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Karakondzho: Evil Spirits of the Twelve Days of Christmastime in the Balkans

Abstract. This article examines beliefs related to the liminal Yuletide activity of evil spirits in Balkan culture. *Karakondzho* is a conventional umbrella name for these beings who appear on Christmas eve, do their harmful work over the twelve nights of Yule, and on Epiphany disappear until the next year. I look at the features and actions of specific demons, and the spaces in which they are active, drawing on ethnolinguistic analysis of Slavic and non-Slavic terminology, massive lexical, folkloric, and ethnographic data, published and archival, along with my own field research. Cognate features found in various countries allow us to trace some of the complex inter-Balkan development of their image, associated linguistic borrowings, and cultural influences, and to suggest archaic prototypes of these seasonal evil spirits.

Keywords: Yuletide, Christmas season, Balkan demonology, folk seasonal regulation

Introduction

This article sheds light on a segment of the folk imaginary related to the appearance of certain evil beings at certain times of the calendaric year. In the Balkan region, the twelve-day period is closely linked to evil being(s), known in most of the countries in the peninsula, it is an interesting case study. They appear on Christmas Eve and disappear or are driven away by priests or ritual processions on Epiphany.¹

Yuletide, the winter solstice, is a liminal period during which, according to folk worldviews, all demons are thought to become more vigorous. The twelve days, as a delimited period, have dialectal asso-

¹ Rodopi: *Traditsionna narodna dukhovna i sotsialnonormativna kultura* [The Rhodope Mountains: Traditional Folk Spiritual and Social-Normative Culture] (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN, 1994), p. 39; Zorka Delinikovola, 'Obichai svrzani so poedini praznitsi i nedelni dni vo Radovich' ['Customs Connected with Some Festivals and Days of Weeks in Radovich'] in *Glasnik na Etnoloskiot muzej* [Newsletter of the Museum of Ethnology] (Skopje, 1960), pp. 143–45.

ciations which portray it as transitional, dangerous, impure, demonic, abnormal, infernal, and a dead time.

The mythical evil spirits associated with this time are known under multiple dialectal names,² with *karakondzho* being a commonly accepted conventional umbrella term, though, according to many scholars, this name is only found in the languages of nations that have experienced direct contact with Greek and Turkish culture; other Balkan and European nations do not have such a designation.³ These seasonal mythic figures, associated with Christmastime and winter in general, are known in the Balkans to Slavic and non-Slavic populations, as well as to both Christians and Muslims. The Greek version is *kallikantzaros*, the Bulgarian and Gagauz *karakondzho*, *karakoncho*, Serbian *karakondhzul*, the Macedonian *karakondzhol*, Aromanian *carcandzal* (with lack of the term in the Rumanian tradition), the Albanian *karkanxoll* and the Turkish *kara concolos*. Entries in dictionaries and encyclopedias,⁴ special works on the Slavic mythology⁵ without fail mention the

² In Bulgarian language only the list of nominations for this evil spirit includes 60 terms. See: Irina Sedakova, 'K probleme zaimstvovaniia v balkanoslavianskikh iazykovykh i etnokul'turnykh sistemakh' ['Towards the Problem of Borrowings in Balkan Slavic Languages and Ethnocultural Systems'], in *Slavianskaia iazykovaia i etnolazykovaia sistemy v kontakte s neslavianskim okruzeniem* [Slavic Language and Ethnocultural Systems in Contact with non-Slavic Environment] (Moscow: iazyki slavianskikh kul'tur, 2002), pp. 483–510.

³ Slobodan Zechevich, *Mitska bicha srpskih predanja* [Mythic Beings of Serbian Tales] (Beograd: Etnografski institut, 1981), p. 166; Tanas Vrazhinovsky, *Narodna demonologija na makedonsite* [Macedonian Popular Demonology], vol. 1 (Skopje, Prilep, 1998), p. 228.

⁴ Nikita I. Tolstoi, 'Karakondzhaly' in *Mifologicheskii slovar'* [Dictionary of Mythology] (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopedia, 1990), p. 273; *Bulgarska mitologija: Entsiklopedichen rechnik* [Bulgarian Mythology: Encyclopedic dictionary] (Sofia: 7M+ Logis, 1994); Irina Sedakova, 'Karakondzhul', in *Slavianskie drevnosti: Etnolingvističeskii slovar'* [Slavic Antiquities: Ethnolinguistic Dictionary], ed. Nikita I. Tolstoi, vol. 2 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1999), pp. 466–48.

⁵ Roger Bernard, 'Le Bulgare караканджо "sorte de loup garou" et autre formes Bulgares issues du Turc karakoncolos' in *Izsledvaniia v chest na akademik M. Arnaudov: Iubileen sbornik* [Investigations in Honour of Academician M. Arnaudov: Festschrift] (Sofia, 1970); Ljubinko Radenkovich, 'Mitoshka bicha vezana za godishnje praznike' ['Mythic Beings in Connection with the Calendar Festivals'] in *Etnoloshko-kulturoloshki zbornik* [Ethnologic-Cultural Book of Essays], vol. 2. (Svrljig, 1998); Anna A. Plotnikova, 'Iuzhnoslavianskaia narodnaia demonologija v balkanskom kontekste' ['South-Slavic Folk Demonology in the Balkan Context'], *Studia mythologica Slavica*, 1 (Ljubljana, 1998), pp. 119–30; Ute Dukova, *Naimenovaniia demonov v bolgarskom iazyke* [Names of the Demons in the Bulgarian Language] (Moscow: Indrik, 2015).

karakondzho's 'Balkan origin'. Descriptions of the *karakondzhos*, or at least mention of them, is a commonplace in ethnographic works devoted to calendar rites or the demonology of local traditions. Most generally, *karakondzhos* are either thought of as monsters of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or anthro-po-zoomorphic appearance, or invisible creatures that assault people at nights and ride them, usually beyond the limits of the human world. These creatures may be very dangerous and bloodthirsty, or they may just scare people.

For this study, I follow the methodology of the Moscow ethnolinguistic school, founded by Nikita I. Tolstoi back in the USSR in the 1970s:

*Ethnolinguistics is part of linguistics, a subdiscipline which orients the scholar towards investigating the correlation and coherence between a language and folk culture, language and archaic mentality, language and folk art, through their interrelations and diverse correspondences. Ethnolinguistics is not just a hybrid of linguistics and ethnology, or a mixture of certain elements, factual or methodological, of one discipline and another.*⁶

I thus draw on data from a range of vocabularies, especially dialectal and regional ones, folklore and ethnographic publications, and archives, as well as my own field research of the last 30 years. To characterize the *karakondzho* as a seasonal demon, I apply an ethnolinguistic scheme devised for describing mythological beings,⁷ listing a wide range of attributes which helps to reconstruct an archaic conception of a mythic being and its origin.

⁶ Nikita I. Tolstoi and Svetlana M. Tolstaia, *Slavianskaia etnolingvistika: Voprosy teorii* [*Slavic Ethnolinguistics: Theoretical Questions*] (Moscow: Institut slavianovedeniia RAN, 2013), p. 19, <https://inslav.ru/publication/tolstoy-n-i-tolstaya-s-m-slavyanskaya-etnolingvistika-voprosy-teorii-m-2013> [accessed 5 October 2020]. For classical examples of ethnolinguistic studies on the theme of the ritual year in English, see Svetlana M. Tolstaia, 'Rites for Providing and Stopping Rain in Slavonic Folk Tradition', *Cosmos*, 12 (2005 [2001]), 179–95; Nikita I. Tolstoi, 'Magic Circle of Time', *Cosmos*, 18 (2005 [2002]), 193–206.

⁷ Liudmila N. Vinogradova, Aleksandr V. Gura, Galina I. Kabakova, Ol'ga A. Ternovskaia, Svetlana M. Tolstaia, and Valeria V. Usacheva, 'Skhema opisaniia mifologicheskikh personazhej' ['Scheme for Descriptions of Mythic Beings'], in *Materialy k VI Mezhdunarodnomu kongressu po izucheniiu stran Iugo-Vostochnoi Evropy* [*Materials for VI International Congress on Investigation of South-Eastern European Countries*], Sofia, 30 August 1989–6 September 1989, Materialy kul'tury [Material Culture] (Moscow: Institut slavianovedeniia RAN, 1989).

Another explanation is needed here regarding the linguistic and cultural contexts of the Balkan area. The Balkan languages (Romanian, Aromanian,⁸ Bulgarian, Greek, Roma, Gagauz,⁹ Albanian, Macedonian¹⁰), despite belonging to different families share distinct similarities in their vocabularies and grammatical systems which have allowed the scholars to think of them as members of a Balkan *Sprachbund*.¹¹ Many scholars see this unity not only in languages but in various spheres of popular culture, such as the spectacular parallels between Greek and Bulgarian calendar customs and mythological ideas.¹² Tatiana V. Civjan has widened this approach and put forward the notion of a specific Balkan worldview, an idea widespread among Balkanists today.¹³

Due to Greek and Turkish influence, shared history, close proximity, protracted contact, and multilingualism in many regions, the Balkan languages have a great number of borrowed words connected with specific lexical subsystems. That of demonology, for example, describes mythic beings using foreign words, alongside taboos and euphemisms, in order to protect against the entity's harmful deeds.

It is difficult to analyse the entire system of terminology because of the mixture of borrowed and native vocabulary and related ethnological data. Foreign words are not always seen as 'alien', because of the assimilation of the original root, their use with 'native' suffixes, and folk etymology. Many lexical units have transformed over time and cannot be relied upon to carry a linguistically clear picture of their ultimate origin. This is exactly the case with *karakondzho* and its dialect versions. The same processes are at work with regard to folkloric and ethnographic evidence, much of it of different origins and varying

⁸ Aromanian is a dialect of Romanian language spoken on the territory of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Albania.

⁹ Gagauz is a Turkic language spoken by Orthodox Christian people on the territory of Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine and Turkey.

¹⁰ The list of the members of the Balkan Sprachbund varies according to different scholars. Some linguists do not regard the Turkish, Serbian, Croatian, and Slovene languages as Balkan, while some others do.

¹¹ Kristian Sandfeld, *Linguistique balkanique: Problèmes et résultats* (Paris: Champion, 1930).

¹² Mikhail Arnaudov, 'Grutski vliianiia v bulgarskii folklor' ['Greek Influence on Bulgarian Folklore'] in *Izbrani proizvedeniia* [Selected Works], vol. 2 (Sofia: Bulgarski pisatel, 1978), pp. 59–68 (p. 61).

¹³ Tatiana V. Civjan, *Lingvisticheskie osnovy balkanskoi kartiny mira* [Language Basis of the Balkan Model of the World] (Moscow: Nauka, 1990).

geographically, nevertheless, a detailed analysis yields some evidence regarding the spread and development of its particular root.¹⁴

Several factors play a role in this respect. First of all, the materials available to us do not come from very ancient times, but rather record the state of the system as it existed no earlier than the nineteenth century. Second, demonology is a sphere of popular knowledge that intimately intersects with religious beliefs. Therefore, religious differences (e.g., between Orthodox Christianity and Islam) add important nuances to the interpretation of evil spirits, especially with regard to calendric holidays, feasts, and fasting.¹⁵

1 *Karakondzho*: Language Issues

1.1 *Terms for the Christmastime Evil Spirits*

Taken together, the characteristics of the *karakondzho* are so varied that they seem to be beyond any consistent system's framework. Nevertheless, it is possible to make certain generalisations. The term itself is stable in all the Balkan traditions though it is subject to considerable phonetic and morphological variation. The morphological nuances are direct reflections of the beliefs associated with the *karakondzho*. Thus, in Bulgarian, the respective terms are often formed in the masculine or neutral gender while in Serbian they are feminine.¹⁶ The formation of a group entity of innumerable demons is reflected in the collective plural (*karakondzhureto*) found in Bulgarian, which features many folk tales about families of *karakindzhos*.

¹⁴ See the three maps in Irina Sedakova, 'K probleme zaimstvovaniï', pp. 483–510.

¹⁵ In this respect a remark made by V. A. Gordlevskii seems to be exceptionally valuable. He distinguished the superficial, borrowed components in the Ottoman Turkish popular culture: [These components] 'suppress grains of the original Turkish beliefs and that is not surprising because Turks by the moment of their conversion to Islam had not developed as yet a consistent religious system. As Turks came into contact with neighboring nations they borrowed from these nations superstitions these nations believed in. Thus the Ottoman Turks' superstitions acquired even more motley and confused character.' See Vladimir A. Gordlevskii, 'Iz osmanskoï demonologii' ['From Osman Demonology'], in *Izbrannye sochineniia* [Collected Works], vol. 3 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury, 1962), p. 305.

¹⁶ Thus in the Serbian dictionary of mythology the entry for this evil spirit is called *Karakondzhula* (with the feminine ending -a). See Liubinko Radenkovich, 'Karakondzhula', in *Slovenska Mitologija: Entsiklopedijski rechnik* [Slavic Mythology: Encyclopedic Dictionary] (Beograd: Zepeter Book World, 2001), pp. 259–61.

There are specific documented terms for winter demons, like *kan-dzo*, *kandzil*, which in some Balkan areas mean 'devil'. In everyday speech, these are used as swear-words: *kandzul*, *kandzo* is Bulgarian for 'damn it', *kundza* is 'devil, demon bringing misfortune';¹⁷ *kundzavurin* is the Serbian for 'devil, scoundrel'.¹⁸ These terms thus bridge the Bulgarian and Serbian border.¹⁹

Another sub-group of terms for winter evil spirits consists of *dzhongoloz*, *dzhangoloz* formed through metathesis and vocalisation of the consonants in *karakondzho*.²⁰ It appears to be derived from Turkish *congalaz*, 'old woman'.²¹ Similar meanings are recorded in the Bulgarian *dzongoloz*, pejorative for an 'old man',²² and *dzhongolozin* 'old profligate'. Normally these words are used in invectives: *Proklet dzhongolozin* 'Damned dzhongolozin'.²³ The same lexical unit applies to Christmastide guisers and to a child born on Christmas who, according to old beliefs, would possess peculiar, demonic features. Irrespective of the linguistic origin of this term, these beliefs are common throughout the Balkan region.²⁴ This phenomenon of a single root being associated with many derivative terms for sets of objects, actions, or ritual persons in one custom is characteristic of the vocabulary of folk culture.

Vladimir A. Gordlevskii adduces the terms *karakondzho*, *kondzholos*, and *dzongolos* as synonyms for the winter demons, though it seems that there are two slightly different meanings. In the first, the terms denote the monsters that, at Christmastime, leave their caves. In the second, they denote a house-spirit that inflicts harm only on utensils

¹⁷ Stefan Mladenov (compiler), *Bulgarski tulkoven rechnik s ogled kum narodnite govori* [Bulgarian Explanatory Dictionary with a View towards Popular Dialects] (Sofia, 1951), p. 531.

¹⁸ Yaksha Dinich, *Rechnik Timochkog govora* [Dictionary of the Timok Dialect] (Beograd, 1992), p. 437.

¹⁹ Irina Sedakova, 'K probleme zaimstvovanii', map 1.

²⁰ Bernard, 'Le Bulgare караканджо'.

²¹ *Bulgarski etimologichen rechnik* [Bulgarian Dictionary of Etymology], 8 vols (Sofia: Akademichno izdatelstvo 'Prof. Marin Drinov', 1971–2017), I, 368.

²² Naiden Gerov, *Rechnik na bulgarskii ezik* [Dictionary of the Bulgarian Language], vol. 1 (Sofia: Bulgarskii Pisatel, 1975 [1895]), p. 289.

²³ *Sbornik za narodni umotvoreniia i narodopis* [Collection of Popular Works], vol. 42 (Sofia: BAN, 1936), p. 115.

²⁴ Irina Sedakova, *Balkanskie motivy v iazyke i kul'ture bolgar: Rodinnyi tekst* [Balkan Motifs in Bulgarian Language and Culture: Birthlore] (Moscow: Indrik, 2007), p. 277.

and tableware. According to the Turkish popular etymology, the word *congoloz* can be traced back to words *con*, *can* 'tiny bells'. This hypothesis finds a confirmation in Bulgarian ritual and linguistic materials. The Bulgarian words *dzhan*, *dzhon* and *chan*, *dhangaratsi* 'the ritual bells' are borrowed in the Bulgarian and Macedonian dialects.²⁵ These bells are a defining attribute of Yule guisers (who, appropriately, get the name *dzhongaldzhii* 'those with the bells').

1.2 Popular Etymology

The first component of *karakondzho* (from Turkish *cara* 'black') is well assimilated in the Balkan Slavs' dialects. *Karakondzho* is principally portrayed as the black demon and some scholars suppose that this color characterisation is the fundamental feature, due to the semantic transparency of the *kara* component of the term. A similar process is seen in the Bulgarian popular interpretation of the first component, which is associated with the verb *karam* 'to ride'; this is one of the most frequent activities ascribed to *karakondzho* at Christmastime. Another related popular etymology traces the term's second part back to the word *kon* 'horse', a Bulgarian term for the evil spirit *karakoncho* that corresponds to the centaur-like appearance of this evil spirit.

1.3 Terminology of the Twelve Days and the Seasonal Evil Spirits

Winter (Christmastime) demons are known under other names. In this respect Northern Greece and Southern Bulgaria form a common territory where the terms for the calendric days and for the associated creatures are similar: *pogani* 'the pagans', a poly-semantic word meaning 'unclean', 'indecent'. It denotes also aliens and people of different religious faiths (*boganets* is a synonym for *karakondzho*, but also, in the Rhodopian dialect, 'a Bulgarian Christian converted to Islam'²⁶). This latter meaning is well known in popular culture but is also recorded in ancient literary manuscripts²⁷ and is but one example of the fact that the terms for the evil spirit and Christmastime can be identical — *pogan*.

The terms for the twelve-day period itself contain a multitude of mythological and ritual allusions, since it is seen as a period of transi-

²⁵ Gerov, *Rechnik na bulgarskii ezik*, vol. 1, p. 287.

²⁶ *Bulgarska dialektologija: Materiali i prouchvaniia* [Bulgarian Dialectology: Materials and Studies], vol. 2 (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN, 1965), p. 130.

²⁷ *Bulgarski etimologichen rechnik*, V, 416–21.

tion between dark and light,²⁸ a time belonging to the evil spirits, Bulgarian *diavolski dene* 'devil's days'. The lexical meanings for the twelve days characterise it as 'unbaptised, unholy', reflecting popular and Christian beliefs that the water, and sometimes the earth and sky, are considered 'unbaptised' until Epiphany, too. Other lexical meanings include, 'unclean', 'unholy', 'foul' and 'vicious'. This is the time, too, when souls of the dead are released and bother people during the night (cf. Macedonian term *mrtvi denove* 'dead days').

2 *Karakondzho* as an Evil Spirit

Unfortunately, neither ethnographic descriptions nor dictionary entries have many accounts of the evil spirits of the twelve days, contrary to what the above ethnolinguistic scheme would imply. Most descriptions are comprised of just a few details such as their seasonal activity, their appearance, and the sort of harm they cause. Beliefs about appearances, attributes, functions, habitation sites and victims of these demons, and popular views of their genesis are fragmentary, while scholars' hypotheses are often contradictory. The references, empirical data, and analytical works all produce a very variegated picture.

The characteristics of the *karakondzho* and its activities are differentiated not only between individual traditions (e.g., Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, etc.), but also *within* each one, though there are common, shared elements. The most resilient characteristic is their seasonality: their activities are tied to the hard winter frosts, predominantly to the Christmas season in the Christian tradition (with Yuletide extending into the new year; January is called 'the month of *Karakondzho*' in Bulgaria), and to the winter holidays in the Islamic tradition. Belief in their seasonal nature is less stable in some Serbian areas, though. In Gruzha, Central Serbia, for example, people believe that the *karakondzho* appears twice a year, at Christmas and in autumn.²⁹ In some parts of northeastern Bulgaria, the *karakondzho* is intertwined with the image of Saint Teodor (Bulgarian *Todor*), the demonic horseman who appears in spring, during Teodor's week (the first week of the Lent).³⁰

²⁸ Emily Lyle, *Archaic Cosmos* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. 49.

²⁹ *Srpski etnografski zbornik*, vol. 58 (Beograd, 1948), p. 343.

³⁰ In Bulgaria, *Todor's* week is also called *chern* 'black', *prazna* 'empty', *luda* 'crazy'. The rites and regulation of activities in this period are in many respects similar to

The most recent transformation of the *karakondzho* (as with many other mythic creatures in recent times) has been its admission to the pantheon of childish bugbears and to folklore with no temporal or seasonal correlation.³¹ In all traditions, the *karakondzho* is now the night-time demon which appears with the darkness and disappears with the first cock crow. What follows is a resume of the features associated with these winter mythic creatures.

2.1 Appearance

It is possible to isolate areas of the Balkan peninsular where certain perceptions of the *karakondzho's* appearance predominates. Normally four aspects of appearance are considered: anthropo-zoomorphic, zoomorphic, human, and invisible. A centaur's appearance is recorded predominantly in Northern Bulgaria. The *karakondzho* is perceived as a human being, sometimes with various anomalies: one-eyed, one-legged, with huge ears, gaunt, naked or covered with hair, with red burning eyes, with disproportionally big heads, very tall or, on the contrary, of a child's height. However, descriptions of the *karakondzho* as a human being with goat's legs, tail, horns, claws, etc., predominate in Greece. The appearance of animals (dogs, cats, hares, hens, lambs, monkeys, camels, bears) is often attributed to the *karakondzho* and werewolf properties are inherent in them, as well.³² Only Serbs describe the *karakondzho* as

the Christmas 12 day period: the water is deemed to be 'impure', children born in this week and people who died during it may turn into the *karakondzho* or a vampire. Eggs laid during *Todor's* week are not used for chicken raising because demons (*tudurcheta* 'small Teodors', or *karakoncheta* 'small *karakondzhos*') may grow from such chickens. Sometimes Saint Teodor is imagined as a rider on the white horse who rides from the cemetery as *talasam* 'evil spirit'. Saint Teodor is directly likened to the *karakondzho*: '*Sveti Todor e kato karakoncho I khodi na bial kon prez Tuduritsa*' ('Saint Teodor is like *karakoncho* and rides the white horse in *Todor's* week). See Rachko Popov, 'Svetsi-demoni' ['Saints-Demons'], in *Etnografski problemi na narodnata kultura* [Ethnographic Problems of Popular Culture] (Sofia, 1992), p. 81; Loveskhi kraj: *Materialna i dukhovna kultura* [Lovech Region: Material and Spiritual Culture] (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN, 1999), p. 284. I suppose these parallels are of late origin because Saint Teodor's image with the *karakondzho*-like appearance is recorded specifically in north-east Bulgaria where the *karakondzho* has a horse-like appearance.

³¹ Irina Sedakova, field research in the village of Ravna, Provadia region, Varna area, Bulgaria, 1997 (personal archive).

³² *Kapantsi: Bit i kultura na staroto bulgarsko naselenie v Severoiztochna Bulgaria. Etnografski i ezikovi prouchvaniya* [Kapantsi: Everyday Life and Culture of the Old Population of North-East Bulgaria. Ethnographic and Linguistic Investigations] (Sofia, 1985), p. 270.

a female demon. While notions of *karakondzho* families and female *karakondzos* are known in Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia³³ (with narratives about the attendance of a village midwife to the female *karakondzho* in labor), the lack of female *karakondzhos* is emphasised in Greece. Hence the belief that children born at Christmastime become the Christmas-time demons extends only to infant boys. Finally, the *karakondzho* may be invisible, with Macedonians and Bulgarians describing its presence as ‘a wind’ or ‘a voice’.³⁴

2.2 Location

The *karakondzho* comes out of caves and woods, from underground (according to Bulgarian Christmas beliefs, the earth is like a sieve and the demons can get out that way). Among the recorded tales there are stories with mentioning of the precise loci of the *karakondzho* (for example, an area known as *Garvanova dupka* ‘Raven’s Hole’), near the village of Petkovo in the Rhodope mountains. Serbs, and sometimes Bulgarians and Macedonians, often consider the *karakondzhos* to be the water demons, as they live under ice, near mills, wells, etc. Stories about the *karakondzho* residing in lakes are recorded in Montenegro.³⁵

2.3 Performance (Activity)

The most widespread image of the *karakondzho* depicts a creature that mounts a human and rides him all the night, sometimes leaving him on cliffs, near whirlpools, or on a frozen river.³⁶ Serbs believe that drunkards and women are natural ‘targets’ of their attacks (for example, with its long arms, the *karakondzho* drags women out of their homes through chimney stacks). Bulgarians think that targets are late-night travellers and children.

³³ It is not surprising that in Serbian dictionaries the *karakondzho* is interpreted as a ‘witch’ and is an expressive word for description of a grubby, uncombed woman.

³⁴ Vrazhinovsky, *Narodna demonologija na makedontsite*, p. 229; Rodopi: *Traditsionna kultura*, p. 39.

³⁵ Pavel A. Rovinskii, *Chernogoria v eio proshlom i nastoiashchem* [Montenegro Now and Before] (Sankt-Peterburg, 1888–1915).

³⁶ Anastas Primovski, ‘Obshtnost na niakoi obichaii u rodopskite Bulgari’ [‘Similarity of Some Bulgarian Customs in the Rhodope Mountains’], in *Narodnostna i bitova obshtnost na rodopskite Bulgari* [People and Everyday Commonality among the Bulgarians of the Rhodope Mountains] (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN, 1969), p. 172.

Segmented data on the *karakondzho* as a bloodthirsty vampire able to drink blood or devour a person are partially embedded in the pagan winter rituals connected with killing the Christmas pig.³⁷ In this respect, we can isolate areas of northeastern Bulgaria where people believe that the *karakondzho* appears only at the place where a pig was killed, and areas in Greece where this demon is thought to have a passion for pork. The custom of burning the Christmas pig's bones is carried out with an explicit intention 'to burn the *karakondzho*', more evidence of a close connection with the pig.³⁸ In the Rhodope mountains, the Christmas ritual pig is called *karakanzel* and dishes cooked of it are deemed to be unclean, foul.³⁹ This connection with the Christmas pig and with pork is not so simple, however. On one hand, the *karakondzho* itself licks the blood at the site where the pig was slaughtered,⁴⁰ likes pork, and enjoys its entrails. On the other, the demon monitors the people's compliance with the fast, ensuring they do not break it prematurely and do not eat in excess as they begin to consume pork.

The *karakondzhos*, like many other demons, are capable of bringing disease (Bulgaria, Macedonia), particularly if a person encounters them, puts a foot on 'their' territory, or disturbs their children.⁴¹

Data on the *karakondzho*'s role in the home space is far more sparse. It is known to sit on chimney stacks, whistle down chimneys, go into dwellings to smash tableware, spoil food or water (by spitting or urinating in them), but such beliefs occur in irregular and patchwork patterns across the Balkan Slavic countries. They are most typical for Greece and with migrants from Greece, as well as with transhumant stockbreeders.

Particular 'rules' pertain in dealing with food and water in Christmas folk customs. In Serbia people do not drink water during the night and do not wash unbaptised children. In Bulgaria and Macedonia, it is advised to cover water and food vessels at night, or even to empty them in order to protect against the *karakondzho*'s harmful acts of spoiling drink and food.

³⁷ Rodopi: *Traditsionna kultura*, p. 39.

³⁸ Plovdivski kraj: *Etnografski i ezikovi prouchvaniia* [Plovdiv Region: *Ethnographic and Linguistic Investigations*] (Sofia, 1986), pp. 255, 303.

³⁹ Rodopi: *Traditsionna kultura*, p. 91.

⁴⁰ Loveshki kraj: *Materialna i dukhovna kultura*.

⁴¹ Rodopi: *Traditsionna kultura*, p. 39; Vrazhinovsky, *Narodna demonologija na makedonsite*, p. 229.

2.4 Karakondzo Origins

The notion that people born (or conceived) in the Christmas season become the *karakondzho* is a shared belief across Balkan nations.⁴² Ability to transform specific to *karakondzhos* may be inherited: ordinary people may become *karakondzhos* during the Christmas season.⁴³ Besides that, they may 'spoil' or contaminate ordinary people and integrate them into their own flock. In regions where the *karakondzhos* are likened to vampires, their origins are identical. They are either people who died at Christmastime (corpses are pricked with a needle to prevent this conversion⁴⁴), in particular, dead children born on Christmas Eve,⁴⁵ or they were the dead who had been buried without adherence to strict funeral rites. Occasionally, the *karakondzho* is the soul of a pig killed for the Christmas festivities.⁴⁶

3 Folk Protective Measures against *Karakondzho*

Among the Balkan Slavs, the Christmastime interdicts are mainly of a protective nature, aimed at avoiding meetings with *karakondzho* and averting any harm. It is forbidden to leave the house at night, spin or weave, start a journey, propose a marriage, baptise children, bury the dead, perform funeral services, or pray for the dead. All practices with

⁴² According to the beliefs of the Southern Slavs, children born during the 'impure' Christmas period become *karakondzhos*, or vampires, and in the future a dragon may fall in love with girls born during this period. Old women and midwives fumigate such babies immediately after their birth; see Rodopi: *Traditsionna kultura*, p. 90. If a child is born before cockcrow, women sew a 'one-day' shirt (one which must be made within a single day and night) and put it on the child; see Strandzha: *Etnografski, folklorni i ezikovi prouchvaniia na Bulgaria* [Strandzha: *Ethnographic, Folklore and Language Investigations of Bulgaria*] (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN, 1996), p. 231; *Loveshki krai: Materialna i duhovna kultura*, p. 285. Greeks attribute demonic properties of the newly born to the fact that they were conceived before the Annunciation. To avoid the conversion of an infant into a *karakondzho* the infant's mother rasps away the infant's nails and puts a garland of garlic on its neck; see George A. Megas, *Greek Calendar Customs* (Athens: Press and Information Department, Prime Minister's Office, 1958), p. 34.

⁴³ Khristo Vakarelski, 'Bit i ezik na trakiiskite i maloaziiskite bulgari' ['Everyday Life and Language of Thracian Bulgarians'], Part 1, in *Trakiiski sbornik* [Thracian Collection] (Sofia, 1935), p. 406; Zechevich, *Mitska bicha srpskih predanja*, p. 168.

⁴⁴ Rodopi: *Traditsionna kultura*, p. 90.

⁴⁵ Strandzha: *Etnografski, folklorni i ezikovi prouchvaniia na Bulgaria*, p. 231

⁴⁶ Tsvetana Romanska Archive, Gostilitsa village, Gabrovo region, Bulgaria.

the water are forbidden (washing clothes, dishes, etc.). Any home dwellers who violate the Christmastime bans on work may be punished.

The use of protective amulets and preventive actions is extensive. In the Rhodope mountains, people sprinkle water consecrated on Saint Ignatius's day, and millet from their sleeves, clockwise around the home.⁴⁷ The *karakondzho* is tasked with 'impossible' missions of the sort customarily used for driving away evil spirits; counting the seeds in sunflower heads,⁴⁸ for example, or combing wool.⁴⁹ Strict observance of 'rules', such as those governing the use of Christmastime ritual objects (e.g., garlic, the coals of the yule log, water in which coal has been extinguished, Christian symbols, such as the cross, the sign of the cross, a prayer) all help to avoid an encounter with the *karakondzho*. Homes are thoroughly protected against the ingress of evil spirits: doors are kept closed, bells are hung on the door, and signs of the cross are painted on them with oil tar.⁵⁰ Inside houses, the people talk to each other in hushed voices to prevent the *karakondzho*, that are believed to sit on the roof, from hearing what people say.

Children born on a Saturday can see the *karakondzho*'s frightening smile in windows indicating those who will die in the next year. It is believed that 'the Saturday people' (born on a Saturday) guard the house from the *karakondzho* and prevent its appearance in the house.⁵¹

4 Non-Slavic Balkan parallels

4.1 Greek Evidence

Many stories are told in every village about these evil spirits at this time, though descriptions of their appearance and behavior differ.⁵² Fermor delineates two principal types: giants of anthropo-zoomorphic appearance in which 'goatish' features predominate, and black dwarfs led by the devil (*karakondzhos* of this type predominate on the Black Sea southern coast). In Greece and Cyprus, we find the *kallikantzari*,

⁴⁷ Rodopi: *Traditsionna kultura*, pp. 39, 91.

⁴⁸ *Sbornik za narodni umotvorenii i narodopis*, vol. 42, p. 115.

⁴⁹ Archive of the Ethnographic Institute with Museum (Sofia), 775-II.

⁵⁰ *Strandzha: Etnografski, folklorni i ezikovi prouchvaniia na Bulgaria*, p. 231.

⁵¹ Sedakova, *Balkanskie motivy*, p. 278.

⁵² Irwin T. Sanders, *Rainbow in the Rock: The People of Rural Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 183.

evil spirits depicted as small black humanoids often, with goat legs or other animalistic features, and, as Kyriakides notes, all unusual in some way, e.g., one-eyed, one-legged, clad in rags, wearing iron footwear and pig skins.⁵³

They come down the chimney stacks and so the flues are tightly closed during the twelve-day Christmas period and sweetened water is placed in front of ovens for them. They eat filthy food, such as frogs and snakes, and are fond of pork,⁵⁴ so housewives put pork on their homes' roofs to prevent the evil spirits from coming in. On Lesbos, women scatter ashes around homes to protect their houses against them.⁵⁵ They are bloody-minded and nocuous, but not deadly, attacking travelers, making them dance until the first cockcrow, and they are very noisy, beating drums. The second type of *karakondzho* is harmless and innocuous: they infiltrate houses, smash tableware, consume all strong drink, dance, and involve travellers in their dances.⁵⁶ Apart from these tricks, these monsters do not harm people, but just spoil the water and foodstuffs (pork in particular).

They appear before Christmas and disappear on Epiphany when a priest sprinkles houses with Epiphany water. The monsters come out from the underworld where they support the tree of universe.

Magical protective actions performed for protection against dangerous spirits of the ancestors are used against the *karakondzhos*: gates are painted with oil tar, thorns are stuck into gates and doors, houses and churches are surrounded with red thread. Nowadays, the mandible of a young pig is used as a protective amulet in Greek villages. People place them in front of doors, throw salt or old boots into fireplaces, hang uncombed flax out before doors, bake flapjacks, smudge them with honey and throw them on the roof before the Epiphany. While leaving for the Epiphany service people say: 'Let's go, let's go, for the priest has come already and is consecrating the water'. Similar beliefs about Christmas evil spirits are found in Blagoevgrad (Bulgaria) among migrants from the Drama and Solun regions.

⁵³ Megas, *Greek Calendar Customs*, p. 34.

⁵⁴ Stilpōn P. Kyriakidēs, *Two Studies on Modern Greek Folklore*, trans. Robert A. Georges and Aristotle A. Katranides (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1968), p. 33.

⁵⁵ G. Georgeakis and Léon Pineau. *Le Folk-Lore de Lesbos* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1894), p. 34.

⁵⁶ Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese* (London: John Murray, 1958), p. 194.

4.2 Turkish and Slavic Muslim Evidence

As seen in these descriptions, there is a great affinity between the Greek Christmastime demons and those of Bulgaria, Macedonia, Croatia and Serbia. Greek parallels are not sufficient, however, so we may adduce further materials from Ottoman Turk and Muslim-Slavic popular demonology. The latter data are particularly significant in that they reflect a system of coexistence between the two cultures and religions in the same territory. For example, in Visochka Nakhia (Croatia) *karandzolos* as they are called are known only to Muslims. In the Rhodope region, where many are Muslim, representatives of different religions describe and perceive the *karakondzho* in diverse ways.

Here, the *karakondzho* resembles a vampire (Chepino, Rhodope mountains). 'The days of *karakondzho*' is a period of nine days or a week following the New Year or Christmas. On the first evening after the New Year, a stone, or a branch (picked with the left hand while saying 'Let this branch be the roof of my home'), is thrown over the house roof three times to prevent the evil spirits from coming in. Vessels with water are sealed for the same purpose. It is believed that people born at Christmastime follow the *karakondzhos* on their walks along rivers.⁵⁷

Materials on the demonology of Ottoman Turks, gathered by V. A. Gordlevskii, add some details to the general appearance of the Christmas-time demon as it is seen by Balkan Slavs and Greeks. In 'regions where Greeks and Turks lived side by side and Greeks predominated,' for example, '*karakondzho* has passed from Greeks to Turks. At Christmas-time it rattles with chains and generates terrible noise and frightens people.'⁵⁸ Gordlevskii writes about an evil spirit called *dzhongolos* and/or *kondzholos*, which appear in the cold wintertime, during the seasonal Muslim holidays. They spit in open vessels (water buckets, salt cellars) and thus, housewives cover such vessels tightly. Mothers scare their children, too: 'Close vessels, otherwise *dzhongolos* will come in night and spit in them with its venomous spittle. It will poison you.' The contributor who relates these details adduces the popular etymology in which the basic morpheme is the mutilated word *cingildin*, i.e. 'rattling'⁵⁹ for the evil spirit is covered all over with bells. At night-time,

⁵⁷ Rodopi: *Traditsionna kultura*, pp. 39, 91.

⁵⁸ Gordlevskii 'Iz osmanskoj demonologii', p. 64.

⁵⁹ Vasilii V. Radlov, *Opyt slovaria tiurkskikh narechii* [Dictionary of the Turkic Dialects], 4 vols (Sankt-Peterburg: Tip. Imp. Akademii nauk, 1889–1911), IV, 22–23.

it gently opens doors to bedrooms. Its face is black, its eyes sparkling as fire, its hair snarled. It wears black garments. Usually people who see it die of fright. Frequently, the *cangolos* comes up to a window and shouts something, imitating the voices of acquaintances. When a person comes out, the demon takes him/her to some recess and strangles them. This is also known to Armenians who associate it with Lent and frighten children with it. Gordlevskii writes that there is 'a cave in Zirenbashy. Every year in winter, during the coldest nights, turnskins, or werewolves, *karakondzholos* came out of it and drove carts all around, coming back to the cave and disappearing there at dawn'.⁶⁰

5 Conclusions

The ethnolinguistic data here adduced describe the superficial facts bound up in the language and associated rites. But a full reconstruction of the term *karakondzho*, as well of the genesis of these creatures, is impeded by the fact that the demonological vocabulary has been subject to numerous overlays and cross-impacts, due to close contacts between neighbouring Balkan nations' languages and cultures. The ethnographic literature expresses very different, often incompatible opinions on when and where the form and description of the *karakondzho* coalesced. The theory of ancient origins is faced with strong evidence that Byzantine, Romaic, and Turkish mythologies and ritual systems are the original basis for the emergence and subsequent dissemination of these beliefs in the Balkans. Etymological studies often prove to be blind alleys, as the Turkish term can be traced back to the Greek which, in turn (and sometimes via Albanian), is traced back to Turkish — a vicious circle.

It is difficult to deny an at least superficial resemblance between the Christmastime demons and a centaur (the Bulgarian *karakondzho* often has similar form), but also with Pan, Satyr, and Cyclops (in all Balkan traditions), although this resemblance is merely superficial. Chaikanovich and others reject an ancient Greek origin and assert the *karakondzho's* connections to the cult of the dead.⁶¹ Components of various nations and religions, and of various chronological strata, have

⁶⁰ Gordlevskii 'Iz osmanskoi demonologii', p. 64.

⁶¹ Chajkanovich Veselin, *Stara Srpska religija i mitologija* [Old Serbian Religion and Mythology] (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1994), p. 313.

merged in this demon. There are Slavic affinities, particularly with *shulikuny*, the Russian winter demons,⁶² and the feminine hypostasis of the Serbian evil spirit partially corresponds to the East Slavic *kikimora*.⁶³ Besides that, it is evident that, at least in Bulgaria, proto-Turcic components should to be taken into consideration (see, for example, the resemblance of the *karakondzho* to the Yakut *siuliukiunam*).⁶⁴

It is also important to find out *how* a lexical unit and a corresponding fragment of the associated spiritual culture, finds its way into other languages and cultures. In this respect, spatial ethnolinguistic studies are of particular importance. An obvious phonetic and morphological affinity between Romaic lexical units and south Bulgarian Thracian lexical units (the Bulgarian *kalikanzeri*), and the obvious domination of derivatives from the Turkish basic unit *karakondzho*, allows consideration of two paths for the terms and their ethnographic content to have passed from one ethno-cultural tradition to another. The first route is via direct borrowing from/to the Greek by the South Slavic languages, the second via Turkish.

Seen from this standpoint, the traditional spiritual cultural vocabulary (the role the 'alien' words and ideas play in development and transformation of popular beliefs, rites, superstitions, and folklore) is of particular interest. Often, the frightening, dangerous, unexplainable or incomprehensible are tabooed and deliberately replaced with foreign terms, not just exoteric in origin, but also 'foreign sounding', perceived by the language carriers as 'alien' (e.g., names of unbaptised 'impure' children found in Bulgarian folk culture: *ayol*, *gudzho*, *dzhole*, *dzhivgar*, *dzavdzhe*).⁶⁵ There are many terms originally borrowed from other languages in the transitory rites that imply a change of a status, i.e., in birth, wedding, and burial rites. This is true for some liminal calendric periods like Yuletide and it is no surprise that the evil *karakondzho* spirits appear at that time.

The most important feature of the evil spirits that come under the term *karakondzho*, known throughout Balkan folk culture, is their tem-

⁶² Tolstoi, 'Karakondzhaly', p. 273.

⁶³ Marina Vlasova, *Novaia abevega russkikh sueverii* [New ABC of Russian Superstitions] (Sankt-Peterburg: Severo-Zapad, 1995), pp. 170–72.

⁶⁴ *Mify narodov mira* [Myths of the Peoples of the World], 2 vols (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopedia, 1982), II, 482.

⁶⁵ Sedakova, *Balkanskie motivy*, pp. 45–47.

porality, as they are mostly associated with Yuletide, a dangerous, 'unclean', 'unbaptised' time of the year. In the images of this demon many beliefs of different origins (proto-Turkic, ancient Greek, old Slavic) have merged, and in the very terms themselves we can see amalgamations of these Greek, Turkish, and Slavic roots.

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