Aleksandar Loma, Belgrade

SOME TRACES OF INTERLINGUISTIC CONTACTS IN THE CENTRAL BALKAN MOUNTAINS

Abstract: The etymology of three Balkan tree names, S.-Cr. munika ‘Pinus leucodermis’, molika ‘Pinus peuce’ and omorika ‘Picea omorika’ is discussed. The latter is supposed to go back, together with Bulg. morika ‘spruce’, to Slavic *mъlnika ‘fringe’ describing here the hanging branches of spruce. The Bosnian pine munika, munjika growing in high and rocky places exposed to the thunder, the relation to S.-Cr. munja < Common Slavic *mъlnja seems probable, and molika may be explained as a re-borrowing from Alb. molikë traceable to the same Slavic prototype *mъlnika.

It is well-known that Slavic colonization in South-East Europe started by occupying the vallies and plains, while the mountains remained for a long time the domaine of nomadic shepherds of Rumanian and Albanian stock. Nevertheless, the subalpine vegetation of Balkan highlands with prevailing conifers happened to be more akin to that of the north European homeland of the newcomers than it was the flora of the subjacent lowlands. Consequently, the Slavs already had their own, inherited words for the main coniferous species they encountered in the new environment: pine (*borъ), fir (*edla), spruce (*smerka or *smъrkъ), as well as for conifers in general (*xvoja).

There are, however, certain varieties of conifers endemic to the Balkans, and it is precisely the designations for these subspecies that the Slavs may have borrowed from the autochthonous population. At least it has been supposed for three South Slavic names of trees: the Bosnian pine (Pinus leucodermis) munika, the Macedonian pine or silver fir (Pinus peuce) molika and the Serbian spruce (Picea omorika) omorika.

According to Petar Skok the three tree names could reflect the same “Illyro-Thracian” designation. The alternance r/l/n he explains by the substrat influence.1 Actually, the variant with l exists in both Albanian molikë2 and Rumanian molid (also molidf, moliv, molitf, molif). The latter is usually derived from the former, but within the Albanian etymology of the word in question is controversial. Missing in MEYER, it is treated by Jokl as an inherited element of Albanian vocabulary, related to mëllenjë ‘blackbird’.3 Otherwise SELIŠČEVA 198 gives priority to Bulg. molika and considers the Albanian word to be a Slavicism. However, he leaves the Slavic word unexplained, and his judgement seems to be based only on its suffix typical of South Slavic plant names, e.g. Alb. borigë / borikë ‘kind of pine’ < South Slavic borika S.-Cr. ‘pine’, Bulg. ‘fir-tree’. VI. Šaur4 derives Alb. molikë from S.-Cr. omorika and the latter – quite unconvincingly – from Turk. orman ‘forest’. SVANE l.c. joins Skok in assuming a probable substrate origin for molikë as well as for omorika. A new derivation of molikë from Slavic has been proposed recently by the author of a new etymological dictionary of Albanian, who traces it back

---

1 Skok 2:451 s.v. molika, cf. id. 555 s.v. omar.
2 Svane 127 cites the variants mëlikë, mlikë, mërlikë in Malësia e Madhe, Puke and Tropoje and notices that the official designation for Pinus leucodermis in Albanian is arneni i bardhe.
3 N. Jokl, Linguistisch-kulturhistorische Untersuchungen aus dem Bereiche des Albanischen, Berlin/Leipzig 1923, pp. 196 f., 200, according to Orel 272 s.v. molikë.
4 Cited after BER 4: 216.
to Common Slavic *molika ‘young tree, sprout, shoot’ (Orel l.c.). The South Slavic form molika would be in this case a “Rückentlehnung”.

From the semantic point of view this proposal is rather unconvincing, as well as Jokl’s idioglossic explanation as ‘black tree’ cited above. Yet the Slavic origin of the Albanian (and, consequently, of the Rumanian) word still remains likely, due to its suffix, and we will return to this possibility after considering the variant with -n-.

Besides munika, the form munjika also occurs, which is formally explainable as a derivative in -ika from Serbian munja ‘lightening; thunderbolt’. Semantically, this sounds like a plausible explanation, for this kind of pine is believed to attract the lightning more than the others do. This belief seems not to be unfounded. We read in the website of an Italian national park the following definition of Pinus leucodermis: “(Il pino loricato) vegeta ormai nelle zone rocciose piu impervie, modelatto dal vento, dal gelo, dai fulmini”. It is indeed a tree which is shaped by wind, by frost and by the thunderbolts, and the designation “the lightning pine” seems quite appropriate for it. Since Serbian munja goes back to Common Slavic *mstlnija, the protoform of the tree name *mstlnjika can be reconstructed, which underlies not only Serbian munjika, munika, but also Albanian molikë, the cluster Alb. -ol- regularly reflecting Slavic -ln-. Consequently, the form molika in South Slavic is to be considered as re-borrowed from Albanian, and the Rumanian one cited above would be an Albanian loan-word too, perhaps transmitted by the Slavs, since its -itf seems to be modified under the influence of the Slavic word molitva ‘prayer’, which in Serbian designates also a consecrated tree where annual processions take place.

As for the name of Serbian spruce omorika, it is at home in the mountainous regions of Montenegro, Herzegovina and western Serbia, but not to be separated from West Bulgarian morika ‘spruce’. This parallel indicating a prothetic character of initial o- in omorika, the radical element -mor- may be compared with the dialectal plant name mor ‘a kind of grass’ in East-Serbian region of Crna Reka, which goes back to Common Slavic *mtkxor as its phonetically regular continuation, whereas other dialectal forms mahor and mohor show secondary vocalisations. The same word mohorë / mohorë in Old Russian means ‘fringe, tassel’, and it is worth mentioning that the synonymous *rèsa may also designate the hanging branches which are distinctive of spruce in comparison with other conifers, especially the fir. In view of these facts, the derivative *mtkxor-ika

---

5 In Ylli no reference to molikë is found.
6 It also meets with a phonetic problem, since for such an early a borrowing, supposed to have taken place before the liquida-metathesis, we would expect Alb. a for Slavic short *o, thus *molikë and not molikë.
7 The website www.parcopollino.it.
8 An older form *msldnija is probable, but irrelevant for us.
9 Cf. the place name Alb. Vëla < Slav. Vilna Selišće 309, Molisht < Molnište (1431 A.D.) Ylli 2:145, where the derivation from moli ‘moth’ by Selišće 240 is accepted. However, such a place name would be unparalleled from both semantic and morphological points of view (an adjective in -an- from moli is neither attested, cf. BER 4:214 f. and ESJa 19:203 ff., nor probable). St. Rospond in Onomastica Jugoslavica 3–4/1973–74, p. 121 f. rejects –with good reasons– Selišće’s interpretation, but the alternative he proposes (‘Molniš-čće’) is hardly more convincing. It is most likely that underlying the Albanian toponym is a Bulg. counterpart to Serb. family name Munjići < *Molnjići, going back to the very word mslnja ‘thunderbolt’ used as nickname, thus providing another instance of the phonetic development we are assuming in molikë < *mslnjika.
10 Skok 2:451 explains it as reflecting a Slavic ū-stem *moliy, -kwe.
11 ESJa 20.215 s.v. *mâvra / *mâvra cites only S.-Cr. mahor. Cf. also mâvra ‘a kind of meadow grass Festuca elatior’ RSA s.v.
12 Cf. BER 6:229, where s.v. pecè the meaning ‘unisnali klunki na eđa’ is cited.
seems to have been originally used as an attribute to *edla, designating the spruce as a subspecies of fir by describing it as a ‘fringed, frayed fir’. It is, indeed, the most conspicuous distinction between the spruce and the fir, which I can confirm from my own experience dating back to my childhood, as my late father taught me to distinguish different species of conifers in the mountain forests of Maljen in NW Serbia. In this region the name for spruce is *smrća derived from Common Slavic *smerk-/smërkt-; the renaming of spruce in the southwestern area as *omorika may be explained through the fact that the dendronym *smrća, *smreka is there related to the juniper.

The etymology we propose here seems plausible from both the semantic and structural points of view, but it should be rendered hypothetical, due to the lack of evidence for *hr- as supposed in the original form of the name. There are no records of the word in question earlier than the 19th century, which might either confirm or contradict our reconstruction. The fact must be taken into account, that the spirant *h is either lost or instable in the majority of Serbian and in many Bulgarian dialects, and that in such a difficult cluster as *mhr- it would have been eliminated earlier than elsewhere. A trace of it would be the prothetic o- in *omorika, otherwise inexplicable. Indeed, such a prothesis is usually provoked by the initial consonant clusters hard to pronounce, like Serbian *obzova besides *zova ‘elder’ from *b(ν)zova, or Russian *omšar(a), WRuss. amšara, umšara besides *mšara from *mšar- ‘bog, moss’. It is noticeable that the latter word is but a morphological variant of the form *mšor, which we assume underlying to *smrća, *omar ‘(spruce) forest’, Bulg. *mura ‘Pinus peuce; Pinus leucodermis’, is better understandable if assumed to have taken place in the suffixal part of the word, since among the derivatives of *mšor and *mšar- in other Slavic languages we have not only *mšor- and *mšar-, but also *mšar- in Czech chmouř ‘conifer needle fallen down, putrid or dry’, with the same metathesis as in Czech chmurek ‘hair of a new-born child’, dial. chem, chmu ‘moss’. Consequently, we can suppose three variants of the same designation, *mšor(-ika), *mšar- and *mšar-, underlying respectively Serbian and Bulgarian forms *omorika / *morika, omar(a) and *mura, all derived with r-suffixes from the word *mšor ‘moss’ and semantically related to the “frayed” branches of the coniferous trees and consequently to their needles. Our etymology thus excludes the possibility, vague but repeatedly admitted, of a connection between *omorika and Common Slavic *smërka, *smrkt. If we are right in proposing Slavic etymologies for the tree names in question, it does not mean that they cease to be a Balkan phenomenon. Their specificity lies in the limitation

---

13 Skok 3:451 tries to explain it by a decomposed Roman article.
15 In ESSJa 8:43 chmouř ‘conifer needle’ is wrongly identified with the homonymous chmouř ‘dark dust’ < Common Slavic *smur-. The etymological discussion in BER 4:330 s.v. *mopa is limited to repeating Mladenov’s reserve toward a connection with Gr. *maur ‘black’, Lat. morus etc. Cf. also Bulg. *mür ‘Juniper’.
16 An alternative explanation of the latter meaning would be a likeness of the forest ground covered with the carpet of fallen needles to the moss.
17 Skok 2:451 s.v. *molika, 3:295 s.v. *smreka; M. Snoj in Bezlj 3:276. Svane I.e. admits a connection between molika, *omorika and Alb. hormog, hormog ‘(spruce)’. Orel 142 follows Çabej 8:83 in deriving the latter, together with the homonymous harmoć ‘crumbled plaster’, from horma ‘to destroy, to exhaust’ (which is, in its turn, based on harr ‘to weed, to cut down’). Such an explanation sounds rather as a folk etymology, which in fact may have influenced an earlier form of the word, perhaps *mharoć < Slav. *mχoroć, cf. *mχoroć > Czech chmorek, Russ. mochorók ESSJa 20:215 f.?
and the discontinuity of their areas matching the distribution of the species, which is, in its turn, conditioned by the relief. The sporadic distribution of words *mъlnika and *mъxorika and their various developments as reconstructed in this paper are imaginable only in the frame of nomadism connecting the highest mountain ranges of the region and practised not only by the Albanians and Rumanians but, since an early date, by the Slavs as well.

References
BER: Български етимологичен речник, София 1971–.
Bezlaj: Fr. Bezlaj, Etimološki slovar slovenskega jezika, Ljubljana 1977–.
ESSJA: Этимологический словарь славянских языков, ред. О. Н. Трубачев, Москва 1974–.
Seliščev: А. М. Селищев, Славянское население в Албании, София 1931, p. 198
SEZb: Српски етнографски зборник Српске академије наука, Београд.

Неки трагови междујезичких контаката у планинама средишњег Балкана

Резиме

Yet in a not so remote past the conifers may have had a larger distribution in the Central Balkans than today, cf., for instance, the folk tradition cited by R. T. Nikolić, SEZb 18, Belgrade 1912, p. 37, concerning the East Serbian regions of Krajiste and Vlasina.