

LEGENDS OF THE AFGHANISTAN WAR:

THE BOY SAVED BY THE SNAKE

Eda Kalmre

Rumours are such funny things that they are actually told as real stories.

That is what Ellen Liiv, head of the Folklore Archives, said in 1986 for introduction, and then, at the coffee table, she told us a story of an Estonian boy sent to Afghanistan and working there as a cook and feeding snakes. In return, a snake saves his life. E. Liiv then added that that was one of the rumours of the year in the city of Tartu.

I don't think there was anybody at our coffee table who would have believed that amazing legend. It seemed all too beautiful and happy to be true. But it concerned all of us, for at that time there indeed was civil war in Afghanistan, and people knew families whose sons serving in the Soviet army were sent there. Everyone remembered the unusual account.

Estonian boys were sent to the Afghanistan Civil War with the Soviet Army in 1979-1989. Unofficial records say that more than 1,000 Estonian boys who made through the military service in Afghanistan.

The story that we heard first runs as follows:

About an Estonian boy - I at first heard that he must have been from Kuusalu - who is serving in Afghanistan and is a cook there, and then all the garbage and scraps of food he used to gather very carefully and he took them somewhere into a ravine near the kitchen, where the snakes lived. And these snakes were already quite friends with the boy, for they were used to the boy bringing food to them every day. But one night a big snake comes out of the ravine and coils itself around him and won't let him go. And, well, the boy was scared stiff and simply can't get off. The snake does not kill him, but won't let him go. And the boy is there in the snake's grip for the whole night and his hair turned white for fear. And in the morning when the sun rises the snake lets the boy go. The boy hurries back to his unit and finds all others killed at night. All others have their throats cut and he is the only one who survives. And, and then they say that the boy is back home and his hair is all white. (RKM, Mgn II 3934 (7) < Tartu - Recorded by O. Kõiva < Ellen Liiv, born 1930 (1986))

I remember there was commotion that time at the coffee table, because a similar legend had been heard by the sound engineer of the Folklore Archives, a young man born in 1956. His narrative was also recorded then. (Since the narratives were recorded on the same occasion, the second narrator does not repeat the whole plot.)

E. Ain, have you heard the story?

*A. I have, but in a slightly different variant. It was told by Toomas Kõrvits, the man from the "Kukerpillid", (*1) as he was working here. That the boy had been enlisted from the Agricultural Academy in his second year and, apparently, sent to Afghanistan to serve the army. As he couldn't do anything there, he was made cook.*

And the following plot is the same, that every day he took the scraps of food somewhere out into the mountains or into a gorge, and the snakes were used to it.

Then one day a big snake caught hold of him and held him until the next morning. And then the boy returned to his company. And by that time all was finished there and so he survived thanks to the snake holding him in its grip. (RKM, Mgn II 3934 (9) < Tartu - Recorded by E. Liiv < Ain Urbel, born 1956 (1986))

The first two recordings of the legend *The Boy Saved by the Snake* were made in 1986. Today the Archives have about ten recorded or written variants. These have been recorded on different years, three latest ones as late as in 1995. The writers, however, have mostly mentioned that they had heard the legend in the mid-eighties.

The Boy Saved by the Snake is not the only narrative connected with the Afghanistan War in the contemporary Estonian tradition, but it certainly is the most clear-cut, variable, and at the same time the most true-to-type. As the Lithuanian folk tale researcher Bronislava Kerbelyte says, the legend *The Boy Saved by the Snake* is known in Latvia and Lithuania, as well as in Russia. I know the story, I heard it twice, it was about 1985. The first time it was told by a Russian woman from Vilnius, when I was going to Moscow by train. The other time it was told by a friend of mine in Moscow. (EFA I, 9 -10 (Letter by B. Kerbelyte))

So far, though, the legend has not been printed in any collection of urban legends. In the recent years folklore researchers have taken ever increasing interest in the contemporary soldier tradition. The folklore of the American soldiers in the Vietnam war has given material for a number of articles and research works (**T. E. Barden, J. Provo 1995**). This legend of the boy and the snake could also be told in connection with the war in Vietnam. Indeed, one of the narrators thought that the event must have occurred somewhere in Vietnam or on the Vietnamese border. - (EFA I, 1 < Tartu - Jaanus Adamson, written in 1995)

THE MAIN PLOT, VARIATION, NARRATORS

The Boy Saved by the Snake shows the main plot clearly, which is the precondition for both the repetition and the variation of the legend. The set elements of the plot repeated from variant to variant are:

An Estonian boy (boys) in the Afghanistan war (feeding snakes). The snake coils itself around the boy (or hypnotises him) and in this way saves the boy, because in the meantime the enemy has attacked the military compound and all others are killed.

The greatest variations occur at the beginning and end of the legend. The boy may come from Kuusalu in North Estonia, or be a student of the Estonian Agricultural Academy enlisted from his second year. In another variant there are several boys, but in most cases there is only one Estonian boy. In one of the variants the Estonian boy is in the army somewhere in the Southern mountain regions, in another the outpost is believed to have been on the Vietnamese border. In half of the variants the boy's hair turns white while being in the grip of the snake. The legend has been recorded in different places all over Estonia: in the Valga district, Tartu, Tallinn, Elva, Keila, Jõgeva, Saaremaa.

In the 1980s the legend *The Boy Saved by the Snake* was retold by both the young and the middle-aged. The narrator could be a young man or a middle-aged woman, less frequently an elderly man. For example:

The legend that you asked me to write down was told to me by a classmate of mine who was back from the army. It must have been in 1987 (1995, informant over 30 years old).

Heard at a wedding party in the district of Valga in 1984 from a mother whose son was just serving in the army at that time. (written down in 1995. The informant was a young woman of 21)

It was told by Toomas Kõrvits, the man from the "Kukerpillid", as he was working here. (Recorded in 1986, the informant then 30.)

Heard from the acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance of the boy. (Tiit Birk, recorded in 1987)

At the same time a similar plot circulated as a children's horror story, having no connection with the war in Afghanistan. The place of action is a pioneer camp.

It was summer and children were in the pioneer camp. There was a boy, who used to go and feed snakes. The she-snake had always looked from afar how the boy fed her young. She never did anything. But one day bloodthirsty snakes came into the camp and they ravaged the camp and went away. But the she-snake coiled herself around the boy while the bloodthirsty ones were in the camp. The boy dared not resist and remained there for a long time, and he could not loosen the snake's grip. In the end he was released and had to walk for many, many kilometres before he got home. I heard the story when I was in hospital, I was 9 or 10 years old. (Told by an 11-year-old girl from Elva in 1989)

Although the issue - the war of Afghanistan - has been finished for a decade now, and is not topical any more, many people remember this amazing story. The last two recordings were sent to the Archives by students during the student folklore collection campaign (EFA I 4, 57 < Tallinn < Valga district - Written down by Terje Potter, 21, 1st year student of the Estonian Academy of Music < an elderly woman (1995); EFA II 13, 124/5 (31) < Tartu - Liina Laur, born 1973, 4th year student of Estonian philology at Tartu University (1995). It is remarkable that none of the variants has been told by a veteran of the Afghanistan war.

LINKS WITH THE EARLIER TRADITION

The Boy Saved by the Snake stands out among the rest of the urban legends with its typical folk tale elements. Feeding the snakes is an occupation which in itself has quite a mythological implication and it is not easily associated with the modern man. Although snakes, poisonous spiders, alligators, rats can be found in other urban legends, there they appear as real living beings causing accidents and disasters. They never occur in urban legends as benevolent beings, although they do so in the earlier narrative tradition. ([*2](#))

A snake is an ambiguous character in the Estonian folk narratives and beliefs. One can find abundant examples to illustrate that. In Estonia snakes have been regarded as holy or even as soul animals. A snake can be the protecting spirit of a house who is kept and fed. The slaying of such a snake causes misfortunes (e.g. AT 285A). In a folk narrative the snake can appear as a baby-sitter who eats from the same dish with the child (e.g. AT 285). The Estonian folk belief has surrounded the snake with an aura of awe and respect. ([*3](#)) The belief that is well known even today - if you kill a snake, you are absolved of nine mortal sins - is a later one that was taken up with the spread of Christianity. According to Oskar Loorits, however, the association of the snake with the sexuality is rare in Estonia and Latvia (**Loorits 1951, 339-341**).

But such implications can be found in two legends published in the Latvian press. Latvian folklorist Guntis Pakalns sent me two copies of similar legends published in Latvian press. The first of these was *Naja*, a short story by Anita Liepa, published in the 11. issue of the Latvian literary journal *Karogs* in 1987. It was the "hottest" time of dissemination of the Afghanistan war legends. The other is a publication of the folk narrative *Ari kobra spej milet* ('Even a cobra is capable of loving') from the newspaper *Diena*, written in 1992.

Naja is a literary elaboration of *The Boy Saved by the Snake*, whereas the author adds that she wrote it after a story told by a warrior who returned from Afghanistan. She also adds that when she was staying in Central Asia, people spoke of a similar event, with some slight differences. The protagonists of the short story are two boys, Andris and Saulius, one of them a Latvian and the other a Lithuanian. Andris is described as a solitary young man, who has not even a girl-friend. It is the last day before they leave Afghanistan. Saulius expects a letter from Biruta, a girl living in Subate (a border town between Latvia and Lithuania). But Andris goes to feed his friend Naja for the last time and to bid farewell. The name Naja sounds as if it were a woman, but Andris has found it in a book, and the word means 'cobra' in Sinhalese. Naja saves Andris, holding him in her grip. When the man returns, it turns out that there has been an attack and so he is the only one to return home. "How could you possibly know that, Naja?" Andris asks.

Although the plot of the other story, *Ari kobra spej milet*, is different and the point is striking, one can find several points of convergence between these two, and a hidden meaning that makes one ponder whether it has not been influenced by the short story *Naja*, which was published some years before. Here the protagonists are again two boys, a Latvian called Ivars and a Lithuanian called Aleksis, who are serving in the frontier guard. Ivars feels as if he were followed when walking on the frontier. This affects him psychologically. Later it appears that the follower has been a cobra. Ivars finds himself in a hospital as a result of the experience, and the cobra comes to his hospital room window. There the cobra is killed, and it turns out that the cobra who had fallen in love with Ivars had the brains of a 20-year-old girl.

The legend *The Boy Saved by the Snake* manifests the typical semantics of many folk tales: do good, then the good is returned to you. The relations of the legend with the earlier heritage are indicated by the statement that the boy's hair turns grey after the ordeal.

Another legend associated with the Afghanistan war also shows immediate connections with the earlier narrative tradition. Usually those who perished in the Soviet Army were sent home in a tight-welded lead coffin, and the distressed relatives were not sure whom they were actually burying. During the presence of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan such lead coffins were sent to Estonia more than ever.

*Look, I'm telling you a true story. In Villandi (*4) the son was sent home from Afghanistan in a coffin and buried. But the next day the son himself came home and he had a letter with him and he had to take it to Leningrad or somewhere. But they opened the letter and it said that the young man who had brought the letter had to be killed! Mind you, killed! How many of the Estonians they mean to kill. Then he went with this letter I don't know where, to the military commissariat in Tartu perhaps? And then they opened the grave and see, there were drugs. (Told by a 60-year-old woman in Tartu district in 1988. RKM II 413, 411/2 < Puhja - Written down by E. Kalmre < Liidia Pedajas, over 60 (1988))*

Urban legends about drug traffic or transportation of some other illegal goods in an unusual manner (with a dead body) have been known and circulating in the western countries for years. Such legends have been printed in most of the collections of urban legends (**Virtanen 1987, Brunvand 1981, 1984, etc.**). It is also a well-known motif that is frequently used in fiction. (*5) There is also the characteristic motif for sending the letter, which occurs in the folk tales (AT 461) as well as in the Bible. Unfortunately there is only a single variant of the plot in the Archives. But the legend itself is so extraordinary that one should infer its wider distribution.

THE BOY AND SNAKES: LEGEND AND REALITY

The legend *The Boy Saved by the Snakes* has been retold as a personal experience of the second or third degree. Some of the narrators do not doubt its genuineness, while others retell the story and try to interpret it in their own way or to find a plausible explanation.

*It is not known whether the boy was converted to Islam or not, or whether these were real snakes or dushman (*6) disguised as snakes. Did such an incident occur at all? But how could the snakes know beforehand? Was it because of some vibration that could be felt on the ground?*

There are more sceptics among the young narrators. The threshold of belief of the young people is lower, they either do not believe or are ashamed of believing. One of the informants, a man of letters, gives a clever explanation of the relation of an individual to such legends in general.

The legend was told as if it were true, something that had really happened. When hearing such stories, nobody would usually ask questions such as when? where? who told it to you? Therefore there has always been the impression that such things are not distant (either temporally or spatially) from the one who tells the story. It as if characterises the world that the speaker was once part of. The narrative thus was switched into the series of unusual and risky stories transmitted between friends who had been serving in the distant territories. For me it sounded improbable. It is all too beautiful - wrong-doing and reward (EFA I, 1 < Tartu - Jaanus Adamson (1995).

Older narrators do not reason in this manner, they rather tend to find substantiation for it. They transmit the legend in an emotional way, contributing rich details.

But nobody came and at sunset the snake seemed to be releasing the grip slowly, then crept behind a bush. The boy went with careful steps, fearing that it comes back. Well it didn't and the boy

started running. Got to the camp, nobody was there, some where killed, others taken prisoner. It was only then he realised that the snake was for him and protected him. See how smart a snake can be! It must have been a true story, it is no lie. We had men from the mainland here staying overnight - their car broke down and when they repaired it they told the story. They said it was all true. (Written down from a 71-year-old woman at Saaremaa in summer 1995. (EFA II 4, 268/70 < Saaremaa, Valjala - M. Hiiemäe < Adeele Kalju, 71 (1995)

One of the key issues of contemporary urban legends is whether the story is true or not. At the same time it is remarkable, as Leea Virtanen notes in one of her latest articles (Virtanen 1995) that no urban legend has a proved event as the basis. The present legend is not different. We can explain the origin, distribution and demand for it with the theories presented by well known urban legend researchers (Brunvand 1981, 1984; Virtanen 1993, etc.). For example, the modern urban legends have been compared to folk tales. Although neither the story-teller nor the listener would give credence to wonders, they do believe wonders at the moment of narrating - anything is possible and everything changes for better. The Boy Saved by the Snake, like a good fairy-tale should, contains special symbols for hope, and its genuineness is born from the belief in its truth. This could be one of the phenomena that helps explain the distribution and durability of the legend. ([fig. *7](#))

Secondly, the topical character of such legends is accounted for by their ability to reduce the tensions and feelings of insecurity of both the young and the old. The true information about the situation in Afghanistan and the role of the Soviet troops there was scant, and the environment was dangerous unfamiliar for an Estonian. Even wonders seemed possible there. Each closed coffin and each victim further contributed to the feelings of tension. The social apprehension and, at the same time, the general attitude of opposition towards this senseless military intervention was expressed also in the jokes.

The recruits going to Afghanistan are told that for each enemy head they will get 100 roubles / dollars. The aeroplane touches down. Soon everybody comes back with slant-eyed heads. Captain says, 'You fools, it was a stopover in Kirghiz!'

During the Afghanistan war soldiers are taken to their new position. The helicopter pilot does not dare to descend low enough for men to jump down, for then those on the ground would jump on.

CONCLUSION

All these narratives reflect the period of their origin. The Boy Saved by the Snake certainly did not arise in Estonia. It is just that the environment and the characters have changed. The connections with the earlier Estonian narrative tradition have rendered the legend the particular resonance and helped it to take root in the Estonian tradition.

As a good folk narrative should, this legend has also survived beyond its temporal limits and offers equal excitement for both the young and the old. And the fact that such a nice and extraordinary, in comparison with other urban legends, story circulates in the modern world of materialist outlooks and technology shows that even today folklore is alive and changing.

Translated by Kai Vassiljeva

Comments

(*1) A well known Estonian country band.

(*2) For example, AT 612 "Three Promises of the Snake", AT 674* "Snake-stone". The snake can also be ungrateful (AT 155 "The Ungrateful Snake", a type quite rare in Estonia), who strangles its feeder and helper.

(*3) The snake is used in bewitching, love magic, folk medicine, weather forecasting, etc. A snake can penetrate into a person; people believed that snakes give birth to their young in a tree; it was believed that snakes did not die before nightfall, and if its head is not destroyed, it will grow another body and thus persist.

(*4) Viljandi - a small town in Estonia.

(*5) E.g. James Hadley Chase, The Coffin from Hong Kong, where this is the key to the mystery.

(*6) dushman, which is the Turkish for 'enemy', was the name for the Afghans.

Literature

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