

The designation “folklore hero” might be controversial from the standpoint of the various conceptions of folklore and its studies in the Slovenian space, yet it is certainly grounded in the horizon of contemporary folkloristics. In the research of heroes and famous personalities,<sup>1</sup> this category includes alongside real historical figures, especially those with a recognized role in the building and strengthening of the national identity, and the contemporary, mostly instantaneous celebrities, also the imaginary as well as factual heroes known to literature, to “classic” folklore and everyday life. Their heroics and reception processes are different than in the above famous personalities, who developed narrative stability and were perpetuated in the national scope –with no little assistance from academia and the education system–, or in those who perhaps entered the heroic arena but were in time forgotten; or in those who, after a period of more or less ephemeral media fame, simply vanished into thin air like so many soap bubbles.

In the study of folklore heroes, an open disciplinary approach is essential. Research to date namely shows that heroes are created on the basis of mythological, historical, religious worlds, that they exist not only in folklore in the classic sense, but also in literature, the fine arts, the media. This is why clear boundaries cannot be drawn between, for example, the historical, mythological, literary, or folk hero. Consequently the ranks of folklore heroes are mostly joined by individuals engraved into some, or several, of the forms of folklore expression. In other words: “The folk hero is not a historical personality but the image or representation of that individual within folklore” (Seal and Kennedy White 2013: xxix). Analogous holds true for the literary heroes who were folklorised, or the saints who were received especially well by the people. In the opposite process, “true” folk heroes have also undergone literarisation, entering into spheres of film, contemporary popular culture, and other aspects of the public consciousness. Becoming, perhaps, folklore the more.

The heroes of the Slovenian cultural milieu display a pool of common narrative elements, popular in the traditions of various times and social environments. The folk stories, songs, rituals, speech and daily life are rife with mythological motives, historical references, the lore of the land made available for popular use, as inspiration for any particular purpose. They are recycled through various expressive practices and performative events, in local and national promotion, in marketing, etc.

Ethnologists and folklorists have so far dealt with the phenomenon of heroism or its approximations most particularly in the research

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**1** Research project *Heroes and Famous Personalities in Slovenia and Central Europe* (ARRS, 2013–2017) outlined in the introduction.

of mythology and belief, folk letters, as well as customs and celebrations. If we parallel these heroes with those who “made history” and were, or still are, granted fame with the enthusiastic waving of flags, the group of folklore heroes is in a certain sense minor: but a handful had made it into the contemporary imaginarium through the filters of time and social censorship so to speak; whereas conversely, those attributed with merit in various fields of social life contribute new names to the gallery of the noted with each new political epoch.

A shift from the past academic attention to the community, in which the individual’s role was marginalized or even left untreated, forces the question who the heroes of the variously differentiated communities and their everyday lives actually were. Were they only those heroes spoken of in the expressive genres of tradition? Does the category also include local heroes, whose limited sphere of activity did not place them in the company of “state” heroes? What has (had) to happen in order for some to be granted their space on the “national podium”, to remain on it or be ignored, even erased? What were and are the ways of remembering and (trans)formation, evident in e.g. the narrative, storytelling, poetic and other lore, in literature, in the creation of monuments, in ritual practices and the contemporary heritage-making? Alongside various “types”, categories of heroes, who were or still are popularized among various groups, the authors in this book put forth especially the subject of reception, i.e. how the heroes are encoded into the local and national history, how their roles and signifiers are manipulated, what is added and what removed so that they remain suited to the cycles of time and space.

Of the “Slovenian” heroes, this book features a reasonable selection and (just) two heroines (Beautiful Vida, Saint Mary). Their characters are colourful – in the ways they originated, in their stability and/or the pliability of their role, the environments they existed and survived in and, not least, the ways in which they might be explored by modernity.

The paramount place in the book belongs to King Matjaž, “Slovenian” hero *par excellence*, whose figure today appears in many-layered mythological, historical, epic and fairytale, social, literary and broader artistic guises. The storytelling lore of Matjaž is analyzed in detail by Monika Kropelj Telban, who compares it with the legacy of Peter Klepec. Both these traditional heroes “became elements in the construction of the national identity, in which coalesce also political, social and ideological expectations. Identifications with the heroes thus adapt to the societal needs and existential conditions, which is precisely what keeps them alive.”

Božidar Jezernik addresses this process on the case of King Matjaž, the way his phenomenon reflects in both the nationalization of the folklore and the folklorisation of the national in the 19th and

20th century. He takes a close look at stories from the “glorious” past, woven by the press through force of imagination invested into daily-political use. Their rich legacy contributed matter for the transmogri-fication of the mythological-historical figure into the Father or leader of the nation. The motor of the perpetual reproduction of the myth of King Matjaž is aptly illustrated by the quote: “Ever since King Matjaž has been gone, so has justice.”

The vitality of King Matjaž’s legacy, and in parallel that of the Beautiful Vida, is illuminated from a different research perspective by Marjetka Golež Kaučič. Interpreted materials are worded into poems, whereas the topic itself –the myth of the saviour and the myth of long-ing– is approached through Jung’s assertions of the archetypal uncon-scious masculine and feminine, his concepts of *animus* and *anima*, which assist in the explication of the hero and the heroine’s respective canonisations. On the other hand, they are both subject to transfor-mation with a demythologising effect: resulting in the contemporary translation of Vida’s longing into materialistic gluttony, whereas in King Matjaž the “[s]emantics of the past [...] are replaced by those of the new nation-state, which no longer requires saviours in the shape of the mythological hero but merely capital.”

Anja Moric and Ana Perinić Lewis dedicate their attention to Peter Klepec, the frontier hero who became a man of two homelands and two citizenships when the Slovenian-Croatian state border cut across the valley of the upper Kolpa and Čabranka rivers, though his transformation was already set in motion with the early collection and recording of his lore, activities that are “part of the process of creating national stories, ‘records of the nation’”.

This strategy is illustrated excellently by the figure of Mar-tin Krpan. Originally a literary character, Krpan grew to a status of widespread popularity, even in scientific circles. Milan Trobič, whose fieldwork has been scanning for real-life traces of Krpan for years, this time centres on the Krpan Syndrome, and on Martin Krpan as the “role model” of all those who used to, or still do, operate along the ever-slippery boundary between the legal and the legitimate. That is why –beyond stereotypes of the boorish and grovelling nature of the Slovenians– the author’s contemplations on Krpan are highly current. Even regarding his mythical strength: in the Slovenian strongman competitions, years appear to have shown that “the contest requires not only dedication to muscle and brawn, but also some skill and sen-sible thinking.”

The most regionally limited hero included is Štefan Kofčar of Bohinj. Based on living and recorded oral tradition and literarisations, Marija Cvetek establishes he was at the same time a jester, a maverick and a hero: strong in body and character, open-minded, brave, mar-ginalized due to his disloyalty to the authorities, cunning and witty.

A close treatment shows how he became, was and remained a hero in Bohinj where his biographical data is preserved in popular awareness, weaving in over a century a “pattern of imaginary scenarios over a factual background”; reaffirming belief that the imagined filling out the blanks often appears, with the passing of time, more convincing than the historical. A nod to the realization that folklore trumps over history.

The fact brute strength is the most frequent attribute of the Slovenian folk hero is pondered on by Saša Babič. Strength – be it physical or psychological – “can be real or imagined on the part of the observer”, but at any rate a “[h]eroic weakling [...] is unthinkable”. She examines the manifestations of strength on the cases of Peter Klepec, Martin Krpan and King Matjaž, finding that: “They used their physical might to overcome the foreigner or ‘other’, whereas psychological strength is by all three utilized in their defiance against authority.”

That the people identify closely with subjects connected to their survival in the immediate surroundings is further supported by a treatment of folk hero portrayals on beehive panels. Bojana Rogelj Škafar establishes these traditional artistic representations most frequently feature patron saints, foremost among them Saint Mary in her numerous iconographic variants. She proposes that the saints “held an extraordinary position in the symbolic imaginarium of the majority population. They were the symbols of the rustic man’s beliefs, committed to the significance of the religious world encompassing the profane, and the power of saints to assist those in need in their daily troubles.”

The Slovenian holiday calendar is in December balanced out by the “three good men”, heroes in good standing in the eyes of today’s children – Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus, and Grandpa Frost. The emergence and popularization of Grandpa Frost following the Second World War is examined by Janez Bogataj, who establishes that the post-war ideology successfully implemented him as a supposed replacement for the “clerical” St. Nicholas, but failed to erase the latter from the people’s December celebrations. Tradition simply resists administrative measures.

The final chapter is dedicated to particular heroes – the alpine climbers. Jernej Habjan shows how the alpine climber is the quintessential folk hero, boldly transgressing forbidden boundaries: “Just like the encounter with the dragon symbolizes the hardships on the road to inner understanding, or the metaphysical battle between good and evil – similarly does the secular conquest of the mountain embody the heroic deed of overcoming life’s greatest challenges”. Hence, the hero-alpine climber ascends into folklore, spreading among popular consciousness.” He is the hero of climbing literature, which is “folklore in its wide adoption by the public without the assistance of the education

apparatus". Life itself weaves stories of heroics, encouraging new alpine climbers and with that, new heroes. These aren't typical national heroes but rather "heroes of the common man, and, as such, potentially international; the alpine climbing community is a community of the everyman, in spirit more trans-national than national."

As a final note, the matter at hand is certainly not exhausted with the heroes appearing in these writings. They may be read as a contribution to the broader rethinking of the processes of tradition, which always appear in dialectic and dialogical relation with modernity and the contemporary age, on the relation between folklore and history, on the various histories written into the interpretations of the heroes, on knowledge of the nationalization of history and the people's lore, on cultural heritage, and, with all that, on the interplay between culture and the social fabric, between the individual and the community. After all, folklore as the compound of *folk* and *lore* implies a semantic cluster addressing the relationships between bodies of "knowledge" and groups of individuals; or between what we name folklore and its contexts: the environments where it unravels or materializes in manifold ways.