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## **Folklore-based value profile of the Slovak culture: use of folktales in cultural studies**

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*The article describes the use of folktales in courses on intercultural communication. It is based on the idea that globalisation has made intercultural competence a highly needed competence. Students can benefit from studying in courses focused on theories about culture and their application in practice. Folktales are an excellent source of texts originally transmitted in oral tradition through history. They reflect the values and practices of the cultural community. The heroes/heroines represent the ideal patterns of behaviour while the villains are their opposites. Analysing these stories, the students can learn a lot not only about their own culture but others as well. We provide a list of possible tasks that help them understand the various layers of cultures and implement their knowledge of theory in a practical way. Whether practising in seminars, doing home assignments, or proving their understanding in tests, folktales provide an enjoyable and effective mode of learning.*

Keywords: *folktales, folklore, values, heroes, Slovak culture*

### **Introduction**

Globalization is the main current trend with both benefits and drawbacks. To cope with the many challenges of our times, people need to acquire some knowledge and understanding of the variety of lifestyles, ideologies, beliefs, and histories that exist around the world. In other words, they need to grasp the importance of cultures and their impact on the cognitive processes of individuals. The way we think is the result of cultural upbringing mixed with personal experience collected individually on the daily basis. We are all unique at the personal level, but we still share certain features due to the environment we grow up in.

Cultural studies as a subject provides the required input to create, develop, and maintain a high level of cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence to succeed in our professional but sometimes also private life. The aim of such a course is to familiarize the students with the basic concepts of culture and its components, introduce some theories concerning their specific features, provide appropriate tools for comparison of cultures and most of all teach the students to respect and accept the differences among cultures as alternative solutions to fundamental questions/problems rather than deviations from ‘normalcy’. What they need are cultural literacy and intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence, similarly to other competencies consists of three basic components: attitude, knowledge, and skills. If we use the ABC model of intercultural competence by Várhegyi and Nunn, the attitude is interpreted as the (A) affective (emotional) component including open-mindedness, curiosity, and readiness to discover. Skills represent the behavioural (B) component, that is the ability to use in real-life situations the acquired knowledge which is presented by cognition (C) in the model (Várhegyi–Nunn, 2012). The ABC model also includes identity as a core element of intercultural competence. We cannot ignore its importance because its formation, development and changes may have a profound impact on all the three mentioned aspects. To provide an example: an adult, mature person perceives the world differently from an inexperienced young person and the same applies to individuals

coming from different cultural backgrounds, they interpret the same reality differently, according to their cultural and life experience.

The cornerstone of any endeavour in that area is the proper knowledge and understanding of one's own culture. We fully agree with Edward T. Hall, the founder of intercultural research who wrote:

*“Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand the foreign culture but to understand our own”* (Hall, 1973:30)

It is rather demanding to analyse the context and environment in which the observer lives. It is nearly impossible to take a step back and objectively study all the features and characteristics of one's own life. Therefore, we need a material that is relatively distant from the observer's everyday life but can still feel somehow connected to its key ideas. In our paper, we would like to present folktales as an appropriately relevant but historically distant enough source that we can use in courses on intercultural communication for the analysis of not only Slovak culture but others as well.

### **Folklore and Folktales**

Folklore is according to Sims and Stephens an expressive manifestation of a culture that is shared by a cultural community (Sims – Stephens, 2005). It is a collection of traditions, beliefs, customs, crafts, and stories that the members of a community treasure and transmit from generation to generation by oral tradition. Folklore has many forms, and their study and preservation have contributed to the tight-knit cohesiveness of a society. The major language-related forms are songs and music, ballads, proverbs, charms, riddles, or tales.

The stories, known as folktales, are the major focus of this paper. The aim is to demonstrate how folktales can contribute to a better understanding of a culture based on the values and other features identifiable in the tales and represented by the behaviour of all characters participating in the plot. The folktales of each culture are different because they were created under different conditions, but they all have certain general characteristics that are typical for this genre:

- they existed for a long time only in oral tradition;
- their authors are unknown and therefore, they are considered the collective product of people;
- they were originally meant for an adult audience;
- their role was to both educate and entertain;
- they are a source of collective wisdom and experience;
- they carry a moral lesson;
- they were collected and recorded by national enthusiasts
- they were adapted at one point for children

The tales with their complex and extraordinary plots fuelled the fantasy of the people, they encouraged them to act in a certain way in their real life. They fostered the ambitions to change the world to match the needs of people and at the same time, to change people to become more fit for the world. As Zipes (2012, pp.1-20) stated:

*“Therefore, the focus of the fairy tales, whether oral, or later written, has always been on finding ways, magical instruments, or powerful people and animals that will enable*

*the protagonists to transform themselves along with their environment, making it more suitable for living in peace and contentment.*” (Zipes, 2012, p.2)

These stories are still an important part of cultural heritage as they reflect the mindset of the people throughout history, their worries, beliefs, and hopes for a better future. The folktales present also the ethical principles ruling the society that were based on their cultural values. The stories could gradually change for a variety of reasons, sometimes the storyteller made a mistake or adapted the plot to a changing audience. Only those stories which truly reflected the taste and needs of the people survived because they corresponded to their life experiences.

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the birth of national movements when various regions with shared history, religion and mutually comprehensible dialects began to move towards some form of unity attempting to create countries and states based on ethnic principles. The patriotic intellectuals tried to find such spiritual and material products of human activity that would prove the ties between the various groups of population and folklore served with its folktales as a wonderful, rich treasure trove. They collected and recorded the stories and published them in a new, standardized language that would replace the dialects as a means of communication. The printed texts of the stories were then adapted for a younger audience and the original violent punishments were replaced by more acceptable ones. The changes were accompanied by a binary, black-and-white vision of the world that helped the children to identify the recommended and the detested patterns of behaviour. At the same time, such a clear-cut distinction between good and evil may lead to strengthening certain stereotypes which have already been overpassed in the current society. Therefore, presenting them to children requires additional commentary and clarification while adult learners are able to draw conclusions about the changes taking place in time.

The folktales are characterised by certain features that occur frequently, in many of them. There are the typical opening and closing phrases which serve as signposts for the reader/listener to signalize that the story is a tale and is intended for children mostly. We can provide several examples:

- *‘Once upon a time ....’* and *‘They lived happily ever after’* (English)
- *‘Kde bolo tam nebolo ....’* and *‘A žili šťastne až kým nepomreli’* (Slovak)
- *‘Hol volt, hol nem volt...’* and *‘És boldogan éltek, amíg meg nem haltak’* (Hungarian)

Another typical feature of folktales is that they all have their heroes, heroines and villains. The positive character has a problem to solve, very often by leaving home to prove him/herself. The negative characters are there to antagonise the hero and try to defeat him/her. In many tales, magic is present which either helps the hero to make the impossible viable or it is used against him to destroy him. The stories often feature talking objects and animals helping the success of the quest. The tasks that the protagonists need to fulfil are extreme and often include the defeat of various monsters. The story invariably ends with the victory of the good and defeat of the evil who is punished (Williams, J., 2010).

The role of the protagonists is crucial for the identification of core values in the stories. The acts of the heroes are driven by their values while the villains’ behaviour reflects the opposite of these values. So, even the negative protagonists can provide clues about the values embedded in the plot.

### **Research of Slovak folktales - the Cultural Profile**

The scope of the research covers the complete collection of Slovak folktales by Pavol Dobšinský who between 1880 and 1883 compiled and published 90 folktales under the title

*Prostonárodné slovenské povesti*. His work laid the path for a number of other collectors, but his work is still the most highly appreciated. The stories were originally recorded in the dialects of the source storytellers and only later translated into modern language. As stated by the collector, he intended to preserve a wide collection of tales that originated from all the corners of Slovakia to preserve the spirit of the nation and to show the variety of topics, worries, pleasures, and hopes of the people (Dobšinský, 2008). The stories were published in three volumes.

Based on previous empirical research, we made a list of values and features that we expected to identify in the folktales and compared them with the results of our analysis. To identify as many typical characteristics as possible in each tale, we itemised all their details and evaluated them by using the statistical tally method. The results were formulated in an Excel table. Due to its size, we cannot include the table in the paper, so we summarise our findings. The aim of the research was to evaluate the set of Slovak folktales collected by Dobšinský from the perspective of their main characters, both heroes and villains. We included all the three volumes published in the “*Golden fund of the Slovak literature*”.

Before starting with the most typical heroes, we can mention a common characteristic of them. Based on the general European tradition, and possibly going even back to the ancient Greek concept of ‘*kalocagathia*’, a hero/ine in a folktale must be beautiful/handsome while the villain is usually ugly. Physical beauty as a reflection of inner qualities helps the children to recognize immediately who represents the good and who the evil. This characteristic can be graded through the story when the hero/ine turns even more beautiful after succeeding in their task as part of their reward. The transformation often happens after the revival of the protagonist. The process of becoming more beautiful represents a specific rebirth; the look of the hero differs from his previous existence. The change is also accompanied by increased self-confidence which they often lack at the beginning (Hrivíková, 2016).

### *The heroes*

We can divide the main protagonists of the Slovak folk tales basically into male, female and pair or multiple heroes. The pairs are usually siblings who share the same fate and try to help each other faithfully. They are relatively frequent in Slovak tales (19%) reflecting the high position of the family in the value ranking of the Slovak culture. But in most tales, it is a sole hero who has to solve a difficult situation and fight the villain. The most frequent positive protagonist is a male hero (58%) compared to 23% of female and 19% of multiple heroes (again, mostly male, or mixed pairs). In Slovak tales the male hero can be:

- a poor village boy
- an orphan
- a shepherd
- a prince or a king

According to our research, nearly 67% of heroes were of humble origin while the rest of them (33%) were princes or kings. The hero faces a complication which can be cruel treatment at home, poverty, a need to find a bride, to fulfil the tasks assigned by some relatives of his future bride, save his village/country from a monster, or simply test his abilities on a journey. Each type of task and the methods applied to fulfil them throw light on the motivations and values that stand behind their acts. For example, the task of saving one’s relative appears frequently in a culture where the family is a highly prized value which is the case of the Slovak culture. This is proven in the tale by overcoming many difficulties and often readily sacrificing the hero’s own life to succeed. Of course, the hero is revived again and lives then happily ever

after. On the other hand, tasks connected with freeing the country from a monster or witchcraft point at the value of patriotism and/or collectivism as the hero sacrifices everything to help the suffering people. The noble quest is equally distributed whether the heroes are rich or of humble origin. Though in many Slovak folktales physical power plays an important role and the hero deserves his victory through hard work and suffering, it is the wit and cleverness that are most praised as the best way of solving difficult problems. Another typical aspect of the Slovak folklore is also the celebration of an unassuming hero – an “underdog” who is modest, has a deep respect for elderly people and follows obediently the advice of his parents or other well-wishers (Dobšinský, 2005). A typical Slovak hero achieves his goals by obeying his parents, sharing food with wayfarers, helping the weak ones, saving animals, having mercy on the vulnerable and defending the innocent.

### *The heroines*

In contrast with the strong hero, the heroines of the Slovak folk tales tend to be young innocent women, examples of virtuousness, purity and sometimes even naivety. Poor girls prevail (60 to 40%) over high-born ladies or princesses. They are all described as exceptionally beautiful and their beauty is often the source of their difficulties (envy, jealousy, lust) but also the reason why an attractive man (a king, a rich man) falls in love with them. In many tales, they have to leave their home as a consequence of banishment caused by a disagreement with their relatives. While in exile, they find their love and happily return home to their remorseful parent. This structure is typical for tales where the heroine is of noble origin.

The poor heroine is mostly an orphan who suffers under exploitation from her stepmother who hates her for her beauty often contrasted with her own ugly daughter. Such a type of heroine is predominant in Slovak folktales. These heroines are neither banished nor run away from home. They usually live with a person who harms them, accomplish various difficult or even dangerous missions and are eventually chosen and saved by a prince or a rich gentleman. The moral message of such heroines is transparent; good, humble, obedient, and virtuous young virgins always end up as happy women married to admirable men. The values of modesty, hierarchy, obedience, and forbearance are promoted. The plot reflects the ideal of a Christian woman – the Virgin Mary and the perception of the different gender roles men and women fulfilled in the Slovak culture.

### *Variety of villains*

We need to stress the importance of contrast as the basis of comparison between the good and the evil represented by the hero and the villain. The role of the villain is very important in a folk tale as he represents the culturally detested behaviour patterns, and his defeat reflects the desire of a cultural community to achieve an ideal state of affairs. As in the case of the heroes, the villains are manifold, male, and female, with or without magic, human or other. Their common feature and aim of their existence are to harm, defeat and destroy the hero. The hero and the villain have a shared desire (a person, a treasure, or a whole kingdom...) and this becomes the source of their conflict. The fight often seems to be unfair as the villain is either physically strong or has some extra powers but the hero/ine eventually overcomes all the difficulties and prevails.

The most powerful and very frequent type of villain in Slovak folklore is a dragon featured in around 20% of the stories. Its interpretation can be twofold; it represents either the power of nature that the ancestors in pagan times had to cope with or alternatively, consistent with the later Christian tradition, it can be the representation of the devil. Both interpretations bring important insight into the formative process of cultural development. The hero, in Slovak

folktales, fights and defeats a dragon (or even a succession of three dragons with a growing number of heads) and saves the princess and the whole kingdom. It is a symbolic fight and victory over the nature that the ancestors subconsciously craved for. Later, also the Christian yearning for redemption and defeat of the “powers of darkness” can be revealed in those tales. Another typical villain in Slovak folk tales is an old woman, either a cruel, heartless stepmother or a true witch. The first kind usually plots against a heroine while the second pursues mostly a male protagonist. She needs magic to be an equal opponent to a brave man while a stepmother does not need magic to terrorise her patient female victim. There, the reflection of high power distance and the masculine character typical for the Slovak culture can be noticed. 35% of the folktales feature a witch or a sorcerer which means that the dragon and witchcraft are present in more than half of the plots, that is they contain some magic element that works against the protagonist. We can interpret their frequency as an expression of vulnerability, and helplessness of the people facing the powers of nature.

On the other hand, the wretched stepdaughter invariably respects her tormentor, the stepmother, she never protests, and fully accepts her lot. The role of the villain serves to contrast the benign and mild character of the heroine. Though, if the protagonist is a male hero, he immediately takes up a fight against injustice, behaves as a brave, ‘true man’. The villain in both cases represents the worst and most deplorable attributes – hatred, jealousy, cruelty, deceit, and malice.

#### *Other features*

Symbols also play an important role in folktales. They carry a special meaning for the members of the cultural community and often serve as cultural metaphors. Two out of 3 tales included the element of nature in the storyline. The forest can protect, but in some cases its sinister appearance forebodes danger. Birds, horses, fish, and ants are the most frequent helpers of the protagonists. They represent the typical fauna surrounding the people. The symbolic power of nature, animals, and plants shows the strength of the bond between nature and people in Slovakia. They felt to be interconnected and often dependent on ‘Mother Nature’. Respect for nature brings success in the tales while harming it spells doom.

The two main objectives of a hero’s journey were the search for a bride (endogamy) or helping others. Both are strongly supported in the culture; the first leads to an improvement of the genetic pool and the other strengthens the ties among the members of the community. The rewards also bring an insight into the mindset of the audience. The achievements of the hero/ine are mostly rewarded by a bride/groom usually accompanied by some riches (half of the kingdom or a treasure). Again, the importance of the family is placed above any other reward and is interpreted as a path leading to happiness and contentment. The material reward in the form of some treasure or even half of the kingdom proves the people’s desire to improve their economic situation which was usually quite bad. They could not name a specific figure that would meet their expectations being mostly uneducated but the image of a half of a kingdom was so abstract and huge at the same time that it could nicely express the extent of their dreams.

The punishment of the villains is a specific aspect of the collected folktales. In their original versions, the punishments were really cruel, various forms of execution were used, the culprits were boiled in tar, cut into pieces, put into a barrel with nails and rolled down a slope, or beheaded. Later, the executions were replaced by milder forms of punishment such as exile, servitude, or poverty.

*The values*

As values are considered to be the core of any culture, their identification in folktales is very important. Our research resulted in a set of dominant values that are generally accepted as being still important in our current times and some that may have lost their leading position but are still identified as very positive and perhaps desirable. The following eight values achieved the highest ranks in our research:

- family
- perseverance
- forgiveness
- modesty
- loyalty
- kindness
- diligence
- obedience

Not surprisingly, the family was the most frequently appearing value in the folktales. It describes the relationship between parents and children, siblings, or spouses. The relationship between parents and children is mostly depicted as caring and full of love and sacrifice, though in some cases the children forget about their parents as soon as their situation improves. However, as the tales prove, a true hero always returns to share his/her happiness and wealth with them and looks after them in their old age.

A special case is made for a stepparent (mostly a stepmother with a daughter) who is usually cruel and heartless. She is often punished as the hero's or the heroine's main adversary. In some tales, siblings turn against each other, but always with a clear message that this is considered the most evil, and the end of the story brings strict punishment to the offenders. One of the folktales touched even the issue of incest as a strict taboo when a king wanted to marry his own daughter and she had to trick him to escape. The king repented his sins though and was forgiven for the sake of the family reunion. The moral of all the analysed stories is that the family is the most important refuge in people's lives; you can find love, help, and support in its circle repaying it with equal care.

Perseverance is very often praised in the tales when the hero or heroine has to complete often hopeless tasks, toiling on and bringing even the highest sacrifice rather than giving up always brings a turn of events and the success is well deserved. In a rural society such as that of the Slovak in the past, it was crucial that the peasants kept working on the land even under the hardest conditions.

Forgiveness is the next frequent value appearing in folktales. It is often linked to the value of family because the hero/ine shows mercy to their relatives who did not behave properly stressing the idea of family unity. Yet the hero/ine shows mercy also to other villains too but usually in those cases when the villain does not possess any magical powers. The message seems to be that magic is not to be trusted and should be eliminated from their lives. This reflects the people's fear of the supernatural and their religious, Christian background. Religiosity was not addressed directly in the tales, but it is perceivable. Mostly, it is shown in the form of greetings usual at those times involving a kind of blessing (*'God bless you with happiness'*) or a church, a chapel or a cross appearing in the story providing safety or a hiding place. It seems that religion was taken for granted, a fixed aspect of everyday life and therefore not necessary to be stressed in the tales.

The next frequently described value is modesty. The hero is mostly an unassuming young man or woman who knows his/her place and always chooses the outwardly least

attractive options (ugliest horse, cheapest gift, most difficult road...) but is invariably rewarded with the best of the best. The protagonist never boasts, even hides his achievements, and is revealed as a hero by others. On the other hand, the villains who are boastful and conceited are usually defeated, humbled, and punished.

Loyalty also ranks high in Slovak folktales. The protagonists show loyalty to both family members and friends, never hesitating to help and support. Moreover, villains are used for demonstrating that value through their contrasting actions. They betray others, leave them in difficult situations or cheat to get the rewards instead of the hero who trusted them. Kindness is celebrated in various forms. This can be showing mercy to the weak, helping others to solve their troubles or combined with forgiveness letting the villains get away with only light punishment. In a society, where people lived in closed, very small communities, this value was extremely important to preserve the well-being of all the members of the group. Hard work and a lot of effort supported by perseverance is the proper way to achieve one's goals. This is the message supported by a large number of tales. Unobtrusively, the stories point out that those who work hard are rewarded while those who are lazy get nothing or worse, they are eventually punished. The protagonists of the tales are usually industrious, hardworking young men or girls even princes or princesses who do what is needed and do not shy away from physical exertions.

The last of the top values appearing in the analysed Slovak folktales is obedience. In a high power distance society, this value is vital, especially within the family and in relationships with elderly people. The respect for age is demonstrated primarily by the repeated appearance of knowledgeable old men or women who after being greeted kindly and politely provide excellent advice or direct help to the protagonists. Those who do not treat the old and feeble ones with due care and respect are usually punished, defeated, or even die. Similarly, the hierarchy within the family is based on the amount of experience that the grandparents and parents could share with the young generation as they were the only resource of knowledge in a society where education was not an option.

### **Application of folktales in cultural studies**

We use folktales in the classroom on a regular basis for both teaching and testing purposes. The texts are full of clues about the culture in which they were created and transmitted from one generation to the next. Therefore, not only can the behaviour of the positive figures be used as a source of information but also their adversaries, the environment in which the plot takes place, the type of supportive characters, tools used, places, greetings, or relationships. We can use the stories, studying the basic cultural models to demonstrate the various layers of Hofstede's onion model which includes values, rituals heroes, and symbols as the main layers of the culture (Hofstede, 1991:9). With careful guidance, students can discover various cultural symbols, heroes, rituals, values, in other words, practices, as proposed in the abovementioned model. Similarly, any folktale can be analysed based on Hall's iceberg model and his theory of Primary Message Systems (Hall, 1973:39). This way, we can discover the more visible as opposed to the deeper aspects of culture and what activities dominated the life of the members of the community. But our classroom experience shows that folktales can be used very effectively also in practising value identification. We can list a number of reasons for using these stories:

- many of the tales have become quite popular and turned into cartoons, movies or plays so, we can state that students are familiar with them;
- the Slovak language is the mother tongue of the majority of students therefore, they can read the texts more quickly (efficiency);
- their cultural upbringing is beneficial for an easy understanding of the cultural background (this is why we recommend starting with one's own folktales);



- the analytical skills applied are universal and easily transmitted from one language to another;
- the tales truly test their cultural competence as they try to use their knowledge (about the culture) and practice comprehension with a positive mindset.

To demonstrate the use of folktales in the course on intercultural communication, we will describe the process of analysis of one story during a seminar. Familiarity with the plot is important because then the students can focus on the details of the text. After a quick reading time, we divide the students into smaller groups of preferably 3–4 members and they work together on the assigned tasks. They fulfil the following tasks:

- listing all the characters appearing in the text;
- assigning them a value grouping the positive, negative, and neutral ones together;
- identification of the protagonists, the heroes or heroines and the villains;
- discovering the environments in which the story develops and their impact on the events;
- finding symbols typical for the Slovak culture in the text;
- identification of the task(s) of the main characters;
- analysis of the methods and tools used to achieve them;
- finding (if present) rituals characteristic for the culture (greetings, work processes, habits, traditions);
- analysis of the role of magic (if present) and the reasons for its use;
- characteristics of the protagonists;
- identification of the values present in the tale;
- evaluation of their role in the past and at present (possible changes and reasons);
- finding proof of the Slovak cultural dimensions;
- summary of the moral lesson that children should have learned from it.

These tasks can then be assigned as homework with another folktale to get a better understanding of the analysis and as a follow-up, two versions of the same tale can be compared. We used the Slovak folktale Janko Hraško and the English version of Tom Thumb. The main storyline is similar but there are many interesting details for comparison. The tales can be also used also as a part of a test to evaluate how they apply the studied theories to the text. The tasks require a practical approach that should be the main goal of the course.

## **Conclusion**

The paper aimed to show the importance of cultural studies and the use of folktales in courses on intercultural communication. The process of globalisation has increased the need for mutual understanding among various cultures. Intercultural competence has become an important and highly valued competence that needs to be developed in specialised courses. The courses focus the students' attention on various aspects of intercultural competence demonstrated on the ABC model. The knowledge collected about one's own culture can be later used to learn about other cultures as well.

Folklore is a rich source of information about cultures. One of its forms, folktales, can be successfully used for learning purposes as the stories are relatively well-known and therefore effective and they can disclose a lot of information about the mindset and values of people in the past. The texts are used to discover the appearing cultural layers and the potential developmental changes in the interpretation of various contexts provided by the plot of the stories.

The article describes the typical features of the tales, their function in the past and the process of their transmission. The research was based on the most recognised collection of Slovak folktales published by P. Dobšinský. The set of 90 tales was analysed and based on them we provided a profile of the Slovak culture. It describes the typical hero and heroine, the tasks they need to fulfil, their motivation, rewards, and values they represent. Similarly, the villains are analysed proving that even their evil deeds disclose the values the Slovak culture identified with. The third part of the article provided a description of the possible use of these folktales in seminars, to practice the use of cultural models and to identify the fundamental aspects of culture including symbols, heroes, rituals, values, motivations, or gender roles. Their use in the evaluation process of the course was suggested as well. The author is convinced that folktales are a very positive contribution to the study of cultures.

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