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**Isabel Cardigos, PhD  
b. 1942  
Portuguese Studies, Researcher**

**Centro de Estudos Ataíde Oliveira,  
FCHS (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences)  
University of the Algarve  
8005-139 Faro  
Portugal**

### **The Enchanted Calendar of the *Mouras Encantadas*.**

#### **Summary**

Legends of snakes as guardians of treasure take the shape of Legends of Enchanted Moorish Women – *mouras encantadas* – in the Iberian Peninsula. The *mouras* are enchanted since what is perceived as the beginnings of Portugal: they are supernaturally powerful and immortal creatures and yet all that they aim for is to become human and mortal like any other woman. They appear as beautiful women either in the full moon or preferably in the summer solstice, offering treasure in return for the chance to be delivered from their enchantment.

Because legends of *mouras* are an umbrella covering a varied number of legends of different origins and different nature, this paper tries to trace common denominators that will lead us to understand the grip that they have on the Portuguese imaginary.

Our reflections are illustrated with versions of different types of legends, some of which are carefully examined to offer keys to the well-kept secret of the *mouras*' nature. In order to unravel this secret, we use a template of dichotomies based on the feminine calendar revolving between the ovular and menstrual poles. The different types of legends surrounding the *mouras* suggest that they are a materialization of arcane fears connected with the awesome power of menstruation and menstrual women, the arch-symbol of which is the snake, kept indefinitely young by the sloughing of its skin – like a womb continually shedding blood skins. The calendar of the *mouras* keeps them always young yet sterile and unavailable to men, confined to very brief openings in the solar and lunar calendar – the summer solstice or the day of the full moon in summer nights – to become mortal/ human /Christian / nubile /disenchanted /ovular, instead of /immortal /snakes/ Moorish / enchanted/ menstrual.

## The Enchanted Calendar of Moorish Women \*

*The translation from nature to culture demands that the feminine organism should become periodic, since the social as well as the cosmic order would be endangered by a state of anarchy in which regular alternation between day and night, the phases of the moon, feminine menstruation, the fixed period for pregnancy and the course of the seasons did not mutually support each other. Lévi-Strauss 1978:221-222.*

### *From history to legend*

The Islamic peoples who lived in the Iberian Peninsula from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century left behind impressive signs of their remarkable cultural heritage. However, we will be dealing here with a completely different kind of heritage, that of “the Moors” as they came to be perceived and remembered in the Iberian and, more specifically, in the Portuguese folk imagination. Although this bears very little connection with the reality of Islamic presence in Portugal in the Middle Ages, it may lead us to a certain configuration of the otherworld in this westernmost stretch of land in Europe. In that world, all the caves, boulders, wells and dolmens belong to “the times of the Moors”, thus chasing from folk memory the times of much older waves of invaders / inhabitants, the Lusitans (perceived as having been the ancestors of the Portuguese), Romans and Visigoths.

Whereas the Lusitans are acknowledged as our ancestral family, the Moors – particularly when women and enchanted, the *Mouras* – became our intimate enemy, the substance which dreams are made of, easily merging with what in other countries is the otherworld of fairies, mermaids, devils, treasure guardians.

Accounts of *mouras encantadas*, enchanted Moorish women, are documented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as guardians of hidden treasure, snakes whose upper half is of a woman with beautiful hair. The Portuguese writer Manuel Bernardes transcribes a legal declaration dated 1653 in which a young man came about some gold: he was led to it by a huge snake with beautiful eyes and blond hair. The author then relates this declaration to the belief in *mouras encantadas* (Bernardes, 1708, *apud* Coelho 1993:347-349). Local

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\* I am very grateful to Francisco Vaz da Silva for his enlightening revision of this text and also for Heda Jason's sharp professional final touches. They have greatly improved this text. The remaining errors are mine of course.

legends noted down from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards give us a richly unfolded portrait of these *mouras*.

### *Menstrual Mouras and Cyclical Women*

We can give historical origins to legends of enchanted *mouras* but we shall see that they speak a very ancient language, far more ancient than the time when the Islamic peoples inhabited the Iberian Peninsula. They still speak the language expressing the awe inspired in man by woman's blood, and the consequent need to control it with taboos that stretch across the world, and are well attested in Classical Antiquity (Pliny 1983: vol. 3, books VIII-XI). This is the language of myth that seems to be so deeply concerned with the relationship between cosmic harmony and the periodicity of women. We shall see that the *mouras* – a special configuration of widely found elements - converge to unfold a dangerous image of the feminine as disturbers of the cosmic calendar with their sterile immortality. We shall finally establish the connection between our findings on the nature of the *mouras* and their very particular calendar.

We shall travel through our *corpus* of legends\* having in mind anthropologist Chris Knight's theory linking the phenomenon of menstruation with the origins of culture (Knight 1991). This can be put in a nutshell for our purpose, as follows: "by synchronizing their menstrual bleeding with the dark phase of the moon, women in proto-human societies invented a symbolic construction that equated the moon's darkness with a period of sexual negativity, aimed at driving men away to hunt. Menstrual women were then sexually tabooed to men by reason of their bleeding, in exactly the same way that the food provided by game animals was tabooed to their male hunters by reason of their 'raw' and bloody state. The moon's fullness would drive men back to the women and to a period of feasting and sex, after the meat had been brought back and cooked" (Cardigos 1996:39). By the power of symbolic thought, women's natural swinging between ovular and menstrual create a primeval human society that changes every month to acquire two alternative and totally different configurations: a dark-moon time of women in blood tied

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\* Bibliography consulted in this paper was found mainly in the following two studies: texts gathered from 38 bibliographical sources by our student Maria Contreiras in her M.A. thesis (Contreiras 2004); and texts collected by Alexandre Parafita for his PhD thesis (Parafita 2006), with a *corpus* of 263 legends from Trás-os-Montes (Northeastern Portugal). I am most indebted to these two authors for having made my bibliographical search infinitely easier.

in kinship bonds and rejecting connubial bonds, perceived by outsiders as powerful, wild creatures, who bleed like wounded animals and yet do not die. And a “honey-moon” time of ovular women bound in connubial ties, a time of cooking and feasting. For those who like myself are not qualified to test the validity of Knight’s model, this is a tale good to think with, a tool used heuristically, to probe binary oppositions that are no longer simply those of gender but, refreshingly, the oppositions issued from the phases of circular time (Cardigos 1996: 40-41).

We shall see that the *mouras* – a special configuration of widely found motifs – converge to unfold a dangerous image of the feminine as disturbers of the cosmic calendar with their sterile immortality. We shall finally establish the connection between our findings on the nature of the *mouras* – forbiddingly menstrual - and their very particular calendar - forever stuck in the “wrong” phase of the moon. We shall also see how they long to become “regular” women when – in the summer solstice or in summer nights of the full moon - they are offered their chance to join the human race of Christian women and their well-ordered periodicity. And we shall also see how their attempt is nearly always rejected by the very order which they so much would like to follow – how the *Mouras*’ wish to become *Christian* is itself sacrilegious.

#### *Four main clusters for legends about mouras encantadas*

Gathered under the same umbrella of “legends of *mouras*” there are narratives conveyed under very different modes of belief. These were therefore tentatively organised into four groups, as follows. (1) *Mouras enchanted as snakes*, legends connected with the German *Schlangenjungfrau* that can be traced back to the Middle Ages and have kept a wealthy trail in northern European balladry (Woods 1959: 123-127). In Portugal, they are definitely local legends, closely connected with a certain spot, always a good habitat for snakes and for dreams of treasure. These short accounts, usually complemented with examples of encounters experienced by certain people, are more similar to those left by 17<sup>th</sup> century writers or by reports of the Portuguese Inquisition; (2) *legends of disenchantment and marriage*, a small percentage of narratives in which disenchantment and even marriage occur; *legends from the “reconquista”*, those narratives located in historical time of the fight for recovery of Christian land from the Moslem occupiers.

Though perhaps factitious, these legends have nevertheless become part of Portuguese lore and cultural identity. As the Portuguese territory emerged from the land gradually regained from the Islamic occupier, we can say that Portugal was therefore born out of what we call the “Reconquista”. Finally, we shall briefly include legends we will refer as (4) the *secret underworld of enchantment*, where enchanted Moors and *Mouras* live a parallel life mirroring that of the humans.

#### *Mouras enchanted as snakes*

In popular belief *mouras* are snakes, first and foremost - so much so that today village people may refer to snakes as *mouras*, particularly when believed to be seen with hair. We recently witnessed the genesis of one of those legends, conveyed by a friend who has roots in the deep rural area of Arouca: During the building of a major road circling a mountain which surrounds the region, a bull-dozer ran over a snake. A month later the driver died and the story developed that he had killed a *moura*. Later still, my friend heard it from her cleaning lady that the *moura* had hair on *her* head. By July of the following year my friend heard that the *moura* had in vain pleaded to be spared, hence the driver’s punishment (heard in Minhões, Arouca, July 2004).

The *moura encantada* is often believed to appear as a woman who is in fact a snake, to be also seen as half woman and half snake (in Parafita 2006 n°s 43, 103, 192, 228; also Vasconcellos 1969: n°s 260, 265, 274), and hoping that someone will break her enchantment. But as a rule this never happens:

It is told by the old ones that at the bridge of (...), located on the road of (...) that goes to [small town in the Northeast], there lives an enchanted *moura* by some boulders, and there she keeps a rich treasure. And they also tell that she has the body of a snake and the head of a woman and that, in summer nights, she comes out with the moonlight to stretch her clothes on the rocks and to comb her beautiful hair with a golden comb.

Some say that long ago there were boys who tried to break her enchantment. However, they never could, because one had to venture to go alone to that place and, sharp at midnight, wait for the snake to come out to comb her hair on the rocks. In order to disenchant her, he would have to take with him a sharp rod with a prong and gather the courage to pierce her body while she was combing her hair. Should he manage to make her bleed, the body of the snake would turn into a beautiful woman, and one of the boulders would open up so that he would

become the lord of the treasure inside. As there never was anyone who had the courage to go there alone – because the site itself is frightening – the *moura* and her treasure remain there, hoping for ever that someone may go there and disenchant the two. (Parafita 2006: n° 228)

### L1.

Disenchanting the *moura* by making her bleed with a sharp rod could not be more transparent a metaphor for the sexual act entailing a defloration – at its rawest. It would seem here that the *moura*'s enchantment has to do with a spinsterhood condition. The young man is nearly always unable to gather the courage to make the *moura* bleed. She is forbidding because she is a snake or (worse even) half woman and half snake.

A far more widespread form of disenchantment is the kiss – again, doomed to fail. Here is one of countless variants:

[... location and history of the place] People also say that, when the Moors were expelled, they left behind a beautiful princess enchanted inside the hill, where she is seen weaving on a golden loom. This princess appeared to a miller in a night of St. John's, in the form of a snake, and she asked him for a kiss, so as to be free from the enchantment that kept her prisoner of that place. But the miller was terrified when he came near that loathsome animal and he ran away. And she screamed that he had doubled her enchantment. (Parafita 2006: n° 76) L2.

The problem lies again in that it must be a kiss given to or received from a huge snake (explicitly so in 30 different versions found in Parafita 2006 and Contreiras 2004) and there is hardly a candidate who can endure that. He may perish in the attempt and the *moura*'s enchantment is invariably doubled because of his failure. There are stories of princes or warriors who kiss a snake who was a *Moura encantada* (Parafita 2006: texts n° 55, 56), but these would be fairy tales rather than legends. We shall come back legends of successful disenchantments at the appropriate time.

One is well beyond gender distinction in these encounters: the snake's embrace together with the sharp lick of its tongue combine both sexes in undifferentiated primeval lust. At that point of the process towards disenchantment, the kiss can also be given to a woman (end of note 10), or the snake can in fact be a male guardian, the *moura*'s kin or, if one prefers, her *alter ego*. Why is the face of enchantment so hideous and impossible to overcome? Why does it make sex so unbearable? Why a snake?

A woman enchanted as a snake is the perfect metaphor for a woman unavailable to man. It is her body saying “no” to a man within a widely pervading symbolic context of taboos and terrors about menstruation. In other words, the time in woman’s calendar she is visited by “the snake”, there is no way she can be visited by a man. In her collection of Algerian folktales, Micheline Galley quotes the following ‘true’ account that she collected from an informant:

Une jeune femme très belle aperçoit, près d’une source, un serpent. Elle reçoit un choc; elle se sent liée au serpent. Chaque nuit elle reçoit la visite du serpent. Elle ne peut plus laisser son mari s’approcher d’elle. Il la répudie. Elle se réfugie chez ses parents, et le serpent continue de lui rendre visite” (Galley 1971: 65).

This beautiful metaphor of menstruation “visiting” a woman and her consequent separation from her husband to join her blood family can be seen as the step that precedes the woman’s transformation into the snake itself – the *moura*.

The tragic condition of the *moura* is that she is desperately begging a “yes” from a man when her body is crying out a “no”. Like the snake – the moon-like animal that sheds its skin to renew itself – the *moura* is governed by the moon, keeping her young forever as a “menstrual” snake, an implacable moon that only allows her to appear as a woman when in full-moon, only quickly to revert to her snake skin-shedding condition.

The attraction of the *moura* is in the treasure she promises. She may appear sitting by the roadside, giving the passer-by raisins, figs or charcoals as a gift or as a reward. The person discards the gifts /looks at them before the appointed time / cannot keep quiet about the gift. Later he finds proof that had he shown discretion and real acceptance of her gifts, they would have turned into gold (cf. tale type 476\* -A\*, Jason 1975).

Indiscretion is in fact one of the most frequent violations of the pact proposed by the *moura* for her disenchantment. She can also appear as a beautiful woman sitting by the wayside with her golden comb and mirror, needle and scissors. She asks a passer-by to choose whatever he prefers. He always chooses one of the golden objects rather than the *moura*, who would then be disenchanting. His wrong choice proves to be fatal: she curses him to be blinded or killed by the sharp object of his choice:

[...] The boy went to fetch wood in the early morning to the [...] [Galicia] at the day of St John’s. As he was gathering wood he suddenly saw a beautiful girl who was in front of a

display of beautiful utensils. [...] Finally the girl asked him “From what I have got here, what do you like best?” “The scissors”, he replied. The furious girl then replied: “May they take your life away!”, because the reply had not been the right one. What he should have said was that it was the girl he liked best. The boy ran away so fast that he did not even take the wood with him. The girl is still enchanted, together with her feminine companions, in the [...]. I suppose she is waiting for another opportunity. (González 1995:78-79) **L3**

Her predicament is that she is never found worth the preference, the discretion or the respect of a man. Should he keep the secret, should he know how to wait, and she would be disenchanted and he would have the riches (as in fairytales).

The *moura*'s hair is often mentioned, no matter what shape the *moura* may take: long black hair, short hair covering the whole body of the snake, making it even more hideous (Parafita 2006: nº 211), or long golden hair that she combs it with a matching golden comb:

There is in the village of Freixeda [northeast], a hill with a boulder, where people say that one can hear a girl crying in nights of full moon, while she combs her hair with a comb of solid gold. [...] This girl turns into an ugly snake that during the day remains coiled at the entrance of a well. To break her enchantment one would have to go and kiss the snake, but no-one has ever had the courage to do it. (Parafita 2006: nº 101) **L4**

The hair-combing *mouras* appear as beautiful maidens with beautiful hair and ideally under the light of the full moon, reverting back into their snake form at the slightest disturbance. Only once in our *corpus* does she appear as a hideous snake combing a dishevelled hair, “[...] an enormous snake with a huge head of hair, which it combed with a comb of gold and diamonds” (Parafita 2006: nº 258), an exception which also helps. The *Moura* combs her hair, just as the Banshee of the Celtic tradition, the Slavic Rousalka, the fairies, or the mermaids of more general popular belief. In her study about the Banshees of Ireland, Evelyne Sorlin strengthens her view that this image suggests a cleansing ritual of an unavailable, “unclean”, menstrual woman (Sorlin 1981:48-56). Her argument relies on other features of the Banshee that we can also consider for our *moura*, as both are unavailable as sexual or marriage partners. They are very different, though: the Banshee was once a woman who died in labour or who has been rejected

(Sorlin1981:30-36) and she won't let go off her singleness, she won't let go off her comb (p.48), because she dwells for ever on her grief and anger. Unlike the Banshee, the *Moura* is unavailable against her will. She would be only too willing to give her golden comb to whoever could kiss her as a snake and break her enchantment. In a recent work, Vaz da Silva offers remarkable evidence on the symbolic links connecting "the multitude of enchanted maidens of European folklore, who undergo chthonic enchantment in the shape of snakes and periodically appear combing golden hairs in human shape" (Silva 2008: ch.4). These he relates to "blood and dishevelled hairs" and to "the belief that a woman having just given birth [like the Banshee!], or else having her menses must not comb her hair." "Taken together", he adds, these two instances bespeak a symbolic link between female blood, uncombed hairs, and snakes" (*idem*).

The beautiful picture of the *moura* combing her long blond hair is the outcome of several euphemistic displacements that veil the terrifying Medusa-like picture of the woman in blood, carrying such apotropaic power that it causes the very Devil to take flight when he sees the woman's genitals (folktale type ATU 1095, *Scratching Contest*), or his incapacity to straighten her pubic hairs (when he can remove mountains or build bridges in one day: ATU 1175, *Straightening Curly Hair*).

Weaving is the only activity the *moura* is seen (or heard) occupied with more often than combing her hair (30 instances in Parafita 2006, two accounts in n° 298, Vasconcellos 1969). It sometimes seems that the one calls for the other as she appears to be doing both at the same time (Alves 1934:122-123 and in Parafita 2006: n°s 170 and 249) and in fact both tasks could be seen to reflect the same condition, both are a matter of combing threads to make them tidy.

The *moura*'s weaving is (just as with her hair combing) a task that appears never to be finished. She is the opposite of Penelope, who has to un-weave at night what she wove during the day to appear unavailable to her suitors, postponing indefinitely the fulfilment of a promise of marriage: her deadline of a finished shroud will only take place when Ulysses, her rightful husband, comes back. The *moura*'s continual weaving, on the other hand, reflects her state of fateful unavailability to any union with a man: her endless thread – the signal that her job is endless – is of solid gold that should never be broken

(Parafita, n° 30, 47, 88, 121, 122, 183, 262; Alves 1934:494; Vasconcellos 1969: n° 304, 305): if it does, it appears as blood and then her enchantment is doubled. We can see the clear homology between the *moura*'s endless thread and her endless unholy state of enchantment in the following account:

(...) A woman found a golden thread on her way to church. She pulled it and she realized that the thread never came to an end, so she said to herself "this is enough for me to be rich", and she cut it off, for she did not want to miss the holy mass. As soon as the thread was cut it melted into blood and the woman heard shrieking and cursing. Had she delayed her pulling of the thread until mass was finished, the *moura*'s enchantment would have finished. (Barreiros 1915:298) **L5**.

We can use this same thread as an introduction to the strong and paradoxical involvement of the *moura* with the catholic rituals. The last statement in the text implies that there is a connection of redeemer – redeemed between the woman and the *moura*. The thread appears as a link between the *Moura* and the Christian woman who is pulling it and that should not be broken until mass comes to an end. Therefore the woman redeems the *moura* at the cost of missing attending mass, as if the *moura*'s salvation would have to be carried out at the expense of the woman's fall from grace. As if grace / salvation (disenchantment) was acquired at the cost of someone else's disgrace / condemnation. This notion of a limited good in cosmic economy, where for something to increase something else will have to decrease (Foster 1965), is remarkably present in the interaction between the enchanted *moura* and the human with regard to disenchantment. We can easily replace the binomial Human /Enchanted with that of Christian /*Moura* (*i.e.* Islamic woman). The *Moura* in popular belief is the very opposite of Christian, sometimes explicitly connected with the devil (one of the "Christian" reasons that could account for *the moura* being seen as a snake). More importantly, this accounts for the notion that the *moura* needs to acquire something that the Christians have and that she lacks in order to be disenchanting – *i.e.*, to become human. The kiss of the snake is therefore often connected with the *moura* licking away the Christian's "holy oils" with her kiss, (the *santos óleos* with which the child is anointed during the Catholic baptismal ritual), so as to become disenchanting (Dias 1955: 57-58; Moura 1996:32). In one of the accounts, it is the *moura* herself who warns her prospective disenchanter what he will

have to do after she kisses him on his forehead: he must go to the priest and ask to be anointed again with the oils of baptism that she would have licked away for her disenchantment (Oliveira (1898) 1996: 211-212). Under the understanding that with a kiss she would literally endanger her saviour's eternal salvation, his refusal is even more understandable.

Female otherness becomes intolerably dangerous: a kiss from her literally damns the soul of the human who accepts her approach. In one of the accounts (Dias 1955:58) it is even stated that the man from whom the *moura* takes the holy oils will become enchanted himself (enchantment and paganism being here regarded as equivalent: a baby who hadn't yet been christened used to be affectionately called *mourinho*, "little Moor"). We see the fierce logic of limited good at work, see-sawing from the giver to the taker: the *moura*'s disenchanter will become himself enchanted.

There is a series of ambivalent features surrounding the *moura*, which may be regarded as corollaries of her double nature. The holy oils have to be snatched away with a lurid kiss - something quite the reverse of the holiness of baptism. In fact all the Christian rituals will have to be banned from the *moura*'s presence, another tacit indication of her unspoken connection with the unholy. Parafita (2006:448) indicates twenty texts where the presence of a Christian ritual (the sign of the cross or the invocation of a holy name) suffices to shatter the apparition and cause the *moura* and her riches to vanish away. In this context it would seem that the *moura*'s very wish to become a Christian becomes sacrilegious.

The *moura* may need the holy oils of baptism to be disenchanting, but she needs to be nurtured with milk, and this she gets from the human world as well. This need is one of the most striking features that connect her with the snakes, arch gluttons for milk in the popular belief throughout Portugal. The *mouras* love drinking milk in their snake as well as in their human form. The human is always rewarded for the milk he gives the *moura*: "a shepherdess was suspicious that someone was stealing the milk of her cows. A *moura* appeared and told the girl that it was she who drank it and asked for more. Finally she rewarded the girl with a pair of golden scissors" (Santo 1982:1, *apud* Bastos 1988:25). But this is the exception, as most often the gift is thrown away or looked at before the

right time (Miranda Júnior, Santos, Santos Júnior 1986:17-18; Santos Júnior 1957:52; Parafita n° 62, 108, 109, 145; Vasconcellos 1969: n° 256, 280, 294 and Moura 1996:60). We can also find the belief that a (Christian) woman can baptize a baby *mouro* by breastfeeding it and that this “baptism” can disenchant his mother.

People say that a long time ago, a *moura encantada* was left behind and remained there with a baby, who could often be heard crying. And it is also said that she would only be disenchanted if the baby was baptized and that, in order to be baptized, it would be sufficient if he was breastfed by a woman who was also baptized. One day a woman from the village went there to collect the flax that had been left soaking, and she left her baby under the shade of some trees while she worked. Then the *moura* who was peeping went and swapped the babies, waiting for the woman to go and breastfeed her baby. (Parafita 2006: n° 259) L6.

As we have noted earlier, being a Christian is homologous to being disenchanted, that is, with being a *moura* no longer. In the above account this homology appears through the interesting mediation of “comadrio”:<sup>\*</sup> had the Christian woman breastfed the *moura*’s baby, the baby would be baptized, i.e., become a Christian, and the baby’s mother would be disenchanted, i.e., would become a Christian. A redemptive blood relationship of “comadrio” would link the two women, with the milk flowing through the baby from the milk-giving Christian to the enchanted *moura*. We can find here an unexpected permutation of Vaz da Silva’s concept of “sexually transmitted horns” from semen travelling from a man to another man through the womb blood of the woman shared by both (Silva 2006: 402-404). Those two “comadres” would be regarded as sisters. Unfortunately, the Christian woman refuses the invitation and there is no disenchantment.

### *Legends with disenchantment and marriage*

Let us now see the virtue of milk working successfully as a disenchanter:

A young shepherd saw once a girl who was combing her hair with a golden comb. “Ah, lady! How I wished I could have the comb you are combing your hair with!” “I shall give you the comb and much more than that if you are not are not afraid to do what I’ll tell you.”

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\* “Comadrio” is the relationship between the mother and the godmother of a child, as “compadrio” is the relationship between the godfather and the father. “Compadres” are also the godparents of the same child. This establishes a symbolic blood relationship which traditionally forbids the marriage between a “comadre” and a “compadre”.

And she told the boy to bring a bowl of blessed milk the next morning and to hold it on his hand until she finished drinking it, without being afraid of whatever might happen.

The boy arrived with the bowl, and a huge snake came to him and started drinking the milk.

The boy held the bowl until the snake had finished and then it became the lady of the day before and she gave him many riches (González 1995:117) **L7**

Let us take a closer look at the richness of paradoxical images conveyed by this Galician text: what seems to occur is a swap between the lady's (menstrual) comb and the "blessed milk" that the boy will pass on to her. Yet the "frightening" situation portrayed later is that of soft feminine cupping of both hands to hold a vessel to be entered by the head of a huge snake. An exchange is taking place but the borders blur as to who is male and who is female – a striking performance of disenchantment, after which no wonder the snake becomes a lady and her riches become a reality.

Other accounts confirm that the milk given to *mouras* (or male *mouros*) is more than just nurturing: it has the virtue of the holy oils. We can find statements that girls give milk to snakes believed to be *mouras* in the hope that these will be disenchanting and give their riches. A lengthy narrative concerning the disenchantment of a male *mouro* is worth summing up for its startling connection between milk and disenchantment.

A young shepherdess becomes friendly with a beautiful lizard. She kindly hands him some milk of the only nanny goat of her flock. She starts feeding the lizard with that milk every day. But as the lizard goes on thriving, the nanny goat starts giving less and less milk. She cannot bring herself to give up feeding the lizard and the nanny-goat's milk finally dries up. At that moment the lizard becomes a boy. He thanks the girl for carrying on giving him 90 days of the milk he needed to be disenchanting. He then gives her a key with which she will be able to open hearts and treasure. She only has to keep quiet for the next three months, the time needed for him to arrive in Moorland - which she does, getting of course rewarded with love and treasure (Vasconcellos, 1969: n° 273) **L8**.

This narrative is meant to be a pretty story, with none of the usual violation of the interdictions set by the enchanted one. In a benevolent way, we can find the same striking connection between the thriving lizard and the motherly nanny goat whose milk of disenchantment dries when he no longer needs it. The relationship between the lizard's gradual approach to disenchantment from drinking the milk and the nanny goat's milk

decreasing until it dries out is another instance of the concept of “limited good” referred to in Mencej 2006, typical in Slovenian lore about witches: a woman is believed to magically “steal” milk when her cows produce a lot while those of her neighbours don’t produce enough. In another variant,

A woman feeds a little snake with milk and she is led to an underground place where the disenchanted Moor is a boy with a red cap who thanks her for her kindness and instructs her on how to find access to the treasure. He will also need three months before he can reach Moorland, during which the woman will have to keep quiet and fast, which she does. (Frazão s/d, 67-71, our résumé). L9

We can also see here the motherly connection between the Moor and the milk-giving woman, while he is a snake and then, at the next stage of disenchantment, when he is a little boy with a red cap, during the three months before his full release until he reaches his homeland. Not unlike the nanny-goat, this woman will have to fast for three months, as a mother dwindling for her son to grow. Male children with a red cap are familiar protagonists in legends that bring forth the underground world of enchantment. They are all kin to the ophidian *mouras*, as sexually unavailable and enchanted as the *mouras* themselves. It is remarkable that there never is any question of marriage with the disenchanted Moor. Disenchantment is a release which generally entails the Moor’s return to his homeland.

Legends in which disenchantment occurs can hardly be classified as such, because nothing lingers behind to haunt the place any longer, no fear, nothing worth lowering one’s voice when talking about it. These “legends” are nevertheless useful within the *mouras*’ lore to better understand the logic of their enchantment. From those narratives only very few end in marriage (González 1995:109-110; 115-116). As in fairytales, the beast is kissed and marriage takes place, after disenchantment (as in tale types ATU 102 or ATU 125). A third narrative, quite unique, is given in the dry summary of a well-known ethnographer:

In [...] [Northeast Portugal] there was once a *moura* in the shape of a snake with ears. One day a boy went there to kill it but while he was in wait he fell asleep. The snake then approached him and gave him a kiss and she at once became a beautiful girl who married the

boy and they both lived very happily, as should be expected. (Vasconcellos 1980: VII, 410-411). **L10.**

This looks like - again in terms of fairytales - a *Dragon Killer* story that turns into a gender inverted *Beauty and the Beast*, the “beast” (*moura*) kissing a sleeping “beauty” (a human male). We may remember that in *Dragon Killer* folktales the dragon is – as in the story of St. George – closely connected to the maiden to be rescued. Here, they melt into one. This connection of many-folded implications is aptly summed up by Vaz da Silva: “to kiss a loathly lady and to slay a dragon are two equivalent means for freeing a bride from her ophidian condition” (Silva 2002:180). Again, this could happen in fairytales but is not supposed to happen in legends.

*Legends of the “reconquista”: the moura as her father’s daughter*

The “legend of *Moura Cassima*” is an example of those lengthy narratives which offer the “historical” setting for the *mouras*’ enchantment, going back to the time of the Islamic occupation in the Iberian Peninsula. The legend may be shortcut as follows:

Near the end of the Arab occupation of the Algarve in southern Portugal, the Christians conquered the fortified village of Loulé, and the ex-governor managed to flee with his three daughters. When he realised that he could not take them safely away with him, he enchanted them near a well, hoping later to come back for them. He uttered a spell and they remained enchanted inside the well.

Years later some Christian prisoners arrived in Tangier. The *mouras*’ father recognized one of them and he trusted him with three baked bread loaves each with the name of one of the three girls, explaining what he should do. The Christian was sent back home in a magic basin, carrying with him the three loaves. When he arrived, he hid them in a chest while he waited for St John’s Eve, the day when the disenchantment could take place.

In the meantime his wife found the loaves and she cut one of them to see if there was any treasure inside. The loaf bled and she rushed to put it back where it was. When the time came, the man went and threw the loaves inside the well, one at a time, while he called for the name written on each particular loaf. He then saw a cloud coming out of the well and flying south. When it came to the turn of the *moura* whose loaf his wife had cut, he heard a moan. She could not get free and go because her leg had been cut and would have to remain enchanted

in the well. (Résumé from Frazão s/d: 11-24. The same narrative appears, phrased differently, in Marques (1964) 1997: III 191-198) **L11**.

The The baked loaf bleeds, the *moura* is hurt and her enchantment is doubled. In one version it is the man who tries to retain the third *moura* by pricking the loaf so as to hold it with a thread. Before she sinks back into the well she enchants him to become a chestnut tree by the well, to keep her company (Delgado 1985: 240-244). Unlike with the action of piercing the *moura* to make her bleed (as in **L1**) which would lead to her disenchantment, this violation of the cooked cake impersonating and conjuring the disenchanted *moura* is seen as defilement: it oozes blood and the *moura*'s enchantment is reinforced.

Popular stories of *mouras* like these ones carry with them the consensual explanation as why the *mouras* were enchanted in the first place: they were “frozen” into enchantment by their father or surrogate father (Frazão s/d:57-62; González 1995:115-116; Oliveira (1898) 1996:154-155). By leaving the *moura* under a spell, her father is keeping her safe from outside prowlers. Wherever she is left behind, the *moura* is a marker of a territory that still belongs to her father, hidden and forbidden to the Christians in an otherwise Christian land, a safe kept in the underworld where, together with his daughter(s) he keeps his other treasures also intact. But the father never comes back In order to disenchant them, he will have to charge someone else, and the *mouras* will fly back to their homeland, to their father. Alternatively, the *moura* has been instructed by her father and she tells the human what to do so that she may be disenchanted *and* go back to her blood family. Just like her treasure the *moura* may stay underwater for ever and ever, rich and sterile, endlessly longing for our world of unfolding abundance. She remains the enchanted property of a father who wouldn't give her up or away, and her enchantment is also that she will remain pinned down to a place.

The treasure, always offered by the *moura* in exchange for her disenchantment, was never meant as a dowry for a marriageable daughter, it may be used to make her free... to go back to her father's home. In the one legend from these “reconquista” narratives which ends up with the marriage between disenchanter and disenchanted,

there is an attempt from the faraway father to recover his daughter. She persuades her husband to travel to Moorland and visit her family. He goes and is very well received by her

father who gives his son-in-law a belt as a present for his daughter. When he is back in Portugal, the man decides to try the bejewelled belt on a tree. Immediately the tree is wrenched from the earth and flies southwards - instead of the *moura* for whom the belt was intended. (Résumé of Vasconcellos 1969: 742-743, also Frazão s/d: 45-47; cf. tale type \*446 (Jason 1975) L12.

We have seen that in the narratives of this group the main ingredient toward the disenchantment of the *mouras* consists of bread or cake, some dough that is kneaded, baked and handed to them.

If we take up the dichotomies introduced by Lévi-Strauss for the purpose of decoding mythic images, our watery *moura* is a paradigm of the *wet* as opposed to the *dry*, and of the *raw* (animal, held in kinship bounds) as opposed to the *cooked* (human, bound by rules of marriage): raw is to cooked as kinship is to marriage. Enchanted as a snake, the *moura* is cursed to be permanently in the *wet* and in the *raw*.

Seen under this light, no wonder the way to counteract the magic that threw the *moura* into wells and springs will link her with their antipode: she must be made *dry* and symbolically *cooked*. As we have seen earlier, loaves, buns and cakes will therefore be likened to her (as with witches' dolls), inscribed with her name, "called" her name as they are thrown into the water where she lives. She will then emerge to be inscribed once again in the well-ordered cycle of human life. Nevertheless, she flies back to the country of her kin, free to marry but only her own kind.

Before we bring our threads together, let us get a glimpse of the enchanted land of the *Moors* beneath the Christian surface of our soil.

### *The secret underworld of enchanted Moorland*

In this particular cluster the *Moors* are perceived as living in a community and leading the appearance of a normal life that in some way mirrors our own (as in Christiansen (1958) 1992: 91-99; also Briggs 1977:164). It is a migratory legend that, at first sight, wouldn't quite fit the substance of the *mouras*' in our conceptual framework. In this otherworld of enchantment, the women have husbands and children, a fact that seems to contradict the *moura*'s "menstrual" sterility referred to earlier. But not quite: the *moura* appears as a needy mother, she needs the help of a Christian woman, as a midwife (as in

Christiansen *idem*: n° 5070) and above all as a giver of milk – her own or that of an animal, amply referred to earlier. We would just mention the *mouras*’ need for the company of women as a curious feature of this group which appears twice in our corpus (Dias 1967:50-52; Parafita 2006:n° 144). These accounts show the *mouras* joining other women for a spinning “veillée”, for a good time together that ends abruptly when the taboo is broken that there should never be a man among the spinners. In one of them the intruder is found out because he is not deft at spinning. The *mouras* disappear, never to join the women again. The novelty of these “veillées” is that “Christian” women are also looked for to share the togetherness of “spinsters” for an evening – the complicity of women together that for a while is stronger than the divide between the world of the enchanted and the world of the living - a trust to be broken with the presence of a man.

*Piecing together a jigsaw portrait of the moura*

*The moura* is a young and beautiful Moorish woman who is also a snake and a treasure keeper. Her disenchantment is most often related with finding a man willing to be kissed by her in her snake form. Both the *mouro* and the *moura* indistinctly love milk, a fluid which can also have the power to disenchant them. The *moura* is often seen combing her hair or weaving, a pervading image with enchanted women, which evokes the cleansing of impure blood. She is enchanted because, in a panoply of ways, she is unavailable to man, and that is the circular reason why she cannot be disenchanting, beautiful, sweet and enticing that she may appear to be. One can easily see in fairytales that a state of enchantment is also a state of disjunction from a connubial union with a man. It is only after the disenchantment of one of the two that the pair will marry and live happily together ever after. She is preternaturally powerful and yet she is totally dependent on human action. She can live forever with untold riches and she longs for the mortality of human condition. She holds in her nature all these contradictions of enchantment. All she wants is to be disenchanting.

Secrecy is one of the main rules to be kept if she is to be disenchanting, in other words, she is a secret that must be kept. We approached her secret by keeping in mind a template of dichotomies based on the feminine calendar revolving between the ovular and menstrual poles which we shall now bring forth. In Cardigos 1996, chapter “The Little

Snake” refers at length to a fairytale about the secret friendship that links a girl and a snake. While enhancing the beauty of the girl, the snake is closely connected with the ‘loathsome’ periods connected with the shedding of blood in the girl’s life, appearing at the outset of her puberty, her marriage and her birth-giving, while becoming conspicuously absent during the heroine’s pregnancy (p.154).

Unlike nubile young women, who oscillate in a movement between the snake-like skin-shedding of their menstrual phase, and an ovular, fertile, receptive phase, the *moura* is – with short intermittencies in which she is seen as a human – the never-aging snake, believed to be indefinitely rejuvenated by the sloughing of her skin.

Like the Banshees, *Mouras* are sometimes heard crying (Parafita 2006: n° 41, 43b, 48, 59a, 185, 214, 238; Martins 1987:273-274). In fact they are *wet* in a multitude of forms: they are often enchanted in springs or in wells and tanks, where they are seen, bathing - an archetypal image of the woman washing off the uncleanness of her blood.\* The *mouras* are also *raw* in the sense that they live in the wild and easily revert into their animal, ophidian form. Therefore, disenchantment can take place if *cooked* buns representing the *mouras* are made on their behalf in order to replace them in their enchantment and set them free. They are kept in blood-kinship bonds that take many forms: the father who enchanted them, the male kin who can appear as a snake in their stead, the fact that they tend to fly back home as soon as they are disenchanting.

Chris Knight uses dichotomies running along the classical axis “male / female” (fire / water // dry / wet // cooked / raw), and refracts this axis into a new cleavage, that of the two poles of the feminine moon-cycle: ovulation / menstruation // connubial bonds / blood-kinship bonds // semen (milk) / blood // full moon / dark moon (Knight 1991:374-416). When applied to the symbolic world of the *mouras* we can now specify a few more dichotomies along the same new axis: disenchanting / enchanted // this world / the other world // Christian / Moorish. In the light of these oppositions the *mouras*’ fit perfectly the dark, menstrual half of this rich feminine matrix.

We can now see why they are stuck in a kinship bond, why they appear as women in nights of Full Moon, why they are basically sterile. We can also see why they need

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\* For classical examples of “the woman who bathes while unavailable or being a professed virgin is in a ‘poisonous’ blood period that translates into the primordial shape of the snake”, see Silva 2002:190-191.

women, their milk and their company – their other halves when ovular, their kin when menstrual, their longing and their hope because, unlike the *mouras*, mortal women follow the trail of their moons in the dance of life, they are alive and whole: “At the close of the three-day period a hag turns into a bride and [...] a maiden then comes from a serpent-like condition” (Silva 2002:179).

### *The Calendar of the Moura Encantada*

Time flows almost without phases in the enchanted, eternal and inert world of the *mouras*. Their legends only depict the swift interruptions in the nearly flat continuum of their eternity. Within our human calendar, we have seen that, in some narratives, they appear on the summer nights when the moon is full - a time when they can enjoy the privilege of being perceived as desirable women, of getting their chance of being disenchanting and join the rhythms of women on the human world.

The full moon is the lunar equivalent of the summer solstice. In fact, more than any other day, it is in the summer solstice that, in most accounts, the *moura* can emerge from her snake-like condition and step into this mortal world in order to be disenchanting. St John's Day on 23<sup>rd</sup> June is then the privileged turning point in the solar calendar in which she can enter the warm ups and downs of human time. It is the opportunity for her disenchanting.

The *mouras* are then allowed to join human time through one of the cosmic doors leading to human life on Earth - the very same portal that leads to “sacred” time in human religious rituals. As if a kind of porosity was created in the summer solstice that would allow free circulation between different worlds: the human world when the *mouras* were able to step out of the time that, in the words of M. Eliade, “always remains equal to itself, [that] neither changes nor is exhausted” and meet the humans who were in turn receptive to the demonic world “homologized to eternity”, where treasure could be found through the ever living *mouras*, “indefinitely repeatable, indefinitely recoverable”, if only once a year (terms in brackets quoted from Eliade 1959:68-70).

Like the summer solstice in many other parts of the world, the festival of St. John's is also a sacred time of sexual conjunction, particularly propitious for connubial license. In the town of Oporto, once known for its strict marital manners, everybody is out on the

streets in St John's Eve: the men hold a very phallic leek with which they are allowed to touch each and every woman (Veiga de Oliveira 1984:125) and the virtue of its touch is believed to be beneficial to them. It is a festival of fire (*idem*:171-177), when the door opens for the dewy *mouras* to be seductive, to show their gold, to be released from immortality by the touch of a man, to appeal to the virility and bravery of the human males who will make them mortal and fertile, who will rescue them from their otherworld of continual doom, before they sink again – for another year, for seven years, for ever - into the time of enchantment, in eternity where nothing happens.

**Narratives quoted or transcribed:**

- L1:** “A moura da Ponte da Aradeira” [The *moura* of the bridge of ...], Parafita 2006: n° 228.
- L2:** “Lenda do Cabeço dos Mouros” [Legend of the Hillock of the *Mouros*], Parafita 2006 n° 76.
- L3:** “Mozas Enchantadas de Teixido” [Enchanted Girls of...]: González 1995: 78-79
- L4:** “O tesouro dos Mouros da Freixada” [The treasure of the Moors of...] Parafita 2006: n° 101
- L5:** [The endless thread of the Moorish woman], Barreiros 1915:298 (*apud* Parafita 2006:140c).
- L6:** “Lenda da Torca de Balmeão” [The flax workers and the *mouras*]: Parafita 2006: n° 260.
- L7:** “A señora de Castro Alegre” [The lady from...]: González 1995:117
- L8:** “O Penedo do Sino” [The bell boulder], Vasconcellos 1969: n° 273
- L9:** “A Cobrinha do Barranco” [The little snake in the valley], Frazão s/d: 67-71
- L10:** [“Moura encantada”, enchanted Moorish woman], Vasconcellos 1980: 410-411 (*apud* Contreiras 5.2).
- L11:** “Lenda da Fonte Cassima” [Legend of the Spring of Cassima], Marques1997:191-198 (*apud* Contreiras 31.13).
- L12:** “O cinto da moura” [The belt of the *moura*], Vasconcellos 1969: n° 249.

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