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## The Shibboleth Incident (Judges 12:5-6) as a Migratory Narrative Folklore Motif

*Zgodba o šiboletu (Sodniki 12,5-6)  
kot migracijski pripovedni motiv*

**Abstract:** Shibboleth is a special sociolinguistic category, denoting a functional communicative mechanism; a word, a phrase, or merely just a phoneme used as a test or a marker to identify people through their pronunciation. The term and the concept originate in a short passage in the Old Testament of the Bible, Book of Judges, chapter 12, verses 5 and 6 – called The Shibboleth incident – which describes a language trial administered by the Gileadites in order to identify disguised Ephraimites and kill them. Throughout history in different parts of the world, strikingly similar stories have emerged, set in comparable contextual circumstances of inter-ethnic bloodshed. In the article, a comprehensive folkloristic comparative analysis of various shibboleth accounts is presented, prompting a question if these stories are standalone narrative material; or if they are rather individual articulations (ecotypes) of an otherwise shared timeless migratory narrative folklore motif.

**Keywords:** Shibboleth incident, the book of Judges, shibboleth test, ecotypes, comparative analysis, folklore studies

**Izvleček:** Šibolet je posebna sociolingvistična kategorija oziroma funkcijski komunikacijski mehanizem – beseda, besedna zveza ali zgolj fonem, ki se uporablja kot preizkus (oziroma kot označevalec) identitete posameznikov prek njihove izgovarjave. Termin in koncept izhajata iz kratkega odlomka iz Stare zaveze Svetega pisma, kjer v 12. poglavju Knjige sodnikov v 5. in 6. vrstici beremo o jezikovnem preizkusu, ki so ga izvedli Gileadci, da bi v svojih vrstah prepoznali preoblečene Efrajimce ter jih ubili. Zgodovinopisje in pripovedna folklorja pa skozi čas in na različnih koncih sveta »beležita« presenetljivo podobne zgodbe, vpete v primerljive kontekste medetničnega prelivanja krvi. V članku je predstavljena obsežna folkloristična primerjalna analiza različnih zgodovinskih primerov uporabe tega jezikovnega preizkusa, pri čemer se zastavlja vprašanje, ali gre pri posameznih pričevanjih za nepovezane pripovedne artefakte ali pa le za posamezne artikulacije (pripovedne ekotipe) sicer občečloveškega in brezčasnega ter v času in prostoru potujočega pripovednega folklornega motiva.

**Ključne besede:** šibolet, Knjiga sodnikov, preizkus s šiboletom, ekotipi, primerjalna analiza, folkloristika

## Introduction

One of the most intriguing narratives found in the book of Judges in the Old Testament is the so called »Shibboleth incident« (Judges 12:5-6):

Then the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. Whenever one of the fugitives of Ephraim said, »Let me go over,« the men of Gilead would say to him, »Are you an Ephraimite?« When he said, »No,« they said to him, »Then say Shibboleth,« and he said, »Sibboleth,« for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites fell at that time.

This short Bible passage has garnered quite a lot of attention by biblical scholars, historians, linguists and other scholars over the past century with their texts focusing on incidents' various historical and cultural contexts (see for instance Willesen 1958; Marcus 1992; Chisholm 2013, 17-109) – sometimes questioning the veracity of the account itself (Speiser 1942, 11) – as well as tackling the unique linguistic (phonetic) challenge it presents (see for instance Speiser 1967; Beeston 1988; Hendel 1996). The linguistic analyses had varying degrees of success, however: »All in all, I am inclined to think that we do not have adequate evidence for achieving any conclusive 'solution' to the phonetic problems of the shibboleth story.« (Beeston 1988, 261) The Shibboleth incident passage is also acknowledged as the only explicit acknowledgment of variations in Hebrew dialects in the Old Testament (Hendel 1996, 69).<sup>1</sup>

With this article, however, I would like to propose a fairly new perspective on the Shibboleth incident from the Old Testament – one that is provided by *folkloristic* comparative analysis.<sup>2</sup> I've come across this short passage only after learning about several alleged historical instances of using

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1 I recognize that the shibboleth is first and foremost a linguistic problem, as the biblical narrative itself centres around pronunciations, phonemes and dialects. Linguistics is not my field of study and research, however, so I will not delve into the linguistic and etymological material that has been presented thoroughly (and much better than I could ever do it) elsewhere – see all the authors quoted above.

2 In general, collaboration between the disciplines of folkloristics and Bible studies has always been rich and fruitful, sharing both content and methodology (for an overview see Niditch 1993).



a language test in order to determine one's identity and subsequently decide if they should live or die. At the same time as I started reading into these historical examples and recognizing traits of folklore/tradition in them, I was collecting contemporary narrative folklore material in Slovenia, and found similar stories in circulation today. In addition to all this it became apparent that both the word »shibboleth« and the concept it describes are sporadically used (if not articulated) in today's art and popular culture as well. The comparisons were quickly drawn and all this led me to Judges 12:5-6 – the passage that many scholars deem »the original shibboleth«.

This is of course true of the name »shibboleth« itself – the very word used as a test of Ephraimites' identity in the story. However, faced with many narratives of and about it with several apparent similarities spanning across millennia and various cultural contexts, a bold hypothesis formed about the said »original«. What if the biblical account is not just the story from which all others originated, but is *itself* an example of a (written down) migratory narrative folklore? This idea can only be explored using comparative analysis, which is why the article presents several historical and narrative instances of shibboleth test side by side with the biblical account, looking for textual and contextual parallels and their potential meaning.

### **Shibboleth: a linguistic mechanism of identification and distinction**

The biblical term *shibboleth*, originating in Judges 12, has long been »at home« as a loan word in many languages outside of Hebrew. The term – and the concept it describes – is primarily defined as a functional communicative mechanism, i.e. as »a word by which one knows someone« (*Slovar tujk* 2002, 1120), that is to say a criterion, a catchword, or a password. Furthermore, this term describes a word, a phrase, or merely just a phoneme used as a test or a marker to identify people through their pronunciation. Shibboleth is thus a (socio)linguistic mechanism, marked by condensed symbolic communication, that demonstrates how differences in accents, pronunciation and other variability in all forms of linguistic communication convey one's cultural identity (Senior 2004). It is an arbitrarily pre-arranged sign (signifier) in a language that becomes



an element of distinction on the basis of linguistic identity. This, of course, also has a wider cultural and social impact, since the question of shibboleth is a question of the »tenability« and boundaries of a cultural or linguistic community (Esposito 2009, 211), since it presupposes active participation in it – you are part of the group if you are able to pronounce the word (and vice-versa).

Within the cultural reality of various social groups, the question of identity and identification is unbelievably broad. The symbols used to articulate identity are numerous and are chosen consciously or subconsciously by communities themselves to project said identity inwards or outwards. Although other cultural elements can function as shibboleths as well (for example clothing or habits), identity differences or boundaries between the Self and the Other(s) are firstly and most clearly revealed in the symbolic field of language. This can be observed, for example, in generationally defined communities (slang), professional communities (jargon), provincially defined communities (dialects), exclusive groups that also communicate using agreed gesticulation (e.g. criminal gangs or medieval monastic orders). Large imagined social groupings, where individual members do not necessarily know each other – such as the nation – are primarily established on the basis of language (Anderson 2000, 161). The establishment of identity boundaries in the recognition of the Other is thus often focused on the search for *linguistic* differences on the one hand, and markedness in and by language on the other. This markedness is what French philosopher Jacques Derrida has called the »legitimate habitation of a language« (Esposito 2009, 209).

The shibboleth can best be understood by understanding its function. Jacques Derrida has pointed to a detail from the initial biblical story as its essence: »Only those who pronounce *the shibboleth* correctly can pass through, or are granted life.« (Derrida 1994, 3) Those who are unable to pronounce *the shibboleth* correctly are literally murdered in the biblical account; which translates to symbolic »death« – irreversible characterisation of an individual as being a non-member of the group – in the context of everyday communication where a need for language differentiation occurs. In this respect, »it is not enough to understand the meaning of a word, to know what it means, or to know how to pronounce it, but the individual must be *able to* pronounce it [...] and to *do so* is an act



of *signification*.« (Derrida 1994, 29) It is precisely because of their inability that an individual gets to be (symbolically) marked as an alien, as Other, or as an enemy. In this vein, Canadian biblical scholar Francis Landy proposes that a shibboleth is an expression of the »boundary to the ideals of cultural integration, a linguistic demarcation of ‘the Other’ which may be impossible to hide« (Landy 1990, 97).

Examples of discriminatory identification through linguistic distinction abound in general discourses (i.e. media, popular culture) (Kvartič 2016, 257–263), but an even more important »timeless« field of articulation of *the shibboleth* is narrative folklore with all its genre manifestations.<sup>3</sup> Collections of traditional and contemporary narrative material contain numerous examples of short narrativized episodes that highlight dialectal and other linguistic differences between for instance neighbouring towns and regions. These are often humorous tales of linguistic differentiation, which continuously become part of the repertoire of locally bounded stories (for Slovenian examples, see Gričnik 1995, 192–191; Kleindienst 1995, 52). The establishment of points of linguistic distinction in these stories is not only evident from their texts – during their »performance«, the narrators often change the texture of the narratives to convey the message effectively. Staying with Slovenian examples, in many cases of stories about immigrants, the narrators change their voice, imitating the (presumed) speech from the various places of former Yugoslavia. The shibboleths in this case are very clear but reduced to individual phonemes, with the »hard« (palatal) L [l̥] and open-mid front unrounded E [ɛ] standing out when the narrator wishes to indicate an immigrant from the Slavic areas of the Balkans, or the softening of the speech by inserting the [lj] and [nj] into different words, which is supposed to illustrate the speech of immigrants from Albania and Kosovo.

Various narrative (folklore) materials collected by the researchers focus on the existence of communicative and, consequently, identity boundaries between outsiders and the environment that sees them as such. The implied cultural contact where recognition of Otherness occurs can

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3 Narrative folklore is one of the most important fields of construction and representation of the cultural Other in general (for comprehensive overviews see: Kunej and Hođzar 2006; Mlakar 2019; Golež Kaučič 2019).



be gradual and prolonged, but it can also be instantaneous and impactful, even traumatic. It is in this case, where the use of shibboleth occurs most prominently in narrative folklore. However, there is a special narrative motif employing shibboleth as a test of identity in the context of violent clash amongst two ethnic (linguistic) groups. This motif keeps appearing throughout history and all around the world, attaching itself to specific situations, creating a lot of narrative variants (*ecotypes*<sup>4</sup>) that prompt comparative reading.

## Shibboleth identity test

### The Bible

The biblical account of the Shibboleth incident (Judges 12:5-6) tells of a group of Ephraimites that wanted to escape persecution or death in the land of Gilead, after suffering defeat to Gileadites led by judge Jephthah. The incident is thus embedded in a wider historical conflict that places it around eleventh century B. C.

The Ephraimites were an invading party of this conflict and Gileadites defeated them in defensive campaign. Ephraimites were thus trying to flee back home by crossing the river Jordan westward to Palestine. As the Gileadites took over the crossing points (fords) and stopped the Ephraimites from advancing, the latter pretended to be natives of Gilead. A linguistic test was presented to them though by the Gilead guards, which betrayed their pretence – they were asked to say the word *šibbōlet* (with a shin). When the fugitives pronounced the word as *sibbōlet* (with a samekh), as they were unable to do otherwise, they were slain. The test was thus a phonetic one, involving a dialectal difference, burdened with an identity signifier as well. It is of note that Ephraimites were not asked to name an object presented to them but were told specifically to say the word »shibboleth«.

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4 For an explanation of the folkloristic concept of *ecotypes*, see below.



The original meaning of the test word »shibboleth« is twofold. The first one, as is apparent in some other passages of the Old Testament, is that of »ear of corn« or more broadly »ear of grain«. The second potential meaning is »flood« or »stream«, with broad etymological Semitic background (Speiser 1942, 10). Most prominent medieval Hebrew scholars have put more emphasis on the former meaning, and later (and modern) experts agreed with it.

### **Middle ages**

The Sicilian Vespers (*Vespri siciliani*) was a successful revolt on the island of Sicily that pushed against the rule of French house of Anjou over the Kingdom of Sicily. The rebellion broke out on the Easter Monday of 1282 and stood up to French-born king Charles I of Anjou who had ruled the island since 1266. During the six-week revolt approximately 13.000 French were killed by the Sicilians. The conflict, however, escalated further as it engaged several competing European ruling houses into a War of Sicilian Vespers that lasted up until 1302. The revolt is said to have been sparked by an incident on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1282 just outside Palermo where a religious ceremony was set to take place at the church of Santo Spirito. The locals were gathering at the place of worship and a young married couple was among the crowd. At some point, a Frenchman met them, shouting a gross insult to the lady. His rudeness shook her so much that she fainted, and her husband caught in a rage exclaimed: »Death to the French!« As he said that, he pushed a knife into the heart of the Frenchman. The crowd responded and the bloody revolt took off. Historian Steven Runciman describes what followed thusly:

To the sound of the bells messengers ran through the city calling on the men of Palermo to rise against the oppressor. At once the streets were full of angry armed men, crying »Death to the French« – »moranu u Franchiski« in their Sicilian dialect. Every Frenchman that they met was struck down. They poured into the inns frequented by the French and the houses where they dwelt, sparing neither man, woman, nor child. Sicilian girls who had married Frenchmen perished with their husbands. The rioters broke into the Dominican and Franciscan convents; and all the foreign friars were dragged out and told to pronounce the word »ciciri«



(chickpea), whose sound the French tongue could never accurately reproduce. Anyone who failed the test was slain. (Runciman 1958, 237)

In 1302, Flanders was governed by the French King Philip the Fair, who had imposed his rule over the region by the threatening presence of a large French army. The Flemish towns considered this French military and government presence as an undesired intrusion into their own internal affairs, which inhibited the effective rule and imposition of the French laws. To override the Flemish insubordination, the French governor James of St. Pol led his army to the town of Bruges, and arrived there on 17<sup>th</sup> of May. The tension between occupiers and occupied escalated and rumours of French atrocities spread throughout the town, reaching the majority of the rebels that fled the town before the French arrived. The Flemish decided to actively rebel and, at sunrise on 18<sup>th</sup> of May, while most of the French army was asleep, they attacked with the battle cry »*Scilt ende vrient!*« (Shield and friend!). However, this phrase was also used to identify the French and their supporters amongst the population. The phrase was so difficult to pronounce for the French that they immediately stood out among the towns-folk. This led to the massacre of over 300 French soldiers. The massacre at Bruges would eventually become known in history as the Bruges Matins (Brugse Metten) (Pergalias 2012, 10–11). This particular language test is mentioned for the first time by chronicler in 1435, a whole century after it had supposedly occurred (Scales 2017, 286).

Ever since the establishment of the city of Krakow in 1257 under the Magdeburg Law, the people of German origin had played a significant role in the economy and the social life of the city. They strongly supported the Bohemian (Czech) pretenders to the Polish crown, first among them being King Wenceslas (Waclaw) II, who laid claim to rule Poland in 1296. His main rival to the Polish throne at the time was the Duke of Brzeg-Kujawy, Władysław Łokietek, who began to take back a lot of the Polish lands from the German-backed Bohemians (Přemyslids) in the first years of 14<sup>th</sup> century. Łokietek, having disrupted the social peace, displeased many of the prominent German(ized) people in Krakow. They were the ones who feared Łokietek's rule the most, claiming that he would be unable to hold up city's economic development, centred around trade with Bohemia and Silesia. Thus in 1311, an armed revolt broke out in Krakow





and the neighbouring town of Sandomierz by German bourgeoisie wishing to reunite with Bohemia, led by Albert, the German mayor of Krakow. After several months of fighting, Łokietek captured Krakow and he exercised the cruellest revenge on the rebels: he dragged the imprisoned ones all over the city with horses and hanged them on gallows outside the city walls – the events of the revolt and its aftermath were presented in contemporary Krakow city chronicles (Strączyński 2017). It was a later retelling of these events, however, which added the information that, after Łokietek had seized Krakow from Albert, the soldiers dragged the townspeople out of their houses and ordered them to say these words: »Soczewica, koło, miele, młyn!« (»Lentil, wheel, grind, mill!«) Anyone who did or could not say these words was sentenced to death. The Germans, even those who had lived in Polish lands for years, were helpless as the correct pronunciation of the word »soczewica« or the distinction between sounds [l] and [ł] is practically impossible to a non-Polish speaking foreigner. The oldest example of this information is preserved in the Krasinski Chronicles (Rocznik Krasieńskich), of which only a 16<sup>th</sup>-century copy is known to historians (Rożek 2014).

### **20<sup>th</sup> century and today**

October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1937, marks the start of a genocide on Caribbean Island of Hispaniola, shared among Dominican Republic and Haiti. On that day the execution of between 18,000 and 35,000 Haitian Creoles began under the orders of U.S.-backed Dominican dictator President Rafael Trujillo, a former sugar cane plantation guard. The events that followed have later become collectively known as the Parsley Massacre (Turtis 2002). The genocide resonated with the contemporary turmoil in Europe as the Dominican Republic was facing growing economic difficulties and as power-hungry Trujillo has become obsessed with ideas of race and status. By 1937 the Dominican Republic, which based its economy largely on sugar exports, was practically broke. At that time Trujillo had put forth a nationalist (populist) plan to distract Dominicans in times of austerity, telling the nation that they cannot afford to feed foreigners as well. Thus, the government cracked down on migration from neighbouring Haiti, where a lot of the sugar plantation workers came from. On October 2<sup>nd</sup> Trujillo gave orders for the »solution« to the Haitian problem, justifying it by claiming that »Haitians are foreigners in our land. They are dirty,



rustlers of cattle, and practitioners of voodoo. Their presence within the territory of the Dominican Republic cannot but lead to the deterioration of the living conditions of our citizens.« (Farmer 1994, 103) The massacre earned the moniker »Parsley Massacre« because of an alleged language test, that some soldiers allegedly carried out in order to identify Haitian Creoles:

For Haitians [...] in the streets or in the fields—the soldiers applied a simple test. They would accost any person with dark skin. Holding up sprigs of parsley, Trujillo's men would query their prospective victims: »¿Como se llama esto?« What is this thing called? The terrified victim's fate lay in the pronunciation of the answer. Haitians, whose Kreyol uses a wide, flat *r*, find it difficult to pronounce the trilled *r* in the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*. If the word came out as the Haitian *pe'sil* [...] the victim was condemned to die. (Wucker 1999, 49)

During World War II several (narrative) examples of alleged shibboleth tests are known, with varying degrees of veracity or verifiability. Various national army personnel or civilian people are said to have used shibboleths to identify invading Germans. The Dutch used the name of a seaside Dutch town Scheveningen. The Soviet Red army reportedly used several such words, one of them being described in the diaries of one of the most famous military snipers in history, Vasily Zaitsev, who came to prominence in the battle for Stalingrad:

The corporal trotted off through the dark, while Gryazev and I hid and waited. Soon we heard his voice calling out: »Doroga, doroga.« »Doroga« is a good Russian word: by having people say it, you know immediately if you've got a Russian or a German heading your way. Germans can't pronounce it properly, when they say it, it always comes out sounding like »taroka«. That word would trip up even a German scout dressed like a Russian. As soon as he said »taroka«, we would nail him. (Zaitsev 2003, 129)

On the Pacific front, a shibboleth test word of »lollapalooza« occurred, used by Americans to supposedly identify Japanese soldiers infiltrating their ranks (McCarthy 1943, 552). The shibboleth itself was the Japanese pronunciation of the [l] sound. This was somewhat acknowledged and



formalized by the U.S. army as it included it into *Pocket guide to China*, an instructional booklet, published in 1942 for its soldiers stationed on the islands in the Pacific:

Sometimes the jap officers have none of these characteristics - many of them speak English, some know our American slang [...] But most Japanese hiss when they pronounce the letter »S« [...] Have the two men repeat a sentence like »Smith left the fortress« (or a similar line). Or try Lalapalooza on them! That's a panic! The JAP sucks in on any »S« sound - and he can't pronounce the letter »L«. (Caniff 1942, 71)

Heading back to the Middle East, a shibboleth test appeared once again during Lebanon's civil war, which raged for 15 years, from 1975 to 1990. During this conflict, religious identities overlapped with ethnic (and linguistic) ones as Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims and Christians clashed in a conflict that produced estimated 120,000 casualties. During the conflict, it is reported that in at least one instance, members of Lebanese Christian paramilitary group called Phalangists set up checkpoints, stopped civilians, showed them a tomato and asked them to give the Arabic word for the vegetable to pass. Depending on the answer, an individual lived or was sentenced to death. If the person used the Lebanese Arabic pronunciation »banadurra«, the pass was granted; if they pronounced the word the Palestinian way - »ban-dora« - the Phalangists' men would torture and kill them. It is believed that the same shibboleth test occurred between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1982 during the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, two Palestinian refugee camps southwest of Beirut, where two days of killing left up to 3500 Shia civilian casualties (Dean 2016).

Collecting contemporary legends and other contemporary narrative material in Slovenia, I've come across a rumour that a shibboleth »Kekec« - a name of a Slovenian hero of children's literature - was used among The Territorial Defense of the Republic of *Slovenia* to identify spies sent by Yugoslav people's army who were supposedly unable to pronounce the close-mid front unrounded vowel [e] properly (Kvartič 2016, 265).

The most recent example of alleged shibboleth test comes from the Russian-Ukrainian war, which started in 2022. Thereafter the immediate



need for clear-cut national/ethnic identity as well as identity of oppressed/oppressor occurred, prompting Ukrainian news media to write instructional pieces, like this one, which was published only three days (!) after the Russian invasion began:

Every day, Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups are detected in Ukrainian cities, which were deployed in our country by the enemy at different times. Apostrophe<sup>5</sup> explains how easy it is to tell a Russian from a Ukrainian. An old and effective method is often used to do this – they ask you to pronounce the Ukrainian word »palianytsia« (bread). People who have never studied a foreign language think they have a good command of their language apparatus, but in practice, they find it difficult to pronounce some sounds, and sometimes cannot do it at all. Despite the many similarities between the Ukrainian and Russian languages, the pronunciation of some words and sounds is a problem for Russian speakers who have not learned Ukrainian since childhood. For example: palianytsia (bread), polyunitsia (strawberry), Krynysia (name of a village). Russians pronounce these words with a soft »и« sound instead of »и«, and »ц« sometimes replaces »тс«. (Apostrophe 2022)

### **Shibboleth test as a migratory narrative folklore motif**

Reading all the given examples back-to-back brings up some very striking textual and contextual similarities shared amongst all the accounts: (1) The broader context in all of them is a situation of inter-group (ethnic, national) bloodshed, which is for the most part historically accurate. This context heightens the need for a clear understanding of an individual's identity, belonging to either one of two clearly defined sides – there is no middle ground or any third alternative. (2) Because of that, failure to pass the test results in severe punishment, death or imprisonment – a literal »erasure« of an individual. (3) The words used as shibboleth tests are chosen arbitrarily, although a pattern is showing as they are often taken from the context of everyday (domestic) life (i.e. parsley, tomato, lentils, bread).

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5 An Ukrainian news outlet, publishing online.



Thus, they seem to be in a somewhat of a semiotic or ideological disconnect to the identity creation they convey by being used as shibboleths.<sup>6</sup>

An important difference that has shown among individual accounts is one of power-dynamics. In examples where this dynamic is lopsided, it is sometimes the oppressor who administers the test and sometimes the rebel side. Where power-dynamics are even, the narrative is usually about recognizing hidden infiltrators (i.e. spies) within the group.

According to folklore scholars and their texts based on comparative analysis, the presence of this kind of similarities across time and space, as well as their simultaneous occurrence on the geographically very distant areas, is the very proof that these narratives (or their motifs) are in fact *migratory*. This means that their basic ideas are not confined to one social and linguistic group or political entity, but are part of a wider tradition, whose emergence and dissemination knows neither geographical nor social boundaries (Hobbs and McCulloch 2007, 117). These motifs are narrative »parcels« that are constantly »travelling«, passing through time and space, through various folklore genres,<sup>7</sup> as well as between linguistic and otherwise identifiably bound environments. For this reason, their occurrence can be sought both on a *synchronic* (horizontal or spatial) as well as on the *diachronic* (vertical or temporal) axis (Wolf-Knuts 1987, 173).

Looking for similarities shared among widely dispersed narratives is the key to observing diachronic migration of individual motifs over a long period of time. However, a mere recognition of the folklore motif's broad presence is not enough when trying to understand its concrete effect (*function*) in concrete narrative situations. For this, the fact that with each new transmission (narration), the motifs are repeatedly adapting to the real (historical, cultural) contexts is of much greater importance.

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6 There is, however, also one important difference among individual accounts; one regarding power-dynamics, as in certain cases it is the oppressor who administers the test and in others it is the rebel side.

7 Because hereby described migratory motifs usually »attach« themselves to the experiential, everyday reality of people (as they are usually presented as true or at least plausible) they most often create new folklore material in the genre of legend. An example of a general definition of the genre of legend: »A story that [...] takes place in the real world and the unusual event it describes is not impossible or unimaginable; it may even sound plausible. It fits the everyday life of ordinary people and the contemporary value system that surrounds it.« (Dégh 1994, 29)



Migratory motifs tend to contextualize and localize within the cultural realities of people. This contextualization shows itself in the ways of how the narrators – either the ideological authority or everyday storytellers – incorporate elements of their own experiential world into these motifs and vice versa, thereby bringing the narrative closer to their own reality and that of their audience.

Thus, the key to exploring synchronic migration is the comparative search for differences. These differences can be observed in a wide array of different facts, elements of the environment, people, material culture and more broadly, values, emotions, ideologies and other things that are in convention with the experiential world of the bearers of the story. Migratory narratives spread through a process of *selective appropriation* (Bird 2002, 522; Simonsen 1993, 124), i.e. by narrative inclusion of facts, descriptions and other contextual elements during the process of storytelling. In doing so, a multitude of versions specific to particular environment or community emerge, which Carl von Sydow called *ecotypes* (Sydow 1932). This is a direct consequence of the fact that people never remember stories literally, but rather they always reconstruct (Fine 1995, 158) or create them (Lord 1960). Furthermore, this process always takes place in dialogue (Dégh 2001, 45), because in order for a story to be understandable and fulfil its function, both the storyteller and the listener have to come from the same starting discourse (Berger and Luckmann 1966). That is why individual shibboleth accounts strike differently despite their apparent similarities – Haitian Creole cultural reality is thoroughly different from the ancient Hebrew one, and both created a unique new variant(s) (ecotypes) of the otherwise migratory »shibboleth narrative« in the process.

Understanding of context is of vital importance here. The contextualization of migratory folklore means that »[e]vents take place in the world, which is as close as possible to the reality of their bearers. The environment in the migratory stories is thus the environment of the community, so to speak.« (Tangherlini 1994, 5–6) All the narrative accounts share the same context – that of violence (rebellion, war, genocide) between two clearly defined groups. It is thus apparent that this very context seems to be the fertile ground for the shibboleth test migratory narrative motif to »take roots«, to actualize, localize and subsequently create new folklore ecotypes that respond to »here and now« of the people experiencing said



(need for) identity division and subsequent violence – be it Ephraimites and Gileadites in ancient Middle East or Ukrainians and Russians today.<sup>8</sup>

When reading into presented material comparatively, there is one more element that demands reflection. What can the *primary meaning of shibboleth*, as it is presented time and again, tell us? Why are the words such as »shibboleth/ear of corn«, »lentils«, »chickpea«, »bread«, »path« or »Kekec« chosen as a test word, and not any others? Some scholars conclude that the words seem to be chosen deliberately to evoke the notions of domestic life, the taken-for-granted solidarities, which distinguish the natural and known from the artificial and foreign (Scales 2017, 286). This would explain, for instance, the overwhelming presence of »food words« being chosen. It can also be argued that in some conceptual frameworks, Kekec (to focus on a Slovenia example) can be understood as a Slovenian »national« character (Špelec 2013), i.e. linked to the identity of the one who defines and uses the name as a shibboleth.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars disagree with the notion, stating that the original meaning of the chosen word is without such interpretive weight or is at least of minor importance (for the biblical account, see Speiser 1942, 10). This also corresponds to Derrida's definition of shibboleth: »[I]t has no meaning in and of itself, but becomes something that the individual must be able to recognize and, above all, to label.« (Derrida 1994, 28) The question of the primary meaning of the shibboleth is thus much less crucial than the question of its potential as a signifier of the Other. Just as other symbols of the Other are chosen arbitrarily, the shibboleth seems to also be arbitrary and is thus merely a functional symbol.

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8 There is one whole other field of research that can shed some additional light on the matter – that of children's counting-out rhymes (Abrahams and Rankin 1980). Researchers in children's folklore have identified a sub-set of these short folklore forms, by which children choose an individual among themselves by basically performing a shibboleth test. The context here is surprisingly similar to examples, presented in this article – there is an implied »conflict«, where the necessity of an identity distinction is increased, facilitated by the use of a consensually chosen linguistic test. The incorrect pronunciation of the chosen test word symbolically singles out the individual child and temporally ascribes them a different identity to all the others (distinguishing between those who flee and those who chase). This suggests that the »institution« of the linguistic test may be even more important element of narrative folklore than suspected (Kvartič 2016, 266).

9 After a word or a phrase has been used as a linguistic test of identity, it can acquire a whole new set of meanings. »Schild en vrienden«, for example, is today a name of a metapolitical youth movement, related to the popular alt-right movements in Flanders, focusing on Flemish identity and family values.



There is admittedly one important flaw with the analysis I am exercising here, though – the question of veracity of the accounts of shibboleth tests. The narratives present them as true, of course, and it is entirely possible that they are in fact historically (objectively) accurate – not only with their historical context, but the tests themselves. The migratory motif hypothesis I propose here does not allow for that option (Bennett 1985), which is why I will address this question using other researcher's work.

The book of Judges is (along with eleven other books) a part of the historical division of the Old Testament. One of course cannot read these texts merely as accounts in historiography (in the modern sense of the word), describing events objectively, as they truly happened. These books present a wide variety of narrative genres and their intention when composed went far and beyond mere historical reporting (history for history's sake). The biblical writers were not primarily interested in the accurate recording of real events, but rather used stories set in the shared past to illustrate various issues of importance to their audience, namely that of Israelites in B. C. (Coogan 2007, 309).<sup>10</sup> One can therefore reasonably assume that the »aura« of folklore in the Judges 12:5-6 passage is not that far-fetched. Furthermore, some Bible scholars have concluded (using etymological data) that the Shibboleth passage is showing »elements of tradition« and that it is therefore most likely a folkloric rather than a historical record (Speiser 1942, 11).

In the middle ages, narratives of inter-ethnic bloodshed were tightly woven into medieval thought, and it is for that reason only the accounts of it need to be read with caution. The narratives (scarce as they are) tended to fit to these established patterns, projecting ideas of massive ethnic purges onto smaller outbreaks of violence, which were often fairly limited in scope and far more complex in character (Scales 2017, 286). Both Polish and Flemish examples of the language tests are mentioned for the first time in the chronicles much later than when they supposedly happened. In the case of the Flemish uprising (Brugge Metten) in particular, the language test which supposedly sealed the fate of the French is mentioned by just a single chronicler more than a century later

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10 For an overview on the Bible's place in Jewish historiography, see Jelinčič Boeta 2023, 186–191.





(see cales 2017, 286). Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the chosen shibboleth »*schild en vriend*« might be etymologically incorrect as the actual shibboleth could have been *s'gilden vriend* (a Friend of Guilds), changing through later retellings. All this led Belgian linguist Pierre Swiggers to call this particular account a »parallel folk-linguistic story« (Swiggers 1981, 205).

An extensive analysis of Creole survivors' recollections of the »Parsley Massacre«, conducted by researcher Lauren Derby, has shown that reports of ethnic identification through the pronunciation of the word *parsley* are most likely folk narratives rather than historical facts (Derby 2006). Other sources also mention that the Dominican dictator Trujillo himself denied identifying Haitian Creoles using said shibboleth (Llosa 2000, 240).

The examples of »lollapalooza« from the World war II and the contemporary Ukrainian one are somewhat distinct as they are not strictly narratives but rather straight instructions, supported and propagated first and foremost by actors of (dominant) ideology.<sup>11</sup> However, there doesn't seem to be any concrete evidence that these instructions were ever implemented in real life – my research into this has admittedly not been very thorough, but I could not find any (first hand) memoirs or personal narratives of how »lollapalooza« test had actually been used. I have, on the other hand, been trying very hard to verify the account of the example of Slovenian territorial defence using the shibboleth »Kekec« during the nine-day war for Slovenian independence, only to find out that most of my informants have never even heard of this being the case.

As one can see, there exists quite a significant amount of doubt about the verifiably objective nature of several historic shibboleth tests. I claim, however, that when it comes to (supposedly) migratory folklore material, the question of its veracity is of secondary importance. What is much more important is looking at the concrete variants (ecotypes) and how they are connected to the experiential reality of people or groups that share these stories among themselves. Certain events might have happened, but it is the fact that people feel the need to talk about it through stories

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<sup>11</sup> As I have remarked already, media instructional pieces on how to recognize Russians among Ukrainians by using certain words were published just three days after the Russian invasion began.



that is of utmost importance, when we try to understand people and their culture. Getting to know and understand this side of (folk) narratives requires fieldwork, participation-observation, a personal and long-lasting connection to the people that tell them and live through them. With most of the presented historical accounts, especially with the biblical one, this is, of course, impossible.

## Conclusion

Shibboleth – a mechanism of checking and determining one's identity through speech and pronunciation – is an important cultural and linguistic element that is reflected in narrative folklore as well. Though often overlooked, it is nonetheless an integral part of how communities define themselves inwards and outwards. When employed in everyday or ritualized communication, it plays a vital role both in maintaining the boundaries of an already existing communal identity and in establishing a new one, determining who belongs to it (legitimately habituates it, according to Derrida) and who does not. Shibboleth is thus an illustration of how deeply ingrained into our sense of self our speech patterns are and how the formation of various cultural boundaries is instilled in us through language and communication at an early age.

A very special aspect of this dynamic is a »shibboleth test«, a formalized linguistic trial that decides whether the tested (symbolically or literally) lives or dies. The shibboleth test manifests itself in the contexts of intense inter-ethnic violence, when the need for clear understanding of an individual's identity – belonging to either one of two clearly defined sides – is heightened.

Various examples of such contexts have been presented here, found throughout history and across wide geographical space. However, after a comparative overview of these accounts that point out intriguing similarities across time and space, it is reasonable to assume that at least a significant portion of them can be viewed as examples of ecotypes of an otherwise migratory (folk) narrative motif. This is a motif which follows humanity wherever it goes, and gets articulated, told, retold, and even written down whenever and wherever (inevitable) violent conflicts among



different ethnic, linguistic, national, or otherwise defined human groups occur.

The same is probably true of the biblical account of Judges 12:5-6, known as the Shibboleth incident. The passage has garnered a lot of attention from numerous scholars and various disciplines so far, to which I hope I have added a fresh perspective. I realize that a comparative analysis and interpretation in folkloristics can never be truly finished, as long as new and new narrative materials are showing up – and, as I have illustrated, even the modern new conflicts create new stories of the shibboleth test. After comparing some of the existing accounts, however, I can propose a conclusion that the Bible's Shibboleth incident is neither the »original shibboleth narrative«, from which all the subsequent ones derive, nor is it a standalone story one can read without knowing about other examples. What it is, is the very first recorded (written down) ecotype of an otherwise timeless narrative.



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