

Semiotic presentation of the moustaches and the beard

THE FISTFUL OF BEARD EXHIBITION

- The *Fistful of Beard* is the name of the exhibition staged at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb between 2 September and 20 November 2016. It shows a barber's shop as an instance of the current retro culture. The significance of the moustaches and of the beard, their spread and the related changes are examined semiotically through examples from oral literature, proverbs and other written and oral sources.

Key words: moustache, beard, barber shop, retro culture, fashion,
museum exhibitions

A FISTFUL OF BEARD

The Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb staged between 2 September and 20 November 2016 the exhibition *A Fistful of Beard*, displaying the reconstruction of a Zagreb barber's shop from the first half of the 20th century. The project was devised in cooperation with Dolores Miličić;¹ the same name was used for the exhibition, the festival, additional educational and humanitarian programmes, and an entertainment-interactive event.²

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The first barber's shops in Zagreb were opened in the nineteen-sixties. The citizens knew which barber's catered for the elite, and which for ordinary citizens. Initially the barbers learned the trade in European cities, later in Croatia as well, and there were also self-taught barbers. In addition to the barber's trade, many also made wigs, and engaged in pedicure and blood-letting, considered to be a physician's business (Brenko 2001: 58-64). Even women could work as barbers, in most cases after the death of their barber husbands or after inheriting the shop from their fathers (Šperanda 1996: 81). A barber's shop was always a place for socializing, especially on weekends when people were free of everyday duties. Jovial and imaginative barbers were particularly popular because they promoted such gatherings (Lang 1912: 92).

Marking the World Beard Day (first Saturday in September) and *Movember* (from *November* and *moustaches*: *Movember* is an annual event involving the growing of moustaches during the month of November to raise awareness of men's health issues), for two and a half months the Ethnographic Museum was the center of retro culture in Zagreb and its surroundings. Accordingly, the barber's shop was the logical choice for the theme of the exhibition. This was also due to the fact that Zagreb has become the place with a growing number of retro culture lovers – from music and clothing to care for one's hairdo and moustaches and beards. This is also evinced by many 'modern' barber's shops in Zagreb and other Croatian towns. The efforts of the *Back to Swing* dance group and other partners in the event, first of all *The Barbers* – a group of Zagreb barbers who shaved on several occasions visitors in the Museum, established liaison with the community and realized one of the fundamental roles of a modern museum: interaction with the users. This established communication with the new public and, in professional terms, the presentation of a segment of intangible heritage.

The name of the exhibition, i.e., the adage, implies doing something for oneself, achieve success in one's work. It is interesting in ethnological terms because it involves methods of exploration of proverbs and other oral literature forms in which moustaches and the beard are also mentioned along with other things. This paper also focuses on this segment. It attempts to present oral literature from the past until the present day in the area inhabited by the Southern Slavs and beyond, which was studied during the preparation of the exhibition and which could not be displayed adequately within the exhibition because of physical constraints. It includes proverbs as a form of oral literature and its figures of style, similes and epithets, phrases and syntagms. All these are oral

Kolbas; English translation: Mía Dimšić; partners: State Archives in Zagreb, *GoRetro*, Croatian State Archives, Igor Recek Gangster, Sv. Ivan Zelina Museum, Antun Penezić, *SentiMental Bikes*, Škrgatić Hats, *The Barbers*, University of Applied Sciences Baltazar Zaprešić.

literature and linguistic forms in which elements of the symbolic significance of moustaches and of the beard were found by proceeding from reconstruction of ancient Slavic sources to present-day examples.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the terms *moustaches* and of the *beard* is based first of all on folklore practices, on the fixing and study of the folklore segment as an artistic communication (cf. Lozica 1979). Moustaches and the beard are observed in proverbs, oral literature forms as figures of style, popular etymology etc. When we study them within their context at the geographical, literary, art or anthropological level, we arrive at conclusions that have not been highlighted so much in ethnology.

Through the comparison of certain semantic characteristics and explanations of the terms moustaches and the beard, and their contexts, the analysis actually remains at the semiotic level and attempts to arrive at their conceptual meaning and the perception thereof over time. The methodologist and art historian Petar Bakotić noted in one of his works the value of traditional oral literature in this part of the world: “There is no doubt that our folk literature represents a group of similar works, sometimes so similar as if a single man had put them together” (1937: 2). This similarity is crucial in the conceptual analysis and research of the meaning of the moustaches and the beard. The fact that analysis can also comprise folklore forms of an area larger than Croatia is also a positive contribution.

In the study of the semiotic significance of the terms under consideration we have analyzed older records mainly of artistic and literary nature. We also studied the types of barber’s shops over time up to present-day shops, including the one displayed in the Ethnographic Museum, although it is of an older type. Today’s barber’s shops provide the answers and modern meanings related to moustaches and the beard.

SYMBOLISM

SUCCESS, POWER, FERTILITY

The first analyzed example of the beard is found in the very name of the exhibition – in the proverb *A Fistful of Beard* – the source of which can be found in pre-Christian times and which has mythological roots.

The study and reconstruction of Old Slavic mythology have enabled the definition of some physical features of the deity known as Veles (Volos). Veles is a god of cattle living underground, in the root of the tree of life and, according to belief, close to water. In some ethnologic and philological theories it is represented with a human head, horns and a thick curly beard. Since Veles is the god of cattle, sheep and more specifically wool are closely related to this deity. Veles's beard is curly like sheep's fleece, and it has a special significance for humans. According to the reconstruction of the 'ancient religion', Veles's beard stimulates – indirectly through wool – wealth and well-being. In wedding habits in the Balkan region the groom's parents donate woolen objects to the bride, put on fleece-lined coats turned inside out with fleece on the outside, etc. Such procedures are intended to enhance the wealth of the couple who will live in their home (Katičić 2007: 108).

As the god of cattle (but also the god of the harvest), Veles also turns up in annual customs. After the harvest is over, sheaves are carried home like flower bunches and placed on places of honour. Here is an example from the Baranja region:

“If the reaper returned home on foot, the youngest female reaper or the youngest male reaper with the bunch/sheaf. Entering the host's house, they would greet him with the words: 'Jesus be praised, the harvest is over!' and hand the bunch/sheaf to the host or to the woman on duty. The person receiving the bunch would reply 'Amen forever!' and hang it on a beam or a place of honour. If they returned home on a cart, the younger male or female member held the sheaf, sitting proudly by the teamster, and solemnly handed the sheaf to the head of the household. The harvesters also brought a sheaf to the host in the same way. That was the most joyous day of the year, the end-of-harvest day” (Mihaljev 2012: 184).

According to the encyclopedic dictionary *Slav Mythology*, such or similar customs are widespread throughout the Southern Slav but also part of the Eastern Slav world, and the term “beard” is even defined as a “ritual object symbolizing the end of the harvest” (Radenković, Tolstoj 2001: 47).

Because of this, some localities still use the expression “binding Veles's beard” for the procedure involving the binding of the sheaf which is later decorated as the symbol of the end of the harvest, the most important part of the annual cycle providing food for the whole year. Hence the expression “fistful of beard” for something positive, abundant and noble. Similarly, “pull god's beard” [‘be on top of the world’] meant a successfully completed job in one's own interest by “pulling god's beard” as the symbol of wealth. “If somebody was said to have a golden beard, this meant that he was rich and powerful”

(Kasumović 1911: 149), and the proverb “god first grew his own beard” [‘charity begins at home’] also has connotations of power and wealth, although it is more frequently related to Christian rather than mythological sources.

A “koleda” (Christmas/New Year’s carol) suggest the significance of a “fat” and “bedewed beard”:

“Oh beautiful young year / be real merry / and have a fat beard / bring our home God’s mercy every day / so that our flock of sheep can multiply / and sweet wine bedew our beard / and let God bring us all / to the Kingdom of Heaven” (Milčetić 1917).

These verses want to highlight and fertility in the coming year, and explain the meaning of the terms “get a fat beard” or moustaches” [‘lick one’s chops’].

WISDOM

Along with wealth and success, the beard also implied wisdom. Since most Old Slavic deities have beards (Milošević 2011: 51) and such representation of the sublime continued in Christianity, people may have started to perceive the beard as a metaphor of eternal wisdom, the more so as priests and other prominent village powers that be (probably by taking deities and idols as symbols of the sublime and wise) wore beards more often than, for instance, soldiers or some other social classes (Milošević acc. to Léger: 51).

Thereby a long beard created new interpretations in human communities as borne out by many proverbs and aphorisms. Thus, the adage “it is not the beard that makes the philosopher” best exemplifies the interpretation of the beard as a symbol of wisdom. There follow other examples, such as “brains are not to be found in the beard”, “the beard grows, but the head does not grow wiser”, “a long beard and a rosary don’t make you a priest”, “if you have a beard you’ll find a comb”, and the like.

“Our people also jokingly mocked a pointed and thin beard by calling it ‘goat’s beard’, and by describing somebody as having a beard like a ‘billy-goat’ (Kasumović 1920: 34). Mocking based on the stereotype appearance of an old man and comparing someone’s beard with a bill-goat may also suggest the significance of the beard as a source of wisdom. Other proverbs also include association with a goat’s beard indirectly suggesting wisdom, e.g., “if the beard were all, the goat might preach”, “the beard says goat, not philosopher”. A similar message is suggested in the following proverb: “no moustaches will make you smart”.

“Pearly beard” or “waist-length beard” are found in oral South Slav tradition. Older people usually have a long beard, symbolizing wisdom and experience, which is why it is “waist long”, “white”, “silvery” and “pearly”: “his head and chin were both white / and reached to his waist” (Belović acc. to Hórmann 1906: 41); “his white beard overtook his waist...” “and he shaved his beard” (Maretić 1903: 11); “his beard stretched white down his chest / and gave zest to his dark clothes” (Belović 1906: 17).

“The old man had a pearly beard; a gold cup in every hand; the pearls are shed into the cup; every cup is worth a ducat; and the beard four towns” (Balarin 1898: 2284). These verses are part of the wedding ceremony in the Konavle region. By linking the beard with the pearl and (four) towns, it may be concluded that it was linked with certain symbols of higher value.³

The image of the old man with a long beard is also found in personifications and folk stories singled out by Tomislav Maretić: “...the head on the ground, the tail on the ground, an old man with his beard in the ground...” (1882: 6). People connected the image of the old man and the image of a bow, and added properties on the basis of which one can relate a long beard to old people.

MATURITY, HONESTY

In oral South Slav literature moustaches and the beard are often physical features of heroes or young men in girls’ songs. Men were proud to wear moustaches because they were a sign of their maturity and manhood, and they distinguished them from the boys. This maturity and manhood is also the subject of a *bečarac* [Slavonian humorous ribald folk-song] about a mustachioed fellow who liked to drink his coffee unsweetened, with no sugar: “Here’s a ‘stache’ who likes his coffee bitter with no sugar”, or another about what girls appreciate in their boyfriends: “Oh my ‘stache’, you old rake / nobody is your match!” A verse from Bački Monoštor in northwestern Bačka reads: “Keep away, boy, from my face / there’s not even down on your upper lip / I will not trust you with my face”.

“Whoever has met our peasants in Bosnia, Herzegovina, (Dalmatian) Zagora and other regions knows that moustaches are man’s greatest pride and the sign of manhood, and people who shave their moustaches an object of mockery

3 In addition to representing value the pearls are also in this case a descriptive feature of outside appearance, and the town can be explained as a place at the top of the holy tree, the abode of Mara, a deity visited by Ivo, whose story is actually the annual cycle. Hence, the town can be explained as a place having a certain value which (value) is indirectly visible in oral literature and customs (cf. Katičić 2010: 120).

(that's why they say "may my moustaches help me" or "do you hear me, honest moustaches", etc.; sometimes a peasant also twisted his long moustaches round his ears as a sign of pride or swaggering (Banović 1928: 228, 229).

There is also a phrase "if that's not true, I'll shave my moustaches". This highlights the importance of the moustaches, but also of the beard, as a symbol of true manhood, honesty and sincerity, hence the expressions "to spit into someone's beard", "tell somebody straight into his moustaches" or, conversely, "he lies in spite of his beard".

HEROISM

"In our popular epic literature the moustaches are a symbol of heroism, even its standard of comparison, and the greater the hero the longer the moustaches" (Banović 1953: 233). By linking the moustaches and the beard with soldiers in many lyrical and epic songs, especially those describing the struggle against the Osmani/Turks, beards and particularly the moustaches were highlighted as symbols of heroism and courage.

In the *Dictionary of the Croatian or Serbian Language*, the so-called *Academy Dictionary*, the entry "moustaches" is related to many verses bearing witness to moustaches as a hero's symbol. Most of them date from the 18th century, and their authors are well-known Croatian writers like Pavao Ritter Vitezović, Andrija Kačić Miočič, Jerolim Kavanjin, Ivan Zaničić; some of them derive from folk songs:

"Whoever joins the beard with the moustaches and strikes the Turks. (...) He vaunts his moustaches and his beard, and his sword (...) He struck him in a bad place above his moustaches and on the forehead (...) With moustaches to his shoulders he challenged the Turks with his spear (...) He already rolls up his sleeves and twists his moustaches (...) Come on, valiant heroes, twist your moustaches." (1880: 659)

The moustaches sported by brave people in Dalmatia and Slavonia is also found in the *Pleasant Conversation of Slavic People* by Andrija Kačić Miošić:

"Two young braves drank wine / in the white town of Šibenik / One had moustaches to his shoulder, / and the other a queue to his waist. / Said one half-brother to the other / Come, brother, let us see where the hawk's nest will be / Where will the hero's heart be? / By the one whose moustaches reach to the shoulder? / The young man from Kotari / Or the young man with a queue to his waist? / The young man from the town of Mostar..." (1942: 37).

“Song about Marijan Terzić od Kobaš from Slavonia, famous hero and knight, with moustaches to his shoulders (...) fearing no challenge...” (1942: 475).

The association of moustaches with heroism is still present, at least in collective awareness. One of the recent examples was prompting men to grow moustaches on the eve of the 300th anniversary of the Sinj *Alka* (equestrian competition) in 2015. At the time all the riders had a long moustaches, while girls let their hair grow in order to braid it like their grandmothers. “The symbol of our Krajina, the symbol of manhood in our area were moustaches fifty, one hundred, one hundred and fifty years ago. On the 300th anniversary of *Alka* I decided to rally three hundred mustachioed men in one spot.”⁴

THE BEARD AND MOUSTACHES AS FASHION

In time keeping moustaches and a beard became fashionable, and the hair on the face was formed according to the current fashion. One of the styles was the *Kaiserbart* of Emperor Francis Joseph I, named after him; he shaved his chin and let ‘staches’ grow to join up with mutton-chop sideburns.⁵ Ivan Mažuranić also sported such a beard, and that meant that the middle class also followed the fashion of the Imperial Court. However, so did the peasants because a similar beard type was also worn (mainly) in the mountainous regions: Lika, the Dalmatian hinterland, Herzegovina, the Dubrovnik hinterland etc. There is an interesting story about Zelovo, a village near Sinj, where the well-known Zelovo pipes were made in the 19th century: the bowl was fashioned in the image of Emperor Francis Joseph with his beard, and the local soldiers also smoked such pipes (Živković 2015: 43).

Formerly moustaches and the beard meant power, maturity and wisdom; today they are part of a fashion style, and their significance and value change over time. Sometimes the style is more present, sometimes less. The *Fistful of Beard* exhibition actually wanted to review all the aspects of retro culture, and the barber’s shop was the best choice since recent types of barber’s shop in Zagreb combine today other arts and trades: fashion details and dress (*GoRetro*, *Buried Clothes*), vehicles (*SentiMental Bikes*), restoration of 19th century objects (*Retro House*), music and dance (rockabilly groups, *Back to Swing Dance Club*).

4 From the article *Sporting a moustachess became quite a venture, women were not overly enthusiastic*; 6 August 2015. Statement by Edo Crljen (<http://www.index.hr/black/clanak/pustanje-brkova-u-sinju-postalo-pravi-pothvat-zene-bas-i-nisu-odusevljene/834873.aspx>).

5 HR-DAZG-857 Ulčnik Ivan Collection, 1983, State Archives in Zagreb.

The name 'new type' barber's shops could be applied to shops which appeared over the past dozen years in Zagreb and some other towns in Croatia (and neighbouring countries), which share only the barber's services (shaving type – hot towels and razors) with older, classic shops (some of which more than a hundred years old), and the whole approach to the barber's shop and culture is quite different. The recent and youthful component is probably the key item which currently makes such shops more popular and more successful than classic barber's shops which go out of business because they have no customers.

From the anthropological perspective the whole story is very interesting because they are a subcultural rallying point. For retro culture lovers barber's salons are places which they attend regularly and mingle with other members of a specific culture group. This restores to the barber's shops the function they had in the 19th century and earlier, when they were popular haunts and social gathering points. This is also borne out by records showing that in the past inns, and even baths, were part of barber's shops (Brenko 2001: 60).

CONCLUSION

The preparations for the *Fistful of Beard* exhibition in the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb prompted the research of the significance of moustaches and of the beard since past times. First of all, a semiotic analysis was carried out of the terms *moustaches* and *beard* in songs, proverbs, figures of style and popular etymology in Croatia and other countries, but mainly in the South Slav regions.

Certain conclusions were drawn about the significance and symbolism of moustaches and the beard. The development of this significance has also been shown until the present day when the popularity of retro culture is on the rise and when new, "more up-to-date" barber's appear and give new meanings to moustaches and the beard,

The analyzed examples show that moustaches, and first of all the beard, were the reflection of the adult male as compared to boys and young men. This demonstrated their maturity and new phase in life. The beard was the symbol of power, wealth and success; in other examples it had the meaning of wisdom and experience, while moustache were related more frequently to heroes. Today they are a fashionable addition of growing popularity owing to the return of retro culture into modern fashion and other aspects of culture. Certainly, the sporting of moustaches and of the beard has always been a part of fashion, regardless of the period, and the maintenance of the hygiene of facial hair after the daily business has always - in the past and today – been one of reasons for socializing.

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