
THE RAINBOW IN BULGARIAN FOLKLORE AND SOME GENDER ISSUES

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Abstract

Based on the overview of evidences concerning beliefs on sex transformation under the influence of the rainbow, there are several conclusions to be drawn. First, in the Bulgarian lands this notion and belief can be dated before the 18th century, while in the French lands – around the 16th century. The notion can be linked mostly with the Slavs, but it is also present among other Indo-Europeans in the Old Continent. Beliefs about the rainbow's sexual dimorphism, as well as about its ability to change one's sex, are present in different continents and cultures.

There is only one ethnographic evidence from an ethnic Bulgarian territory where this idea is presented as the deed of the Christian God, and in the other cases there is no explanation of the sex-changing force and its source with its origin in the celestial rainbow, which – in my opinion – means that this notion might be rooted in the pre-Christian past of our ethnicity and its composing elements. Here it is noteworthy that the rainbow is ascribed the ability to change the biological sex, while in folk culture the symbolic change of gender is possible through the ritual and in ritual context.

Keywords: Rainbow, folklore, beliefs, gender

The optical celestial phenomenon occurring after rain, the *rainbow*, has touched human imagination due to its shape and colours ever since the remotest antiquity. Literally, each folkloric pre-modern culture abounds in examples of beliefs and narratives about the nature and the influence of the rainbow on the life of the communities. The perceptions connected with it vary in the different parts of the world. In some regions they take the form of animation of the rainbow, i.e., there is a notion that the rainbow is a spirit. There is also zoomorphisation of the mythic images of rainbow, whereby the belief that the rainbow is a serpent=dragon¹ is most sustain-

¹ The Greek word δράκων, ἄοντος, means 'serpent, dragon.' Its initial meaning is 'serpent' – but it evolved together with the imagined creature generated on the basis of the notion about the serpent

able and widespread. These beliefs are spread in Australia, Oceania, and faraway Asia – in Indonesia, as well as in equatorial Africa and in both Americas.

The perceived impact of the rainbow on the natural and human world is ambivalent. For example, the indigenous populations in the cited geographic areas consider in most cases that the rainbow is evil and dangerous to humans. The lasting linking of the rainbow with water, rain, ground and underground water sources is also a *locus communis*. The dragons/serpents personifying the rainbow hide in and/or guard springs, rivers, lakes and deep caves filled with water. In many cultures, it is believed that the rainbow is either an omen of the end of a rainfall and the change to better sunny weather, or conversely, an omen of precipitation and storms. According to the Poles, the rainbow is a grass snake drinking water from earthly water sources and giving it to the clouds from which the rain pours (Stoilov 1924: 39; Georgieva 1993: 137, note 42). This celestial phenomenon has left a lasting trace in folk beliefs. It is associated with cosmogonic myths and with important turning points in the lives of people. One of the most lasting notions is of the rainbow-serpent that creates and also destroys the world (Sofronirvski 2007: 381). The anthropomorphism of the mythic rainbow was evinced in ancient Greece and elsewhere.² The rainbow referred to as Iris (Ἴρις – celestial rainbow) was believed to be a goddess, a herald of the deities, and above all of Hera.

Unlike Hermes, who spreads good news, Iris is believed to bring gloomy and sinister news. She is qualified as “fleet of foot” and “gold-winged.” Homer associates the rainbow with serpents/dragons (δράκοντες), which “Zeus hath set in the clouds” (Hom. *Il.* 11: 26–28). The image of Iris as the herald of wars and human suffering is found again in Homer (Hom. *Il.* 17: 547–550): ‘As Zeus stretched forth for mortals a lurid rainbow from out of heaven to be a portent whether of war or of chill storm that maketh men to cease from their work upon the face of the earth, and vexeth the flocks’.

According to another passage in Homer, Iris saved Aphrodite from the fierce battle between Achaeans and Trojans with the horses of the god Ares (Hom. *Il.* 5, 350–365). The rainbow was thus situated in entirely divine context. Such a deification of the rainbow can be noticed among the later ancient authors as well.

Hesiod from Boeotia, the younger contemporary of the blind Greek poet, writes about the embassy of Iris, who “ran” above the sea, carrying a gold cup so as to pour water (Hes. *Theog.* 780–788). Hesiod links the herald of the deities Iris with water and with the bringing of bad news.

with incorporation of other zoomorphic elements as well. In Slavonic languages it is called змей, ‘dragon’, again a derivative of змия, ‘serpent, snake.’ On the mythology of the dragon in Bulgarian folklore, see Benovska-Sabkova 1995, *passim*.

² One of the early attempts at scientific explanation of the rainbow phenomenon belongs to Aristotle. In *Meteorologica*, he examines the main manifestations of the weather and of the celestial bodies. On Aristotle’s analytical arguments and on the opinion of other ancient authors concerning rainbow, see Taub 2003; Boyer 1987; Boyer 1956: 383–386; Sayili 1939: 65–83.

That link of the Olympian goddess with water is associated with her genealogy. According to both Hesiod and Apollodorus, she was the daughter of Thaumas and Electra, and sister of the Harpies. Electra is the daughter of Ocean, Thaumas – of Pontos (Hes. *Theog.* 265–266; Apollod. *Myth. Bibl.* 1, 2, 6).³ Apollonius of Rhodes, in turn, also associated Iris with the Halys River and the Aegean Sea (Apoll. Rhod. *Argon.* 365–369).

Virgil refers to Iris as Juno who is wearing a garment of thousand colours (*mille coloribus*) (Verg. *Aeneid.* 5, 610-612). In another passage from the *Georgics* the same author mentions that the rainbow drank water (*bibit ingens arcus*) (Verg. *Georg.* 1, 380–381).

After the triumph of Christianity, the Bible – both the Old and the New Testament – had a strong influence on the ideas concerning celestial phenomena. Following the Church doctrine, beliefs concerning the rainbow were rendered in folkloric form over time and took a stable place in the folk worldviews. The Biblical narrative of the Deluge and Noah’s survival had the strongest and long-lasting impact on the beliefs and notions of the rainbow. At the end of that story, a rainbow appears and marks the end of the natural cataclysm and hence the end of God’s punishment of the sinful humans. It was God who declared to Noah that the rainbow was his omen and pledge that there would be no new deluge. When a rainbow appears after rain, people can be calm and never fear God’s punishment (*Genesis*, 9, 12–16; Denio 1890: 274–279).

The ideas about the rainbow in the Greek and Roman literature, as well as in the Old Testament Bible, may have been based on ancient Mesopotamian beliefs. For example, the rainbow is not mentioned in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but in a Sumerian hymn it is called “the bow of the Flood.” A Mesopotamian document also informs that at the moment when the rainbow appeared, the goddess Ishtar drew the bow that Anu had made following his own wish (Boyer 1987: 19).

In the Bulgarian 19th century cultural milieu, the idea about the rainbow as a covenant between God and humans is evinced by Lyuben Karavelov, concerning his native city of Koprivshitsa (Karavelov 1861: 240; Stoilov 1924: 38).

The development of the medieval Bulgarian literature started after the conversion to Christianity in the 9th century. Albeit in few writings, there is nevertheless evidence of natural science knowledge, and in particular about a number of celestial phenomena. In most of the cases, these were explanations that did not comply to the Christian worldview, although they did not contradict it either. Above all, the texts explaining the natural phenomena were translated or strongly influenced by Byzantine sources (Kristanov, Duychev 1954: 6–78; Miltenova 1992: 5–23).

In his *Hexameron*, John the Exarch gives useful information concerning the rainbow, namely that its appearance is a sign of precipitations, violent storms, or very variable weather for a long period of time (John Exarch, *Hexameron* – Miltenova 1992: 97).

³ See more data both on the Greek and Roman literary and poetic tradition in Renel 1902: 68–80.

One of the questions in the *Dialogues* of Pseudo-Caesarius (question CXIII) addressed the causes for the rainbow. The answer is that this celestial phenomenon is not accidental, being linked to the Sun that extracts water from the clouds with its rays (“as if with a mouth”) and the rain falls to the ground. According to the same author, the rainbow has three colours: red, white and green (*Dialogues* of Pseudo-Caesarius – Miltenova 1992: 116; Kristanov, Duychev 1954: 333–334).

In his compilation *Debris from Medieval Cosmography and Geography*, Constantine of Costenec believes that the rainbow does not have an essence of its own, being a vision. It appears when a cloud carrying raindrops is against the Sun, then the rays are refracted and our eyes see “a part of some circle.” He also refers to Aristotle, according to whom that image is neither a circle, nor part of a semi-circle. That passage from the compilation by Constantine of Costenec has been taken from the work by Simeonus Sithes *A Brief Presentation and Answers to Questions about Nature*.

Medieval natural science compositions were intended to be read by the elite of the Bulgarian medieval society and in practice, as we shall see later, they did not influence the folkloric notions on the rainbow’s nature and significance. The Biblical notion is strongly presented on a mediated level, above all in the names.

In the 15th century, the Slavic literary tradition was enriched with a work that gave expression of Early Christian ideas on the rainbow: *О дуге небесней* [*On the Celestial Rainbow*] by the Patriarch of Constantinople Gennadius (458–471 AD). It was translated into Russian by the man of letters Euphrosynus. No Bulgarian version of that text is known (Iliev 2015: 91).

Many of the early literary monuments did not mention the word *Джга* and its appearance is difficult to trace. However, it renders the meaning of the Greek nouns τόξον, ἶρις – rainbow. In the Old Testament the words *лък, дъга, арка* designate the Hebrew word used: *keshet*. The word originates from the text of *Genesis* and in other texts, notably in *Sirach* (43, 12; 50, 7). The word ἶρις is used only in *Revelation* 4, 3 and 10, and once in *Septuaginta*, in all other cases the word τόξον is used. This is so because Iris denoted God’s rainbow, whereas the other cases tended to be associated with a bow as a weapon and a shape (Iliev 2015: 91–93).

The lexeme *Джга* has been attested so far in Simeon’s First Miscellany (*Изборник*, 1073 AD) as a sign of God’s covenant with the people, but also as a natural phenomenon, and its colours are also referred (ibid.: 92). The word was used in the 12th–13th century in the *Grigorovich Parimeinic* as a symbol of the covenant between God and humankind, and also as a natural phenomenon (ibid.: 92–93). It may be concluded, and this is evident from the Greek words used, that the lexeme *Джга* played a double role both in the biblical narrative and in the later literary Christian tradition – both as a divine omen and as essentially natural phenomenon.

A. P. Stoilov was the first author in Bulgarian ethnological literature who tried to explain the information on the rainbow that existed until the 1920s (Stoilov 1924: 37–41). He has included almost all local names of the rainbow, recorded on the then-entire Bulgarian ethnic territories, including Macedonia. The names from Mac-

edonia that he reports are: “wine-wheat, wine-brandy, my wine, my wheat, *bozhilok*, *bozhilak*, *bereket*, *Virgin Mary’s belt*, *belt*, *cloud*, *zonka*, *Zounitza*, *Zonitza*, *Zounka*, *Ouzunka* and *Dunga*.” (божилок, божилък, берекет, Пояса на Божията майка, пояс, облак, зонка, Зуница, Зоница, Озунка и Дунга)⁴. Nayden Gerov makes two references to the rainbow in the *Dictionary of the Bulgarian Language*. In the first he lists the synonyms under the the internal form of *Божий лък* – God’s bow, complementing the transient linguistic picture with the names: *Grandma’s shirt*, *Grandma’s belt*, *Grandma’s cloth*, *Virgin Mary’s belt*, *wine-wheat*, *wine-brandy*, *rainbow in the sky*, *zonitsa*, *ziunitsa*, *zounka*, *cloud*, *belt*, *ouzounitsa*, *Raduga* (Gerov 1975: 58). Gerov’s other reference in the same dictionary is below the combination of words “wine-wheat”: *wine-brandy*, *God’s bow*, *Grandma’s shirt*, *Grandma’s belt*, *Grandma’s cloth*, *Virgin Mary’s belt*, *Zonitza*, *zounak*, etc. (ibid.: 126). With the exception of the Turkish word *bereket* and the Greek one *Zone*, with their variations, the remaining names are of Bulgarian origin (Stoilov 1924: 37).

The most frequent names among more than sixty words and combinations of words denoting “rainbow” and registered on the Bulgarian linguistic territory are: arc, belt and *zouna* (Topalova-Simeonova 1980: 186).⁵ Local diversity was maybe due both to the weaker links among people in those days and to the absence of a strict literary norm that would bring uniformity in the names. Names of the rainbow associated with “belt” are known throughout the Slavonic world and in the Baltic region (Nepokupnyy 1969: 69–76). In those notions the rainbow is a belt of Heaven or of God, or of a saint, the Virgin Mary, etc. This idea was being spread almost everywhere in Europe, among Slavs, Balts, Suomi speakers, Germans, French, Basques, Greeks, Africans, etc. The sky in that notion is the deity’s garment, the rainbow being the belt – one of the important elements (Petrukhin et al. 1995: 330–331). According to the Bulgarian notion, the Holy Mother of God protects the city from St. Elijah’s wrath precisely with her belt/rainbow. In another version she protects the sinners with her belt and takes them out of Hell. Rites of body covering with garments are characteristic of the Mediterranean region when newly born infants are accepted in the family (Strakhov 1983: 44–45).

In some regions of the country the rainbow is associated also with Prophet Elijah, claiming that “St. Elijah is guarding us, he released the *zounka*, there will be no hailstorm.” Prophet Elijah is present here in his capacity of the Master of the Celestial Elements, according to the folklore tradition. Another popular belief is that the rainbow is God’s belt that He drops over the Earth to dry it after the rain (Sharlanova 1999: 72–73; Petrukhin et al. 1995: 331).⁶

⁴ On the diversity of names used to denote “rainbow” in the Bulgarian language and on their imaginary charge, see Kyuvlieva-Mishaykova 2004: 43–44.

⁵ There exists an opinion that the various veiled names, referring to the rainbow in particular, expressed a certain degree of taboo on the name “rainbow” – see Zelenin 1929: 116.

⁶ Spas Vatsov, one of the founders of meteorology as a scientific discipline in Bulgaria, mentions that Bulgarians believe that when there is a rainbow in the sky, the weather improves. He notes

Several different semantic motifs for the different groups of names can be discerned. The religious motif is expressed in names connected with God and the Virgin Mary, and they are placed predominantly in a Christian context. On the other hand, it is necessary to note the name that is most widespread in Europe and in the Indo-European languages, namely the association of the rainbow with a “bow.” Stoilov gives examples how the rainbow is denoted in Sanskrit as “the bow of the God Indra.” That is his military bow and the Hindus believed that when a rainbow appeared, that was a sign that the thunder God Indra was preparing to fight against the evil forces (Stoilov 1924: 38). Indra was referred to as the “master of the bow” – *gopaticapa*. Lithuanians call the rainbow “celestial bow” – *kilpinnis dangaus* (Afanasyiev 1995: 178). Even in the *Septuaginta* the Greek word for “rainbow” is τόξον – bow. In Latin the names for “rainbow” are *arcus* – bow and *caelestis* – дъга (cf. the French name for “rainbow” – *arc-en-ciel*). Another semantic cluster is seen in the name “belt” of God, of the Virgin Mary, or of a saint.

In the Arab-Muslim folkloric tradition, too, the rainbow is linked to Islam, God and the figures close to the Prophet Muhammad. The rainbow is known in the Maghreb as “the wife of the rain” (*al- ‘arussat ash-shta*) or as “the Prophet’s bow, arc” (*al-qaus an-nabi*), and the name “the belt of Fatima” – the Prophet’s fourth daughter – also occurs (Rodrigues 2008: 108).

These data can be linked here to the folkloric notions about wood nymphs, and to the belt as an important element of both the male and female costume.

According to folkloric notions of Bulgarians in the 19th and the early 20th centuries, the wood nymphs (*samodivi*) were beautiful maidens dressed in long white shirts, with “belts of seven colours” and long unbraided hair (Georgieva 1993: 144). They lived close to water sources (rivers, wells, lakes) (Todorova-Pirgova 2000: 128). Similar to the rainbow associated with water basins, the wood nymphs are also linked to water. It should be mentioned here that their multicoloured belt⁷ was likened to the colours of the rainbow (Mitseva 1994: 15–17⁸).

Semantisation based on colour is also observed, but it is “secondary” and it notes and likens the rainbow colours to some crops, notably wheat, grapes and derivatives, e.g., wine. Prophecies about the harvest are made from the thickness of the colour bands of the rainbow (Drazheva 1976: 57–58).

specifically beliefs connected with weather forecasts, and with the crops. According to his observations, if the green colour prevails in the rainbow, that means rainy weather, if the red colour prevails, then this means wind. The divining was linked to both, the seasons as well in his observations. He also cites prophecies about the crops connected with the colours of the rainbow (Vatsov 1900: 72–73).

⁷ Ever since ancient times, and later in the folk culture as well, belts were an important part of the male and female garments – see Arutunyan 2009: 42–49.

⁸ Mitseva (1994: 41–50) specifically treats the wood nymphs unambiguously as “water daemons.” According to Todorova-Pirgova (Todorova-Pirgova 2000: 128), that link was not absolute. It should be noted specifically here that the data included by Mitseva in her volume were collected predominantly in the 20th century.

A widespread notion in the Bulgarian lands is that the rainbow “drinks” water from sources like rivers, springs, lakes, wells and seas.⁹ That water is then poured over the Earth as rain. According to popular beliefs, a silver cup could be found at the places where that happened (Stoilov 1924: 39; Karavelov 1861: 240). This idea was known among the Germans as well, where the image of a cup was as if made of gold, or there were gold coins, or a key, and similar idea is known among the Czechs as well (Stoilov 1924: 40; Grimm 1877: 611) and among the Russians as well. A variation of this belief claims that if someone finds a gold cup where the *zouna* “drank” water, that person could learn about his/her future, and have all wishes fulfilled (Sharlanova 1999: 74).

Evidence from Hesiod is relevant here, according to which Iris carried a gold cup (Hes. *Theog.* 780-788), bringing water from the Styx River that divided the world of the living from the world of shadows. In Europe, there was also a widespread belief that if someone succeeded in touching the rainbow with iron or another base metal, it would turn into gold (Stoilov 1924: 40).

During the time between the 16th and the 18th century, popular readings translated from the Damascinus literature penetrated in Bulgarian literature. These texts linked to the Church doctrine were aimed at explaining both issues connected with faith and at presenting natural science knowledge about the structuring of the world comprehensibly for ordinary people. These writings are at the borderline between the “elitist” Church literature and the apocryphal, i.e. popular one, the apocryphal literature bringing to life folkloric interpretations. As will be seen further below, the process of the impact could also be qualified as bidirectional.

In one of the speeches in the Tikveš Miscellany entitled *Разумник за всички въпроси* [*Wise Answers to All Questions*], one finds dialogues in the form of questions and answers, addressing above all the Bible doctrine on Creation. Many of the questions concern natural sciences, notably about the creation and the nature of the Moon and the Sun, Heaven and Earth, stars, sunrise and sunset (Ilieva et al. 2010: 38–42). However, no question was asked on the nature of the rainbow in that context. That absence could be explained perhaps with the probably well developed and varied folkloric notions about the cited optic phenomenon.

Indirect data on the beliefs concerning the rainbow can be found in a speech in the Tikveš Miscellany entitled: *How Did the Holy Mother of God Ascend to Heaven?* (ibid.: 35–36). Indirect data on the notions about the rainbow can be found in a speech in the Tikveš Miscellany entitled: *How Did the Holy Mother of God Ascend to Heaven?* (ibid.). It refers to the excommunication of St. Thomas from the realm of the Holy Apostles related to his baptismal work in India. In order to prevent his excommunication, the Holy Mother of God gave him her belt as she was ascending to heaven. When he showed it to the other Apostles, they recognised him as belonging to the Holy Virgin, and they readmitted him out of fear from the belt. The word used in the orig-

⁹ According to Stoilov (1924: 40), the idea that the rainbow drinks water from terrestrial water is pre-Slavonic.

inal text is a derivative of a word borrowed from Greek *zonitsa* (from ζώνη – belt)¹⁰ (Nachov 1892: 400, 20a-206). Explaining the word used in the original text, Nachov specifically notes that this was a popular word denoting rainbow and cites examples of folkloric names like “the Virgin Mary’s belt” and “God’s belt” (Nachov 1893: 150, s.v. *зоница*).¹¹ Greek dialects are also familiar with the expression *ἑζωνάρα Παναγίας*: the belt of the Holy Mother of God (Topalova-Simeonova 1980: 187).¹²

Belts also served as signs of social standing: when a girl gets married, she achieves a higher social position (Ganeva 2003: 88). Dimiter Marinov had noted that the female belts resemble the rainbow with their colours. And he writes: “Following the model of the *zouna* in the sky, the maidens and the married women made and decorated their belts that had the same name: *zouna*, *zounka*, *zounitsa* (ibid.: 89). Folkloric records note that “belts follow the colours of the *zounitsa*” because “they are multicoloured like the *zounka*.” The rainbow is called *нояс*, i.e. “belt.” A riddle presents the rainbow as “Our [girl] Mara wove a cloth and spread it across the sky” (ibid.).

Here I shall deal with the beliefs of sexual dimorphism: first of the rainbow itself (in comparative perspective), as well as with the beliefs connected to the rainbow’s influences on the change of one’s sex. These legends, beliefs and even cosmogonic myths connected to the rainbow and sex date back to the pre-modern times of different human communities.

A mythologem explaining the androgynous nature of the rainbow existed in the Island of Bali, Indonesia. According to a local legend, the God Guru saw the Goddess Uma and he felt like attracted to her. “God Guru looking at the Goddess Uma became passionate. She was male, not male, female, not female: she had a male member... He [the God] clutched her ... and was frightened at the sight of her male sex, snatched it off and threw it into the sky. This is the rainbow.” The blood that fell from the goddess onto the ground gave the origin of the buffaloes and of the cows (Hooykaas 1956: 300).

In many cultures, the rainbow was considered to be a gigantic serpent.¹³ In Singapore the rainbow was believed to be a huge snake and people were scared of it.

¹⁰ There exists an opinion that the word *zone* is of ancient Thracian origin, not Greek, and some authors associate it with the female theonym *Zana*, an epithet of the goddess Bendis, identified with the Roman Diana or with the Greek Artemis, and hence with the nymphs and wood nymphs in Bulgarian folklore. Here the authors proposing that reconstruction propose specifically also the link of the cited deities with the wood nymphs who are riding stags and shooting with a bow, in addition to being virginal goddesses, see Pavlova 2004, 127–130. However, I am not aware of an attested theonym *Zana*.

¹¹ See Ilieva et al. 2010, *passim*. This is the latest edition of the Tikveš Miscellany, with updated orthography, as well as with an introductory study and dating of the monument.

¹² The names *thanitsa*, as well as *zouna*, *zounitsa* for “belt” also occur as names of the rainbow, see Ganeva (2003: 88).

¹³ In the Bulgarian folklore, the woman’s belt, its colours and function are associated with the serpent, see Ganeva (2003: 92).

For example, the local Semai tribe believed that it was very dangerous to pass below a rainbow, because that would cause fever/malaria. According to another belief, the rainbow was a reflection in the sky of a huge snake that lives on earth. The red colour/band was its body; the green band was its liver, and the yellow band – its stomach (Borneo). Such beliefs were characteristic of Malaya as well. All names for the rainbow in the local languages are associated with the serpent concept. The rainbow-serpent touches the earth with both ends and the local people believe that they should not live close to such places, because this brings diseases. The popular belief is that the rain is the serpent's perspiration and if that rain-sweat falls onto a person who is not protected by an amulet, he/she will fall ill (Loewenstein 1961: 31–32). There is a belief in the same region that the rainbow is composed of two serpents drinking water from the earth. The local communities also think that a person can find incalculable wealth where the rainbow-serpent “drinks water”. They believe that until that moment no one had succeeded in doing that (ibid.: 32). There is a link here with the beliefs related to dragons/serpents guarding treasures, widespread in different cultures.

Such beliefs exist in Europe, Mexico, Indonesia, China and among the natives of North America (Blust 2000: 532). According to a number of local folkloric beliefs, the serpent-rainbow lives in rivers and springs. The aborigines in Australia perceive the rainbow as a huge serpent inhabiting deep holes/caves full of water. Many of those tribes have only one word for the rainbow and the snake. The rainbow can be either of feminine or of male sex, or of both (Sofronievski 2007: 381). The rainbow is associated with a serpent in Eastern and Western Equatorial Africa. In Togo and Benin, the rainbow is called *Oshumare*, it is believed to be a deity and is associated with a giant serpent from the chthonic world, which drinks water from the sky (Loewenstein 1961: 34). The Hausa people from Northern Nigeria think that the rainbow-serpent is androgynous, the red band being male and the blue – female, and that it inhabits water basins. The colours of snakes in the tropical regions where these beliefs originated are the reason for that serpent–rainbow association. That belief is evidenced on a mass scale in the tropical regions, moreover among communities that never had contacted each other (ibid.: 38).¹⁴

The notion of the dragon-serpent-rainbow is a cultural *universalia* found in Europe, the Middle East (including Egypt), India, the Far East, Mesoamerica and North America. In the different continents, dragons are believed to be androgynous, or capable of changing their sex (Blust 2000: 519–520). For the aborigines in Australia the rainbow is a serpent that gives blood to terrestrial creatures, being also responsible for the menstruation of women. This is a frequent idea, known among the various cultures. Besides, the rainbow-serpent can devour young boys and vomit them subsequently. This motive is probably related to initiation rituals, symbolically transforming young boys into men. Among Northern Australian natives, the

¹⁴ The author is of the opinion that these similar beliefs may have existed since prehistoric times and may have evidenced contacts among the present communities even then (Loewenstein 1961, 39–40). Such a hypothesis is, of course, speculative and cannot be proven.

rainbow is considered bisexual: it can be both female and male, but is perceived to have woman's breasts. The rainbow-serpent is believed to be bisexual in Haiti as well (Blust 2000: 524; Roheim 1945: 196–197). Attributing sexual affiliation to the rainbow-dragon is part of the mythic anthropomorphisation of other celestial bodies as well, notably the Sun, the Moon, the stars, etc. In some cultures, the double rainbow is considered to be both, male and female. Such ambivalence in the notions of the sex of rainbow is evidenced in Malaysia, Micronesia, Mexico, Panama, Columbia and Nigeria (Blust 2000: 529, No. 8). Hence the representations of rainbow are universal and essentially anthropomorphic.

The belief in China is that the rainbow can be both, male and female. When a rainbow in distinct colours appeared, it was considered of male sex; if its colours were indistinct, then it was considered of female sex (Boyer 1987: 24).

The sexual dimorphism is one of the constitutive manifestations of human culture. That division opposes the male and female principles in the category of sex, grammatical gender, symbolic features, as well as at the level of ritual functions. According to Bulgarian beliefs, men and women are only half human creatures, and an entire human being is obtained only when they get together (Velentsova 2004: 311).

A child was perceived as asexual until a certain age – and was marked linguistically in the neuter gender. Among the Slovaks there was a firm ban on wearing clothes or accessories of the opposite sex. Thus, for example, they believed that if a man wore female headdress, he would be afraid of wolves, and if a woman wore a man's hat, she would be afraid of cattle (*ibid.*: 312).

Such a change was permitted as a punishment at a certain level in the community. For example, in Bulgaria a bride that proved not to be a virgin was dressed in man's clothes and returned to her father in the middle of the night.

There was a widespread belief among the Slavs that if someone was exposed to certain forces, e.g., the rainbow, he/she would undergo a sex change. Serbs, Bulgarians, Slovaks and Western Ukrainians believed in that. That happened when a person passed under the rainbow or drank water from the same place where it “drank” (Velentsova 2004: 312; Sofronievski 2007: 383–385). The belief in Greek Macedonia was that if a boy passes under the rainbow, he would become a girl, and vice versa (Abbott 1903: 71).

Stoilov summarises the data collected from Bulgarian lands in the second half of the 19th century concerning the belief that if someone passes under a rainbow, sex transformation would occur: a man would become a woman, and a woman – a man (Stoilov 1924: 40). Such an idea was the earliest to be evidenced among the Serbs. The *Dictionary of the Serbian Language* by Vuk Karadžić, first published in Vienna in 1818, reads: “*Срби кажу: да мушко прође, постало би женско, а женско да прође, постало би мушко*” (Karadžić 1818: 151, *дуга*; Karadžić 1852: 143, *дуга*).¹⁵ Such a belief was also evidenced for the region of Pleternica, in Croatia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Kraus 1884/1885, col. 43).

¹⁵ Grimm 1877: 611 cites the information by Karadžić, attributing it only to the Serbs.

Dimitar Marinov, who reported and summarised evidences recorded before 1914, informs about the popular belief that the rainbow, *zouna*, possesses another – *divine* – force that could transform male into female and female into male creatures. That would have been done as follows: if someone *wished* to change his/her sex, he/she had to go to the river while it is raining, and to drink water exactly from the place in the river where the rainbow is drinking, and then sex transformation would take place. This belief has been recorded in the Kyustendil region (Marinov 1914: 16; Tolstoy 1976: 60-61). It is curious to note that (a) this force is specifically qualified as *divine*; (b) the sex metamorphosis was possible only if the person really wanted it, naturally faced with hard conditions to be met. A curious addition by his informer is the claim that there had been such cases in the past, but there are none anymore (Marinov 1914: 16).

In evidence from the regions of Gabrovo and Kazanlak, there was a belief that “if a girl passes under the *zouna*, she would go to drink water from the same place where the *zouna* has dipped one of its ends and is drinking water, then the girl would become a boy, and if that’s a boy, he would become a girl” (Stoykov 1890: 141; *Ethnography* 1985: 28; 41). It should be noted here that the belief concerns young people, which is not true of all such beliefs, as we shall see.

For example, the popular belief from the Tarnovo region says that “if a man drinks water from the same place as the *zouna*, he would become a woman, or – conversely – a woman would become a man” (Gabyuv 1900: 222). In the region of Drama, the belief claims that: “17. If someone passes under the *zounitsa*, he/she changes – a man becomes a woman, and a woman – a man” (ibid.: 225).

In *Градиво за български речник* [*Building Material for a Bulgarian Dictionary*], Kouzman Shapkarev places the wine-wheat alternative below the lexeme “God’s bow.” The narrative continues: “When a rainbow (*bozhilak*) appears and reaches the earth’s surface, if someone jumps over it, it is said that his sex changes, if he is from male sex, he becomes a woman, and vice versa” (Shapkarev 2001: 15, 33). A notion that can be seen in Greece is attested here.

In Greek beliefs, the person who manages to jump over the rainbow, driven by excessive arrogance and recklessness, would undergo transformation (Politis 1884/1885, col. 38–41). That representation is close to Kouzman Shapkarev’s ideas. It should be noted here that the story is about the punishment of a young man for having demonstrated negative qualities, not manifestation of his own wish. This situation is very reminiscent of the ancient Greek notion of the expression of *hubris* (ὑβρις): any excessive act that violates the divine and human order. According to information that is not reliable, the Greeks believed that whoever passed under the rainbow would undergo sex change (Daniels, Stevans 2003: 979–980).

Racho Slaveykov, in his summary of the popular beliefs and customs, thinks that the rainbow is formed by rain “heated” by the sunrays “so as to purify the air” after the rain. Then the rainbow descends into rivers, dipping both of its ends and draws water to bring it to the “clouds exhausted by the rain.” Where the rainbow is drinking water, it leaves a silver cup, and whoever finds that cup will be able to see into

his/her future. Bulgarians are also relieved to see the rainbow, because this means that there would be no flood. The colours of the rainbow are perceived to denote different crops and their intensity predicts the yields. Slaveykov drew attention also to the belief that “if a girl passes under the rainbow and drinks water at the same place where the rainbow had dipped one end into the water, she would turn into a boy. If a boy does that, he would become a girl” (Slaveykov 2006: 166).¹⁶ Here we should note the double superposition of symbols. A girl or a boy undergoing sex transformation must not only pass under the rainbow, they also need to drink water from the place where the *zouna* has drunk for the metamorphosis to take place. Here again the reference is to a boy and a girl, i.e., the transformation is assumed to be possible only at a young age.

According to certain similar ideas, the rainbow – also referred to as *zouna* – is formed by the Sun and the rain, moreover when the rain is heated by the Sun. The *zouna* appears when the water in the clouds has been “spent” and thus the rainbow draws water from the basins and gives it to the clouds. This is why the two ends of the rainbow are dipped in the water. According to other beliefs, the rainbow is God’s belt that He lowers to be washed by the rain and then dried. Hence, when there is a rainbow, this means that there would be no flood; instead, there would be an abundance of wheat and grapes, and it will be well both for people and for the animals. If there is no rainbow, there will be a drought, no harvest and the Second Coming of Christ. That could occur if the rainbow failed to appear for seven or three years. Here, in this system of beliefs generated by different cultural *realia*, there is the idea that whoever passes under the rainbow would change his/her sex (Tarnovo and Kyustendil regions). In the same areas of Bulgaria another belief existed that a woman who has had only daughters would give birth to a boy if she drinks water from the same place as the rainbow (Kovachev 1914: 64–65; Tolstoy 1976: 61).

Serbian beliefs in the powers of the rainbow are similar to the Bulgarian ones. For example, people in the Gruža village in Central Serbia believe that: “Whoever manages to pass under the rainbow where it “drinks” water would change his/her sex from a man to a woman and vice versa” (Петровић 1948: 334; Толстой 1976: 61). According to another Serbian belief, the rainbow loved to “drink” water close to the water mills and hence people should not go into rivers at such places (Петровић 1948: 334; Tolstoy 1976: 61). There is a superstition in Northern Macedonia that if someone passes under the rainbow, a vulva would appear on his forehead (Филиповић 1939: 511). Franco, too, refers to similar thinkable metamorphoses, reporting that “our people feel a superstitious fear of the rainbow, attributing to it the power to change the human sex. This happens to the person standing where she “drinks” water, and her ability to inflict all kinds of misfortunes to people” (Franko 1904: 149). The belief in Poland is that, in addition to being able to change the sex of someone passing under it, the rainbow can also devour that person (Kupiszewski 1969: 81; Tolstoy 1976: 62). There is a superstition among the Southern Slavs that

¹⁶ Vakarelski 1977²: 415 summarises the data on that capacity of the rainbow.

appears to be influenced by Christian notions. According to the shepherds in Northern Dalmatia, a donkey would give birth to a male infant where the rainbow touches the earth (Ivanišević 1905: 224). In that case the rainbow is considered responsible for the birth of a human infant by an animal (donkey).

In many European cultures the widespread belief is that passing under the rainbow or touching it may result in the loss of a finger. In such a situation a person can be struck by lightning and be wounded. In Bohemia it is believed that passing under the rainbow may change a person's sex. In that region this is considered highly possible for girls below the age of seven years (Boyer 1987: 29; Lee, Fraser 2001: 27–30).¹⁷ This belief is probably influenced by the Catholic Church. It should not be forgotten that the first Communion in the Catholic world is received at the age of seven. Seemingly, changes are impossible thereafter.

Such notions about a sex transformation after passing under the rainbow are valid in France as well, along the Upper Loire, as well as for Serbia (as seen already), and for Albania and Montenegro (Renel 1902: 66).

In France, and more specifically along the Upper Loire, it is believed that people passing under the rainbow would change their sex. That French idea can be traced back to the 16th century at the latest (Sebillot 1904: 91; Gaidoz 1884/1885, col. 17). According to pre-modern French beliefs, transgender behaviour was considered to be “natural” as a manifestation of a supernatural force (Conner 1997: 128–129).

In Albania the veneration of St. Veneranda was associated with the Roman deity Venus. That cult is oriented to beauty and love. The saint is known in the Albanian tradition as Mrs Prende/Prene, or Mrs Beauty. The rainbow was dedicated to the saint and was known in everyday speech as “Mrs Prende's belt” or as Venus' belt. In this connection there was a belief that whoever passes under the rainbow would undergo a sex transformation (Elsie 2001: 258).

In the Caucasus similar ideas were expressed: “16. If a woman happens to pass under the rainbow, she will turn into a man, and if a man passes, he will turn into a woman” (Grigorov 1892: 112).

The Gagauz people (living in Ukraine and Moldova) do not explain what the rainbow (*kushak*) is, but they believe that whoever passes under it, would change sex, i.e., a man would become a woman, and a woman – a man. The size of the colour bands of the rainbow gives indication whether the grape, wheat, etc. harvest would be abundant, with colour associations. Similar beliefs related to gender transformation occur among the Galicians, Huculians and Armenians, as well as among the Cheremisians in the Vyatsk Region (Moshkov 1901: 57, note 24). Thus, it becomes clear that such beliefs existed among neighbouring peoples, not only of Slavonic origin, but also far beyond the territories populated by Southern Slavs.

Although the ethnic origin of the Gagauz people remains unclear, it is apparent that they shared cultural traditions considered to be Bulgarian. The migration

¹⁷ The authors have not indicated the source of their information.

of Gagauz population to then-Russia¹⁸ (present-day Ukraine and Moldova today) was documented for 1730, and their appearance in Bessarabia – for 1769. Several more migrations were registered until 1896, and that population numbered around 70,000 in the early 20th century. Let me remind that Gagauz people confess the Orthodox Christianity, but they speak Turkish, and in Bessarabia they used to identify themselves as Bulgarians (Mutafova 1993: 94). The evidence about the Gagauz migration to the Russian Empire in 1730 can serve as *terminus ante quem* for the emergence of the belief that whoever passes under the rainbow would change sex. The Gagauz people have preserved many Bulgarian cultural traditions, including also the belief connected with the rainbow. At the end of the 19th century, the Russian army colonel V. Moshkov conducted field observations (Moshkov 1901: 57), adding that the Gagauz people divined on the abundance of the crops by the colours of the rainbow, just as the Bulgarians did.

According to the beliefs of the Votyak people, the rainbow “drinks” water from rivers and lakes so as to replenish the abundance of water in the sky. If someone reaches the place where it drank, he/she can find many objects, e.g., a cross, vessels, etc. According to other beliefs, if you approach a rainbow, you would receive a silver cup and spoon. The Chermisians believe that God created the rainbow with seven colours so as to look at it when creating the colours on Earth. When a person approaches the rainbow, he/she should not breathe, and if your hand catches it, a man would become a woman, and vice versa (Moshkov 1900: 199).

According to the Huculians (a Slovenian ethnic group inhabiting parts of the Carpathians, Northern Romania and Western Ukraine), if a man passes from one end of the rainbow to the other, he would become a woman (Kaindl 1894: 99). The Hungarians believe (clearly under the Slavonic influence) that the rainbow can change the gender of the person passing under it (Dömötör 1981: 228; Lee, Fraser 2001: 27).

According to a fairy tale originating from Benin and Togo, Sub-Saharan Africa (the Gulf of Guinea), recorded in the Nago dialect that is close to or part of the Yoruba language, the rainbow could change a person’s gender. That happened when a boy was “seen” by the rainbow. He then became a girl, but at the same time the king’s first wife (*iyalle*) turned into a man (Bouche 1884/1885, col. 131).

A belief in sex transformation is recorded from the region of Sakar Mountain in Bulgaria as well. However, it is specified for that region that only a man passing

¹⁸ Field research was conducted in Central Russia in the 1960s on the notions and beliefs connected with the rainbow. The evidence shows an enormous number of different beliefs, which are due – in my opinion – to the fact that the contemporary mobility of the rural population as well and the intensified communications resulted in blending and enrichment of all local notions of a folklore nature, see Dobrovol'skaya (2011: 205–216). According to those records, the rainbow could change the gender both of an unborn child and of an adult: “you look at a girl, but it is actually a boy, the girl has a crude look and resembles more a boy.” The rainbow can also change the gender of a pregnant woman so that she would become a man and would be unable to give birth (p. 212).

under the rainbow may change his sex. The variant of a woman doing the same is not mentioned (Sakar 2002: 237–238).

The belief thus described has variants as well, and in addition to the rainbow being capable of changing the sex of the person passing under it, this can also happen if a person drinks water from the same place where the rainbow did. It is also considered that a married woman who has only daughters can give birth to a son if she drinks water from the place where the *zouna* “drank.” There is another curious belief that if a person passes under the rainbow, he/she would be healed (Sharlanova 1999: 74).

Another variation of the idea is that the rainbow can change the sex of whoever sees it (Kolev 1987: 193).

According to some authors, the Koukers (mummers) performing the Sourva rites during the winter, wear clothes with the colours of the rainbow (Koiva, Kuperjanov 2010: 258–259). These ritual acts are also part of the transvestite rites characteristic of those festivities. Here again an analogy can be made with the sex transformation (in the system of the rite) (Kraev 2003: 13–21).

Social transvestism is also known in the Balkans, i.e., the so-called *tobelija* – girls – “sworn virgins” who appear in the social world acting, looking, and dressing as men, and who are socially accepted as men.¹⁹ The *tobelija* phenomenon was registered for the first time in the mid-19th century for regions in Northern Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, above all in the Dinaric Mountains. The phenomenon is evidenced in families that have no male progeny and a girl is sworn to remain virgin at a very early age, dressing like boys/men and being perceived by the community as such (Horvath 2003). That transformation of the sex required total refusal of sexual contacts with men and total devotion to the family for which the woman who had sworn to assume that social role had to take full care. These girls were addressed by male names, wore male clothes and were perceived as men by all members of the local community (Grémaux 1996: 241–281).

An unambiguous interpretation of the rainbow in the systems of human cultures is above all difficult, but not superfluous, although at many semantic and functional levels there are ostensibly inexplicable similarities in different parts of the world. Such *loci communes* are the notions personifying the rainbow as serpent/dragon, its association with water sources, colour associations, above all the red colour with menstrual blood, wine or grapes. Certain scholars tried to summarise the beliefs connected with the rainbow and its significance in human cultures. Their conclusions can only apply at the Indo-European level. According to those analyses, the rainbow is also a form of the mythical Tree of Life linking the three worlds: celestial, terrestrial and chthonic. Lighting and dragons/serpents are cited in that interpretation as analogues of the mediators. Examples are also cited of such association

¹⁹ In Serbian the term is *zavetovana devojka*, in Albanian *vajzë e betuar* or *tobelija* (from Ottoman Turkish – “a person bound by an oath”), or *virđžina* (Alb. *virgjinëshë* – girl sworn to remain a virgin). They create their social alliances and they can moreover be met among all confessional communities of Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Muslims. On these practices, see Young 2000.

with the Australian aborigines who identify the rainbow with lightning and snakes (Georgieva 1993: 121).

Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the information on sex transformation taking place under the impact of the rainbow. First, that notion and belief can be dated prior to the 18th century for the Bulgarian territories and around the 16th century for medieval France. The notion can be associated above all to the Southern Slavs, but it is represented among other Indo-Europeans on the Old Continent. The beliefs in the sexual dimorphism of the rainbow and in its ability to change human sex appear in different continents and in different cultures.

In only one Bulgarian ethnographic evidence that idea is presented as the work of God, in all the other cases there is no explanation concerning the source of that sex-transforming power coming from the rainbow, which means – in my opinion – that the roots of that notion should be sought in the pre-Christian past. It is necessary to note here also that the rainbow is credited with the ability to change both the anatomic sex and gender, whereas in folklore culture such a change is possible at a ritual level, and – of course – in a ritual situation.

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