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Urban Legends as an Emic Category

Vernacular Conceptualizations of 'Urbana Legenda' in Slovenia

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Abstract: The second half of the twentieth century saw important paradigmatic changes occur in anthropology, ethnology, and other humanities disciplines, shifting the focus of attention from rural worlds to urban environments. Marking this shift in folkloristics, the *urban legend* was proposed. Despite its early popularity among folklore scholars, evidence kept piling up that the narratives signified by this term are not necessarily bound to urban areas, because of which the term's analytical value, and consequently its use in scholarly debate, gradually declined. Nevertheless, following the large commercial success of certain legend anthologies, the term was eagerly appropriated by mass media and popular culture, crossing language barriers, enabling its entrance into the world of vernacular. Once there, the term was embraced by the 'folk', the bearers of legends themselves – becoming *emic* in the process – and was attributed a whole new set of conceptual and connotative meanings. When studying vernacular culture and communication, one can thus observe four different emic conceptualizations of *urban legend*: urban legend as a folk genre, urban legend as a frame of reference, urban legend as a metonym, and urban legend as a marker of identity.

Zusammenfassung: In der zweite Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts fanden bedeutende Paradigmenwechsel in der Anthropologie, Ethnologie und weiteren geisteswissenschaftlichen Disziplinen statt, die den Fokus des Interesses von ländlichen Regionen auf städtische Milieus verschoben. Als Resultat dieser Entwicklungen wurde in der Folkloristik der Begriff der ‚urban legend' eingeführt. Wohl war er anfangs unter den Forschenden der Folkloristik sehr beliebt, allerdings häuften sich in der Folge die Belege dafür, dass die damit bezeichneten Erzählungen nicht zwangsläufig an eine städtische Umgebung gebunden sind. Deshalb nahm nach und nach der analytische Wert des Begriffs und somit sein Gebrauch in der Forschung ab.

Note: The paper is based on a presentation I gave at the International Society of Contemporary Legends Research (ISCLR) conference, held in 2012 in Göttingen, Germany, as a PhD student. For the presentation, the ISCLR awarded me the Dr. David Buchan Student Essay Prize.

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Dennoch wurde der Begriff infolge des großen kommerziellen Erfolgs gewisser Legenden-Anthologien von den Massenmedien und der Populärkultur begeistert aufgenommen – und zwar über Sprachgrenzen hinweg, so dass er im Volksmund Eingang finden konnte. Hier machte sich die allgemeine Bevölkerung (‚folk'), in der Legenden beheimatet sind, den Begriff zu eigen. Als Folge dieses Prozesses wuchs dem Begriff *emische* Qualität zu, und ihm wurden eine Reihe neuer Vorstellungen und Konnotationen zugeschrieben. Bei der Analyse von volkstümlicher Kultur und Kommunikation lassen sich daher vier emische Verständnisse von ‚urban legend' unterscheiden: als volkstümliche Gattung, als Bezugsrahmen, als Metonym und als Identitätsmarker.

1 Introduction

Virtually every human settlement of substantial size and significance has been characterized by its own folk narrative repertoire through time (over millennia in some cases), all the way up to the present day. Thus, a vast majority of cities have their own set of stories, explaining the origins of this urban entity or a significant part thereof, its distinctive natural and cultural features, the provenance and traits of its inhabitants, and so on (see: Marks 2000, Cody 2005, Leszkowicz 2009; in Slovenia Stanonik 2001 and Haramija 2011). These narratives display a wide variety of genres of narrative folklore – memorates, jokes, legendry, etc. Often, they highlight a relationship between the cityscape and the supernatural as well.

Primarily, these repertoires of 'urban narratives'[1] are shaped by processes of identity creation that set them firmly within environments that self-identify as urban. That means that their motifs are woven into the context of the urban world as they are repeatedly adapted to real (historical, cultural) contexts with each new transmission through narrative events. Thus, they are linked to the tangible and observable (experiential) contemporary elements of said urban environments. For the urban settlements of today, these elements include inter alia restaurants, shopping centers, school premises, cinemas, car parks, technology, and transport infrastructure, the general way of life in the city, and so on. In the context of transmission itself, such elements are easily incorporated into narratives as they are familiar to both the narrator and their listeners. Many of the resulting narratives then constitute the core identity of the city/town and are therefore often visualized

1 The qualifier *urban* comes from Latin and it means 'relating to or characteristic of a town or a city'. The term *urban legend* thus encompasses and refers to the narratives that occur in the cultural environments of cities or are somewhat connected to urban spaces and way of life.

or otherwise realized and used as part of the city's tourism and other external presentations.

However, in the 1960s and 1970s, a new term emerged, first in American and later in international folkloristics, employing the adjective *urban* in relation to narrative folklore – the *urban legend*. It was proposed as an attempt to define, terminologically and methodologically, an entirely new category within a genre system as it has been employed by the scholarly discipline of folklore studies. Thus, it differed conceptually from the ontological narratives mentioned above significantly. Latched onto a simultaneous paradigm shift towards studying societies and cultures of urban areas in contemporary humanities, the term and concept of *urban legend* was widely accepted by folklorists at first. The 1980s, however, saw a great discussion about and critique of the term and concept, rendering it invalid for scientific debate in folkloristics by the end of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, just as its use in the scientific discourse was irreversibly fading, the term urban legend grew roots in a completely new environment – among the folk, among the carriers of the narrative materials themselves, in the scope of the *emic* or the *vernacular*. Today, urban legend is a widely accepted term in common parlance all over the globe and is practically the only one that describes and even acknowledges the phenomenon of contemporary legendry beyond the folkloristic milieu. Subsequent uses of the term urban legend that have spread through mass and (later) social media, popular culture, advertising, and everyday communication are endless. This quickly became clear during my fieldwork research into contemporary legendry in Slovenia as well, whilst being a participant-observant in many narrative events during the span of five years (2009–2014), and through subsequent analysis of the recorded and transcribed narrative material.

It was not only terminology, however, that traversed this path. Initially proposed as an analytical tool to describe, understand, and compare contemporary narrative material, the urban legend has gradually morphed within the vernacular into smaller, meaning-enriched semantic units that describe particular narrowly defined cultural conceptualizations. After a thorough comparative analysis, I found that these could be grouped together into distinct semantic clusters, forming four clearly distinguishable vernacular/emic conceptualizations of the term. These are: 1) Urban legend as a vernacular genre; 2) Urban legend as a frame of reference; 3) Urban legend as a metonymy; and 4) Urban legend as a marker of identity.

I have become aware of this interesting undistinguished aspect of contemporary folk narratives (and contemporary folk attitudes towards said narratives) during the time I have been conducting my fundamental research on contemporary legendry in Slovenia. That means that the findings of this article are based on Slovenian examples of contemporary narrative folklore, namely contemporary legendry in Slovenia. This brings about the legitimate question of the applicability of my con-

clusions to a broader academic discourse, since the particularities of the language and culture that marked the research process play an important part in this writing as well. However, I have run my findings by numerous colleagues working in folkloristics around the world over the last decade. They have confirmed to me that the ideas presented here are easily applicable in other contemporary languages and cultural contexts all around the Western folkloristic milieu and beyond. Because of that, I can afford to 'paint with broad brushstrokes' here and offer some generalized observations and conclusions as well. It is important to note though, that a certain linguistic partiality can and does shine through the text.

2 Urban Legend

While some older American folklorists had published various attempts to define the specific phenomenon of folk narratives linked to urban space and way of life, it was professor Richard Dorson in the 1960s who first tried to understand them as an entirely separate category within contemporary culture and folklore. He used the *urban legend* to describe "floating single-episode legends [...] usually told as second-hand memorates" (cf. Brunvand 2001a: 15). According to Dorson himself, the urban legend is one of the three most important sub-genres of the storytelling genre of legend as it materializes in North America, alongside stories related to concrete space and place ('placelore' in English literature), and stories about specific real or imaginary persons. While publishing these ideas in various texts, he also constantly reminded his students of the importance of collecting this kind of material (cf. Brunvand 2001a: 14–15).

The coinage of the term urban legend itself is also attributed to Richard Dorson. Although it is not certain that he came up with the term himself, he was the first author to publish it in a scientific text.[2] Initially, in the late 1950s, Dorson (although

2 It is likely, however, that Richard Dorson actually coined the term, as he was known for his fondness for neologisms. He was the author of a number of derivations using the suffix '-lore', to which he added various prefixes according to the content of the individual strand of narrative material in question. This gave rise to such terms as *druglore*, *hippielore*, *draftlore* (military recruitment folklore), and the like (e.g. Dorson 1973: 260–273 and 304–308). The same scholarly wordsmithery also resulted in perhaps Dorson's most important terminological contribution to folklore studies, *fakelore* (see Dorson 1969), an important folkloristic concept of 1970s and 1980s folkloristics, which captures and describes those cultural elements that, due to structural or contextual factors, are misunderstood as folklore (Fox 1980: 245, Briggs 2002: 4). A similar pattern of neologism construction was followed by some of Dorson's students in the publication of their research – in works dealing with contemporary narrative folklore, the term *cokelore* (folklore about the company Coca-Cola) is often cited (e.g. Fine 1978).

inconsistently) referred to contemporary legendry as *urban belief tales* (after Brunvand 2001a: 14), but in later literature he also used the terms *legend*, *modern tale*, and *urban legend* to refer to the same material. The term first appeared in Dorson's 1968 chapter within the joint publication *On Living Traditions* (Dorson 1968), being used to name several examples of ghost stories.[3] He used several other terminological combinations in his texts, where he employed the essentialist category of 'urbanity' (such as *modern urban legend*, *urban belief legend* – see, for example, Emrich 1972: 327–337), but it was the term *urban legend* that achieved the widest use among these.[4] Richard Dorson is credited by many American folklorists as the father of their discipline, as he had greatly influenced his many students, through whom his terminological and conceptual ideas spread to younger generations of researchers, and through them to international academia and further on to non-scientific circles. Among his students, Jan Harold Brunvand was the main advocate and promotor of the use of the term *urban legend*.

The initiative to propose and define a new genre of narrative folklore, grounded in the urban, coincided with and was facilitated by described fundamental changes in the humanities at large, and in ethnology and anthropology in particular, when a break with the exclusive preoccupation with rural populations and a shift in research attention to urban environments occurred. This break brought new concepts and methodological solutions, especially the sub-discipline of urban anthropology (Hannerz 1980: 1–2).[5] Thus, the inception of urban legend was a folkloristic contribution to this shift.

The key concept of these changes is *urbanity*. As several authors have shown, however, this is by all means not a neutral category but rather a value signifier that implicitly represents modernity, openness, progress, tolerance, and other values (Johler 2002: 102). It comes with an apparent clarity it would seem, but in actuality urbanity poses a considerable methodological problem, as it is never a category in its own right, but always, implicitly or explicitly, part of the dichotomy of the urban/non-urban (Johler 2002: 106) or urban/rural (Zenner 2010). For this reason, it is

3 Almost at the same time, independently of Dorson, the term *urban legend* was used by William Edgerton (Edgerton 1968: 38 and 41), professor of Slavic language and literature at Indiana University, but it is clear from the text that his description is qualitative – denoting narratives found in cities – and is not proposed as a distinct genre category.

4 See, for instance, a special volume of a scientific Journal *JFI* (*Journal of Folklore Institute*) from 1980 dedicated to urban legends exclusively.

5 In Slovenia, Slavko Kremenšek introduced research interest in cities and urban environments (with the important focus of the working class) into the discipline of ethnology (see Kremenšek 1980). Later authors have noted, however, that Slovenian researchers have practiced so-called 'urban essentialism' for quite some time after that in the name of the urbanity paradigm, rather than urban ethnology (after Kozorog 2012: 68).

often destructive and exclusionary in scientific discourse, because alongside itself as well as alongside the characteristics attributed to it, the rural becomes a signifier of everything opposite, i.e. closed-mindedness, intolerance, hatred (Kozorog 2012: 61). Numerous empirical studies have shown that the dichotomy between urban and rural is hardly (if ever) as easily identifiable in practice, and that both concepts are very fluid and intangible and often intertwined (see for example Muršič 2000). In the context of Slovenian ethnology, Borut Brumen has proposed a solution to this problem by understanding 'urbanity' as a qualitative category for "defining certain ways of living (and thinking!) and their cultural contents" (Brumen 1995: 163). Urbanity, according to Brumen, is thus to be defined by (self-reflexive) sets of identities and values that can be found everywhere, not only in cities, which opens up new possibilities of interpretation and subsequently justifies the existence of urban ethnology/anthropology. However, many other authors point out that the ideological-discursive exclusionary side of urbanity was (and still is) so strong that no attempt at definition has yet been able to avoid it and that urbanity as a scientific category has therefore been surpassed and consequently rendered useless (Zenner 2010, Kozorog 2012: 61–62 and 66–69).

As the general criticism that concepts based on the essential category of urbanity can (no longer) be acceptable for scientific analysis in ethnology and anthropology has won the discourse, a critical (self-)reflection on the concept of the urban legend has also taken place within folklore studies; since urbanity is a value-laden category of separation, whose binary opposition is rurality, all categories defined by it automatically fall into this value dichotomy. This poses a new methodological problem for folkloristics, since genre systematics – and taxonomy with it – is constantly being refined and verified based on new empirical narrative material amassed during fieldwork (Honko 1989: 16). When trying to understand urban folk narratives, an inevitable requirement emerges for identifying, defining, and distinguishing suburban tales, rural tales, regional tales, and so on (Kammer 1988: 231) – something that is not substantiated by fieldwork and thus inevitably leads to a dead end.

On the other hand, empirical research on folklore material since the 1980s has also shown the futility of using urban categories in folklore studies in general. Many folklorists have shown that urban narratives, both with their content and context, are not in the exclusive domain of cities or urban settlements in general. Gillian Bennett's work demonstrates that many urban narratives have their parallels in rural settings (e.g. Bennett 1985: 221), while Wilhelm Nicolaisen, on the other hand, has noted that many texts, considered urban, are in many contexts not actually related to urban settings at all (after Wolf-Knuts 1987: 169). The reason why certain narratives came to be labeled as urban, says Ulrika Wolf-Knuts, lies within the tradition of folkloristics, which had long regarded folklore and legends as something exclusively rural, peasant (Wolf-Knuts 1987: 168). Bengt af Klintberg shares the

same view, understanding the increased academic interest in these narratives in relation to the narrow-mindedness of older generations of folklorists, who ignored anything other than the stories of pre-industrial communities. This "new research subject", according to him, is only distinguished by the turning of attention to the urban environments, which had not been studied before (cf. Dégh 2001: 88). In other words, the urban legend is nothing more than an affirmative answer to the question "Is there folk in the city?", posed by Richard Dorson at the end of the 1960s (Dorson 1970).[6] Hence, the urban legend, as it had been defined and used in folkloristics in the 1970s and early 1980s, is nothing but a product and an indirect manifestation of the concurrent methodological 'urban shift' in humanities, rather than a reliable reflection of empirical research into contemporary folk narrative material. Urban legend has therefore endured thorough academic critique, which deemed it an unsuitable term or concept for scientific analysis in folkloristics.

Today, some decades after this terminological and conceptual reflection, the proportion of folklorists who use the qualifier *urban* in their scientific texts to designate the topic of their research is rather small. Much more than the distinctive category of urbanity (or the dichotomy urban/rural), the categories designating the temporal relativity (the *modern legend*), the spatial relativity (the *local legend* – see Bird 2002), or the historical and social context (the *contemporary legend*, the *migratory legend*) have come to the forefront of defining and constructing of key concepts in folkloristics' understanding of the genre of legend. Despite these new and different emphases, however, some national research traditions have retained the 'urban dimension' of these narratives in their own terminology – i.e. Finnish (Virtanen 1988), French (Campion-Vincent 1992), Italian (Kovačević 2012), and Polish (Czubala 2005), and also Estonian researchers to an extent (Kalmre 2007).[7] A special case among these is Italy, whose technical term is even broader in meaning and emphasizes a kind of hyperurbanity, as such narratives are called *legende metropolitane* (e.g. Kovačević 2012) – *metropolitan legends*. When it comes to Slovenia, researchers became interested in this particular area of narrative folklore only in the mid-1990s, after the critical reflection on urban terminology had passed through international folkloristics circles. Therefore, the term *urbana povedka* has never actually been used in Slovenian scientific folkloristic texts. Even though urban legend has been invalidated within scholarly folkloristic use, the term has

6 This also seems to be the main element of the critique of urban anthropology as an anthropological sub-discipline in general. In Slovenian academia, for example, this corresponds to Ingrid Slavec-Gradišnik's observation that the change was more related to defining the concept of 'the folk' than to forming a new direction of ethnological interest (cf. Kozorog 2012: 60).

7 Finnish *kaupungin kansantarinoi*; literally tanslated as 'folk tales of the city/town'; French *la légende urbaine*; Polish *miejska łegenda;* Estonian *linnalegend(id).*

not disappeared from the *etic* discourse entirely. Scholars still use it when they are reaching out to non-academic audiences, i.e. when they publish popular texts (e.g. Bennett/Smith 2007),[8] give lectures open to the public, and so on.

3 Urban legend as a vernacular concept

In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, when its use in scientific discussions was already fading fast, the term *urban legend* set roots in a whole new environment – among the people deemed as 'folk', among the bearers of the narrative materials themselves, in the scope of the *emic* or the *vernacular*. In common everyday parlance, urban legend is now a widely accepted term all over the globe and is practically the only one that describes or even acknowledges the phenomenon of contemporary folk narratives (legends) beyond the folkloristic milieu. How did this happen?

If we were to seek a single 'culprit' for this occurrence, we would have to point to Jan Harold Brunvand, an American folklorist, whose anthologies (Brunvand 1981, 1984, 1988, 1993, 2001b, 2004) achieved remarkable popular success, introducing his readers to the terminology he had used in his scholarly work in the process. This was partly coincidental, however, as Brunvand's decision to use the term *urban legend* and not any other equivalent was entirely arbitrary. His first (and arguably most important) book, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (Brunvand 1981), was published at a time when the terminological debate among scholars of contemporary narrative folklore was already at its peak, and the arguments against the 'urban' adjective were already more prevalent than the arguments for it. This could have possibly led him to make a different terminological choice for his books aimed at a wider, non-academic public. He insisted, however, on using the term urban legend in all his later popular works as well, which only cemented it more firmly with his readers. While widespread popular acceptance of the term was presumably not a part of Brunvand's initial plan when compiling his books, it was nevertheless a crucial side effect of his work. Subsequent journalistic discourse and popular culture played an enormous role as the term's distribution channels, often drawing on Brunvand's work for their own creative production. Due to all these elements

8 The reference to this monograph is particularly interesting because it was Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith who were the most prominent actors in the broader critique of urbanity and modernity as qualifiers of the main topic of folkloristic research in the 1980s (see Bennett/Smith 1990). There is a clear terminological divergence between this work, aimed at a general audience, and most of their other scholarly works, where they consistently use the term '*contemporary legends*' (see Smith 1989, Bennett 2005).

combined, *urban legend* and *urban myth* have become ubiquitous emic terms in all aspects of cultural (narrative) activity, from everyday vernacular communication and institutionalized practices to the narrative lives of online communities.

"[…] [V]ery many of the 'native' terms are borrowed from the learned culture," (Voigt 1999: 24) but as far as the discipline of folkloristics goes this process has typically been reversed; at least when it comes to genre terminology.[9] It seems, however, that the urban legend is one of only two prominent terms that entered common parlance from scholarly folkloristic terminology – rather than the other way around – and had such a significant impact.[10] In Slovenian, for example, *urbana legenda* (a loanword translation of the English *urban legend*) is currently used for a cluster of various emic narrative categories. The term came into the Slovenian language and cultural context via various products of popular culture, mainly produced in the USA. The earliest public example of its use that I have been able to confirm dates back to 1998, when a feature-length thriller called Urban Legend came to Slovenian cinemas. For the purposes of domestic distribution, the movie's title was translated as a calque: *Urbana Legenda* (IMDB 1998). Both sequels to the franchise were translated in the same fashion (IMDB 2000; IMDB 2005). The subsequent uses of the term *urbana legenda* that have occurred in the mass and social media, popular culture, advertising, and everyday communication are endless.

It was not only terminology, however, that traveled this path. Having gone through the process of popular/folk appropriation, the urban legend has become an emic, *folk* category as well as a folkloristic one. In the realm of vernacular, it has gradually morphed into smaller, meaning-enriched semantic units that describe particular narrowly defined cultural aspects (Bronner 2007: 27); creating various new conceptualizations in the process, including some that do not exist in scientific discourse at all.

4 Four different emic conceptualizations of urban legend

4.1 Urban legend as a (vernacular) genre

The first vernacular conceptualization of urban legend analyzed here – urban legend as a folk genre category – emerged directly from the scientific/folkloristic

9 Fairy tale, joke, myth and others come to mind immediately (see: Terseglav 2002: 56).
10 The other one being *folklore*.

discourse, where the term was first introduced and defined. Thus, it most closely resembles the semantic function it has (or has had) in folkloristics. By using the term urban legend within this conceptual framework, people identify and describe a loosely defined distinct type of narrative folklore phenomena. "Genres [...] are 'ethno' or 'native' concepts in that their audience can massage the meaning the meaning of discourse by their understanding of the genre. [...] [as they] regularly categorize the type of discourse to which they are exposed." (Fine 1995: 124). Thus, one can understand this particular conceptualization primarily as a mechanism of vernacular taxonomy: "We should assume that if the folk does know a genre it has a 'name' for it, so the native terms just demonstrate the existence of the genres." (Voigt 1999: 24). This approach towards genre in folklore theory – its realistic understanding – was an important realization of 1990s-era folkloristics, as it shed new light and gave rise to more context-oriented approach to folk narrative analysis.

Observing vernacular genre conceptualization at its own internal logic, however, renders this taxonomy hardly useful for the purposes of scientific debate, as it is neither systematic nor consistent or self-reflexive. This became evident rather quickly during my fieldwork research in Slovenia as well, since *urbana legenda*, as perceived by my informants, encompasses a much wider array of narrative material than what is being (and has been) recorded and studied by folklore scholars as urban legends. This folk narrative material entails various genre categories as defined in folkloristics, which overlap and mix constantly. Thus, people ascribe the name urban legend to various mono- or multi-episode narratives, with or without a developed plot, which may correspond to legendry, jokes, gossip, short narrative forms, humorous stories, stereotypes, dyadic or polyadic traditions, and so on. On the other hand, the name urban legend is also attached to those elements of everyday communication that are not the subject of typical folkloristic research, i.e. individual positive statements or messages that merely suggest narrative traits. Under the umbrella term urban legend, then, the world of the emic brings together a multitude of elements whose systematics (if we can call it that) and use are constantly changing and adapting, closely linked to the context of individual narrative situations again and again. It is no wonder, therefore, that research often leads to very interesting conceptual discrepancies in the emic-etic relation, which are immediately apparent to the folklorist who enters the field with their own methodological apparatus and a range of comparative material, only to be faced with a completely different conceptual reality.

The following story, for example, can also serve as evidence of the futility of using the essentialist qualifier *urban* in folklore studies. The story alludes to an explicitly idyllic village setting. What is more, the narrator felt it necessary to emphasize this idyll with the words "there, where people are still grateful", which is unequivocal information about the assumed primordial human solidarity as

a great social value belonging to a different time and place. The story goes on to describe traditional grape pressing and generally highlights personal 'homemade' efforts. Despite all this essentialist rurality, the story was actually presented (introduced) as an *urban legend* by the narrator:

> I have one urban legend for you. Somewhere in Dolenjska, where people are still grateful (smiles), there was a farmer. And he really, really wanted to thank his doctor, because he had just cured him of something. Well, and he – he brought him one bottle of wine, a homemade one! He had also put such a nice label up, homemade as well, and up on the label there was him, with his feet – with his bare feet, crushing the grapes. And everything would have been cool if that doctor hadn't cured him of one severe case of fungus infection on his feet (laughs).[11]

The second example violates some of the structural elements that define the genre of legend because it does not follow the narrative arc of the story, or at least does not follow it to the end. The narrator introduces the characters and the plot, only to have the narrative stop abruptly. The story does not have a narrative twist that would present it as funny, shocking, or scary, which would make it deliver a stronger impact upon the listener. The absence of a stronger narrative point is all the more extraordinary because the example also contains all the contextual and textual elements of a legend's 'typical' narrative delivery. The narrator has declared himself as believing the story to be true and has presented its relationship with wider reality as well as with a final commentary on the event described.[12] Despite this structural 'flaw', which makes its interpretative value in the scholarly debate questionable, the narrative was also introduced as an 'urban legend' when recorded:

> This is a sad urbana legenda, that – I believe it, in fact – because ... there were two guys who couldn't even finish primary school. And then, they decided one day to catch a little old granny, throw her in the trunk of a car, take her in the middle of the woods, leave her there, and just drive away (laughs). And I've heard from a lot of people that this really happened! (laughs). Now, why – why would one go and do such a thing though (laughs).[13]

Despite its conceptual looseness, when discussing the vernacular discourse on *urban legend* as a genre category, one can also identify some aspects that narrow it down semantically. The first of these is its definition. A genre that is recognized as such needs a definition, and that goes for every field of its use – inside or outside of the scientific discourse (Voigt 1999: 24). Among the folklore bearers (in the context

11 Male, 1985, recorded in Ljubljana 2011.

12 All of which has been used as criteria of defining the genre of legend in scholarly discourse as well.

13 Male, 1989, student, recorded in Celje, 2010.

of the 'folk'), however, the mere mentioning of the term tends to suffice, as this usually works as a substitute for a more precise definition. By introducing a narrative as an urban legend, both the storyteller and their audience usually understand the genre that is implied and its characteristics.[14] Nevertheless, one can still come across articulated definitions of the urban legend in the context of vernacular communication as well. These are either provided by informants or found in the media discourse. Some are loosely descriptive; others can allude to or be taken from the scientific literature on folkloristics.[15] The key elements that these definitions employ most often are the question of stories' veracity, the unusual nature of the events described, the indeterminable first source, and untraceable oral or media transmission.

> *– I mean, there are stories that you've heard and you don't know exactly whether they're true or not.*
> *– That's exactly it, yes.*
> *– Well I heard that Martin Strel swam the Amazon* (loud laughter from everybody present).[16]

> *This week, we checked what urban legends about sex are spreading on the streets of Ljubljana. You know, those weird stories that circulate among people.* (cf. Kvartič 2017: 66)

> *Thanks to nosy tabloids, angry ex-partners, and jealous colleagues, many bizarre stories circulate in the celebrity world. Some of them have become true urban legends, obscure stories of unknown origin for which there is no evidence whatsoever.* (Dnevnik 2010)

Finally, people employ the term urban legend as a (indirect) genre conceptualization when they are simply trying to summarize a story efficiently. In this case, the mentioning of the term plays the structural role of introductory formula, which places the following information, stripped of the narrative arch, in the appropriate

14 Using another example, if the narrator announces that what follows is going to be a joke ("Let me tell you a joke about …"), they are expected to follow the genre's pre-known structural and contextual backbone. If they do not follow them, their narration will fail to achieve the effect intended by the genre, i.e. laughter (cf. Terseglav 2002: 57–60).

15 During my fieldwork, however, some informants displayed a surprisingly sophisticated, even self-reflexive knowledge of some of the key elements of folkloristic (*etic*) analysis of folk-narrative material. One can link this to an apparent broad popular interest in contemporary legends of the past two decades since the arrival of the internet, which has led the people to obtain information about the topic either sporadically or deliberately online, in the media, in popular culture, and in academic works as well. I am aware that in US and Canada this kind of popular interest in contemporary folklore (namley *urban legends*) is much more prevalent (see: Donovan 2004: 111–132).

16 Male, 1988, student, recorded in Maribor 2010. Martin Strel is a Slovenian extreme swimmer, a fascinating and amusing character, who is also the butt of many jokes.

semantic context for its addressees. Thus, the use of the term itself may only allude to the story or even replace it entirely.

> *Although urban legend has it that the boss of the video library has watched all the films in it, he himself admits that this is not true.* (Alič 2013)

I should also mention that a frequent conceptual companion to the urban legend as a genre category in the realm of the emic/vernacular is the so-called *urban myth* (Slovenian *urbani mit*). In contrast to *urban legend*, the term is of purely vernacular origin and does not appear in any scholarly literature as a folkloristic concept. In terms of meaning, the urban myth usually characterizes simple positive claims or information about a certain fact or an event – without an identifiable plot. In other words, urban myth is used to denote widely held perceptions and misunderstandings conveyed by various discourses. Used in everyday communication, both phrases ([urban] legend and myth) tend to overlap as well. While the urban legend emerged directly from theoretical folkloristic work and is sometimes still relevant in communication between scholars, the urban myth is useless as a scholarly category. Myth in folklore studies, and in the humanities in general, is roughly understood as a dogmatic description of events in the distant past that justify and explain the world and its origins, the established ritual order and taboos, and, in general, the place of man in nature and the universe (Bascom 1984: 9). Thus, the urban myth is a kind of folk genre discombobulation, most often used in relation to the question of the veracity of the stories it signifies.

4.2 Urban legend as a frame of reference

The second distinctive vernacular conceptualization of urban legend is one of a frame of reference that helps define, "its status as a representation of reality" (Fine 1995: 126). More accurately, everyday communication applies the concept of urban legend as a *negative* frame of reference that a priori and categorically signifies the conveyed information (a story, a claim) as untrue. Untruthfulness, or at least dubiousness, which may be based on the unverifiability of information, on the presentation of contradictory information in the same narrative context, or on the recognition of contextual nonsense, is thus an inherent property of a claim labeled as (an) urban legend. Moreover, this label rejects the possibility of narrators themselves believing the truthfulness of their own story. In this sense, the labeling of information as an urban legend also becomes a narrative device by which the narrators distance themselves from the narrative's content when it comes to the question of reality/veracity. Therefore, with this conceptualization, an interesting paradox arises, since

it represents a contradiction or even a perversion of the urban legend's conceptualization as a (folk) genre. With the latter, the conveyance of the reality/veracity of the events described is, so to speak, the most important (if not necessary) substantive component. Not with urban legend as a frame of reference though:[17]

> *– I heard once that McDonald's made a phantom company when they supplied them with meat, and they called it 'Pure Beef', just so that they could write in their commercials that their products were 100 % pure beef.*
> *– But did they really?*
> *– Well, it was an urban legend.*[18]

The key idea behind this conceptualization of urban legend is not reality, though, but belief – a vernacular category of everyday communication that describes the attribution of reality and validity to something, thereby expressing a persuasion, an accepted truth, or an opinion about the way things are (cf. Valk 2012). The objective reality of a narrative and the belief of its narrator are not equivalent categories, as the belief expressed through narrative folklore is not fixed and is constantly changing with the individuals participating in the narrative event (Mencej 2006: 29). This is because narratives are not merely the articulation of belief but also its *proposition*, which the narrator communicates to his audience, who in turn decides on its acceptance (see Fine 1995). Declaring something an urban legend thus proposes disbelief on the part of the narrator. This does not affect the dissemination of the narrative though, as studies have shown that even skeptical narrators usually continue to tell and retell the story regardless of their (declared) disbelief (Dégh and Vászonyi 1976: 94).

Urban legends can be identified as a (negative) frame of reference most easily when they are paired with a proposition of reality, to which it presents a binary opposition: "Either it is true, or it is an urban legend." (cf. Voje 2005: 215). This pairing is often expressed dialectically, when one of the participants in the narration asks a question about the information's veracity, while the other, using the term urban legend, at least downplays if not outright denies its truth. More often than not, the two contradictory elements appear together in the same retort or sentence:

> *I don't know whether it is an urban legend or whether it is actually true that there has been only one job posted for an ethnologist/cultural anthropologist in the last five years.*

17 The question of the relation between the narrative genre of the legend and implied reality or consequent belief of its carriers, as observed and analyzed in folkloristics, is of separate importance to the topic of this article (cf. Kvartič 2017: 97–127). Hereby I look at one of the vernacular conceptualizations of the term exclusively.

18 Two male students, 1985 and 1986, recorded in Ljubljana 2011.

This latter text is, of course, not an example of folk narrative material. I received it by email, completely outside the context of my research. However, it is a good illustration of how this particular conceptualization goes beyond the genre system of narrative folklore, and even beyond narratives as such, since the use of the term has also become a label for any kind of widely known (if not widely accepted) but inherently false claim. In fact, *urban legend* is used to describe widely held, established, and familiar but erroneous, poorly argued, difficult to verify, or blatantly misleading information that appears in a wide variety of discourses: media, political, ideological, and other discourses that convey information from a position of authority, as well as in everyday communication.

> *All the mountain guides describing the trail across Kranjska Reber point out that the soil there is so different from the surrounding area that it is home to rare botanical wealth. After such an introduction, you'd expect a botanical garden. However, if you arrive in mid-June, you are rather disappointed. The whole mountain is covered with thick grass through which only few flowers can emerge. Maybe I visited at the wrong time, or maybe Kranjska Reber is just another urban legend that travels from guidebook to guidebook.* (PoHribih 2013)

In addition to individual pieces of information, urban legend can also collectively refer to a whole series or system of false and/or misleading claims. The information labeled this way is rounded up into thematic and semantic clusters, and as a result, a wide variety of articles, excerpts, columns, articles, and manuals presenting (and refuting) urban legends on and of the specific field can be observed. There are 'sets' of urban legends regarding medicine, cosmetics industry, construction, finance, business, the energy sector,[19] the judiciary, and so on.

4.3 Urban legend as a metonym

The third vernacular conceptual manifestation of the 'urban legend' occurs when it becomes a signifier for a specific person and it therefore functions as a political representation of how that person is perceived by their community or by wider society (Adams 2009: 81–82). In this context, it has a similar function to a *nickname*. We cannot equate the two, however, as nicknames are always individualized and more permanent, whereas an *urban legend* can also be only a momentary and performance- or context-contingent signifier.

The moniker *urban legend* is given to an individual when particular episodes of their life or general patterns of their behavior are so interesting, special, or unusual

19 For an interesting overview of these in Slovenia see: Valenčič 2019.

that they become motifs within the narrative repertoire of the people who share a common element of identity with them on a synchronous level (attend the same school or live in the same place as them). The label thus arises when individual narratives about a person are so much a part of the discourse about them that their basic representation in the community is based on these narratives. Both the labeled person and the stories about them are a part of the same process of cultural construction of their identity. This is why this particular articulation of urban legend is a metonymy – it functions as a poetic device by which the stories about the person replace the person themselves. Such metonymic labeling occurs at a varying degree of permanence, as it can also take place at the micro level in the context of a single narrative event. Nevertheless, it happens often enough to warrant attention.

The articulation of urban legend as a label of a specific person can manifest itself in very different ways, but from a point of view of folkloristic analysis, the narratives most often correspond to so-called personal narratives (memorates), that is, narratives that describe a personal experience from first or second hand (Stahl 1977: 20). These are narratives related to legends proper, but lacking their poetic characteristics and their tradition (Dégh 2001: 58). It is not necessarily the case that a narrative follows the label urban legend at all: it can stand on its own and be a story or a set of stories implied merely by its articulation.

In general, transcultural parlance, a *legend* is a common signifying nickname that expresses respect for a person, their achievements, or their specific ethical stance (e.g. Kosi 2009, Žnidarčič 2000). Thus, this moniker is something that an individual 'earns'. The justification for the moniker *urban legend* is usually the opposite in that the stories that legitimize this designation usually emphasize the behavioral and conceptual deviation of an individual from socially accepted norms. This culminates into a set of motifemes that are also present in and essential to contemporary (urban) legendry – the strange, the bizarre, the unbelievable, and the ridiculous are highlighted in the individual's interaction with the world. Through this, the individual is also distinguished from the anonymous protagonists who carry the plot in legends in general. This also gives these *urban legend* characters a broader, dual role in their respective communities – they either become admired as so-called trickster figures (e.g. Dorson 1973: 278–288) or they are portrayed as a negative example, only to fulfill an educational purpose in the process.

> *But you know, there was that one story, from one X,*[20] *who was an enormous urban legend at our grammar school. When he was […] he didn't know maths, like at all. And he had a maths test and he went to take the test in a jacket in the middle of the heat wave. But he allegedly had a VHF radio in his jacket. And then he went to the toilet and he threw the test out of the window.*

20 Name redacted.

> *And his friend picked it up on a bike and took it to the library, where another friend solved it. And then the first guy came back to the school and was talking to X through the VHF radio about the correct answers. And they had like hand gestures and signs and everything. And that is how X, the urban legend that he was, passed the exam.*[21]

Since *urban legend* as a metonymy (or as a nickname, rather) highlights unconventional or controversial episodes in an individual's life, it could also be understood in this role as a semantic parallel to the Slovenian idiom *vaški posebnež* (*village idiot*), corresponding to a similar idiom in other languages. This idea is very intriguing, as it also indirectly points to the ideological dichotomy of urban/rural – and consequently even allows for the hypothesis that the former phrase has somewhat replaced the latter in our contemporary society. However, this idea can be neither tested nor confirmed, as there is not yet enough (mainly performative) fieldwork data for a proper comparative analysis.

4.4 Urban legend as a marker of identity

The fourth vernacular (emic) conceptualization of the term urban legend highlights the intersection of narrative folklore and the processes of identity construction. Furthermore, all three of the other conceptualizations listed above are infused with it. People come to know, understand, and make sense of their identity through storytelling (Bird 2002: 521), although storytelling and narrative materials are not the substantive basis for identification, but rather a by-product of it. The key point here is that identity is first and foremost a form of an essentialist ideology, and that it always seeks its material existence (Althusser 2000: 91). This existence is found, among other things, in narrative folklore. Thus, when the ideology of urbanity is at the forefront of identity creation, the identity will seek its material existence in *urban folklore*. "From the point of view of folklore, the city is 'us' – you and I and all the rest; what people say, especially what they say about themselves in their own way with their own words [...] and what they find worth remembering." (Botkin 1954: 1) – "The tales themselves also become part of the city and its performances." (Cody 2005: 220) So, finally, the urban legend is also an articulation and manifestation of *urban identity* as its signifier, and is therefore an ontological category, whose articulation designates people as members of 'the urban'. In this way, urban legend has a clear political and sociological dimension, from which we can also discern the emic dichotomy between the essentialist categories of urbanity and rurality.

21 Male, 1984, employed, recorded in Velenje 2014.

Thus, urban legends is a collective name for the narratives created, used and appropriated, and created by a community that in one way or another (self-)identifies with urbanity. It is therefore a direct consequence of processes of collective identity creation, characterized by seeking and emphasizing similarities (Jenkins cf. Visočnik 2011: 48), common elements of association, and identification with imagined urbanity. The selected narratives to fulfill this role is arbitrary, and the people – whether they be ideological authority or everyday storytellers – form it by (mostly unconsciously and unintentionally) picking out and emphasizing, contextualizing and localizing elements of their experiential reality. The urban legend as an (emic) marker of identity is thus in the service of the community and is: "socially situated and geographically sited […]" (cf. Cody 2005: 219), as it exploits (urban) space as its central representational element by means of folklore localization in urbanity. These processes and their (narrative) results are clearly visible with the efforts of forming a new identity of urbanity[22] and in retrospective or manifestative events of older, already established urban communities.

In Slovenia, urban legends in the function of identity creation were very apparent in 2012, when the city of Maribor took over the organization of the large-scale *European Capital of Culture* (ECC) project. This was a yearlong international political ritual, during which the so-called *urban stories* and *urban legends* were placed virtually at the center of the city's external presentation through a series of cultural, protocolar, and tourism events. This was already evident during the preparation phase, when the program managers highlighted these narratives as one of the cornerstones of the project:

> *We are thinking a lot and we are going to rely on what looks simple, but then all ECOC avoid this: the* story of the city *as a specific organism, with its own core, its own centre, its own symbolic centre, its own peripheries, its own points where it opens up to the future.*[…]
> *There is a* legend *about Maribor, stating that a little tailor man (or was it a little shoemaker?) had saved the city from the Turks. What do you do with a story like that? On the one hand, you can create a picture book for children, you can make a game as an animation on an internet portal. But if you think about the* urban mythology that *forms the identity of a city, you can ultimately* [sic] *connect with a fashion store and its ideas, bring in an artist, for example Andraž Vogrinčič, who dresses houses, etc., and out of all this an unexpected* story *develops, which was initially based on an* urban legend. (Zemljič 2010; emphasis A.K.)

The concrete application of urban legends in the context of identity creation is most evident when observing the products made for tourist consumption. Tourism is a

22 Identity is not something fixed, although it is constantly forming, reforming, and transforming: "[…] individuals or groups do not have a single common identity, but a vast number of potentialities which are only partially realized and developed in real social time and space." (Muršič 1997: 226).

dynamic and complex dialogue (Nogués 2008: 228), and an arena where identities are continuously formed, as it provides local communities with all sorts of affirmation (Lanfant 1995: 6). Contemporary local (urban) communities are burdened with their image – their representation – but also with the scope of this representation in a supra-local (if not global) context (Kozorog 2009: 31). That is why locals[23] and their representatives initiate tourism not only for economic motives, but also (and sometimes above all) for motives of local self-identification (Kozorog 2009: 17). Thus, the emphasis on tourism is increasingly becoming a way of understanding the self, as its elements give meanings to identity labels (Nogués 2008: 222), such as *urbana legenda*. In addition to representing it externally, this emphasis also helps create and consolidate an imagined community of (urban) space (cf. Anderson 1998). Thus, the manifestation of urban legends through narrative and ostensive practices in tourism and tourist products is a means by which local communities dialectically manifest their urbanity outward, presenting it as a positive attribute or even as their highest value. In this way, urban legend becomes, time and again, a means of reproducing the identity of urbanity, as they are burdened with the symbolic presence of the dominant ideology of the desired urbanity (after Nogués 2008: 228).

Today, urban legends as markers of identity are commonly instrumentalized by various projects of identity creation. Another Slovenian example, parallel to the Maribor ECC one, can be found in Celje. There stands the MCC Hostel, accommodation and youth activity infrastructure, which operates in conjunction with the Celje Youth Centre and opened in 2010. It has a particularly interesting conceptual design. When thinking about added value beyond its primary service, the hostel's management came up with the idea of furnishing each room based on one of the local (urban) legends. Thus, the rooms visualize elements of the repertoire of localized Celje legends, as well as anecdotes from the lives of Celje residents and other people connected with Celje. The choice of narratives was left to the young local artists who were selected to carry out the project – each artist decorated one room. Each room of the MCC Hostel also includes applied design and interactive elements related to the specific story of each room. Beyond individual rooms, the hostel's conceptual design foresaw that the content in each room would be linked to a specific part of the already existing tourist offer of Celje. The hostel's marketing campaign invites guests stating that their rooms: "[…] take you into a parallel world of Celje's myths and legends from the past" (MC Celje 2012).

23 With this I mean the local community, the homogenised local population, which can be made up of very different social and cultural groups united under a common frame of ideological representation in the supra-local (Nogués 2008: 236).

At the entrance to each room, a small plaque is placed with a text telling the story that inspired its design. Some of the stories are presented as a narrative, while others are merely summarized. Some of the descriptions refer to the original story with the self-reflexive term *urban legend* or *urban story*:

> The 'Celje Ninja' room: *One calm morning a shuriken flies in, a black shadow is briefly seen, and the city gets a new* urban legend*. This is the true story of a masked, ninja-clad, armed-to-the-teeth man in black who wanted to right any and all wrongs.*[24]

> The 'Mr K.' room: *How to chase after and catch yourself? This is a question that has echoed through the city streets for decades. This is an* urban story *about a policeman searching for the perpetrator of a crime that he himself has committed.*[25]

5 Conclusion

Many folklorists of the last decades of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century have taken an openly critical, even dismissive stance towards the use of urban as a qualifier to describe the topic of their research. This meant dismissing the methodological concept of urban legend as well. And while it has undeniably taken roots among the folk and obtained various new conceptual meanings, this too has been ignored by the discipline, rendering it a side note – an interesting one, but a side note nonetheless.

However, as I have seen through my research and my comparative, contextual, and interpretative analysis of contemporary legendry in Slovenia, there is some significant practical value in observing these folk/vernacular/emic conceptualizations of otherwise scholarly methodological tools, namely that of *urban legend*, presented in this article. Primarily, their existence demonstrates a strong embeddedness of the narratives, studied by folkloristics, within people's everyday lives. This alone should push folklorists to look into them thoroughly, as they point towards what the scientific endeavor actually seeks – understanding what folk narratives can tell us about the folk among whom they live.

The value in their consideration is pragmatic as well, as it can offer important help when doing fieldwork. Not only does knowledge of these conceptualizations

24 The 'Celje Ninja' room also features an interesting ostensive narrative practice: in the wardrobe, the guests can find a ninja outfit, so that they can dress up and go to Celje at night and experience it as the protagonist of the legend that inspired the room's design. XXXADD REFERENCE E.G. WEBSITEXXX

25 XXXADD REFERENCE E.G. WEBSITEXXX.

facilitate the comparative identification of narrative material, its modes of dissemination, and its systematics and taxonomy (however crude they might be) during the fieldwork itself, but it also assists in expediting narrative associations, guiding the conversation and preparing interpretations in cooperation with informants, which is particularly valuable. With that, all subsequent analytic and interpretative efforts in search of the meaning of folklore (folk narratives) become substantially easier, along with all else that can enrich the thinking of and writing about contemporary narrative folklore.

Admittedly, the topic of this article was somewhat of a digression from my primary folkloristic research, even a frustrating one at times. The fact is, that *the vernacular* most often violates the established forms of folkloristic understanding of (contemporary) narrative folklore with its ever-changing conceptualizations and their ever-flowing meaning. I suggest, however, that herein lies its greatest value – it ultimately forces the field researcher not to remain trapped in their assumed methodological and contextual frameworks, and to continuously verify and adapt their fundamental research postulate. Thus, it is a useful reminder of the substantive interdependence between folkloristics as a scientific endeavor and the people, the bearers of the narrative folklore the discipline studies. In other words, it compels us, the researchers and scholars, to remain humble and curious in the process of searching for any and all forms of folk narrative material, as: "No theory could progress – it could not acquire greater interpretive effectiveness – if it did not have to confront provocation, resistance, and even refutation by the facts." (Augé 1994: 42).

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