



Mythology and Destiny

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Abstract. – In Albanian tradition, the essential attributes of the mythological figures of destiny seem to be symbolic interchangeable representations of birth itself. Their mythical combat is but the symbolic representation of the cyclic return in the watery and chthonian world of death, leading, like the vegetation, to the cosmic revival of a new birth. Both protective and destructive positions of the attributes of birth, symbolized by the amniotic membranes, the caul, and other singular markers, or by the means of the symbolism of maternal water, would be only two antinomic oppositions, two complementary and interchangeable terms of the mythopoeic opposition of the immanence of universal regeneration. The ambivalent representations of soul and destiny are not isolated in Albanian tradition. There are especially those which have also a function of assistance to childbirth, close to Greek representations of the destiny, personified there by the Moirai, in Scandinavian and Germanic traditions by Norns and in the Albanian tradition by other local figures. [*Albania, birth, myth, destiny*]

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The Marker of Singularity

Albanians attach a good deal of importance to omens and predictions connected with the placenta, the umbilical cord, the caul, as later with baby teeth, locks of hair from the first haircut, among Christian groups, or the circumcised foreskin, among Muslims, to nail clippings, etc. Generally speaking, these bodily elements all carry a strong polyvalent symbolic value. They are regu-

larly associated with the person's spirit, with their life and death, their health, their future character, their successes and setbacks. They symbolize the person's properties, are the spiritual condensation of their qualities. They have such close mystical ties with the person that merely the way they are dealt with or the aim they are ascribed determines the individual's own aptitudes and fate.

Although they are separated from the child's body, these pieces are regarded as still being permanently connected with the individual. Indeed they continue to carry with them some of the life principles that structure each individual. From the standpoint of metonymy, they are effectively an integral part of that person. That is why Albanian tradition believes that they can be used in various magical practices directed against the owner. Care is taken therefore that these separated pieces are not exposed to misappropriation, that they do not fall into the hands of spiteful people who might use them to bring about the person's downfall or death. Were the umbilical cord to be burned, for example, or thrown into the water, or eaten by some animal, it was believed that the same would happen to the child.

These pieces often carry heavy supernatural overtones, which can easily be used for wicked ends. This is almost always the case of magical powers, which can be used for either good or evil. All sacred things are dangerous. Because they are charged with a strongly ambivalent symbolic value, the pieces of body separated when the cord is cut and the placenta delivered are always subjected to ritual processes of symbolic destruction or conservation designed to protect the individ-

ual from the many possible dangers. The pieces are often placed, buried, or discarded in symbolic spots, which *capture* the cosmic energy: ancient trees, ancestors' graves, the threshold or the roof of the house, crossroads, flowing water, etc. In every case they unfailingly undergo a specific operation, which consists of excluding them from the habitual secular circuit of exchange.

In different parts of Albania, the placenta is regularly buried in the ground, under the threshold or in the inner courtyard of the house, or at the base of a fruit tree or a very old tree. Because one of the models for fertility is plant growth and the other is gestation, the placenta is thus placed in relation with plant fertility after having been in relation with human or at least animal fertility.¹ If the placenta was not expelled and buried, it was believed that the baby was not fully born. No doubt, with respect to the fertilizing powers of the earth, only such practices could mark the completion of the ritual.

The relationship of the placenta and the umbilical cord with the mother is an ambivalent one. Being connected with the baby's growth and with the fertility that they transmit to the woman, as they are with the fertility of the earth and the fruit tree under which they are buried, they have fertilizing powers. They are used by sterile women in different conception rites, or by new mothers and more generally young mothers in connection with lactation. Use of the placenta ensures that the woman will have enough milk and that it will not dry up, which would spell death for the child. In the region of Korça, in southeastern Albania, for instance, a sterile woman is supposed to stand over the still warm placenta of a newly born baby (Frashëri 1936: 29).

Just as they provided nourishment to the foetus in the womb, so the placenta and the umbilical cord ensure the same function at the symbolic level. But the functions the placenta fulfilled for the child are cancelled after the birth precisely because they are always separated at the moment of birth. Alternatively, Albanians keep the umbilical cord and the caul, and conserve them with care. They are attached to the child and he or she may even wear them as a lucky charm throughout life. Given that the umbilical cord once really linked the mother and her child, it was believed that it was still

capable of representing the protection the mother must afford her child even after birth. However, since this tie must be severed at birth, the umbilical cord represents at the same time the independence the child must acquire in order to become an adult.

These elements are not merely useful when separated from the child's body. They are also part of the individual's organic identity at birth and belong to the history of his or her person. The caul, a piece of amniotic sack that can adhere to the child for a number of reasons, is a special case. The Albanian terms for the caul are related, like those of the Germanic and Slavic zones, to terms for an item of clothing, in particular a garment worn next to the body, *këmisha*, chemise, undershirt, shift. It is always regarded as a good omen. It brings the child luck, good fortune, and happiness throughout life. The proverbial expression, *lindur me këmishë*, "born in a chemise," is used in particular to describe people who are always lucky. The child "born in a chemise" succeeds in everything. By analogy, the same favors are often attributed to children born with a lock of hair on the forehead. Among Albanians as among southern Slavs, the caul is often kept and sewn into a pouch that the child wears around his neck as a lucky charm. It is his *fatum*, his companion spirit. The rare fact of being born with a caul creates a durable interaction between the child and the maternal membrane that effectively surrounded and protected it in the womb. It was thus believed that the caul actually offered protection, especially against demons.

Among the supernatural powers Albanians attribute to the caul are the gifts of seeing and healing, the qualities of dexterity and cunning, etc., which are also found among other groups in Europe. But it is especially the immunity it gives from dying by water, by fire or from a wound that seems to be its fundamental power. In her book "Les signes de la naissance" (1971), Nicole Belmont analyses this threefold immunity in detail, with emphasis, in regard to the child, on the belief that the caul gives immunity from drowning. Before its birth, the amniotic membrane enabled the child to live in water, while after birth the caul can protect it from dying in water. This belief, found in the Albanian tradition, is one of the rare instances in mythology where the caul gives rise to the myth, in particular, by its power to protect against storm demons, also present in the Hebrew tradition. This is presented in the myth of the *dragù*, which, to my knowledge, is not found in the same terms in any other group.

In Albanian tradition, the cases of children born with a caul, or "in a chemise," to which other

¹ A complementary metaphorical relationship is introduced by means of egg symbolism. Sometimes, as in the region of Devoll in southeastern Albania, it is the custom to bury the shell of an egg that has been dipped in the baby's first bathwater (Sheshori 1944: 16).

cases of singular birth can be compared, such as birthmarks on the shoulder, under the arm, on the chest, or elsewhere, are regarded as the sign that supernatural protective powers intend to preside over the social status of these individuals throughout their life. By this attribute, they are assigned to fulfill certain cultural functions. It is the replacement of the real maternal protection by a symbolic protection that makes the child into a culture hero, passing unscathed through the adversities and the exploits of his life, like the child protected during its intrauterine life. The splitting off from the real mother of a symbolic mother represented by the caul or other related signs, which substitutes for the real mother, guarantees constant protection precisely because she moves to the symbolic level (Belmont 1971: 80–89).

In Albanian mythological tradition, individuals born “in a chemise,” but also with two and sometimes four little wings under the arm, are predestined to change into *dragù*, obliged to fight and vanquish the *kulshedra*.² Çabej calls attention to the two semantic sides of the figure of the *dragù* in Albanian tradition. The earliest authors writing in Albanian represent the *dragù* as a monster, like the Roman and Balkan dragon or hydra. The occurrences furnished by dialectology and toponymy show that this belief is also transmitted in the oral tradition. However, there is another semantic sense fairly widespread in collective beliefs whereby the *dragù* is presented as the male conqueror of the female monster *kulshedra*, whom he must fight to death. This representation is already attested in works written in Albanian as early as the seventeenth century, for example, in the 1635 “Dictionarium Latino-Epiroticum” of Frang Bardhi (Roques 1932). But, Lambertz stresses, the *dragù* are not only fabled beings of yore. As every mountain Albanian firmly believed until recently, – and there are old women, like the one I came across in the southern Albanian region of Përmet, who still believe – *dragù* can be born every day.

In collective beliefs, the *kulshedra* is represented as the demon of storms, a huge frightful, disgusting, horrible being, a female being with big

breasts that hang down to the ground, a long tale and nine heads with lolling tongues, fire spewing from the gaping maws and the head and body covered with long red hair. When she is in the vicinity, the weather turns foul, black clouds gather and big storms break. It is said that small storms are the work of her offspring. According to the collective representations in central Albania, she lives in springs and fountains. She often dries up rivers, blocking the waters and causing drought, but also bad weather, or flooding, or other natural disasters, which can only be ended by human sacrifices. In the South, I noted in the villages of Uraka, Kotodesh, and in Katjel in lower Mokra in southeastern Albania, that she is represented as a big female serpent who encircles the world with her mouth touching her tail. “If she were ever to take her tail in her teeth, she would destroy the whole world. For accepting to postpone the catastrophe, she requires daily human sacrifices” (Doja 1986). Here the beliefs are clearly mixed with the Andromeda theme. Other mythic representations, too, are embodied in the *kulshedra* figure. In traditional Albanian tales of the supernatural, for example, she is also contaminated by the Circe or Sphinx themes.

Only the *dragù* is capable of saving humankind from the monster. He sets upon the *kulshedra* with the beam of the plow and the plowshare (Nopcsa 1923), with the pitchfork and the post from the threshing floor, and with the big millstones (Shkurti 1989). He also hurls lightning bolts, meteors, tall trees from the forest, boulders, and whole houses torn from their foundations. It used to be believed that the thunder that growled on dark winter nights was the sound of their clashing weapons. The *dragù*’s impressive battles with the *kulshedra* took place, for instance, in the Great Northern Mountains in the bend of the river Drini, near the Vizier’s Bridge. There, at the place known as Rana-e-Hedhme, the huge boulders strewn the bed and banks of the river tell of this eternal, never-ending battle between enemy forces that clash so terrifyingly during a storm. Sometimes, in order that she perishes forever, the *dragù* must drown the *kulshedra*, otherwise she might come back to life. In the Çermenika Mountains near Elbasan, in central Albania, for example, it was believed that, having knocked the *kulshedra* senseless, the *dragù* had been able to destroy her only after having drowned her in the Shkumbini, the big river running from east to west through central Albania. Another important detail is that the *dragù* fends off his enemy’s blows for the most part by using his cradle as a shield. Curiously, the main weapons

2 Most data concerning the *dragù* and the *kulshedra* are taken from Lambertz (1922). Later authors repeat, use, or in the best of cases confirm the same information. For a recent account see (Tirta 2004: 121–132). The words designating the *dragù* and the *kulshedra* are found throughout the Albanian zone, with dialectal variants that, in the first case, derive from the Latin *draco* and, in the second, the Latin *chersydrus*, from the ancient Greek *cersudroi*, “a kind of serpent that lives in water or on land” (Çabej 1987: 300–302).

used by the *kulshedra* in the fight are her urine and the poisonous milk from her breasts.

These heroes may live unnoticed among humans. The gifts heralded at birth by the caul or other special signs can appear at any age, and in most cases go unremarked. As in the case of other heroes of European mythology, the gift is often displayed by the baby while still in the cradle, hence the role of the cradle as the primary defensive attribute. Whenever there was thunder and lightning, people believed the *dragù*a were going with their cradles to the place where all the *dragù*a met. In Albanian, the word *dragù*a is related to *drangë*, *drëngë*, *drëngëzë*, “a small fresh-water fish that does not grow very big”, and to *drangë*, “kitten, puppy, bear cub, in general a usually wild baby animal” (Çabej 1987: 302). *Dragù*a are nevertheless considered to be invulnerable, untouchable, and undefeatable. If someone is a *dragù*a, only his mother and, it must be noted, God can tell. As soon as a child is born, the mother hides the caul with which he was born so as to keep it safe, for no one must learn his identity, or he will immediately die.

The *dragù*a's invulnerability fits with everything we know about them from collective beliefs. It flows from the fact that the *dragù*a is born with a caul or is singled out by his unusual birth, but paradoxically this may also cause his death. This phenomenon can be compared with similar themes in Irish mythology (Belmont 1971: 61–69, 92–95, 190–192). The heroes of one Irish epic, the three brothers Fionn were all born with a caul. They have a sister who was taken captive by an aquatic monster. They sometimes appear as children in a cradle and die as soon as they are shown the caul with which they were born. In this case it is the conjunction with their caul that must bring about their death, in other words their encounter with something that was already joined to them when they were born but which should not have been. This means that the abnormal, or rather, unusual conjunction at birth entails a fatal consequence if it should be repeated. The first conjunction is good, its reiteration makes it bad. In another Irish myth, one of the heroes, in order to kill the monster, sends his magic lance directly into its navel, in other words, into the mark left by its birth. This brings about a counter-birth, since now it is a dead-ly substitute for the umbilical cord that is inserted into the navel. Another figure in the same cycle, whose fate was decided this time by the name he was given, also perishes because of the violation of the name taboo. The procedure is the same: a conjunction originally present at birth or at the name-giving, which is another way of marking the

birth, is reproduced, but this reiterated conjunction, in particular because it is reiterated, brings death.

This is something new, as Nicole Belmont (1971: 62 f.) observes for, until now, the documents often specified that the caul must be carefully preserved by the child or by the person who hoped to acquire some advantage from it. Here we have an interesting position between a caul inherently capable of engendering protection from birth and the same protecting caul also inherently capable of destruction. The caul's symbolic protecting function can be expressed in two ways: metaphorically or metonymically. Metaphorically, when it is said that the child born with a caul will be fortunate throughout life, due to the fact that he was born with a caul. Metonymically, when it is believed that such good fortune accompanies an individual who wears a caul on his person. The two levels are rarely mixed. Usually, as the documents show, the metaphoric level is not found together with the metonymic level.

Nevertheless, this separation should not be attributed to a diminished understanding of the beliefs. In this projection of the metaphoric axis onto the metonymic axis, I would instead be tempted to see the *poetic* function of the mythic message, about which Roman Jakobson (1981) wrote, or rather the *mythopoeic* function *par excellence*. The two basic modes of arrangement used in verbal behavior, as in mythic thinking, are selection and combination. Selection is carried out on the basis of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy; while combination, construction of the sequence, is based on contiguity. The poetic function projects the equivalence rule of the selection axis onto the combination axis. Equivalence is thus raised to the rank of a constituent procedure of sequence production (Jakobson 1981). In poetry as in myth, any sequence of semantic units tends to construct an equation. I conclude from this that it is the superposition of similarity, the projection of the caul's metaphoric protection onto continuity, the metonymic protection that gives this myth, and poetry in general, its thoroughly symbolic, complex, and polysemic character. This explains how the mythic sequence becomes a comparison. The metonymic protection is here short-circuited by a metaphoric meaning or dimension, which in turn is fully realized in the metonymic sequence. One of the laws of mythic thinking, confirmed once more by Lévi-Strauss (1962: 141), is that the transformation of a metaphor always yields a metonymy.

The *kulshedra* further retains our attention by her very nature. She is the opposite of everything

that human and social development, as well as the family, kin, and territorial groups' economic, agricultural, and patriarchal development, stand for. Might it, therefore, not be possible to see in this female demon what Françoise Héritier (1996: 87–132), analyzing essentially African documents, reports as a symbolic constant, which she identifies in the collective patterns of representation as natural ill-feelings on the part of females towards the transmission of life, a hostility that needs to be overcome by appropriate ritual and social techniques, with the intent of mystically gaining the good will of the genetic powers peculiar to women and obtaining their favors. In this vein, we could mention the fact that, in Albanian tradition, in some southern regions, the mother of the new mother must not come to see the baby in the first two days for fear of vexing the three Fates (Sheshori 1944: 10). It must be recalled that one of the *kulshedra*'s weapons is her poisonous breast milk. And she has to do battle with a cradle that serves as a shield.

The *dragù*a on the other hand has become the protecting hero who symbolically represents the community of family, kin, and territory. He stops the storms which spoil the crops, he slays the *kulshedra*, he delivers victims, he unleashes the waters and gives them to humans. He appears as a symbol of war and victory, a cultural champion for humankind. The plow, the pitchfork, the post, and the millstones are his attributes, representing economic development through agriculture, just as the cradle is his attribute representing the development of the lineage through new births.

The *kulshedra* is essentially a storm demon. Her other functions, as they appear in Albanian myths and tales, are secondary. The *dragù*a is related to her inasmuch as he, too, is in essence a storm demon. His main function and his *raison d'être* are to fight the *kulshedra*, and one of his visible attributes is the lightning bolt. He is the positive principle opposing the negative principle. In the interests of humankind, he takes on the task of protecting humans from storms, whereas the *kulshedra* represents the harmful, destructive power of the storm. Yet the death of one and the other is represented, in Albanian mythology, as a symbolic return to the womb whence they came. Just as the *dragù*a opposes the *kulshedra*, the essential attributes of the one and the other are opposed in relations of substitution and complementarity. As an aquatic monster, the *kulshedra* must definitively perish in water, just as the *dragù*a, a hero made invulnerable by his birth, can die only if the singular con-

junction produced at his birth is repeated once again.

Their essential attributes would thus be interchangeable symbolic representations of birth, the amniotic membrane or the fluid itself. Their final confrontation would be the symbolic representation of the cyclic return to the aquatic and chthonian world of death in order, like plant life, to accomplish the cosmic renewal of rebirth. The protecting and destroying positions of the attributes of the newborn, represented by the amniotic membrane and other singular marks, or by the symbolism of the mother's waters, would simply be the two antinomic, opposing forces involved in the struggle between good and evil, the two interchangeable, complementary terms of the mythic and poetic opposition between immanence and universal regeneration.

Given the present state of these beliefs, then, should we not consider the dissociation of the metaphoric from the metonymic axis not as a case of diminished understanding, as Nicole Belmont believed, but rather as an "euphemization" of the meaning of the beliefs?³ This must have then resulted in expressing only the univalent side of the representations, the reconciliation of the unleashed antinomic forces, as the only way to ensure and guarantee some protection in the open perspective of human destiny.

Symbolic Ambivalence

The Albanian myth relating the struggle between the *dragù*a and the *kulshedra* represents yet one more relation between the caul, or singular birthmarks, and the gift of metamorphosis in the form of a "second skin," that bears similarities with certain representations in Germanic and Slavic mythology. In particular, Slavic beliefs hold that the child born with a caul will turn into a werewolf. This person's spirit can leave the sleeping body and perform feats of superhuman strength by assuming the shape of an animal, usually a wolf. The internal relationship between being born with a caul and the ability to change one's shape, as it appears in both Slavic and Nordic traditions, could not escape someone like Jakobson. In a work on the "Vseslav Epos," he drew an equation between the themes of the serpent father, the caul, and the

³ I owe this idea to André Burgière, who suggested it to me during a discussion following a paper I presented to the Seminar on Comparative History and Anthropology at the École des Hautes Études in Paris, 26 November 1993.

werewolf. In Serbian, *kosulja*, “chemise,” means both “caul” and “snakeskin.” The serpent, able to shed its skin, engenders a son endowed at birth with a second skin and the lycanthropic ability to change skins (Jakobson 1966).

In Albanian tradition, the *dragù* is mainly represented as a normal man, but he can also have werewolf features and appear in the shape of an animal, which is always male – a ram, ox, bird, rooster, etc. Likewise, in Slavic tradition, the werewolf prince often appears as a falcon, a wolf, a wild ox, a pike, etc. With the approach of a storm, the *dragù* leaves the company of the other men on the pretext of retiring for the night, and no one except his mother knows the real reason for his departure. He goes to bed, but his soul leaves his body to join the other *dragù*. His place in the bed is occupied by a log, as the real *dragù* is far away. The *dragù* can also take on the aspect of a serpent (Tirta 2004: 121–132). Albanian *dragù* are often men with three or seven hearts, or who have snakes in their belly.

Sometimes the *kulshedra* can also appear in the shape of an ordinary woman, in the region of Dukagjini, for example, as Sokol Kondi told me. She also appears as an eel, a frog, a tortoise or a lizard, all of them always female. Information attested from at least the beginning of the last century (Durham 1910) relates that the *kulshedra* is usually represented as a serpent. In the southern region of Lower Mokra, she is notably represented as the great serpent that encircles the world with its mouth touching its tail (Doja 1986). In Tirana, it was believed that the newly born *kulshedra* hid in a dark hole where, at the end of six months, they turned into snakes, and it was only after another six months that the snakes could be called *kulshedra* and began to take up their activity as such. In the Kosova town of Prishtina, it is told that the *kulshedra* is called *bolla*, “a kind of serpent,” after twelve years. However, the representations of the *kulshedra*’s development in the Great Northern Mountains are no doubt the most interesting. When a serpent manages to live fifty years without being noticed by anyone, it becomes a *bullar*, a reptile that provides the venomous snakes with their poison by giving them its milk. If it lives another fifty years without being seen, it becomes an *ershaj*, a reptile that wraps itself around people and plunges into their chest to eat their heart. When an *ershaj* lives another hundred years without being seen, it finally becomes a *kulshedra* (Lambertz 1922). The words *bolla*, *bullar*, *ershaj* effectively mean “serpent or snake” in Albanian or, depending on the region, a particular kind of snake. In the

Zadrina region, in northwestern Albania, the young *kulshedra* is also represented as an eel that lives in the depths of springs where, in the space of a few years, it grows so big that, if it wants to leave its hole, it is obliged to scrape off its skin and so loses a great quantity of blood. It is noteworthy that, in Slavic tradition, Prince Vseslav is conceived through a miracle that is reminiscent of related conceptions: his mother is struck on the thigh by the tail of a snake (Jakobson 1966).

In Albanian, the epithet *dragù* is the very image of heroism. As in Byzantine heroic poetry, where the heroes are named Dracoi, Albanian heroic songs also give their heroes the honorable epithet of *trim dragù*, “*dragù* hero.” Alternatively, the common term of praise for Skanderbeg in the ancient texts is “the *Kulshedra* of Albania,” a metaphor showing the terror he spread among the Ottoman ranks in the fifteenth century. According to an old legend, transmitted by Marin Barletius in a work written in Latin and published in Rome between 1508 and 1510, in other words relayed by a learned tradition, the day Skanderbeg was born, his mother is reported to have dreamed of a *kulshedra* whose body covered the entire territory of Albania. Its head reached to the border of the Ottoman Turkish lands, where it devoured all enemies with its bloody mouth, while its twisted tail plunged into the depths of the Adriatic sea (Barletius 1508–1510: 64 f.). Alternatively, in oral tradition, Skanderbeg was born like the *dragù* in the tales and collective beliefs (Haxhihasani 1967: 24 f.):

Ate s’e zinte plumi, s’e pritte shpata, se ka pasë le me kmishë, siç lejnë drangojt. Ka le me fletë nën sjetull, sikur lejnë drangojt. Ka le me ni shej shpate n’krah dhe me fletë nan sjetëll.

He was invulnerable: neither bullet nor sword could pierce him, for he was born with a caul, “in a chemise,” as all *dragù* are born. He was born with wings in his armpit, as all *dragù* are born. He was born with the mark of a sword on his arm and with wings in his armpit.

He is sometimes even portrayed as doing battle with the *kulshedra* (Haxhihasani 1967: 116):

Kur kishte ardhë Skënderbegju nji herë në Bulqizë, kishte dalë me gjue aty afër katundit. Langojt e vet, qi kishin hikë përpara, i gjet tu u zanë me ni kulçdër. Ngre ata gurë të mdhej Skënderbgju, ja fugi kulçdrës dhe e le top në vent. Gurët gjinden te Rrasa e Doriçet dhe quhen Gurët e Skënderbeut.

While Skanderbeg was in Bulqiza, he went hunting near the village. His dogs had run ahead; when he reached them he found them struggling with a *kulshedra*. So

Skanderbeg picked up these boulders, and hurled them at the kulshedra, which he killed outright. The boulders can be found at the place known as Rrasa e Doriçet, and are called Skanderbeg's Boulders.

Lambertz was the first to point out the internal relation between being born with a caul and the gifts of invulnerability and metamorphosis as they appear in the Slavic and Nordic traditions, and in the Albanian myth of the *dragùakulshedra*. He also established a relation between these representations and those of the Slavo-Germanic werewolf and the Nordic *berserker*s (Lambertz 1922: 11–16), fierce, animal-like warriors that take the shape of werewolves or bear-men in the Old Norse Sagas of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The interpretations of the Nordic *berserksgangr* include the personal or collective gifts of trance and lycanthropy. The myths associate the *berserker*s primarily with the god Odin (Lindow 1987). One explicit description of the Odin *berserksgangr* from the seventh Saga of Yngling is strangely reminiscent of the Albanian *dragùa*: “If Odin wanted to change shape, his body would lie there as though he were sleeping or dead, but he himself was a bird or a wild animal, a fish or a snake. He could thus go in a twinkling to the most remote lands” (Lindow, quoted in Belmont 1971: 54).

The symbolic representations of the *dragùakulshedra* myth also lend themselves to comparison with Icelandic figures such as the *fylgja* and the *hamingja*, both of which are interpreted as ambivalent representations of the amniotic sack and the mother's waters (Belmont 1971: 52–60). The caul is termed *fylgja* in Icelandic, and it is the dwelling-place of the child's guardian spirit, which is part of the soul or one of the child's souls. The way this spirit or soul is used depends on what is done with the caul. If it is burned, the *fylgja* will show itself as a light; if it is thrown into running water, the *fylgja* will be a star; on the other hand, if it is eaten by an animal, the *fylgja* will embody itself in the same animal (Bartels 1900). The *hamingja* is close in conception to the *fylgja*. However, more than a guardian spirit, it is a personal life force. The *hamingja* implies the possibility of metamorphosis. The soul can take the shape of an animal, in the form of which it moves about and acts, while the body lies inert. The caul may, therefore, be seen as both the dwelling-place of the outer soul and the support of the inner soul. It is this type of metamorphosis that is often described in the Eddic literature, in which one sees, for example, the goddess Freyja or the god Odin change their human appearance or slip into the skin of an animal.

The question of reciprocal influences between Slavic and Nordic mythologies, as between Albanian and Slavic mythologies, remains highly controversial. The heroic role of the *dragùa*, for instance, which is completely antinomic to that of the monster, may be an ancient, surely pre-Roman, layer of Albanian mythology (Çabej 1987: 300–302). The borrowings from Latin or Greek would, therefore, be of a purely linguistic nature, an *interpretatio graeca* and an *interpretatio latina*, with the figures of the *dragùa* and the *kulshedra* having subsequently merged with the Roman representations. Lambertz stressed the fact that the main function of the Albanian *dragùa*, which is the essence of his figure, is not, or at least no longer, found in the representations of the Greek *dracoi*. And yet the similarities between the *dracoi* and the ancient snake-footed giants brings the Albanian *dragùa* closer to the Greek *dracoi* in the sense that “the Albanian *dragùa* bear a closer resemblance in their essence than the Greek *dracoi* do to the ancient Giants, those titanic fighters who would stack whole mountains one upon the other and, assault the heavens with flaming tree trunks and huge boulders. The belief that every storm reproduced the battle between *dragùas* and *kulshedras*, that battle of the earthly heroes against the gods of heaven concealed in the clouds, was merely the reminiscence of the ancient gigantomachia, or war of the Giants, in other words the myth relating the frightful clash of the forces of nature as it occurs in the storm” (Lambertz 1922: 16).⁴ More recently, other scholars have rallied to the idea of comparing the *dragùa* with the prehistoric Pelasgian giants mentioned in ancient Greek mythology (Stadtmüller 1954).

It would also be interesting to consider the fact that, in another Indo-European tradition, more specifically in the Lithuanian story of the flood, the myth that tells how humankind arose from the union between the last descendants of the Giants and the Earth, is also linked to the goddess of good fortune called Laima (Greimas 1985: 172–187). I personally think that it is perhaps enough

4 “Denn die albanischen Drangues haben ihrerseits wieder große Ähnlichkeit im Wesen mit dem Giganten, den starken Kämpfern gegen den Himmel, die Berge aufeinander türmen und gegen den Himmel mit glühenden Baumstämmen und Felsstücken anrennen. Der Glaube an den bei jedem Gewitter wiederkehrenden Kampf der Drangoi mit der Kulschedra, der irdischen Gewitterdämonen mit den in den Wolken einherjagenden Wettergottheiten des Himmels wäre nichts anderes als die Reminiszenz an die alte Gigantomachie, bzw. diese der Mythos vom furchtbaren Zusammenprall der Naturgewalten im Gewitter” (Lambertz 1922: 16).

to note that the ambivalent representations of the soul and fate or destiny, as they appear in the *dragù* figure, as in most Indo-European traditions, are not isolated in the Albanian tradition either. In particular, those entities whose function it is to assist women in childbirth should be compared with the Greek conceptions of fate personified here by the Moirai, in the Nordic and Germanic traditions by the Norns, in the Lithuanian tradition by the Laima and in the Albanian tradition by the Fatat, Fatitë or Mirat, and by the Ora and the Zana or by the Vitore. These are birth goddesses *par excellence*, not only because they attend the birth of each human being and foretell their future, but also because they organize the appearance of all humankind. These cosmological and anthropological activities are analogous and parallel, and their divine status can no longer be identified, as some folklorists would probably argue, with the image of the “good fairy” of fairy-tale fame. They appear among the ranks of the earliest generation of gods who, as in Scandinavian and Greek mythology, are contemporaries of the race of Giants.

The Deities

On the third night after the child’s birth, at the time of the principal ceremonies celebrating the birth: purificatory bath, symbolic cutting of the umbilical cord, naming, dressing, circumambulation of the fireplace, laying before the fireplace or on the kneading trough, laying in the cradle, and when the family and kin group gave vent to their joy as never at other times, with feasting, gifts, joyful singing, and dancing, it was believed that three invisible old women drew near the cradle and determined the baby’s destiny (Doja 1991: 105):

*Sonte është e treta natë,
që ndahen-o nafakatë,
ja vezir, ja kushullatë,
ja si gjyshlerët e parë,
dhe nga babaj m’i lartë!*

Today will be the third night,
in which destiny will be spoken,
like a grand vizier or grand dame,
or like the ancestors of old,
and greater than the father!

That day the dogs are kept out of the courtyard, the doors are left ajar, three places are set with silverware, a cup of honey with three almonds, and three pieces of bread for the three Fates (Hahn 1854: 162). In different parts of the South, these

apparitions are called Fatat, or Fatitë, from the Latin *fatum*, or Mirat as a reminder of the Greek Moirai, who made their way into Albanian myth through a popular etymology with *mirë*, “good,” since there is the expression *fata mirë*, “the good fairy,” but also *fatmirë*, literally “of good fate.” They give the baby their blessing and determine his or her destiny. Even the southern Albanians’ fatalistic commiseration with any event is often expressed, as often in the case of the Greek Moirai, by the saying *Kështu e kanë shkruar fatitë* “that’s what the Fates decided,” literally “wrote,” for people believed that the old women wrote their decision on the forehead of their new protégé. Likewise, they *lidhin*, “attach,” or *presin*, “cut out,” the baby’s fate. Often in Albanian tales the following prediction cancels out the preceding, so that the youngest of the three fairies’ prediction is the one that comes true, in spite of all the obstacles that, as in ancient Greek tragedy, expedite the fulfillment of the fateful prediction.

In Camëria, an Albanian zone in the northern Greek region of Epirus, the role of these figures is played by the Vitore (Pedersen 1898: 205), a word analyzed as meaning “a spinster, a woman who spins”: *vejtore* > *vektore* > *vek/vegj*, “loom” (Çabej 1968), like the Greek Moirai: one, Klotho, holds the distaff and spins out the destiny of each person at the time of their birth; the second, Lachesis, turns the spindle and winds on the thread of life, and the third, Atropos, cuts the thread and determines the moment of death. The three young women also appear in other southeastern European groups. Rumanians call them Ursite, Ursitoare, probably derived from *urzi*, “to weave” by way of the vulgar Latin *ordire*. The confusion between the two verbs, *urzi* “to weave,” and *ursi*, “to predestine,” is probably due to a popular etymology, especially as the same goddesses are known by the Serbs and the Croats as Sucije, a word that corresponds to *suci*, *sukati*, “to twist, spin.” The question of whether the Greek Moirai or the Roman Fates live on in these mythological figures of the present-day peoples of southeastern Europe is still open. In any event, nothing we know about the Greek religion suggests that the representation of the Moirai, in the guise of Klotho, Lachesis, and Atropos spinning out human destinies, was anything but a poetic figure elaborated and transmitted according to the canons of learned culture (Cuisenier 1994: 166–180).

The notion of turning is found in the figure of several gods who preside over the birth and fate of humans. But, whereas turning usually refers to the technique of spinning, in Rome it was related to

the turning of the child in the womb before birth. It was Carmentis who was responsible for this turning. The legend of the origin of Rome has colored this figure, and that is where, no doubt under the influence of Greek sources, the power of her name became associated with prophecy. But at the time of the Republic, Carmentis interested people, in particular women, for another power: she attended to births. More precisely, according to certain Latin authors, Carmentis is a Moira, a goddess of fate, who presides over birth. From this specific interest, easily accorded with her value as prophetess, Carmentis went on to more technical interventions, and some texts even make her an actual midwife. But this is a debate that, in the present state of our knowledge, cannot be concluded. The one thing we know for certain is that the goddess had two opposing cognomens, which caused several authors to create two more Carmentes, her companions: Postvorta and Antevorta (or Prorsa and Porrina); other authors attribute these two adjectives to the two extreme presentations of the child to be born: turned the right way around, that is to say that the baby turns around before birth, which then proceeds normally, head first; or turned the wrong way around, that is to say that the baby does not turn around before birth, which is then abnormal, feet first (Dumézil 1987: 397).

Diana, too, who must be regarded as a virgin since she was assimilated to the rigorous Artemis, had power over the procreation and birth of children. Archaeological excavations have unearthed numerous ex-votos that leave no doubt as to their meaning: these are images of male and female genitalia, statuettes of mothers nursing their baby, or women clothed but with the front of their body laid open. On her feast day, the Ides of August, women would go in procession to her wood carrying torches in sign of gratitude for her services. In this wood was a spring where there lived a sort of nymph, Egeria, whose name refers to childbirth (*e-gerere*) and to whom, in effect, pregnant women would make sacrifices to ensure an easy delivery (Dumézil 1987: 410).

It is perhaps not uninteresting to recall the exceptional frequency of inscriptions dedicated to the cult of Diana, in Albania and throughout the Balkan Peninsula, dating from antiquity (Patsch 1922). This particular frequency attests that this is probably more an *interpretatio latina* of a local pre-Roman goddess (Çabej 1941). In this perspective, it has been established that Zana, the mythological goddess familiar to Albanians of the Northern Mountains, whose morphological and semantic counterpart in the South is Zëra, derives directly

from the Latin Diana, as does the Rumanian Zina (Jokl 1911: 98).

In northern Albania, the task of these women who determine the child's fate at birth is effectively performed by the goddesses known to the mountain groups as Ora and Zana. The inhabitants of the Dukagjini Mountains distinguish three categories of Fates: *e Bardha*, "the White One," who brings good luck and wishes humans well; *e Verdha*, "the Yellow One," who brings bad luck and casts evil spells; and *e Zeza*, "the Black One," who deals out death. When determining the baby's destiny, the many *ora* congregate in the night to distribute their favors. The principal *ora*, who is beautiful, with eyes that shine like precious stones, presides from atop a big rock over the meeting of the three hundred *ora*. Their faces change according to the degree of happiness they mete out to the new baby. If they reprimand someone, it means they have already cut the thread of the person's happiness or life (Lambertz 1922: 33–38). Today such a person is still called *or-prem*, "by the *ora* cut."

It was believed that there were as many *ora* as there were humans, for each person has his own *ora*, who is given him at birth as a guardian angel. The nature of each *ora* is suited to the individual to whom she belongs, even her appearance matches that person's character. A decent, courageous, hardworking or fortunate person has a beautiful white *ora*; a person who is shiftless, cowardly or unfortunate, has an *ora* who is black and ugly. Here we are dealing with a component of the person, which acts as a protecting spirit and is given to the individual at birth, comparable to the Icelandic *fylgja*, which is formed not specifically from the caul but from the combination of the placenta and the amniotic sack, so that every human being may have a protecting spirit, whereas only very few are born with a caul (Bartels 1900: 70 f.). In Lithuanian mythology, *dalia* is not a simple theological notion either; comparable to the Albanian *ora*, she is a sort of personal goddess who belongs to only one individual. In Lithuanian tales, one effectively sees heroes who get their wife because of their own *dalis*, the part of fate handed out to each person at birth by Laima or by the three *laima*, as well as heroes who happen to find a *dalia* whom they marry (Greimas 1985: 166).

Like the *fylgja* in Icelandic tradition, Ora as well as Vitore often appear as serpents. For instance, in the Albanian zone, Vitore is widely represented as a serpent with golden horns who brings gold; in other regions, she appears as a large or small snake who protects the house and brings the family luck (Çabej 1968). In the South, the epithet

Vitore-snake is given to a woman who is clever, pretty, fertile, and brings her family good fortune, as can be seen in this song of praise (Komnino 1955: 326):

*I hoqe kyçet e mezit,
si trimi armët e brezit,
emrin e keshe grua,
po jeshe trim e fajkua;
vërje pëqin ndër brez,
mbaje punën me erz.
O Vitoreja ndë mur,
tek rrije lëshoje nur,
gjithë jetën me nder,
të buron goja sheqer.*

You removed the keys from your waistband
as weapons from the belt of a warrior.
You were known as a lady,
and were heroic as a falcon.
You tucked your hem in your belt,
you did your chores with honour.
Oh Vitore, house snake in the wall,
while you lived, you gave us grace,
and you lived your life in honour,
from you came but sugar-sweet words.⁵

In the mythological cycle recounting the deeds of Mui, it was Ora who, in the form of a snake, gave the hero his supernatural powers (Haxhihasani 1955: 302 f.). In other situations, when the hero is badly wounded in a battle with his enemies, she stays at his bedside to keep watch over him, has a snake lick his wounds and places wild beasts at his feet to prevent his soul from escaping into the other world (Haxhihasani 1955: 191):

*A po e shef ket orë,
qu m'rri ke kryet?
Natë e ditë njikshtu m'ruen.
Për ndimë t'madhe
Zoti ma ka dhanë,
nan' soj barnash
për nan gjuhë m'i ka,
tri herë n'ditë
tanë varrët po m'i lan.
Kur dhimbat tepër m'lodhin,
atherë nisë gjarpni me këndue,
nji soj kangësh,
qi kurrkund s' ndi,
harroj dhimbat e bi n'kllapi;
m'duket vetja tuj çetue,
m'duket vetja tuj mrizue,
herë me dhî marr çetat përpjjet,*

*herë bâj not nepër ujna e det;
kur m'lshojnë andrrat
m'lshojnë dhimbat.
Njiky uk, qi m'rri te kamët,
me kalue kërkend
nuk asht tue lanë.*

Can you see that Ora,
standing at my bedside?
She holds vigil over me day and night.
This serpent slithers over my wounds to heal them.
God bestowed it upon me
to come to my assistance.
It has nine types of medication
under that tongue.
Three times a day
it washes my wounds.
When the pain causes me to tire,
the serpent then begins to sing.
All manner of songs
which I have never heard before!
I forget my pain and fall into delirium.
And rave that I am out hunting,
and rave that I am taking my noonday rest,
sometimes taking my goat herds up the mountain,
sometimes swimming in the rivers and the sea.
When my dreams leave me,
the pain leaves me, too.
That wolf resting at my feet,
lets no one pass and enter.

Beliefs about protecting serpents, whether it is Ora, Vitore, or the “house snake,” are found throughout the Albanian culture zone. Many Albanians believe that one must not disturb a snake even when one finds it in the baby’s cradle, because it is the *ora* that belongs to the house and the baby. The original female ancestor of the kin group, called the “mother of the home,” who is in reality merely another representation of the Magna Mater, is also represented as a serpent. Everywhere among Albanian populations, snakes are the object of different rituals of propitiation, fertility, and fecundity, and even the children’s development and education, for instance, in rituals designed to help children learn to talk. Similar representations can also be found in Albanian oral literature and traditional art. Many researchers consider that these representations stem from a paleo-Balkan cult, probably Illyrian (Tirta 2004). Others analyze the archaeological, anthropological, linguistic, and historical data, which reveal the functional features of this cult to be an extension of the Illyrian-Albanian tradition.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Albanian have been made by Robert Elsie, in collaboration with the author.

Ideology

Whatever the case may be, given the ambivalence of their symbolic representations as they appear throughout the Indo-European zone, the figures of the soul and of fate must be very old gods, probably of Oriental origin, and, at least in Greek mythology, linked with the elements of the natural cycle of regeneration and destruction, of birth and death. As such, they arouse ambivalent feelings and attitudes: They are both loved and hated, desirable and awe-inspiring. They personify the iron law of the extinction of the individual on behalf of the group. Every individual comes from an extrahuman power, identified on the third day after the birth, and every birth is thus proof of the tolerance for human life shown by the forces that are naturally hostile to it.

The structural method presupposes the existence of an empty slot that the gods of fate ought to occupy by their appearance and activity. Indeed, if, from the anthropological standpoint, these are the goddesses who determine the life and death of each person, from the cosmological standpoint, having had a role in the birth of humankind, they should also manifest themselves wherever a threat of death hangs over the human race. Their place in this catastrophe is assured not only because this position is secured by the internal consistency of the sphere of their divine action but also because it is implicitly attested by the ethnographic sources. Just as, in the first section of this chapter, I discussed the ambivalence of the *dragùalkulshedra* myth, figures that are clearly connected with the other Albanian gods of fate, who preside over birth and death, so, too, in the Lithuanian tradition, Greimas normally introduces into the sphere of the Laima, goddess of life and death, her functions as bearer of the plague, regarded as threatening collective death (1985: 184–187).

Yet the predictions made the third day after the birth by the goddesses of destiny merely confirm one of their essential functions: namely to maintain the order of the universe and enforce its laws. The supreme god himself only carries out what has been foreordained. However great his power, it is no more than an executive power. In Roman mythology, Jupiter is at the same time a cosmic power and the absolute master of each person's fate. However he shares this latter property with Fortuna, or at least with the god and goddess presented as her equivalents, although their connection is not always explicitly stated. At the opening of one of Horace's "Odes," for example, Fortuna is alone, without Jupiter, but

her action and the ensuing upheaval are imbued with something of the majesty of the absent god (Dumézil 1986: 239). Likewise, the division of roles between the goddess of birth and fate, Laima, who does the predicting, and Perkunas, who keeps watch and carries out the predictions, is confirmed in the Lithuanian semicultural context. Her activity is so important that other variants attribute it to Prakorimas himself. The two divine figures cover the same sacred space, except that, as the sovereign god, Prakorimas tends to stay in the background, while Laima intervenes more readily in the outside world, as his messenger and herald of his will (Greimas 1985: 152, 157, 180).

Yet because they determine a given mass of life, these forces do not operate at the level of the actions and roles that differentiate individuals. They do not foreordain anything and do not determine a person's destiny. They merely give voice to the fate that *awaits* the new baby. Their role as heralds is conceivable only on condition that they *know* this fate. It is, therefore, the *knowledge* and not the power to decide that is their essential attribute (Greimas 1985: 145). So if their principal function is to announce this knowledge, it is clear that fate itself lies elsewhere.

In the oral tradition of the supernatural tale, fate is depicted as the inexorable unfolding of time, like a motionless backdrop behind a conditioned flow of events. If a given act occurs, a given series of events must ensue. The only characteristic of this time is its division into alternating favorable and unfavorable periods. The successive periods can be given different figurative formulations. One day can be considered to be lucky, another unlucky. If a man is born at a certain hour, he will be rich, at another, poor. The child born before cockcrow will be a thief, born after, a priest. Nevertheless the periodization of duration and the difference in the length of the periods is secondary and cannot conceal the fundamental conception of fate. The time in which human life is imbedded is good or bad, and holds within itself the principles of fortune and misfortune.

The *knowledge* displayed by the goddesses of destiny gives them a fairly specific function. They establish a relationship between isolated events and the modulated flow of time. Even as they connect chance events, such as birth, to time conceived as an immutable framework of the universe, they give human life a meaning. Establishing a relationship between chance and necessity cancels out chance, as it were, by the very fact that it becomes inscribed in the order of the universe. While time, through its uninterrupted unfolding, engen-

ders the concept of necessity, its classification, its division into repeated favorable and unfavorable periods already constitutes the organization of duration that founds the cosmic order.

Just as the gods who preside at the child's birth establish the event by giving life as a stable, definitive state, according to another Albanian myth from the Albanian and Indo-European tradition, the first cuckoo call, like a frozen image, *freezes* human activity by changing it into fate. In Albanian tradition, someone who happens to hear the first cuckoo call should note the number of cuckoos. They indicate the number of years he has left to live. Whereas the Lithuanian tradition tells that someone who happens to hear the first cuckoo while working will have to work all year long, while someone at rest will be lazy, someone who is hungry will suffer from hunger and someone with money in his pocket will be rich (Greimas 1985: 147). In either case, whether it is the birth of a human or the birth of the world, the intervention of fate changes chance into necessity.

In Roman tradition, the notion of *fors* indicated the occurrence of an event that could neither be predicted nor explained afterwards through reasoning (even as an act of a god) nor, consequently, prevented, controlled, or modified. It is an experimental notion, suggested by all the situations in which a person is at once taken by surprise and powerless. Romans would, therefore, turn not to *Fors* but to *Fortuna*. The essence of this goddess, as the formation of her name indicates is that she is the "mistress of *fors*," that she has a no less mysterious guiding power over the irrational and, consequently, the power to turn it around to serve human beings (Dumézil 1986: 243–245). From the standpoint of their action, *necessitas* and *fors* cover the same domain: everything over which humans are powerless. However, the concepts are in radical opposition as far as understanding them goes. That which is due to chance cannot be understood, calculated or foreseen, whereas that which is necessary implies a flawless logical articulation, even if the chain of cause and effect is not apparent to our limited intelligence. The coinciding fields and the opposition of values means that *necessitas* and *fors* cannot exist at the same time on the same plane.

Although these are forces of fate, *fatum*, this does not imply inevitability. They determine the limits within which human will can act effectively, but they do not determine this will. They set limits on freedom but they do not prevent freedom. In this conception of fate, an individual is free not only to accept his role and try to make the best use of it, in the knowledge that, when his hour

has come, he can hope to survive as an ancestor in the memory of his descendants. The "true man" is someone who triumphs over death and fate, not by avoiding them but on the contrary, by accepting both risk and necessity. The "true man" lives without fear, with the aim of personalizing his passage and turning his biological life into a social biography. In this way these purely death-bringing, awe-inspiring, destructive figures become determining, giving, liberating, and emancipating. They create the space in which each person can develop his freedom, activity, and future.

Ja vezir, ja kushullatë!

Grand vizier or grand dame!

This valorization is grounded in the aesthetic and mythic, or rather *mythopoetic*, principle of idealization, which concerns not the individual's advancement along the extratemporal vertical axis to the top levels of the social pyramid and immortality, but the forward movement of the whole group along the horizontal axis of social equalities and historical time. In the historical dimension, human life acquires meaning only when placed within the framework of cosmic time. Once their personal work is finished, the individual will age and die, but the collective body and soul, nurtured by the world of ancestral traditions, will be constantly renewed and continue its uninterrupted advance in the path of historical progress. When it has recourse to the symbolic forms and collective representations surrounding the celebration of birth, the social group does not ask for immortality of the soul outside the body, nor for the promotion of the individual outside the group, but for an altogether different kind of immortality, an altogether different advancement, connected with the body and earthly life, and accessible to collective experience. The group asks for immortality of the name and of cultural actions. Through the symbolic traditions surrounding birth and socialization, the worthy man, at the end of his life, hopes to see his person, his old age, and his declining strength regenerated, rejuvenated, and flourishing in the new youth of his sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons. In these traditions, biology is inseparable from social history and culture. The aged father and his ascendants are not present to the same degree in the sons and grandsons but to a different, new, and higher degree. In being regenerated, life is not repeated, it is improved and perfected. The image of old age regenerated in new youth takes on a historical, cultural, and social dimension. This regeneration and rejuvenation are not those of the biologi-

cal individual but those of the historical individual, of the culture of the family, kin, and social groups.

*Ja si gjyshlerët e parë,
dhe nga babaj m'i lartë!*

Or like the ancestors of old,
and greater than the father!

The good wishes, expressed directly or in song, ritual, and ceremonial forms, are always shot through with optimism and unfailing confidence, nurtured by the desire that the future life of the newly born individual will be better, happier, more worthwhile. They are thus an attempt to directly induce good fortune and prosperity, based both on the group's aspiration or the best examples found among the ascendants of the family and kin groups, and on the importance of respecting the same collective and ancestral traditions.

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