

CULTURE

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TWO CULTURES – ONE SYMBOL

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This paper is dedicated to the question of similarities in the approach to the multilevel symbolism in Slav and Native American cultures. Ambivalent symbol of the snake is analyzed in the frame of mythological thinking. At the end the author comes to the conclusion that elements of mythological thinking are still present in everyday life and influence human behavior levels.

The answer to the question what creates the nation and what sustains it might be a corner stone in the attempt of "perfect union" creation. The human subconscious is an unlimited source of different symbols and mythic types, which bears huge amounts of information about the nation, its history and identity, even about its resources for the future. Blessed is the nation that knows and continues to use those symbols in all aspects of life.

Philosophers have proposed a theory of three types of human thinking that followed each other in the history of mankind: mythological, religious and scientific. As Liudmila Shaposhnikova states: "Mythological thinking was the most ancient one and served as a basis for the following two" [1, p. 158]. Mythological thinking is present in every person's conscious and very often it even predominates over other types of thinking, as it controls human understanding and bears the idea of national (and sometimes even universal) belonging. Mircea Eliade writes that "the myth by itself as well as the symbol, never disappeared from the psychological world, it could simply change its aspect or mask its actions [2, p. 27]. This special feature of the myth and mythological thinking gave life to such literary movement as symbolism. According to Alexei Losev, the symbol never bears just information, but it represents the original principle, which causes much into being. Using the language of mathematics one can say that the symbol is not just a mathematical function, but it can be expanded into an infinite number of decimals. So, if one makes an approach to the symbol of something, he simultaneously approaches to the infinite number of its different reflections or connotations, that can "denote its meaning at any level of the accuracy and at any point of approach to the function of the thing" [3, p. 12]. In other work dedicated to the same problem Losev states that: "myth is neither stereotyped pattern, nor allegory, but symbol" [4, p. 57].

Scientific historians find it quite difficult to give an interpretation to the concept of "myth" that would be equally understandable to the experts and to the non-specialists. But all of them agree with the notion that myth is one of the most complicated realities of culture. As Eliade states it: "Myth explains sacred history, telling about the events that took place before real time" at the beginning of all origins. Myth tells how the reality came into its incarnation, whether it is universal reality, cosmos or just its fragment. This is the story of "creation", as we are informed how something got into being" [5, p. 19, 20].

So, through the myth we are positioned in the situation of being at the origins of creation, as myth usually speaks only about existing things and reveals them in the present time. The Word plays an essential role in the creation. There was even special sacred language, which was used for charms and incantations. Through the process of speech we deal with the beginning of human existence in the world. The first incantations went back to the origins of the myth. The very act of creation or destroying of any thing in this world is repeated in these pieces of folk literature. The priest or the medicine person represents the creator or cultural hero, as the myth characters are supernatural creatures. Prop states that the human helpers are either the incantation of certain features of the hero himself, or the spirits of nature [6]. So through the sacred action the priest loses his or her personal identity and disseminates within the creation, which gives power over time and space. Those actions are similar for many traditions as they function in legendary period of "the beginnings of time". Myth explains their creative power and reveals the sacral nature of their deeds. As Eliade wrote: "Myth describes very different sometimes even dramatic manifestation of the sacredness in this world. And these very manifestations were the *real* basis for the creation of the world and made it the way it is now [5, p. 20].

Scholars cannot give an exact date for the appearance of the first incantations, as their origins traced back to the Babylonian and Judaic traditions. In later versions of the incantations Christian influence is found. From the very beginning incantations were not independent from other sacred practices. They served as a verbal explanation of the ritual, as ritual itself was the dramatization of the myth. The myth at some point was equal to the charms and incantations, as they gave verbalization of the ancient events. As the Word the charms and incantations could initiate the world into being by the thoughts and words of the Creator. Here is the creation account according to Keres Indians of Laguna Pueblo [7, p. 29].

In the beginning Tse Che Nako, Thought Woman finished everything, the thoughts and the names of all things, she finished also all the languages. And then our mothers Said they would make names and they would make thoughts. Thus they said. Thus they did.

As it is obvious from the passage, deeds follow words. The act of naming was so important that, according to the Bible, Adam received the power over creation only after he gave names to everything on the earth. After the wide spread of Christianity incantations lost their ties with rituals and the verbal part became independent and powerful by itself. This statement is especially true for the Slavic tradition. Meanwhile the Native American tradition is still closely united with ritual, as Christianity came much later to the western hemisphere.

Since the word was parted from the visual image of the ritual, it had to take additional meaning upon itself. Potebnya states that there are two forms of the word: external and internal [8]. The external form consists of the articulate sound and content that represents the material shape of the word. The internal form is the closest etymological meaning of the word, its actual connotation in the context. Without any help from the action it should express its connection to the supernatural world, and to symbols of the sacred knowledge and convey the main ideas of the ritual. Valentina Eremina stresses that it causes major changes in Slavic incantation, as it "lost many important structural elements and concentrated special attention on two of them – on the call and the order" [9, p. 68].

The symbol of fire plays an important role in both Slavic and Native American sacred traditions, as it represents the Sun God on the earth, the messenger or the reflection of Higher Reality. Ancient Slavic literary texts address fire by the name Svarojich, which means the son of Svarog, the God of

Heavens. Metropolitan Ilarion emphasized the important role of the fire in the human live [10, p. 31–32].

The fire is Holy, given by God, righteous that is why in the past God's judgement was done through it. This tradition passed to Christian times as well, especially it was popular during the Middle Ages, as there was a belief that fire would do no harm to the innocent person ... Nobody can blaspheme in the presence of the fire, because it is Holy... Fire is frequently used in our rites because it has a purification function. That is why people jump over it during Kupala night (the magical night on the 7th of July, the great mystical holiday of Ukrainians). Fires of the Clean Thursday and Easter Night purify the Earth from all uncleanness.

According to Medieval Christian folk belief. Paradise was inaccessible because of the fiery hoop around it. Only innocent souls can go through it without any harm. Putting it into other words to enter the Heaven, a person must go through a fiery test. Medieval mystics equated the purification of the soul to the cleaning power of the fire. Eliade finds similar symbolism in the practice of medicine men, which could go thorough, the fire and even swallow firebrands in ecstasies. These actions are the manifestation of the ability to overcome human body limitations and ascend to the level of the spirit. God and the High Priest of Toltecs and Aztecs Quetzalcoatl is an embryonic form of Nanaetzi, who threw himself into the fire to save the cosmos from extinction and became the Sun for the next fifth era. This act of Quetzalcoatl "opened up the latent possibilities for both men and the gods [11, p. 169].

Fire is closely connected to sacrifice. In the tradition of Hinduism and Vedanta, the god of the fire Agni is one of the most popular gods. In Rigveda he holds the second place after Indra. He acts as the mediator between people and gods, bringing their sacrifices to the Heavens. According to Greek mythology the appearance of fire on the earth is closely connected to the sacrificial act of Prometheus. The Georgian cultural hero Amerani performed the same act for the sake of his people and as Prometheus was bound to a cliff in the Caucases.

The appearance of fire is usually related to the cultural hero, god or demigod, who brought special knowledge to the earth and made the order of things which are close or in the same state as they are now. Very often the cultural hero comes in the form of serpent or snake. For instance, Quetzalcoatl is the Green-Feathered Serpent, the god of wind that represents the spirit freed from matter, the god of regeneration.

"He is the true representative of the omnipotent god on the earth, who, with his coming, brings all

the possibilities of the miracle of life" [11, p. 195]. The morning star is the personification of Quetzalcoatl.

The symbol of the snake is widely represented in different mythological systems, due to its connection to the soil and female fertility, as well as to water, rain, home, fireplace on one side and to the male potential and heavenly fire on another. The serpent is an ambivalent symbol because it is attributed to two powers of nature – fire and water, male and female. Through the combination of those two antithetic forces, it has access to the Mystery of the Being. In many national folk traditions snakes live between the roots of the World Tree and can enter the Underworld and come back to this world. So it has knowledge of Life and Death, the Past and the Future. Through this knowledge it gets authority over illness. The symbol of the serpent or the snake is often used in Slavic incantations over the diseased or a person in love person (love is viewed as kind of illness in folk tradition).

Besides being connected with the Underworld, snakes are related to the rains and heavenly fire, so they could enter the Heavens also and bring its blessings in the form of rains upon the earth. This concept is illustrated by the Native American Pueblo-Hopi tradition of the Snake Dance, a nine day summer ceremony conducted jointly by the Snake and Antelope societies of several Hopi villages. It features the capturing of the live snakes, which the dancers hold in their mouths. The Snake Dance includes both public and secret rites. The main ritual involves the celebration of the marriage of Snake Youth (personification of the sky-god) to the Snake Girl (underworld fertility spirit). The children of this marriage are the human ancestors of the Hopi Snake Clan, as well as the reptiles [11, p. 213].

Due to the possibility to live in all three worlds, the serpent becomes one of the four pillars at the world's cardinal point. According to the Aztec believes, beliefs it symbolizes the principle of the sacrifice that is needed for the incarnation – a perpetual cycle that can not be escaped except through the resurrection [11, p. 207]. The ambivalent nature of the serpent is vividly explained in the image of Quetzalcoatl, who is "the soul that ascends to heaven, and he is the matter descending to Earth as the serpent" [11, p. 195].

Thus for the ancient people the skin that the snake shed every year symbolized eternity and the annual renewal of life, which is reflected in the Snake Dance. According to David Thomas, for many Native Americans, "the cast-off snakeskin has

power to cure and heal, to others it is the teeth, or the flash that holds the creature's power" [12, p. 130].

The most well known and largest effigy mound in North America is dedicated to the snake symbol. This is the Great Serpent Mound on Brush Creek in Adam County, Ohio. As it is described in the American Indians Encyclopedia, it is 1,254 feet long, 20 feet in average width, and 4 to 5 feet in average height. "The earthly serpent has a writhing circuitous shape with seven coiled tail. Its jaws are widely open, holding an oval figure that might be... an egg, or a moon or a sun symbol... The enlarged head creates a natural oval embankment that could be variously used as a fireplace or altar or as the place of community meeting, ritual, or worship" [13, vol. 3, p. 708]. Thomas proposed the idea that the Great Serpent Mound might be a memorial to the appearance of Halley's Comet, as the creation of the mound is dated to the period around 1066, the time of the brightest manifestation ever of the comet [12, p. 133]. Again the symbol of serpent is connected to the heavenly affairs.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition snakes have a relatively negative image because of the serpent's role in the Garden of Eden, although a couple of places in the Bible propose a totally different attitude. Snakes were sent as God's punishment to Israel in the desert, and as redemption from this disaster the Lord commanded to Moses.

Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived (Numbers 21: 8–9).

In the New Testament Jesus compares himself to that serpent: And as Moses lifted to that serpent in the wilderness, even so much the Son of Man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life (John 3: 14–15).

As Ronald H. Fritz points out, the Europeans who arrived into the Americas after 1492 were amazed at the prevalence of so-called white god legends and the amount of Christian vestiges in various Native American religions. Different ideas for the roots of this were proposed. But only members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints are unique in believing that Jesus Christ literally visited the Americas after his death and resurrection. Many Mormon scholars concentrated on the parallels between Jesus and Quetzalcoatl [14, p. 140]. Legend records that Quetzalcoatl in his human manifestation was white-skinned. This belief even prevented Aztec people from opposing the Spanish conquistadors.

Many literary texts represent different stages of acceptance of snake symbolism. For example, Leslie Morrison Silko in her *Garden in the Dunes* describes the coming of Christ, who is very close in his appearance to Quetzalcoatl, though this name is not mentioned in the book. In her novel snakes play roles of deity messengers and protectors of the land. In her other novel *Ceremony* Silko again uses the symbol of the snake as the messenger, who brought the idea about the regeneration of earth and nature to the people, announcing in its appearance the renovation of Indian spirit.

In the verse writing of the Silver Age of Russian poetry tradition this symbol can be found in the works of many writers, such as Zinaida Gippius (*Myth about the soul*, poem "She") and Vladimir Soloviev ("Orphic Songs" – platonic cult). Konstantin Balmont wrote about Quetzalcoat himself in his poetry collection *The Serpent*, Fiodor Sologub addressed the Bible aspect of snake symbolism, and for Valeriy Briusov the snake represented love-sickness. There are three levels of understanding of snake-symbolism in Alexander Blok's poetry. Serpent symbolism has a very important place in the works of Nicholas Roerich.

Snake symbolism plays a particular role in the tradition of mysticism. Russian mystical philosopher Helena Roerich in her letters to the friends writes about snake symbolism connected to Egyptian culture: "Uraeus is the serpent symbol in the form of the cobra head on the crown of the Pharaoh and Enlightened person. Uraeus is the symbol of sacred knowledge" [15, vol. 1, p. 434].

In considering of the stated above facts the conclusion can be made that the elements of mythological thinking are still present in everyday life and influence human behavior and work on different levels, as well as the creation of the national character as a whole. These symbols do not simply belong to national folk traditions, but can be traced in the literary works of artists. Each nation has its own

tradition of sacred knowledge, the basis of which is universal. This fact presumes the idea of a universal source for sacred knowledge all over the world.

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Дві культури – єдиний символ

Розглянуто проблеми багаторівневого символізму у фольклорно-міфологічній традиції слов'ян та корінних жителів Америки. Показано, що елементи фольклорно-міфологічного мислення існують у сьогоденні, проявляючи себе на різних рівнях національної культури та повсякденної поведінки людей.

О. Г. Шостак

Две культуры – единый символ

Рассмотрены проблемы многоуровневого символизма в фольклорно-мифологической традиции славян и коренных жителей Америки. Показано, что элементы фольклорно-мифологического мышления до сих пор присутствуют в современной жизни, проявляя себя на разных уровнях национальной культуры и повседневного поведения людей.