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Mitul ca limbaj al lumii moderne

Rezumat

Soliditatea existenței oricărei comunități umane este dată de mit, nu pentru că acesta ar avea importanță în ordinea istorică, ci pentru că reprezintă un instrument al multiplicării culturale. Membrii comunității își însușesc, astfel, un set de mijloace de standardizare și ordonare a informației.

Ei conștientizează că împărtășesc un set de valori comune și un anumit mod de plasare în lume care îi individualizează în raport cu cei care aparțin altor colectivități. Mitul este, așadar, factorul esențial în structurarea societății, în diferențierea simbolică a acesteia, dar în același timp și „mecanismul” ce impune relaționarea identitară cu indivizii ce fac parte din alte comunități.

Înglobând o mare diversitate de mituri, cultura ar putea fi definită ca un sistem de susținere colectivă a noțiunilor, ideilor, credințelor și înțelegerilor pe care mitul le ordonează. Acțiunile culturale și reacțiile simbolice nu sunt altceva decât pârgii esențiale ale conceptualizării primare și ale modului de raportare a oamenilor la procesele sociale și politice.

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The Myth as the Language of the Modern World

Summary

The solidity of the existence of any human community is given by myth, not because it would be essential in the order of history, but because it is an instrument of cultural multiplicity. Community members thus acquire a set of means of standardizing and ordering information.

They are aware that they share a set of common values and a certain way of placing themselves in the world that individualizes them with those who belong to other communities. Myth is, therefore, the essential factor in structuring society, in its symbolic differentiation, but at the same time the “mechanism” that imposes the identity relationship with individuals who are part of other communities.

Incorporating a great diversity of myths, culture, could be defined as a system of collective support for the notions, ideas, beliefs and understandings that myth orders. Cultural actions and symbolic reactions are nothing but the essential levers of primary conceptualization and the way people relate to social and political processes.

The Myth as the Language of the Modern World

The changes that myth undergoes in the life of modern man can be more easily noticed if we take into account the fact that this is an integral language of the community, targeting the man as a whole. Myth is not only addressed to the sphere of intelligence or only to that of the imagination. This fact can be easily understood if we analyze the structure of the myth. Mircea Eliade outlines the core features of the myth:²

- ultimately, the myth, is a history of the acts of the supernatural beings;
- this history is considered to be true and sacred because it always refers to realities;
- myths are always related to a 'creation', meaning that they constitute true paradigms for all significant acts;
- the possibility to experience the myth ritually, which supports the domination of the known realities;
- one can 'live' the myth, in the sense that man is seized by the sacred power of the recalled and re-enacted events.

Even if this structure would indicate some kind of restrictive delimitation of the myth, it contains some explanatory suggestions of the presence of the myth, both in the life of the archaic man and the modern man, despite the metamorphoses it endures in becoming symbolic systems.

For a better understanding of the symbolic side of the myth, we could add the fact that the myth has a narrative form, that it involves a scenario in which history, legend, morality and the extraordinary interfere, without a precise meaning of the narrative. Secondly, we must note the symbolic-metaphorical character of the mythical story. This presupposes an understanding of the world through symbols, figures of speech or archetypes, subtly adding the hypothetical and the paradoxical. Even if the used symbols not always have cross-cultural validity, they are part of a common system of correspondence. Thirdly, emphasizing the polysemy of the myth and the fact that it explains the world in a symbolic, normative way. Last but not least, when analyzing the myth, we must refer to the rationality of the imaginary. Myth implies certain social rationality at the level of communication and ethical behaviours. Meaning, that it transposes in terms of reality what is related to fantasy and the impossible.

Based on these characteristics of the myth, we could say that the myth „returns a lot more to the future of humanity, than to a primordial time that is much more loaded with potential and virtualities than with references to an original past.”³ In this way, we can

² See Mircea Eliade; *Eseuri. Mitul eternei reînțoarceri. Mituri, vise și mistere*, Trad. M. Ivănescu și C. Ivănescu, Ed. Științifică, București, 1991.

³ Michel Meslin, *Știința religiilor*, Trad. de S. Russo, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1993, pp. 245-270.

explain why, in successive stages of symbolic dynamics, we find a mythical dimension whose multiform presence compels us to give up any temptation to limit the functions of myth to only one function.

Myth is nothing but an attempt of man to explain the mysterious reality, to reveal, in this way, lived experience of the ultimate meanings of everything around us. On the other hand, in the life of the modern man, we can identify the presence and importance of myth in the force that it has the image in the modeling of behaviours, in the system of choice, as well as in the way in which social reality is valued. By inventing a world of human images we could say that it is, in turn, its product.

The importance and a very obvious role of the image can be easily resulted if we consider that it is, ultimately, a simple language, easy to understand, which through simplicity and depth takes control of the human world, acting as a mediating element between man and the world and, between man and his inner life. That way, symbolic images, like myths, play an essential role in any culture, guiding the everyday life of the man, even when the original archetypes or gestures are found only in forms that we consider degrading.

Mircea Eliade makes a carefully argued analysis of how myths survived in the life of the modern man. According to his concept, a myth „never disappears from the psyche but it may change its appearance and camouflages its forms.”⁴ Although they are difficult to identify, due to the secularization phenomenon to which certain mythical scenarios and themes have been subjected, are periodically updated by modern man. Even if they are secularized, degraded or camouflaged in the apparent homogeneity of history, myths must be rediscovered and recognized as such.

Eliade also claims that the strongest cultural areas imbued with mythical motives and behaviours are the educative systems. Education, he says, also has a mythological function that brings into play exemplary models of personal and community behaviour, creating an imaginary universe with a transformative action at the paradigmatic depths of the individual. In the process of building personal identity, exemplary models and mythological structures play a role of archetypal modeling of the personality, accompanied by the cultural, historical recovery of an obscure tendency to transcend ephemeral, the everyday life.

Although the sacred (then implicitly the myth too) is “consubstantial to the human condition”, we cannot fail to notice that the actualization of mythological behaviours seems to the modern man rather a peripheral one. It is clear from the phenomenon that Eliade considers to be a valorization of the mythological potential, namely, the tendency of modern man to abolish historical time by evading daily work routine. From this perspective, there is a fundamental difference in the attitude of modern man towards work. If pre-modern man integrates work into a meaningful system, as part of a whole universe of exemplary gestures unfolding in a sacred existence, it would experience the terror of labour as the terror of time confiscated by this to the detriment of a significant time in which he can rediscover itself. Work appears to be a phenomenon of alienation, and the fear of not being

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp.130-131.

entirely taken away during working time turns into the terror of quotidian time. The only solution by which man could find himself as a being that regenerates its identity at the level of a community would be the one offered by entertainment as a time of evasion. That is an experience of what is „completely different” from everyday experience, in other words, the presence of the sacred. It is difficult for a Western man to accept that reading, having fun, watching movies can be assimilated to an experience of the sacred. But when we analyze universally and imagistically the meanings they develop in human experience, we can accept that they provide an experience that we can assimilate to the mythical, religious. In Eliade’s conception, even in the camouflaged sequences of modernity, the mythical embodies certain exemplarity in which we can perceive the presence of the sacred - even if marginal and often expelled in those “obscure areas of the psyche or secondary or even irresponsible activities of the society.”⁵

The survival of these elements is a result of the need of modern man to recover a mythical-symbolic consciousness, an authentic religious identity, lost or secularized. It is difficult for the Westerner accustomed to using the term myth in a negative or pejorative sense to accept that it can still be a constitutive element of modern identity. Just as it is difficult to accept that the recovery of some mythological elements would respond to religious needs, considering the tear with the mythical thinking that the revealed religion of monotheism implies.

Let us remember that the language of myth is more closed and autonomous, and the individuals of any community become participants in this communication system only after initiation. Therefore, no matter what they say in religious terms, it can be understood only in the light of the whole „network of signs of the sacred.”⁶ Instead, for the modern man, the sacred language can be understood not only concerning the secular system of communication but also under the religious significance of acts and symbols, as historical and cultural manifestations, seemingly disparate. After all, no matter what era we are referring to, we can say that the myth is what gives meaning to the destiny of each member of the community.

For the modern world, myths are an essential component, especially since we are talking about a period in which uncertainties and anxieties offer the image of an incoherent and ambiguous world. The function of the mythical horizon, of great importance in the case of the human order in any historical period, is taken over in the modern daily life by certain formulas of concrete ideology that have the role of establishing balance and social integration. This means that although secularization penetrates the different areas of community life, however, the mythical-symbolic elements remain a strong testimony to the need of modern man to return to certain religious resources.

It can be stated without any doubt that there has been no society over time, no matter how small and backward, that lacks one form or another of participation in the sacred, so, in other word, without religion. Even in the contemporary world, where it has been

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, p.138.

⁶ Leszek Kolakowski, *Religia*, Trad. S. Mărculescu, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1993, p.191.

frequently stated that science has dislocated religion, myths, rites and religious symbols do not cease to subsist, even if they are sometimes distorted or camouflaged under profane masks. The human being spontaneously creates images with religious content, says Jung, precisely because he is „religious by nature,” and removal from this nature can be „an eternal source of neurosis.”⁷ „The sacred,” adds Eliade „it is an element in the structure of consciousness, not a stage in the history of consciousness.”⁸



Simboluri mitologice de pe o poartă băimăreană, foto: Florin AVRAM

⁷ C. G. Jung, *Ma vie: souvenirs, Rêves et Pensées*, Gallimard, Paris, 1973, p. 15.

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Făurari și alchimiști*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1996, p. IX.

The sacred presents a way of giving human life to a transcendent nucleus of stability that generates at the same time a certain behavioural conservatism. Even if in certain situations it is not assumed at the level of intentionality, it acts as a fine spring that measures the inner time and regulates the vital impulses. When placed in the unconscious, it manifests itself through superstitions, habits or anxieties that break out on an individual level and, if it comes to the surface of consciousness it „breaks a balance, breaks a new element that must be integrated into the world order.”⁹

If the myth unfolds its “history” in words, gestures, beliefs and various practices, the essential remains beyond the manifestation, in a “mystical” horizon that escapes the control of reason. What we see in it today, is nothing but a story that eventually seems spectacular. Or, in its primary reality, the myth is a “true history”, a normative factor at the ontological and gnoseological level, or otherwise formed „the exemplary model for all significant human activities.”¹⁰

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⁹ Roger Caillois, *Omul și sacrul*, Editura Nemira, București, 2006, p. 36.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Aspecte ale mitului*, Ed. Univers, București, 1978, p. 6.