

Outlying the Lie: Narrative Exaggeration, Comic Performance, and Folk Intelligence in the Serbian Tale *Laž za opkladu*

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Abstract: This article explores the Serbian folktale *Laž za opkladu* ('A Lie for a Wager') as a representative of ATU 1920, the internationally attested tale type known as the 'Contest in Lying.' Via close analysis of narrative structure, cultural context, and oral performance, the study argues that the tale employs absurd exaggeration as a strategic form of wit and social commentary. Drawing on folkloristic theory and comparative materials from Europe, the Middle East, and North America, it examines how tall tales reflect communal values, subvert authority, and negotiate the boundaries between fiction and belief. Particular attention is given to the role of comic escalation, verbal performance, and storytelling as a culturally sanctioned arena for reversing hierarchies. The tale's preservation in Vuk Karadžić's collections affirms its historical and ethnographic value, as its structure continues to resonate in contemporary narrative forms, suggesting rich potential for further research in traditional and digital folklore.

Keywords: folktale, exaggeration, Serbian oral tradition, lying contests, folk narrative theory

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Introduction

In the wide terrain of European folktale traditions, certain narrative types repeat with such insistence and geographical reach that they seem to spring from a common folk impulse rather than a single origin. One such type is the so-called ‘lying contest’ tale. Known in the Aarne–Thompson–Uther classification as ATU 1920, ‘The Contest in Lying’ (Uther 2011, 148, 160, even though it could be classified as ATU 852 as well), these stories centre on two characters who attempt to outmatch one another by inventing ever more implausible boasts. The Serbian folktale *Laž za opkladu* (‘A Lie for a Wager’) belongs to this group. It is, at first glance, a comic tale about a boy and a beardless man (*ćoso*, a man with no facial hair, a beardless man) who wager over a hot loaf of bread. Yet the story quickly transcends its modest frame: the boy, having been warned by his father never to grind flour in a mill where a beardless man is present, finds the ineluctable *ćoso* everywhere he goes, and eventually surrenders to the company and agrees to bake a loaf with him. When the loaf is ready, the man proposes they lie, and whoever outlies the other shall keep the bread. The man’s lies are tame; the boy’s are astonishing. He speaks of riding a rooster, growing millet tall enough to reach the heavens, and borrowing water from God after climbing skyward on a stalk that grew from a grain spilled into the sea (Samardžija 1987, 2004). His story concludes with him kicking a fox that is eating his brain out of his own forgotten head. A register book falls out of the startled fox (*sic!*), and in it is written the story’s punchline: ‘meni pogača, a ćosi g...o’ (‘the loaf for me, and s...t for the beardless man’).

The tale, humorous and deceptively simple, represents a narrative tradition found across the Slavic world, and indeed across much of Eurasia. Variants occur from Russia to Scandinavia, from the Scottish Highlands to India. In Vuk Stefanović Karadžić’s 19th century collections of Serbian oral literature, such stories are preserved and framed as part of a broader ethnographic project: a national soul expressed in speech, wit, and memory (Vučković and Bratić 2020, Suvajdžić 2022). Karadžić recorded this tale as a piece of spoken Serbian genius, rendered in the idiom of the countryside and preserved in its full absurdity. The

boy's final claim, ludicrous as it may be, contains all the necessary elements of comic reversal, verbal agility, and symbolic triumph over a dull adult.

The ATU 1920 tale type has long been recognised for its peculiar quality, as a story genre in which lying, usually condemned, becomes a legitimate contest of imagination (Uther 2009, Stotter 1996). Lying here is not deception in the ethical sense, and can better be understood as invention. The purpose is to astonish, and the contest rewards creativity. According to Uther, such tales belong to a wider group of trickster narratives in which success is determined by narrative superiority rather than physical or moral strength (Uther 2011, p. 148). In Serbian tradition, the motif acquires a particularly performative dimension. The winner is the one who stretches the boundaries of oral plausibility to the very point of collapse, and yet remains within the internal logic of the spoken world.

This article proposes that *Laž za opkladu*, when read carefully, reveals more than an appetite for exaggeration. It encodes a set of rural Serbian values and anxieties. The folktale elevates a child who listens to his father, avoids danger, but finally triumphs through imagination. It quietly critiques hierarchy, mocks the elderly figure, and reserves admiration for the boy's verbal resourcefulness. In this, it preserves older functions of the folk tale: as social commentary (Ingwersen 1995), moral testing ground (Harrison, 2016), and entertainment (Marić, Dragić, and Plavša 2021). Yet it also speaks to the Serbian tradition of oral performance, where the capacity for narrative invention often substitutes for social power.

The present study uses several methodological lenses to approach this tale. First, a structuralist reading based on Propp's morphology will establish how the tale follows and then subverts the basic sequence of folktale functions (Propp 1968). Following this, a comparative folkloristic analysis will place *Laž za opkladu* alongside similar ATU 1920 variants from neighbouring Slavic and non-Slavic traditions, attending to differences in character types, tone, and resolution. Next, performance theory will be used to understand the tale as a performed act, one meant to elicit response and awe through the manipulation of oral

expectation. This is particularly vital given the tale's roots in a largely illiterate culture in which memory and orality were the chief media of transmission.

Ultimately, the article asks: what does it mean to lie well in folklore? And why would a culture reward that lying with a loaf of bread? The tale's humour lies in its escalation, but its deeper value lies in how it encodes wisdom in nonsense. In the boy's lies, we find vision.

Folktale Background and Classification

The tale *Laž za opkladu* ('A Lie for a Wager') survives today as one of the most vivid and richly absurd examples of oral humor in the Serbian tradition. Its premise is deceptively simple: a father sends his son to the mill with explicit instructions not to grind flour anywhere he finds a *ćoso*: a beardless man. The boy, obedient at first, travels from one mill to the next, only to find the same *ćoso* waiting at each. The beardless man, cunning and fast, always manages to arrive before him. Eventually, the boy gives in and decides to grind his flour in the presence of the persistent stranger. When the flour is milled, the *ćoso* proposes a wager: they will bake a *pogača* (flatbread), and instead of splitting it, they shall lie, and whoever outlies the other shall claim the whole loaf.

At the heart of the tale, as mentioned, is the motif of a *lying contest*, a narrative theme formally codified as ATU 1920 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system. The defining characteristic of this tale type is the competitive escalation of impossible claims, often between a boastful youth and an older, ostensibly wiser opponent. The winner is the most inventive.

In Serbian oral tradition, this form of humorous exaggeration is known as *lagarije*, tall tales told for entertainment and prestige. The Serbian oral tradition of *lagarije* refers to the art of telling tall tales, characterized by humorous exaggeration for entertainment and prestige (Kekez 1986, 8). This form of storytelling is deeply embedded in Serbian culture, serving as a means of social interaction and cultural expression. The tradition of *lagarije* shares similarities

with the American tall tale, which also thrives on exaggeration and humor, often focusing on themes like hunting, fishing, and domestic life (McEntire 2009). In Serbia, these tales were indeed a form of entertainment but also a way to convey cultural values and social norms. These stories often appeared in semi-public storytelling contexts such as *prela* (evening gatherings), where verbal wit served as a form of social currency. The concept of 'inverted behavior' seen in the tale, in South Slavic rituals, as explored recently by Maria Vivod, involves actions that defy conventional norms. This behavior is a form of magic and social commentary, often used in narratives to humorously subvert authority and tradition (Vivod 2023). The *ćoso*, as a figure, often represents such authority (such as age, experience, physical maturity) while the boy embodies a carnivalesque inversion of power, using absurdity as a weapon (a distant similarity we might find in Chekov's vaudevilles, Gromov 2023).

Variants of ATU 1920 are found throughout the Slavic-speaking world. In Russian folklore, the tale *Bpaл* ('The Boaster') similarly features a character who regales his listeners with increasingly ludicrous feats. The Boaster tells a cascade of exaggerated, surreal, and intentionally absurd stories, each more incredible than the last, in a verbal contest to outlie his opponents. The goal is performative mastery of language, imagination, and comic effect. These tales appear prominently in the 19th-century collections of Alexander Afanasyev, who preserved dozens of such examples in his *Narodnye russkie skazki* (Afanasyev 1985).

In the Scandinavian corpus, especially in Norwegian folklore, the motif appears in tales like *Askeladden som fikk prinsessen til å løgste seg*, recorded by Asbjørnsen and Moe. It is a Norwegian folktale in which the clever underdog Askeladden, often dismissed as a fool or a layabout, enters a royal contest where suitors must spin such outrageous lies that they provoke the princess (renowned for her disbelief and pride) to exclaim "You're lying!". Through a steadily escalating series of fantastical absurdities and verbal inventions, Askeladden ultimately succeeds in tricking her into uttering the phrase, thereby winning her hand in marriage and overturning the social order through cunning narrative play

rather than force or status. (Asbjørnsen and Moe 1982). The comic purpose remains the same: to entertain through the increasingly impossible.

Across the Atlantic, American folklore offers a robust tradition of tall tales, especially in the Appalachian and frontier contexts. The legendary Davy Crockett, for instance, is said to have grinned a bear into submission or leapt across entire states. These stories, orally transmitted and often published in 19th-century almanacs and broadsides, functioned similarly to *Laž za opkladu*: as rhetorical contests where imagination, not truth, determined prestige.

Despite these global parallels, the Serbian version bears specific cultural markers. The motif of the obedient but eventually improvisational child reflects longstanding regional values of respect for parental guidance, tempered by admiration for individual cleverness. The figure of the *ćoso*, found in multiple Serbian tales, carries both comic and symbolic weight, often appearing as a meddling figure who is ultimately outwitted by someone younger and quicker-tongued.

Laž za opkladu was preserved in the oral collections of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. Karadžić's project of collecting oral literature was literary and political. He sought to canonise the speech of the people (*narod*), treating their tales as sources of wisdom and evidence of national identity. As Tufekčić wrote, 'narodne pjesme su stoga cijeli poetski i filozofski svijet. U njima je sama duša naroda.' ('Folk songs are therefore a whole poetic and philosophical world. In them is the very soul of the nation,' Tufekčić 2012) – a succinct description of the *Weltanschauung* within which Karadžić operated, as the same could be said for folk tales as well.

It is within this ethnonational framework that *Laž za opkladu* should be read. The tale is more than merely a funny story, as it can be understood as a record of how imagination, language, and comic absurdity converge in Serbian oral tradition to produce a particular kind of narrative pleasure; one that is both communal and competitive. As a story type, it echoes widely. As a cultural performance, it speaks most clearly in its own idiom.

The Structure of Exaggeration: Narrative and Logic

At the core of *Laž za opkladu* lies a sophisticated strategy of narrative escalation. What begins as a folk tale framed by a common-sense warning from a father – “да не меље нигђе у воденици, ће нађе ћосу” (‘not to grind in any mill where he finds the beardless man’) – quickly veers into a sustained performance of impossibility. This shift is neither accidental nor unstructured. On the contrary, the story’s comic force emerges precisely from its methodical accumulation of absurdity, executed in a rhythm that allows the audience to suspend disbelief while anticipating the next exaggeration.

The tale’s climax, the boy’s monologue, is a masterclass in oral inflation. He begins with the arresting paradox: “Кад ја бија у младо доба стари човек” (‘When I, in my youth, was an old man’). This line is the key that unlocks the tale’s logic. By reversing the natural order of time, the boy signals that we have now entered a realm where verbal invention takes precedence over empirical reality. From here, the exaggerations pile up in quick succession. He counts his bees daily, loses his best bee (*челац*), and rides a rooster to recover it. He crosses the sea, recovers the bee from a man who has it ploughing a field with a millet ploughshare, and is rewarded with the bee and with a full bag of millet flour.

The story intensifies. His bag bursts, scattering millet into the sea. The grains grow so tall that he climbs the stalks to the heavens. There, God is found eating porridge made from his millet and kindly gives him holy water. On his way back, his body suffers extreme misfortunes: rain floods the field, his hair becomes a climbing rope, a single sewing needle becomes firewood, and his head is used to crack ice; these acts are carefully sequenced episodes that push the narrative logic further into parody. What binds them together is continuity of imaginative transformation. Every problem, no matter how ludicrous, is met with an equally ludicrous solution.

This mode of storytelling has a structural underpinning. Vladimir Propp, in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, identifies thirty-one functions that govern the

progression of the Russian fairy tale. Most traditional fairy tales adhere to a chain of motifs: interdiction, violation, departure, testing, and return (Propp 1968, pp. 25–65). *Laž za opkladu* begins in line with this morphology. The father's prohibition (not to grind near a *ćoso*) is the initial function (Function 2: interdiction), followed by the child's violation of it (Function 3: violation). The boy departs from the ordinary world in pursuit of an unmolested mill (Function 11: departure).

However, as the tale enters its lying contest phase, it departs from Propp's model. Instead of pursuing a quest or rescuing a princess, the protagonist's goal becomes rhetorical supremacy. The functions collapse into one another, and the tale becomes recursive: each new image is an echo of the last, pushed further into the realm of surrealism. This deviation from classical tale logic does not weaken the narrative; rather, it transforms it into a comic spiral, where narrative progression is driven by the limits of imagination.

Importantly, the tale's internal consistency relies on escalation, where one might expect contradiction. Each lie builds upon the previous one. The rooster becomes a steed, the sea becomes a millet field, hair becomes a rope, and a fox (for lack of words) *produces* a legal document. One could argue here that there is a peculiar order in the bedlam. The logic is somewhat poetic, not empirical; it is this logic that enables the audience to follow along and suspend their disbelief (La Farge, 2014). As Albert Lord has shown in his work on oral epic, formulaic repetition and predictable sequencing are crucial to oral composition (Lord 1960, pp. 67–80). In *Laž za opkladu*, the predictability lies in the structure of one-upping absurdities.

The final twist, where the fox defecates a *tefter* (ledger) reading: “мени погача, а ћоси г...о” (‘the loaf for me, and shit for the beardless man’), serves both as comic release and as a rhetorical flourish. The joke, crude but final, affirms the boy's victory by narrative domination. He has told the better story; he has absorbed and exceeded the *ćoso*'s imagination. In the world of the tale, this is triumphant. Brunvand, for instance, wrote how humor and storytelling provide

narrative closure and symbolic resolution, victory achieved by outwitting, not overpowering the opponent (Brunvand, 1968).

But what are we to make of such a story, where lying is rewarded instead of punished, and absurdity is treated as evidence of merit? Here we arrive at one of the central paradoxes of the folk tradition: *truth through untruth*. The narrative's wild lies gesture toward deeper values. Wit, imagination, endurance, and mental agility are more valued than solemnity or age. The story reminds us that truth in folklore is often functional rather than factual. As Linda Dégh writes, it is not factuality that is the concern of the folk narrator, as his goal is to be artistically impressive and gain community approval (Dégh 1972, p. 62). In this tale, the boy earns both.

The *ćoso*, whose experience and presence dominate the early part of the story, is ultimately rendered impotent by verbal creativity. The tale thus echoes themes familiar in other cultures' trickster traditions. The young and weak defeat the old and strong by means of linguistic inventiveness. African American Brer Rabbit tales (Ruth Leslie 1997), Jewish *schlemiel* narratives (Pinsker 1991), and even Greek *mētis* (cunning intelligence) all participate in similar narrative structures, where the powerless succeed through narrative prowess rather than physical power (Ben-Amos 1969; Lévi-Strauss 1963).

The Serbian boy, in this sense, is a native trickster. The boy's lies are meant to dazzle. His success rests on his ability to animate the impossible in plausible-seeming sequences. Each absurd event is bound to the next by an if-then logic: if my bee crossed the sea, then I must follow; if the millet grew, I must climb it; if God gave me water, I must carry it down. The narrative has a structure (it is *about* something) even if that something is impossible.

Moreover, the tale's conclusion, where the ledger itself contains the verdict, offers a satire of institutional authority. Written proof (long the domain of the powerful, Goody, 1986) is here turned into a gag. The fox's *tefter* delivers a folk justice. The final act of kicking the fox until it voids a record book is grotesque

but thematically appropriate. Truth literally emerges from the rear end of absurdity.

In other words, the tale of *Laž za opkladu* is a carefully constructed exercise in narrative escalation. It mirrors the structure of traditional tales only to overturn them, using surreal exaggeration to explore deeper truths about wit, identity, and social value. In a world dominated by older, more experienced figures, the folk tale reserves its admiration for the young liar with a sharp tongue and an inexhaustible imagination.

Comic Performance and the Oral Tradition

The tale *Laž za opkladu* is a written record of a traditional Serbian folktale; it is, above all, a vestige of oral performance, embedded in a long-standing tradition of verbal contests, comic boasting, and situational playfulness within Balkan folk culture. To grasp the full impact of the story, it must be understood as a performed event, an exchange shaped by audience, occasion, and expectations. Its rhythm, escalation, absurdity, and punchline all reflect but *delivery* (as well as narrative design), rooted in performative storytelling practices that long predate literacy.

In Serbian oral tradition, verbal contests form a robust sub-genre of narrative activity. This includes *nadgornjavanje* (verbal duels), *lagarije* (tall tales), riddling sessions, and boast-based challenges commonly seen during *prela*, *posijela*, and other communal evening gatherings (Koljević 1991, p. 11). These forms of spoken folklore were less about content than delivery, with the performer's wit, pacing, and memory serving as measures of prestige. In this setting, a tale like *Laž za opkladu* is not recited solemnly; we could say it was *played*. Its humour would have emerged from the words themselves as well from gesture, tone, mimicry, and comic timing. In this sense, the tale belongs to a living, embodied tradition of folk drama.

At the centre of this verbal stage stands the *ćoso* (the beardless man) whose figure, recurrent in South Slavic oral narratives, carries layers of symbolic

and comic meaning. In folk tradition, *ćoso* often represents a mixture of mock authority and comic vulnerability. His beardlessness marks him physically and metaphorically: he is older, possibly impotent, possibly wise, but always marked out as 'other'. The *ćoso* frequently appears as a figure who attempts to assert authority but is undone by ridicule or trickery. In *Laž za opkladu*, the *ćoso* opens the narrative with apparent benevolence, offering the boy a turn at the mill and suggesting they share a loaf. But this generosity masks a trap: the *ćoso* proposes the contest to win the whole bread, confident he can outlie the child. His defeat is thus a ritual humiliation of the elder by the younger, played out through performance.

Key to the tale's impact is its careful use of repetition and build-up. The boy's journey through multiple mills, each of which inexplicably contains the same *ćoso*, sets the rhythm early. The repeated encounters establish a pattern that primes the listener for the punchline structure of the final lie. Each exaggeration in the boy's monologue follows the same model: an impossible event is introduced (riding a rooster, climbing millet to heaven), then resolved with an even more implausible detail (God baking *proja*, using hair as rope – a Serbian Rapunzel, perhaps?). The listener does not pause to question plausibility and is invited to follow the tale's cadence and imaginative leap. This aligns with what Milman Parry observed in his analysis of oral epic formula: repetition in oral narrative functions as a memory aid and a rhythm cue, guiding both teller and audience, as a 'special device for supplying the dramatic element' (Parry 1971, p. 289). Moreover, the tale's pacing obeys the principles of what Richard Bauman identifies as 'performance keys' (more exactly, the 'keying of performance', as it was originally put), discursive cues that distinguish storytelling from ordinary speech (Bauman 1975, p. 295). These include the adoption of formulaic openings or closings, shifts in tone, exaggerated gesture, or the assumption of character voices. In the case of *Laž za opkladu*, the boy's switch into the lie ('Кад ја бија у младо доба стари човек') likely serves such a function. It announces a transition from mimetic narrative into heightened verbal play. The statement, paradoxical by design, functions as a signal to the audience that the performer is now entering a game space governed by audacity.

Dell Hymes' theory of the SPEAKING model (setting, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre) offers a useful frame to understand this tale as performance (Hymes 2013). The setting is likely a communal domestic environment, such as a winter evening gathering. The participants include a knowing audience, possibly intergenerational. The *end* or purpose is comic entertainment and, perhaps, social commentary. The act sequence unfolds in structured absurdities, building to a grotesque punchline. The key is playful, ironic. The instrumentalities are oral, improvised, possibly supported by gesture and mimicry. The norms demand verbal ingenuity, and the genre is a contest-tale.

This framing helps explain why the tale's expletive punchline is crude but performatively satisfying. In a communal setting, this closing phrase would likely have elicited laughter for its content and for its inevitability. The audience has followed the rhythm, accepted the premise, and now receives the payoff. The sudden appearance of the *tefter*, the ledger that settles the wager in absurdly bureaucratic fashion, provides a final satirical jab. In a society where written law is distant or oppressive (illegible to the local population, in this case, Ottoman), the idea that even divine justice favours the liar reinforces the folk belief in cunning over hierarchy.

The motif of the verbal duel as social levelling device is not unique to Serbian culture. Comparative examples in Turkic, Persian, and Arabic folklore show similar patterns. The *Nasreddin Hodja* corpus, for instance, contains multiple tales in which absurd statements or clever reversals challenge the authority of scholars, merchants, or judges. In such tales, humour equalises as much as it entertains. It gives the powerless a rhetorical tool to resist. As Jack Goody has argued, oral cultures often develop elaborate forms of memorised verbal play to counterbalance their lack of institutional authority (Goody 1987, pp. 40–51). *Laž za opkladu* fits this pattern precisely. It is a folk parable in which performance determines justice. The truth does not.

Even the child's role in the tale confirms this performative dimension. The boy is both exceedingly clever and a brilliant *performer*. His lies are shaped for an

audience. He escalates deliberately, with a plan, choosing each impossible image to one-up his rival. In doing so, he enters into what Bauman calls a 'communicative competence', that is, a social contract with his listeners that affirms his authority within the rules of the storytelling moment (Bauman 1984, 38).

One can even imagine the performer of the tale, perhaps a grandfather or a young adult, assuming both roles in narration: the voice of the *ćoso*, slow and boastful; the voice of the boy, quick and absurd. The fox defecating a legal record becomes a theatrical gesture, told with flourish, perhaps even mimed. This dynamic is central to oral tradition: the tale is spoken and enacted.

The tale of *Laž za opkladu* must consequently be read as more than a static text but as a living event as well, as it is performed, shaped, and remembered within the frameworks of Serbian oral culture. Its effectiveness lies in its delivery. Its humour, its escalation, and its triumph are inseparable from the oral conditions of its telling. As such, it offers scholars a window into narrative form and into the performative genius of the folk mind.

Social Function and Cultural Values

The tale *Laž za opkladu* serves as more than a record of comic imagination or narrative virtuosity, since it also functions (like much traditional oral literature) as a mirror of social relationships and cultural values within the rural Serbian community from which it originates. Under the guise of humour, it dramatizes power, tension, and the imaginative possibilities of resistance. It offers its audience laughter, but also a subtle commentary on how to live and survive in a world where formal authority may not always serve justice, and where survival often depends less on strength or status than on quick thinking and verbal cunning.

At the centre of the tale is a contest of *wits*, framed by age difference and implicitly by social rank. The *ćoso*, whose figure in Serbian folklore has already been noted as a comic elder, enters the narrative with an apparent advantage. He is physically quicker (arriving before the boy at every mill) and rhetorically

confident, proposing the wager with assurance. The boy, meanwhile, is younger, on an errand of obedience, and initially hesitant. But by the end of the tale, it is the child who triumphs by imagination, where, in many a case, the protagonist would excel in strength and moral righteousness. The world is inverted. Age, which typically commands respect in patriarchal rural culture, is here rendered foolish. Youth, which is expected to obey, emerges victorious.

This inversion is central to the tale's function. It belongs to what Mikhail Bakhtin called the *carnivalesque*: a momentary overturning of norms, a licensed chaos through which social pressures are released and transformed (Bakhtin 1984). During *carnival*, fools wear crowns, kings wear rags, and the ridiculous becomes the new standard of truth. *Laž za opkladu* is precisely this sort of moment. The story is a temporary world in which the logic of everyday life is replaced by absurdity, and it is within this inversion that deeper cultural commentary is located.

Serbian rural communities, like many traditional societies, were structured by strong hierarchies: age, male authority, family order, religious tradition. Obedience and deference were the expected modes of behaviour, particularly from children to elders. Yet these expectations did not erase social tensions or frustrations. Folktales such as *Laž za opkladu* offered an outlet for these feelings. They allowed listeners to laugh at those who usually wielded power. The *ćoso*, here a stand-in for age, tradition, and even bureaucracy (recall the ledger at the end), is outmatched by the very child he might have expected to dominate.

The tale's mode of triumph – verbal exaggeration – is itself a folk ideal. In the absence of institutional power, rural communities often placed great value on *snalažljivost* (resourcefulness, adaptability, cleverness). The boy's success is the application of narrative ingenuity. He constructs an alternate world in which millet grows to heaven and foxes produce legal documents. These are stories, and in the oral culture of the Balkans, storytelling was itself a kind of power. As Slavica Ranković noted, Serbian oral tradition valued the *pričalac*, the storyteller, as a figure of prestige, whose command of language conferred authority in its

own right as a ‘custodian of traditions’ (Ranković 2006, p. 149; Albert B. Lord’s theory of the epic singer – though focused more broadly – applies strongly to Serbian oral culture as well, emphasizing how mastery of traditional formulaic language bestowed both aesthetic and social prestige; Lord 1960). The boy, by this standard, becomes a *pričalac* within the tale, and his victory is also a meta-narrative triumph. Laughter, in this context, serves a dual purpose. On the surface, it entertains. But it also *regulates*. As Henri Bergson argued in his essay *Laughter*, comic moments often function as correctives to social rigidity: ‘Laughter has a social meaning’ (Bergson 1911, Chapter I). In *Laž za opkladu*, laughter emerges from the absurdity of the boy’s claims as much as it does from the recognition of their purpose. The *ćoso* is punished by being the butt of a joke. He is rendered ridiculous, and his defeat is public and humiliating.

Similarly, Sigmund Freud, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, proposed that comic narrative allows for the temporary expression of forbidden or repressed desires. Jokes, he argued, bypass censorship by couching their transgressions in humour (Freud 1905, 1805). In the case of *Laž za opkladu*, the taboo may be manifold: disrespect for elders, delight in scatology, mockery of legal authority. The final punchline is more than vulgarity. It is a linguistic release, a cathartic inversion of dignity. The loaf, symbol of nourishment and success, is awarded to the speaker; the *ćoso* receives filth. This punchline, especially when performed aloud, reclaims power for the weak, ridicules the strong, and allows the audience to experience a world turned inside out.

This mechanism is not unique to Serbian folklore, though its expression here is culturally specific. In rural Balkan culture, where bread was both staple and symbol, a contest over *pogača* resonates beyond the literal. To win the bread is to win the right to eat, to live, to speak. The *ćoso*’s loss is thus a symbolic removal from community respect. Moreover, the setting of the tale anchors it in the everyday world of the village. The story offers a fantastical rewriting of the familiar.

The grotesque image of the fox, the ledger, and the bodily release ties this emotional lesson together with comic closure. The world of the tale is complete.

The hierarchy has been inverted, order has been restored by disorder, and the loaf has been awarded to the rightful (if ridiculous) victor.

Laž za opkladu, then, is far more than a curiosity of Serbian oral literature. It is a vibrant instance of how humour functions as both *release* and *regulation*, as both *narrative form* and *social message*. It teaches that truth may not always triumph, but that cleverness can. It allows laughter to rebalance social tensions and offers its audience a moment of imaginative freedom. And in its final absurd image, it crystallises a core value of the culture that preserved it: that the storyteller, not the authority figure, deserves the last word.

Comparative Case Studies

The tale *Laž za opkladu* aligns closely with a widespread class of folktales in which characters engage in ludicrous contests of boasting and lying. Though classified as ATU 1920 in the international index, the motif is not limited to Slavic oral traditions. Analogous stories are found across Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas, each adapting the basic structure to fit local humour, cultural references, and modes of storytelling.

In British folk tradition, the Yorkshire and Scottish ‘lying contests’ often feature rustic men exaggerating the size of cabbages or the length of winter. Katharine Briggs, in her dictionary of British folklore, records tales where liars compete to convince each other of implausible harvests and weather events, with the winning lie frequently undercutting the logic of its predecessors (Briggs & Tongue, 1968). One Scottish variant, recorded in the Highlands, tells of a man who rides a flea to market and uses a thimble to water his field. As in the Serbian tale, the narrative escalates with surreal detail and absurd self-consistency, blurring the line between invention and parody.

German *Lügenmärchen*, or ‘lying tales’, are perhaps the most formally structured examples of this genre. *Lügenmärchen* are known for their formal structure, which is designed to systematically violate everyday logic. This is achieved by

creating a narrative that follows a consistent schema, similar to the structure of forgery tales, where the interactions between characters follow a dominant direction despite the illogical premises (Ziolkowski 2003, Lenain 2015). The absurdity, like in *Laž za opkladu*, lies in the premise and in the methodical delivery. This resemblance suggests a common underlying impulse: to test the limits of believability in oral performance.

A distant but conceptually related tradition emerges in the Turkish Nasreddin Hodja cycle. Though Hodja's tales tend to revolve around wit and paradox rather than boasting, several stories show the Hodja delivering comic exaggerations to mock pedantry or hypocrisy. In one tale, the Hodja claims he can see in the dark because he carries a lantern – when asked why he then needs light, he replies: 'So others won't bump into me.' These are not lies in the ATU 1920 sense, yet the logic-bending mechanism is shared. As scholarship has noted, Hodja's tales often reveal a peasant's answer to bureaucracy and empty authority (Bynum 1989), a dynamic that closely mirrors the Serbian boy outwitting the *ćoso*.

American frontier 'tall tales' carry this exaggeration to nationalistic proportions. The adventures of Davy Crockett or Pecos Bill often feature larger-than-life feats: riding tornadoes, lassoing rivers, cooking entire forests in a frying pan. As Richard Dorson argued in *Man and Beast in American Comic Legend*, these stories emerge from frontier conditions, where boasting became a communal form of entertainment and masculine bonding (Dorson 1982). Unlike the child hero in *Laž za opkladu*, however, American tall tale protagonists are often adult men representing human dominance over nature.

African-American folk traditions, particularly those shaped during slavery, also include 'lying tales, though they are often embedded in trickster cycles. In tales of High John de Conquer or Brer Rabbit, speech becomes a survival tool. According to Lawrence Levine, such tales allowed enslaved people to invert their social reality and temporarily escape subjugation through humour (Levine 1977, p. 14). While not direct analogues to the Serbian tale, the function (subversive, playful, and primarily communal) is strikingly similar.

Geography, literacy, and social function all shape the variations across traditions. In pre-literate or semi-literate societies, such as rural Serbia in the 19th century, memory and verbal improvisation were paramount (VijayaKumari 2018). The tale *Laž za opkladu* reflects this, with its elaborate, breathless structure that lends itself to performance. The story also depends on local idioms, such as the recurring motif of the *ćoso*, a figure recognisable and faintly ridiculous to Serbian audiences. In contrast, in societies with written traditions, like 19th century Germany, *Lügenmärchen* were often codified in collections, such as those by the Brothers Grimm, and stylised accordingly.

The social context further determines the tone. British and German lies are largely rustic and observational; American lies are heroic; Serbian lies are surreal and linguistically inventive. But across all variants, exaggeration becomes a mode of cultural expression. Margrethe Bruun Vaage, for instance, introduced the concept of ‘fictional relief’, where audiences of fictional works are temporarily relieved from moral obligations, allowing them to engage with narratives without the burden of real-world consequences (Vaage, 2013). Therefore, when the Serbian boy in *Laž za opkladu* recounts how he ‘took his head off to break ice’ (‘онда ја скинем моју главу, те њом пробијем лед’) or how he ‘rode a rooster across the sea’ (‘оседлам пијевца, па узјашем на њега’), he enters a universal tradition. Yet the manner, rhythm, and imagery remain distinctly Balkan. The tale is a culturally inflected performance of resistance and imagination.

Theoretical Considerations: Lying, Truth, and Folkloristics

At the centre of *Laž za opkladu* lies a fundamental paradox that has long preoccupied folklorists: the use of fictional or deliberately untrue statements to produce something culturally meaningful and, in a sense, truthful. The story, in which a boy defeats an elder in a contest of lies, draws its narrative power precisely from its transparent falsity. Yet the tale, far from being meaningless, resonates deeply within its tradition, affirming comic pleasure and a kind of communal logic grounded in performance, memory, and oral expectation.

Linda Dégh was among the first to articulate this dynamic systematically. In her pivotal study of legend and belief, she noted that truth in folklore is determined by credibility within the group ('every utterance that seeks credibility', Dégh 2001, p. 79). Even when audiences know a story to be "untrue" in a literal sense, they can invest in it emotionally, socially, and symbolically. In *Laž za opkladu*, the audience does not believe the boy truly removed his head to break the ice, nor that his millet grew high enough to reach the heavens ('оно моје просо, што се просуло у море... узрасло до неба'). Yet these are not failures of storytelling – they are its conditions.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett deepened this insight by asking how folklore functions as a medium of knowledge. 'Verbal art in performance,' she writes, 'exists at the intersection of the fictive and the real' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989, p. 133). The boy's absurd lies in *Laž za opkladu* serve as demonstrations of imaginative power, linguistic dexterity, and narrative mastery. The punchline is thus above being simply comical. It resolves the tale's logic by confirming that verbal skill, not status, determines social outcome.

This reversal recalls what Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) famously called 'bricolage': the use of available narrative fragments to construct a new, but coherent, world. The boy's impossible story is not entirely random. It is bound by internal consistency, narrative callbacks, and rhythmic pacing. The roasted millet in heaven, the frozen water, the missing head, the fox with the ledger: each motif reinforces the last, escalating the absurdity while maintaining the logic of folktale form. If the tale were truly random, it would collapse. Instead, it builds tension and release through exaggeration, climax, and resolution.

The story thus operates as a meta-narrative: a tale about tales, and the conditions under which they are told, judged, and remembered. The lie contest is a dramatization of oral tradition itself, where the power to fabricate, reshape, and redirect meaning is the mark of a true narrator. As Ruth Bottigheimer notes, folktales often include moments where storytelling itself becomes the object of the tale (Bottigheimer 1989, pp. 65–68). In this case, the boy wins by knowing how to tell the biggest, most consistent, and funniest lie.

This touches on performance theory in folkloristics. Richard Bauman's framing of storytelling as a 'communicative event' highlights the social calibration between narrator and audience. It is not enough to lie; one must lie in a way that meets audience expectations and maintains their suspension of disbelief, even when disbelief is central to the joke (Bauman 1975). The contest in *Laž za opkladu* reveals a shared understanding between speaker and listener: we both know this is untrue, but we are bound by the rules of telling and the pleasure of escalation.

Freud's interpretation of jokes as socially sanctioned outlets for repressed energies (Freud 1905) may also illuminate the tale's appeal. The absurdity is liberating because it exposes the arbitrariness of social convention. Lying, here, is not a vice. It is a sanctioned, even admired, form of cleverness. It permits the audience to laugh at the rules that make the world as it is.

Laž za opkladu is a story about stories; how they are made, how they function, and what they mean. It insists that truth is not a precondition for meaning. Instead, it proposes a folk epistemology in which exaggeration, absurdity, and comic excess become valid modes of insight. In the end, the tale reaffirms the power of fiction to reflect and to shape communal truths.

Conclusion

Laž za opkladu is a Serbian folktale that does more than amuse. It teaches, questions, and reshapes the listener's relationship to narrative, truth, and tradition. Through the ludic frame of a lying contest between an elder and a child, the tale reveals the enduring folkloric strategy of exaggeration. This is no mere stylistic flourish; it is a deeply embedded cognitive and cultural practice. As we have seen, the logic of *Laž za opkladu* emerges because of its absurdities. The serial episodes (millet growing into the sky, a rooster being saddled and ridden, a head used to break ice, a fox defecating a ledger) operate within a consistent, intensifying structure that honours narrative coherence even as it parodies it.

The tale's strength lies in how it balances nonsense with form. It understands, instinctively, what Vladimir Propp observed in the morphology of folktales: that a sequence of actions governed by recognisable functions provides the narrative engine, while the content can veer into the fantastical (Propp 1968). Yet herein are the functions themselves rendered comic. There are no trials for the boy in which he would need to slay dragons; instead, he outlies the elder, subverting the traditional heroic script through verbal wit. If Propp's hero travels across kingdoms, the hero of *Laž za opkladu* journeys through narrative logic itself, stretching it to its breaking point, only to find that it holds.

Equally vital is the story's function within oral tradition. It is a tale to be told aloud, shared between people who recognise its internal game. Richard Bauman's understanding of storytelling as a performance, shaped by audience expectations and social context, is essential here (Bauman 1975). The tale rewards listeners who recognise formula, rhythm, escalation, and punchline. Each successive absurdity is anticipated, and its arrival confirms the shared cultural contract between teller and audience. The final twist is the sealing of a story-world's logic, one that reverses status and affirms skill.

What makes *Laž za opkladu* particularly valuable in the folkloristic canon is its capacity to operate on several levels at once. It entertains. It disrupts. It invites reflection on who has the right to speak, to claim truth, and to win. The boy's victory is about taking the tools of tradition and using them in a new key. This is why the tale persists. It has the durability of all good oral literature: an ability to change without losing its bones.

As a social commentary, the tale gently mocks the solemnity of authority figures. The elder (ćoso) is not wicked, though he is predictable, and he is beaten by someone younger, sharper, and hungrier for the tale itself. We might see this as part of a broader genre of verbal duels and lying contests that allow listeners to rehearse subversion in safe, comic forms. Like Nasreddin Hodja's riddles, or British bragging contests from Yorkshire or Scotland, or the frontier yarns of American tall tale heroes, *Laž za opkladu* plays with truth to

say something honest about human desire for agency and recognition (Bendix 2009; Dégh 1995).

From a theoretical standpoint, the tale helps us see fiction as a form of knowledge. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argued, folklore constructs ‘truths’ through aesthetic, performative, and symbolic means (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989). It is not interested in whether millet really grows to heaven, though it is interested in what it means for a child to say that it does, and to do so better than an adult. In this way, *Laž za opkladu* becomes a story about stories, about their power to outlast, to outwit, and to transform.

Looking forward, this tale invites further research in several directions. One promising area lies in exploring children’s use of exaggeration and tall tales in peer folklore, especially how they use humour to test boundaries and establish status. Another is digital folklore: the rise of ‘cypypasta’, internet hoaxes, and ironic storytelling online demonstrates that the logic of *Laž za opkladu* is far from obsolete. The techniques of escalation, hyperbole, and narrative baiting live on, albeit with new idioms and audiences. The folklorist’s task is to preserve stories, but also to track the forms that continue to express their enduring themes.

In closing, *Laž za opkladu* deserves its place in the international catalogue of tale types as because it represents ATU 1920 so clearly, as much as because it pushes the genre to its limit. It does what the best folktales do: it distills the improbable into something recognisable, something shared. It affirms that lying, when done right, can be the sincerest form of storytelling.

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