

From a Fly to a Bone-Setter: How to Catch a Krsnik?

Luka Šešo, *Krsnik između mita i zbilje. Kulturnoantropološke strukture jednog tradicijskog vjerovanja*

Hrvatsko etnološko društvo, Hrvatsko katoličko sveučilište, Zagreb 2022, pages 144.

The book *Krsnik između mita i zbilje* [“*Krsnik between Myth and Reality*”] is an anthropological-historical study of the phenomenon of “*krsnik*” in the traditional beliefs of Croatia, as well as in a wider spatial and temporal context. Belief in *krsniks* under that name is most common in Istria, the Kvarner Bay archipelago and, to a lesser extent, in Gorski Kotar, although folk beliefs in many other supernatural beings, with different names but similar or even identical functions, have been recorded in the broader region too. In short, who or what is a *krsnik*? Most often, it is a man (although, rarely, it can also be a woman, *krsnica*) whose birth is accompanied by special signs, the most important of which is being born in the amniotic membrane, which becomes the source of the *krsnik's* supernatural power. He gains full power after initiation, when he begins to protect his community from evil forces and supernatural beings, especially against his main adversaries *štrigas* and *štriguns* (witches and warlocks), as well as *kudlaks* (werewolves or resurrected warlocks). These clashes often occur at crossroads, and the opponents fight in animal form, most commonly as dogs, but also as oxen, goats and other animals. The winner of the battle ensures the fertility and prosperity of the community. In some variants, *krsnik* can also travel through the air and, in the form of a fly, transfer his soul into the bodies of animals, control the weather, heal people from diseases, or remove spells and curses. The problem gets more complicated when it comes to terminology. Namely, fieldwork has recorded some other apparently cognate terms: *grišnjak*, *kresnik* (especially in Slovenia), etc. Furthermore, there are beings with

similar functions but entirely different names, such as *višćun* from the island of Brač, *nagromant* from the Dubrovnik area, or *vjedogonja* from the Bay of Kotor. Do these names refer to the same supernatural being of traditional belief?

Luka Šešo undertakes the complex task of using various methodological approaches to arrive at a clearer definition of the main traits of *krsnik* in relation to numerous other more or less similar supernatural beings in local and neighbouring folk traditions. The author structures his study into several sections. In the introductory text (9–15), he provides a theoretical overview of humanity's deeply rooted mythopoetic impulses and abilities, which have been studied by great many scholars in a number of disciplines, from Freud and Jung to Levi-Strauss, Malinowski and Eliade, to name just a few. However, Šešo narrows down his theoretical and methodological approach to a cultural-anthropological framework, i.e., to what can be learned about *krsniks* from traditional beliefs and oral traditions, without delving too deeply into a broader religious-mythological context. Nevertheless, although apparently avoiding extensive theoretical interpretations of the materials obtained from fieldwork, he goes on to offer his own interpretation, which could primarily be characterized as socio-psychological functionalism: no matter how their imagined characteristics and social roles change over time, *krsniks* are constructs of the community through which it conceptualizes the ever-lasting struggle between good and evil, with the individual member of the community at its center. Within the scope of this "anthropocentric egoism" (92), the *krsnik* becomes the guardian, helper and defender of the community, in whatever form and capacity. In this part of the book the reader also learns that *krsnik* was the author's "early love" during his studies of ethnology and history, and that he returned to it several times in his scholarly work, with the present study being a kind of recapitulation of that long-term research effort (14–15).

In the first chapter, „Krsnici u novovjekovnoj svakodnevici“ [“*Krsniks* in the Everyday Life of the Modern Age”] (16–34), the reader encounters a methodological problem: how to articulate a traditional belief within a historical context? In other words, how confidently can the tools of historiography be used in its closer anthropological reconstruction? Having provided a brief initial definition of *krsnik*, Šešo seeks to identify historical evidence about *krsniks* and other similar beings in the early modern period, relying on archival research by predecessors such as Antonio Miculiano, Maja Bošković-Stulli, Carlo Ginzburg and others. The oldest archival record of *krsniks* dates back to 1641 and the writings of

the bishop Giacomo Filippo Tomasini, who mentions “people born in the amnion, whose spirits go to the crossroads at night (...) and there they fight with each other for abundance or barrenness” (17). Speaking of these extraordinary people, he refers to them as “*cresnichi*”. The timing of this written testimony – the era of the increased Church persecutions of witches and other forms of heresy – leads Šešo to compare Tomasini’s *cresnich* with the Friulian *benandanti* studied by Ginzburg, the Hungarian *táltos* studied by Éva Pócs and Gábor Klaniczay, as well as with numerous similar supernatural beings, including the Serbian *zduhaćs*.

However, Šešo demonstrates that direct analogies are slippery ground, as shown by two examples of court trials from the 17th century, whose transcripts were found by historian Antonio Miculian and interpreted by him as trials against *krsniks*. These are inquisition trials for witchcraft, brought against two Istrian women in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Through a direct analysis of the court records in the State Archive of Venice, however, the author dismisses Miculian’s thesis that these were trials against *krsniks*. Actually, it turns out that, apart from Tomasini’s report, there are no direct records of Istrian *krsniks* in the early modern period. Some hints can be found in the documents of so-called canonical visitations, a kind of regular clerical inspections of parishes introduced after the Council of Trent (1545–1563), in which various accusations of “sorcery” appear, but the mention of *krsniks* is curiously absent. The author convincingly argues that rural communities must have protected their own *krsniks* from Church authorities. Šešo’s research into archival materials suggests that *krsniks* existed at least from the early 17th century (and probably from much before), that local communities protected them from the inquisition and likely saved them from demise (unlike the Italian *benandanti*, who disappeared from the historical scene after the persecutions), and that they reappear in records from the 19th century onward, when the pressure from the Church significantly weakened.

In the second chapter, „Krsnici kao predmet naučnog istraživanja“ [“*Krsniks* as the Subject of Scholarly Research”] (35–44), the author briefly outlines the genesis of research on *krsniks* and similar beings of the native folk traditions. These studies began in the 19th century as part of the romantic concept of ethnography, focused on the construction of national traditions, whereas in more recent times they have developed a broader comparative anthropological basis, complemented by extensive fieldwork. Some Slovenian ethnologists recognize in their *kresnik* a solar hero and a proto-Slavic deity, while a number of Hungarian ethnologists find in *táltos* the “evidence” of their direct affinity with ancient shamanic cultures

of Central Asia. Ethnologist Tomo Vinšćak identifies shamanic elements in beliefs about *krsniks* and *štrigas* too. (There is a similar tendency in Serbia concerning *zduhaćs*, but not among academic scholars). Šešo looks suspiciously upon such quests for older, mythological components of the tradition of *krsniks* and related beings, pointing to the possible prolonged influence of “the mechanism of romantic ideas about seeking the origins and unity of one’s own culture” (41).

A necessary corrective factor in the intricate web of speculations on *krsnik* is provided by painstaking fieldwork, as demonstrated by Bošković-Stulli, Evelina Rudan, Noel Šuran and the author himself. It is on the basis of recent fieldwork that researchers have noticed the gradual shift of *krsnik*’s function towards that of a folk healer. An exceptionally interesting document about the medicalization of the *krsnik* phenomenon was uncovered by Nataša Polgar in an 1879 record of the admission of a patient to the Vrapče Clinic for Psychiatry in Zagreb: the patient claimed to be a *krsnik*. Thus, from a solar deity, through a shaman and healer, to a mentally ill person, *krsnik* continues to evade scholarly efforts to define him.

In the third chapter, „Kulturnoantropološke strukture tradicijskog vjerovanja u krsnike“ [“Cultural-Anthropological Structures of Traditional Beliefs in *Krsniks*”] (45–114), the author offers his structural analysis of the main features of *krsniks*. He bases it on fieldwork conducted by his colleagues and himself, on insights into historical records and a broader comparative framework he takes into account. However, he first dedicates a brief but interesting section to attempting to determine the etymological origin of the word “*krsnik*”. His assumption is that the word conceals lexical-semantic duality and contextual stratification: it seems that the older form is “*kresnik*” (as the being is called in Slovenia, and there is also the form “*cresnichi*” in Tomasini’s account), which would link it to *kresovi*, apotropaic fires that were lit at crossroads, while the younger form “*krsnik*” reflects the Christianization of the concept (*krst* = cross). This second form only appears from the 19th century onwards and is more often associated with a real person who assists the community, as opposed to the Slovenian mythologized being.

However, the author soon abandons his discussion on etymology by concluding that the lack of credible sources hinders our search for the exact genesis of the word. He proceeds to analyze parallels and typological similarities between *krsniks* and similar beings in Croatia and the region. Once again, the *benandanti* and *táltos* are brought back into the picture, along with the Dalmatian *nagromanti* and *višćuni*, the Romanian *strigoi*,

the Serbian *zduhaći*, *gradobranitelji* and others. Comparative analysis serves to derive some common traits that distinguish the figure of *krsnik* too: 1) Mystical birth, when signs of the child's special status appear (e.g. bodily additions like being born with teeth or an extra finger), as well as special magical preparations for the mother; 2) Birth within the amniotic membrane as the most important sign of recognizing the future *krsnik* or *štriga* (with the color of the membrane being the decisive factor), as well as the handling of the membrane after birth (usually sewn to the child's left armpit); 3) The role and responsibility of the midwife as the only qualified person to observe and interpret signs during childbirth; 4) The role of older *krsniks* in the liminal phase of the future *krsnik*, who call upon him to join them and thus initiate him; 5) Finally, the initiation itself, which is only hinted at in archival records and fieldwork, and which Šešo interprets within Van Gennep's three-stage scheme of the rites of passage: separation – marginal phase – incorporation. The author further discusses the modalities of *krsnik's* powers, which are often of theriomorphic nature, either in the form of zoometamorphosis (the transformation of *krsnik* into an animal) or zoometempsychosis (the transition of his soul, usually in the form of a fly, into an animal shape).

Here, Šešo once again introduces shamanism into the comparative framework, as he discusses the cataleptic sleep of *krsnik* and the ecstatic journey of his soul over great distances to fight enemies. Referring to the French medievalist Claude Lecouteux in this context, he offers a brief but interesting historical overview of similar phenomena among ancient European and Asian peoples, and even in early Christianity, evoking the image of the magical battle between Simon Magus and the Apostle Peter. Finally, based on recent field research, the author concludes that, in the last century, the role of *krsnik* in popular imagination has largely been reduced to that of a healer.

One of the most intriguing parts of the book is where Šešo argues for the dichotomy of *krsnik's* character (109–114), which is also one of the key points of his overall interpretation. Some other researchers, such as Maja Bošković-Stulli and Evelina Rudan, have also noticed this aspect, but Šešo highlights it as central to the phenomenon of *krsnik*: he always defends *his* village, *his* community, which implies that his main enemy, and thus the source of evil, is the neighboring village, the neighboring community. In other words, the traditional belief in *krsnik* can be understood as a part of the mechanism of constructing one's own identity based on the construction of the Other: "Ours is always good, theirs is always evil" (110). This also leads to the ethical ambivalence that envelops the figures of *štriga*

and *štrigun*, who exhibit significant structural and typological similarities with *krsnik*. In a lucid socio-political extrapolation of his ethnological interpretation, Šešo refers to Andrija Bartulin's statement: "Werewolves protect their godparents and relatives, they beat others" (111) and boldly compares *krsniks* as the undisputed guardians of their community with Croatian defenders of the 1990s: the assessment of good and evil always depends on the observer's position.

In the final chapter, „Krsniče, što je ostalo?“ [*Krsnik*, what remains?"] (115–124), the author fully develops his thesis that, at the beginning of the 21st century, the figure of *krsnik* has been reduced to a bone-setter, using the example of chiropractor Pere Bajčić from the island of Krk. Based on available findings, he demonstrates that Pere, just like his father, was considered a *krsnik*, but that his role was reduced to that of a healer, specifically a chiropractor. Here, one might recall Eliade's remark about the degradation of contemporary shamans, who are no longer capable of the great spiritual feats of their predecessors and who must enhance their diminished powers with psychoactive substances.

Like many other scholars, Šešo sees this partial disappearance of traditional beliefs as a consequence of technological progress and radically altered civilization. However, he emphasizes that these beliefs do not vanish but merely transform: their original habitus and chronotope change, and old creatures from folk fantasy acquire new meanings and purposes, often in the process of folklorization and retraditionalization. The author illustrates this point with an outstanding example of the Legendfest, a festival in the Istrian municipality of Pićan dedicated to local legends, myths and customs. One year, a world-renowned Croatian physicist appeared at the festival and, referring to a book by Šešo himself, explained to the gathered people that the vampires, *štrigas* and *štriguns* of the modern era are actually Wall Street bankers (*bankaroids*, as he called them), and that the global market exhibits supernatural powers in exploiting and destroying human communities. In other words, this scientist, who presented himself as a new *krsnik* ready to protect the community, effectively confirmed the author's basic thesis about the persistence of folk belief in the supernatural, albeit with a changed content and symbolic character: the *krsnik* will continue to defend his community – no longer from witches and werewolves, but from the wolves of Wall Street.

The book *Krsnik između mita i zbilje* is a significant contribution to the study of beliefs in supernatural beings in the folk tradition of Croatia and the wider region. The author skillfully demonstrates the necessary

methodological pluralism in approaching the topic, balancing between historical testimonies, his own archival research, the fieldwork of his predecessors, colleagues and his own, as well as numerous interpretations in the domains of cultural anthropology and comparative mythology and religion. Despite the complexity of the subject, the text is written in a clear and understandable manner, with lucidity and occasional touches of subtle humor. Even if *krsnik* has managed to elude him, Luka Šešo is certainly on his trail.

Noel Putnik