write an essay which then slowly turned into a study of a legend that I had read about before from Ismail Kadare and Fatos M. Rrapaj. When I decided to write about this very beautiful legend, the millennial bridge located at the city of Arta, today part of Greek territory since the Berlin Congress, thought to me, I could find something about this in the General Directorate of Archives. You can now enjoy the version by folklore collector, Lluk Karafili, which I found in the General Directorate of Archives, File 255, pages 11–12. My study or work in this case is to show the three versions, narrating the same legend in different languages. I've made a comparison so that I could mark the value of each version.

The Legend of Arta Bridge Chameria (Çamëria)

Everyone who has been to Greece on vacation, more precisely to the beautiful city of Arta, Chameria, has not come back without crossing a bridge, centuries old! Also, everyone who has walked around the peculiar alleys of Arta, has seen deserted Cham houses. Everyone has enjoyed the magical moments of the sweet moon shone evenings of Arta. Or, the typical Cham foods, now appropriated and named differently by Greeks, just like the towns, named by completely differently. This is what you can see and taste in the Albanian Arta, Arta of Chameria! As part of the ethnic entirety of Albania, Chameria and the furthest city to the south of Albania after the Berlin Congress, Arta has an old bridge, behind which there is a legend on how it was built. My research in the General Directorate of Archives, in the field of Albanian Ethnology, found evidence of a free translation of Greek national songs, put in File 255, pages 11–12, by ethnologist Lluk Karafili. This is what I'll cite next:

Forty five craftsmen and sixty prentices,
To make a bridge over Arta river,
Building it by day, to see it tumble down at night,
Weeping are the craftsmen,
so are the prentices crying.
“What a pity, our work is gone in vain.
Build you all day long, you just disappear at night.”
A bird flies by, stopping by the riverside.
It doesn't chirp like a bird, nor does it like a swallow.
Simply it's crying, orating a human's voice.
“The bridge won't stand its ground, without a human sacrifice;

Do not sacrifice an orphan, neither burry in a stranger, nor do a traveler.

Solely, Foreman's beautiful wife,
walking up slowly before supper time."

Scared to death the Foreman was,
what a statement he heard,

A word he sent to his thin-waist with the messenger bird:

Take your time when you dress up,
take your time when you get ready,
you do so to bring us supper.

Hurry up you go cross Arta Bridge."

Here she comes forthwith,
walking up the white road,

Right before poor foreman's eyes,
making his heart fall apart.

"How is your day going craftsmen and prentices?

But, why is foreman looking worried?

His ring's dropped low in hole,
Who'll go in, and get the ring:

Don't you worry my foreman,
cause I'll go in and get your ring,

I'll go in and so get out,
there your ring will be found.

She set foot into the hole,
not even way down,

"Pull me up, raise that chain;

There's nothing to be found,
my search here is all way through."

They threw gravel covering her and the lime to make it hard,

So big a rock throws the Foreman.

"That's our fate and so was written.

We're three sisters, let you know,
that's our luck we're born so.

One built Tuna, another Afrat,

And I the youngest, the Bridge of Arta.

I wish it quakes, my lip so shakes,
All who pass by, fall like leafage.

Take back girl words and cussing.

One day too, he might go through, only brother of you."

She took back words and cussing,
just to make different blessing.

When wild mountains just so shake,

all the bridges then may quake.
 And, when wild birds fly no more,
 then the bridge shakes its core.
 Cause my brother far away,
 might come and cross the bridge one day!

The note at the end of the page, where this evidence was found, shows that this is a free translation of a Greek national song, dedicated to, in the regions of Arta and Paramithia, because we can see that the Albanian version of this song is being sung in the regions of Sul and Chameria. The demos knew with a narrating finesse how to beautifully intertwine the tragic muring of Foreman's wife with the mythological personification of the bird with a human voice and the noble ritual of casting the ring by a nobleman so that, the one who finds it, is to be married. In this particular legend's case the ring is set as a trap, so that Foreman's beautiful wife comes to the walls of Arta Bridge. Next, this file unfolds some evidence showing that the erection of the Bridge of Arta dates back in 1606, whereas based on other's, in 1602. As a legend, the Legend of the Bridge of Arta is well known all over the Chameria province and it can be found in popular songs dedicated to it. We can see it in legends written by several poets and writers as well as in several well known theatrical plays, such as: The Tragedy of N. Kazanxhaq "Protomastori" (Prime Minister) with music composed by Manuel Kolomiri. The same version of this ballad named The Bridge of Arta can be found in an issue of the book "An Anthology of Greek Poetry," (Printing House Naim Frasherri, Tirana 1986), translated by Ismail Kadare.

Forty five masters with as many as aides.
 Building a bridge over the river, in Arta.
 At daytime they built it, at night it'd fall down.
 Aides were crying and masters cursing:
 Our effort gone in vain, so much for our hard work.
 We build up day by day,
 by the night it's washed away.
 Being it the right arch, spoke the wizard:
 Sacrifice a human being or else the wall won't stand.
 Not a complete stranger, traveler or orphan,
 But, Foreman's wife is to die buried in the wall!
 When the Foreman heard these words, his heart stopped.
 He sent a messenger nightingale to inform his wife.
 "To slow down dressing up,
 To slow down for a makeup,
 Hold up coming to Arta Bridge."
 But the messenger took it all wrong telling his wife:
 "Take no time in dressing up,
 Take no time putting the makeup,

Hurry up to Arta Bridge.”
 Down the road she soon showed up,
 Foreman’s heart came to a stop.
 “Good day masters, good day to you, all the aides.
 But why Foreman’s looking so sad?”
 “Ring fell off from first Arch.
 Try to find it, who’s gonna dive?
 I’ll jump there find it, right.”
 As she reached half the way, not all the way down:
 “Pull me up, you get me out,
 I looked allover nothing’s there.”
 They start by trowels, they throw lime,
 Next the Foreman throwing a rock.
 “Three sisters, we were only,
 all three not so lucky,
 First at bridge in Danube, second one, Valbona bridge,
 And the third, the Bridge of Arta, I made it, the young one,
 Now my heart is so jumpy,
 so the bridge may be shaky,
 As my hair is now falling,
 want the passers to be dropping.”
 “Quit those words, woman, stop the curse,
 You have a brother far away,
 to the bridge might come one day.”
 Then the poor one, withdrew that curse:
 “The heart is strong and the bridge be so,
 Like my hair is strong, the passengers be so.”

The version of Arta Bridge translated by Ismail Kadare, is found poetized and stylized in a different language, whereas the subject and characters used, when compared with the version I’ve found in the General Directorate of Archives, are the same. We can read a literary cured language and harmonious with the history, where we can see from the beginning the standard literary word master (kryemjeshër), while the Archives’ version uses the word foreman (ustabash) or where Fatos M. Rrapaj uses little brother in his version. The first distinction between the three versions is that the version translated by Kadare and that of the Archives are similar, whereas the version of Fatos M. Rrapaj resembles the Legend of Rozafa. In other comparisons, I can say that the personification of the Wizard in Kadare’s version is similar to that of Fatos M. Rrapaj who says it’s an old man. In my fantasies, this wizard looks like an old man who is a magician. The personification of the bird is also preserved in both Kadare and Archives’ versions, with little difference because in Kadare’s version the bird’s voice is not transmitted by a human’s one, but the birds role is kept as such, messenger to Foreman’s bride. In Kadare’s version, the confusion

raised by the bird is not put in unintentionally by the author. I can see it as a joke made to us by the author, to; why not make us smile a little. It also looks like irony that Kadare possesses a little bit in his style. We can find figurative distinctions in between Kadare's version and the one I've found in the Archives, the moment when the Foreman gives an order to the bird. In the version I've found in the Archives, the bird as a mythological figure gives an order to the journeymen that Foreman's wife gets buried in the wall alive. Writer Ismail Kadare made this shift over, maybe because he wanted to give it a tragic nuance. The act of murating is the same in all three versions, also. Characters of ram and ox in Fatos M. Rrapaj's work, as hypotheses look to me like Illyrian mythological figures at times and, also as if they want to show us the farming model of that time. There are similarities in all three versions where working tools used by the journeymen: the trowel and lime are the same. The role of the ring looks to me like a literary figure as much as it is a mythological one, which unites the three versions giving us a unique noble figure of a Foreman used in both Kadare and Archives' versions. Besides the distinctions, we also notice the literary figures of a cursing bride. In the version found in Archives, they are softer, whereas at Kadare, there is a parallel between curses, I cite: "Just like my hair is falling, so may the pedestrians fall," so we have a comparison coming from Kadare's poetizing. The hair is intentional at Kadare, because he wants to show us the fragility, subtlety and beauty of foreman's bride, at the same time. Also, the bird's character is preserved in both of these two versions, with little difference because, in Kadare's version it's not personified by a human's voice, but the birds role is kept as such, messenger to foreman's bride. In Kadare's version, the confusion raised by the bird is not put in unintentionally by the author. I can see it as a joke made to us by the author to; why not make us smile a little. It also looks like the irony that Kadare has a little bit in his style. The brother's character is present in both versions; first, to show us the love a sister has for her brother and, it also shows the phenomenon of emigration, present to this day due to numerous economical reasons. In the publication "Folklorists 3" by Fatos M. Arapaj, Tirana 1983, pages 401–403, we find an even more elaborate version, where author F. M. Rrapaj has collected his story from a Çam native. In his version, bird's character that we also find in the Archives' version is portrayed by a wise old man, giving the brothers the command to murate a woman. Also, the brothers' characters that we find in F. M. Rrapaj's version, brings the Legend of Arta Bridge even closer to that of Rozafa and based on my opinion he makes it alike. Moreover, the description of the last verses depicts Rozafa with no differences at all, when compared to Arta Bridge. In order to better understand dissimilarities, I'll cite from pages 399, 400:

I'm telling you, all friends and comradely,
 The Bridge of Arta, was once made,
 three Lluri brothers had it built,
 We even know their names.
 The oldest one's name was Mihë Guri,
 and the middle one's, Pani,
 the youngest was called Kici.
 Forty laborers they have at work,

Work by day and work by night,
 no deed of theirs can see daylight.
 An old man goes there by and speaks:
 “Journeymen, all you journeymen,
 your work will never thrive!
 How in the world your work can ever be,
 how can your bridge ever stay still,
 without a man being sacrificed,
 without an ox put under the knife,
 or else a ram put under a knife,
 under the pylon of Narta Bridge?
 That’s the way how your work will thrive,
 That’s how Bridge of Narta will stand its ground.
 What are they gonna do,
 how can they make it through?
 So easy for an ox and ram to put in there.
 Poor creature strives when death comes by,
 but how a poor man is going to feel like?
 The three brothers go deep in their thoughts:
 The one with our breakfast next morning to come,
 will be buried deep and alive.
 Just as deep in, poor animals,
 ox and a ram, for the bridge to stand up high.
 Now, the first brother does not tell a lie,
 to betray his brothers: cause “brothers can poke out an eye.”
 To tell their wives, Pani and Miha so disloyal are.
 At early dawn, to the field of Narta,
 bags full of breakfast shows up Kico’s wife:
 May it go handy, the work of all you journeymen!
 May you blessed be our sister-in-law!
 Said Pani and Mihë Guri.
 The wife says to young Kici:
 What’s up with you, my lord, why do you cry?
 My ring just fell down astray;
 it fell so deep the water will carry it away.
 That ring my lord, I’ll get out for you.
 As she climbed down the hole,
 they all cast on her plenty of stones.
 Why my husband, you my darn lord,
 Why cover me alive in that soil?
 Never in my life, ever did no wrong:

So may the Bridge of Narta shake down like I crawl;
 all folks who want to cross,
 let them down fall,
 all who are well or sick unwell!
 Listen to me my husband and my brothers-in-law,
 I'll tell you my last will,
 as hard as a milestone,
 my son for you as my last word:
 A white fig here'll let its root,
 feed my soon the first ripe fruit,
 and my breast out for good!
 Her breast out they left so,
 from there a silver creek to flow,
 for the son to come drink and grow,
 for the sick to heal and get round.
 The Bridge of Narta still stands high,
 just to hear passersby: how the ox brays a moo,
 and the ram bleating baa, the bride's cries of a woe.

So, from what we can see in all three versions, the central character of a woman being buried in the foundations of the Bridge of Arta, is also met in the Legend of Rozafa, thing that makes the Legend of the Bridge of Arta more credible and ethnic. Besides other things, in F. M. Rrapaj's version we notice the fig's figure which looks narrative in a people's language, making verses richer and it also expresses the foodstuff and the parallelism between the fig milk and the breast milk. A perfect symbolical finding. In F. M. Rrapaj's version, the descriptive detail of leaving the breast out is present in the Legend of Rozafa, which makes an even bigger resemblance between the versions of F. M. Rrapaj and Rozafa.

References

1. The General Directorate of Archives, File 255, pages 11–12.
2. "An Anthology of Greek Poetry," (Printing House, Naim Frasheri Tirana – 1986), translated by Ismail Kadare.
3. "Folklorists 3" by Fatos M. Arapaj, Tirana 1983, pages 401–403.