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"Python Goes Hunting". Animals in contemporary urban legends

Summary

The aim of the doctoral dissertation is to check the usefulness of the dichotomous categories of "familiarity" and "otherness" to describe animals appearing in contemporary urban legends. Currently, domestic creatures are often included in close family relationships, however, they are also sometimes, like wild and exotic animals, described as dangerous creatures. Due to familiarization and defamiliarization, the second useful pair of categories in the description of animals, it is possible to use the category of "Other", which has been used so far mainly in the context of human. This issue was verified as part of the analysis of legends occurring in oral circulation, on the Internet, and in printed form in numerous studies and collections of legends in Polish and English languages.

Particular attention has been paid to the Internet, because the network currently plays an important communication role. This medium is commonly regarded as one of the most extensive sources of knowledge, but it should be remembered that many of its contents are of dubious credibility. For this reason, it is an ideal platform for the functioning of legends about false events. Therefore, the idea that public opinion is increasing in terms of fictional narratives due to universal access to online resources is a hypothesis worth verifying. Equally important in these considerations is the media circulation – television, radio, and nowadays, above all, Internet news services reproduce unverified and incorrect content, thus contributing to the dissemination of urban legends.

As part of the PhD thesis, the diversity of legendary narratives was also addressed, and above all the ubiquity of motifs and plot patterns related to animals in various areas of social life. Urban legends often become an inspiration to create entertainment and artistic content, they are also used in the information media and for advertising purposes. This was shown in the chapter on the Vistula python, whose molted skin was found in 2018 in Gassy near Warsaw. The news spread quickly, becoming nationwide sensation. Over time, it began to be used in real-time marketing and in the work of artists publishing content on the Internet.

The dynamics of folklore circulation make urban legends evolve and change depending on the cultural context. Sometimes, however, certain patterns and individual elements remain in the narratives over the years – because of that, a diachronic observation of motifs occurring both in old traditional folklore stories and in contemporary urban legends becomes possible. In the case of old tales, examples from 19th- and 20th-century printed ethnographic materials were analyzed, while currently functioning urban legends come from the studies of Polish folklorists (including the works of Dionizjusz Czubala), as well as from the Internet. Narratives derived from English-language sources have been translated by me.

The first chapter of the doctoral dissertation entitled "Urban legend in the context of other forms of contemporary folklore" discusses the characteristics of the urban legend, taking into account the Polish and foreign state of research. Moreover, it has been compared to other related folklore genres such as gossip, rumor and fake news. In order to present the thematic and formal diversity of the discussed genre, a short overview of the most popular plots based on the classification proposed by the American researcher Jan Harold Brunvand appeared.

The second chapter entitled "Urban legends about animals in a cultural perspective", is devoted to presenting the continuity of the history of animal threads and motifs appearing both in old traditions and in contemporary folklore. Such a diachronic presentation of the phenomenon is an introduction to the subject of creatures in animal studies – primarily how researchers involved in scientific discourse show the evolution of animal categories and what content is the basis of their analyses.

The third section entitled "Domestic Animals in Urban Legends – Self or Other?" was dedicated to urban legends about pets. Dogs and cats, nowadays the most familiarized animals, are often presented in folklore as human victims, but at the same time they can take revenge for the harm done to them. For this reason, their image functioning in society is ambivalent – it refers to both the domain of culture (domestication) and nature (wildness, instinctive behavior).

Chapter four entitled "Exotic animals as Others (on the examples of "Puma in Poland" and "Spiders in bananas")" was devoted to the analysis of the popular in our country narrative about the puma prowling the Polish forests and reports on poisonous spiders found in fruits imported from abroad. Thanks to media coverage, these legends are very popular – every few years, especially in the summer, they return to circulation due to their sensationalism.

The last, fifth chapter of the dissertation entitled "Vistula python – otherness in the Polish edition" was based on my article *Year of the Snake. An Analysis of the Polish Urban Legend of the Vistula Python* published in 2020 in the journal "Lidé města", No. 2/2020 (22). An example of the legend of the Vistula python from 2018 was presented there – the discussion

concerns media reports on this subject, comments of Internet users, as well as works based on this thread in printed form (comics), in online circulation (videos on YouTube) and in urban space (graffiti).

Analyses of urban legends have shown that various animal motifs appearing in the tales are treated interchangeably and do not fundamentally change the meaning of the analyzed narratives. As part of the conducted research, it also turned out that in urban legends, the previously mentioned phenomenon of defamiliarization relate not only to the animals themselves, but also to places present in our everyday life. This kind of exoticization of familiarity calls into question what we are used to – a python or a puma roaming Polish villages deprive us of a false sense of security. In addition to defamiliarization, an opposite tendency is observed nowadays, consisting in familiarization of exotic creatures, which qualifies them to an extremely capacious category of pets treated as family members.

The work also presents examples of the oldest urban legends about animals. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the connections between the old tales and contemporary legends are usually not easy to discover. This continuity is sometimes limited to single motifs, while sometimes similarities in plot patterns become more noticeable. For this reason, the cases of narratives with a long history are relatively few, but significant – for example, the first traces of the "Spiders in the Hairdo" and "Bossom Serpent" threads can be found in medieval tales. The existence of such connections testifies to the important role that animal motifs play in human consciousness.