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Atitudini față de moarte în comunitățile tradiționale din Maramureș

Rezumat

Motivul pentru care omul arhaic a încercat să-și creeze (imagineze) un Dincolo vine din dorința de eludare a haosului, a necunoscutului, a imprevizibilului, de eliminare a nedeterminării, impuls susținut de un profund resort psihologic: tentația descifrării lucrului ascuns (deci oribil) prin prezentări figurate, cunoscute. Rezultatul obținut a fost diferit în funcție de specificul contextelor religioase și culturale: fie oamenii au schițat imagini înfricoșătoare ale morții fie, dimpotrivă, au căutat „retorizarea morții” folosindu-se de forța metaforică de transpunere a sensului. În ultimă instanță cele două opțiuni nu au reprezentat altceva decât dorința înfățișării destinului necunoscut, această înfățișare constituindu-se într-o manieră de dominare a lui.

În acest fel au putut coexista imagini ale Lumii de Dincolo care să atenueze frica îndepărtând, deliberat, haosul prin schițarea unui “dincolo” familiar (morții mănâncă, beau, lucrează etc), cu imagini ale spaimei față de o periculoasă relativizare a pragului dintre cele două lumi și de revenirea în cotidian a celor plecați din “lumea cu dor”.

În această lucrare ne focalizăm tocmai pe ambivalența înfățișării Lumii de Dincolo ce poate fi explicată dacă acceptăm că orice demers de acest gen implică asumarea unor riscuri ce intervin odată cu autonomizarea acestei topografii imaginare.

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Key words: attitudes towards death, the Other Side, chaos, imaginary topography, the world of the sorrowful, images of fear

Attitudes Towards Death in Traditional Communities in Maramureş

Summary

The reason why the archaic man tried to create (or imagine) the Other Side comes from his wish to elude the chaos, the unknown, the unpredictable, as well as to eliminate indeterminacy; this impulse was supported by a profound psychological resort - the temptation to decipher the hidden reality (therefore the horrible reality) by figurative, known representations. The result they obtained was diverse, in accordance with the specific of their cultural and religious contexts: people either sketched frightening images of death, or, on the contrary, sought a “rhetoric of death” by the metaphoric force of the transposition of meaning. At the end of the day, the two options did not mean anything else but the wish to render the unknown destiny, this rendering constituting a means to dominate it.

Thus, images of the Other Side have been able to coexist, their function being that of attenuating fear by, deliberately, removing chaos and drawing a picture of a familiar “other side” (the dead eat, drink, work, etc.), with images of fear of a dangerous relativization of the threshold between the two worlds and the coming back to the everyday life of those who have departed to the “world of the sorrowful”.

This paper is focused precisely on this ambivalence of the images of the Other Side, which can be explained if we start from the hypothesis that each such endeavour implies an acknowledgement of the risks that appear once with the autonomization of this imaginary topographics.

Attitudes Towards Death in Traditional Communities in Maramureș

Even though the true wisdom of man “consists in meditating on life, not on death”², with death (as object of fear) we can enter a “dispute” when it is relativized, and in so far as it dominates part of our being. Spinoza affirms that, even though we cannot deduce the immortality of the soul as a personal entity from the eternal subsistence of the thinking essence of the spirit, man feels he is “eternal”. This experience of eternity within duration has always been opposed to the uncompromising due date of death, and, therefore, annihilating death from start. Ever since the dawn of civilization, man understood that he had to die, and expressly in this “acknowledgement” are we able to identify one of the essential characteristics of mankind, alongside thought and language. Thought, surely, was the first to appear (that is, representation, to be more precise), and, from that moment on, the human being’s own death became a predilect subject for his thought. This pertaining to death has aided to humanity’s rise to self-consciousness. With time passing, and in so far as the finite existence started to be perceived as a unique chance of the ego to state its being, death glided from the perception as natural limit of the biological exit and a humanized death, towards a cultural fact (with its entire cortege of reflexes: religious, philosophical, mythological, ritualistic, etc.). It has already been stated³ that we could define man starting from his external mourning behaviour, better than from his “knowing himself mortal”, which is, most obviously, a very intimate reaction.

The mourning behaviour entails not only a series of funerary rites, which can be identified in various cultures (and which have as central goal inhumation), but also a complex of cultural behaviours that accompany mourning, especially those which have the function to construct collective memory. The entire evolution of mourning consists, ultimately, from a process of interiorization of the deceased, the funerary ritual representing the visible mediation of this process.

The founding of collective memory through mourning allows us to say that man’s life is a life “together” with the dead, this being the essential difference between human and animal existence. What is more, this communion of life with the spirit of his ancestors is a unitary characteristic for all cultures. We may say that there is no culture, unless a clear dominance of the irreversibility of time can be highlighted, which entails the adoption of a series of necessary strategies for camouflaging absence; absence, par excellence, is the absence of the dead. Thus, we may identify mourning, seen as absence, with the origin of culture itself. Therefore, it is possible for us to conclude that any culture is, in a larger sense, a culture of death, and this is induced by the very fact that this “fracture” of life, which is death, must be assumed; this means that it has to be both accepted and negated. In the very understanding of this assumption, even from the earliest times, the archaic man tried to create (to imagine) another Side as an expression of his wish to elude chaos, the unknown, the unpredictable, and to eliminate indeterminacy, an impulse which is grounded in an inner psychological need: the temptation to decipher the hidden reality (hidden, and, therefore horrible) by figurative presentations, which would be familiar. In other words, it is “that universal attempt to subscribe absence to a presence”⁴. The result obtained has been different, in accordance to the specific of the religious and cultural contexts: either people sketched frightening images of death,

² Spinoza, *Etica*, Fourth Part, Proposition LXVII, Trad. Al. Popescu, Col. “Clasicii filosofiei universale”, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1981

³ Françoise Dastur, *Moartea. Eseu despre finitudine*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2006, p. 22

⁴ J.P. Vernat, *Mit și gândire în Grecia antică. Studii de psihologie istorică*. Vol. I, trad. Z. Petre, A. Niculescu, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1995, p. 4

or, on the contrary, they tried to “rhetoric death”, by using the metaphorical force of transposing meaning⁵. Ultimately, the two options have meant nothing else but the wish to represent the unknown destiny, this representation constituting itself in a means to dominate it.⁶

Consequently, this is how various images of the Other World could co-exist, in order to cushion fear, by, deliberately, removing chaos in the representation of a familiar “other side”, where the dead eat, drink, and work; they also imagined fear of a dangerous relativization of the threshold between the two worlds, with a possible return of those who departed in the “sorrowful world” to the everyday life. According with this archaic mentality, the existence of the deceased is prolonged in a different reality, placed in another world of existence. In the new context, the deceased has his lively reality, he can come back to the sphere of life, at least on some occasions, when he will be welcomed, and the past follows its objective existence in the present. This universe cannot be deserted, there is no possibility of gliding from objective existence towards an eliberating non-existence, the present life cannot be unplugged from what once existed, in the past. Everything that once existed claims its presence and expresses its claims with the same force and insistence. This is why the dead enjoyed great prestige: they did not detach completely from the sphere of the living, but listened to their complaints, protected them, or avenged the sufferings of the past. The relations between the living and the dead, the favours that the latter did to the first, through “interventions“ to the almighty ancestors, in exchange for various offerings, are benevolent attitudes, which overlap with other various cases, when fear of the dead was felt.

This ambivalence of the representations of the Other World can be explained if we accept that any such endeavour entails the assumption of certain risks, which appear once with the autonomization of this imaginary topography. From the wish to overpass the fear of death, the archaic man, as well as the man of the traditional communities, creates a world for the dead, which repeats the real world, but which has a different kinetic structure. Once this is invested with a sacred character, and the experience of death is replaced with the frame of a rite of passage, they accept the status of the initiated unconditionally, as well as their possible action on the non-initiated, be it in the sense of helping them, or on the intention of harming them.

From what we have already shown, we may easily remark this contradiction between the need for the dead to be around, and, at the same time, the fear of them being around. Or, in other words, the contradiction between the fear and the fascination. The key element which links (and also explains) this antagonistic doublet, is the *sacred*. It “offers” man a power, not only in the moment of acknowledgement, but also in that of the acceptance and the assuming of what will, eventually, lead to worship. The consecration of a space does not imply a man’s decision, his duty being only that of having the initiative of the consecration, of finding the revealed place.⁷

In the case of the Other World imaginary, we are dealing with such a revealed space. We are not referring to a space of the unknown, but, more than that, to a space of the mystery, which is, therefore, wrapped in the sacred. The difference between the unknown and the mystery is one of the essence: while the unknown can become, after a while, known, the mystery does not allow but mediated, and approximated instances of knowledge; while the function of imagination in its figuring is only one of the means that man employs to approach it.

In this point of the analysis it is necessary for us, we believe, to refer, even briefly, to an issue that has long been debated (an utterly disputed), that of the representation of the sphere of

⁵ G. Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului*, trad. M. Aderca, Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998, p. 413

⁶ G. Durand, *Structurile antropologice ale imaginarului*, trad. M. Aderca, Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998, p. 415

⁷ M. Eliade, *Sacral și profanul*, trad. B. Prelipceanu, Ed. Humanitas, Buc., 1995, p. 101

the sacred. According to a series of researchers, the representation of the sacred is based on the idea of power (which is the “background” of any religion), and which, by imposing absolute power generates the sacred and the mystery. The sacred can manifest itself in the most uncommon situations; for instance, in the case of a dead person, or of a tree, or of a mountain, etc., all of which having a special force that is beyond the human being’s capacity to understand. Related to this uncommon force, the opinions of the researchers have not been unanimous: some maintain its impersonal character (Marett, Van de Leeuw, Otto, etc.), while others underline the fact that to speak about the sacred only makes sense in reference to a certain god (Eliade).



Datul macăului peste sicriu - Cupșeni 2002; foto: Colecția Pamfil Bilțiu

The impersonal character of the sacred has been confuted especially by emphasizing that the force which it entails is always attached to an object, or a person, or a divine creature, thus generating the hierofany, or the kratofany, which, as Eliade maintains, have to be accepted “within any sector of the philosophical, economical, spiritual or social life”⁸. The extreme variety of hierofanies cannot but support the idea that the sacred force that is manifest within a finite entity (deceased, tree, mountain, etc.) refers, thus, to something beyond itself. It is, reversely, difficult to maintain the impersonal and un-intelligible character, par excellence, of the sacred, as R. Otto⁹ does, as, in this way, we negate the known tendency of antropomorphism, manifest in most religions, or, in pantheism, the identification of the Divinity with nature.

Coming back to man’s imaginary of the World Beyond, we will have to notice the fact that this supernatural (thus, sacred) space has been represented, most of the times, through resembling sceneries (sometimes even perfectly similar ones) to those of the spaces that that community lived in. This does not mean that we can deny the importance of the function of the imaginary in the figuring of this (type of) sacred space (from the personal “sketching” of the Mystery, to the global

⁸ M. Eliade, *Tratat de istoria religiilor*, trad. M. Noica, Humanitas, Buc., 1992, p. 30

⁹ R. Otto, *Sacrul*, trad. I. Milea, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1996, p. 33

representation of transcendence). This should not be understood by starting from a temptation to decipher the unknown, but, especially, from an acute necessity to figure out the supernatural. The quality of these figures, obviously, indicate the complexity of the relationship of man with the Mystery.

The performative rites at the passing of the threshold between the two worlds are, firstly, actions of insurance and re-building of the equilibrium, but which can have but a limited efficiency if the spirits have not been, and will not be continuously softened by other categories of rites, which come after death. Thus, regardless of the precautions at the funeral, there still exists the possibility that the deceased might come back and trouble the lives of the living.

In order to avoid this unwished for thing, the road towards the other world should be similar to the existential itinerary: There, as well as here, there exists a law that cannot be broken. The funerary ceremonial songs contribute exactly to the establishing of a behaviour code, that is to the sketching of a strict "law", which is very important to be observed on the other side too, as well as here. If not, the deceased is condemned to wander on the left side of the world, a space which is placed under the sign of disorder, of darkness, of malefic forces, in other words, the frightful hell. On the other side, on the right, there is the world which is orderly, full of light, which is heaven. We should, briefly, recall the fact that the right-left opposition is part of a universal ensemble of binary classifications, which starts from various oppositions: left hand - right hand, white - black, warm - cold, day - night, etc. From this kind of dualism, two contradictory classes of supernatural powers have been born: on one hand an ascending one, which is positive, luminous, and on the other a descending one, which is negative and dark. It is very possible that the right - left dichotomy should have been preserved so well in the traditional culture also because of the fact that Christianity considers right and left in a moral scale of values: thus, on the right part of the divine Throne, the innocent souls will find a place, whereas on the left, the sinful souls will burn "in the eternal fire" (Matthew, 25, 41).

In the funerary songs, this opposition is realized less in the case of heaven and hell, and more between antithetical couples of concepts as the ones we have already mentioned: left - right, or others like: sun - waters, remembrance - forgetfulness, order - disorder, etc. There are a number of very suggestive funerary cries which have been collected from the Chioar area (Maramureş), in which this type of dichotomy formulation is very much used in order to establish the manner in which the road towards the World Beyond should be trodden.¹⁰

"Oh, 'cause this is how I heard it, too,
There's two bad roads there
And if you see the one to the left
Oh, if you can, do not take that at all
Cause it's a road full of mud and dust
Oh, and I'm afraid it is all dark.
Take the road to the right
Since it is well guarded and kept.

Or, in the case of the opposition sun - waters:¹¹

Take care, where you are going,

¹⁰ Antologie de folclor din județul Maramureş, Baia Mare, 1980, p. 231-232

¹¹ Antologie de folclor din județul Maramureş, Baia Mare, 1980, p. 228

Cause there's two evil paths,
Do not wander on them.
Do not travel on the water road,
Cause you'll never come to us.
Since the waters are flowing away
Never to come back again.
You take the path of the sun
Since the sun goes on his way,
But he comes back every time.

Or, another funerary song from Băsești (Maramureș), in which they also use the motif of the stone path as compared to the path of flowers¹²

You are leaving our lands,
But there's two paths, mind you:
One is the road of sorrow
And one the one of sleep;
Do not take the one of sleep,
Cause you'll fall in it too deep;
And you'll not come here again;
You take the one of sorrow
So, you'll be here when you miss us,
You'll, then, come back to us,
Do not take the path of stone,
Cause you'll never come again,
Take the one with flowers,
So when you miss us,
You'll come back.

The lines of another funerary cry, coming from the same area, are very interesting, as the opposition remembrance, forgetfulness is suggested by using the motif of sorrow and sleep:¹³

Take good care what path you trod,
As there's two small paths:
One is that of sorrowful awe
And one of deep sleep;
So don't go down the road of sleep,
But that full of sorrow take.

One invariant of the interference of man with the Mystery is given by the ambivalence of his reference to the sacred. Whether we refer to the case of the individual, or the collectivity, reference to the sacred is distinctively marked by the unique fear, and the irresistible attraction that we feel when confronted with the supernatural. In the case of the images of the World Beyond, we have an ambivalence of the sacred understood both in its psychological dimension (in terms of feared-revered), and in its axiological one (sacred-defiled or cursed-blessed)¹⁴. The force of attraction and that of rejection that the sacred contains, when felt simultaneously, are ruffling for the human being, and this contradiction is profoundly felt, both at a psychological level, and at an axiological one; even

¹² Dumitru Pop, *Folclor din zona Chioarului*, Baia Mare, 1978, pp. 303-304

¹³ Dumitru Pop, *Folclor din zona Chioarului*, Baia Mare, 1978, pp. 225

¹⁴ M. Eliade, *Tratat de istoria religiilor*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1992, 33

more so, as in this territory of death, the defiling (though sacred) force is predominant.

The cadavre is always cursed and defiled, and, thus, it is part of another ontological frame. That means that it enters a series of taboos, that is “that condition of objects, actions or persons which are ‘isolated’, and ‘interdicted’ because of the danger that contact with them presupposes”¹⁵. Even a mechanical contact with it can be contagious, and, therefore, can produce a rupture of level, with extremely evil consequences. This is why, they have conceived a series of ritualistic gestures, which manoeuvre and control this immense sacred force, potentially devastating, ready to invade the community at any time. Whoever might find himself in a “profane condition”¹⁶, that is, unprepared for the rite, cannot enter the sphere of the sacred without risking his life, or, at least, his status.

Disease, death, and exceptional situations in general, are integrated within another ontological frame, and, thus, generate and impose fear and fascination (being negative hierofanies). In traditional communities, the deceased and the defunct are isolated from the rest of the community; but, their isolation should not be understood as singularization, or validation. All people who are different from the others to an extent belong to another ontological realm, which frighten and urge towards veneration. Thus, when meeting with the sacred, man reacts ambivalently: “on one hand, he tries to ensure himself, and to enhance his own reality by a more fruitful contact with these hierofanies and kratofanies; on the other, he is afraid of losing this ‘reality’ by his integration in a superior ontological level, as compared to his profane condition”.¹⁷

The individual pulsation, coagulated and interferated by a social pattern, is perfectly reflected in the imaginary of the traditional man, even the modern man, in his address to the World Beyond. As to the affective investment of man in his dialogue with the sacred, this is mainly due to his “supernatural fear”¹⁸ on meeting with the frightening nothingness, and this paralyzing fear is his first manner of relating with the Mystery.

Fear is a natural feeling, but what is being experimented in the case of the acces to the sacred is a different kind of fear, which R. Otto, referring to a syntagm in the Old Testament, compares¹⁹ with the feeling of the Jew when relating to Iahve: *Emai Iahveh*, that is *Fear of God*. This undescribable fear that is overwhelming at the moment of confronting with the Mystery, is accompanied by deep admiration “that fills the souls with a striking awe”²⁰

Fear and fascination, paralyzing fear and striking awe, these are the terms that must (and can be) used to describe the approaching of the World Beyond for any man.

¹⁵ M. Eliade, *Tratat de istoria religiilor*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1992, 33

¹⁶ M. Eliade, *Tratat de istoria religiilor*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1992, 33

¹⁷ M. Eliade, *Tratat de istoria religiilor*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1992, 35

¹⁸ R. Otto, *Despre numinos*, trad. I. Milea și S. Irimia, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1996, p. 227

¹⁹ R. Otto, *Despre numinos*, trad. I. Milea și S. Irimia, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1996, p. 20

²⁰ R. Otto, *Despre numinos*, trad. I. Milea și S. Irimia, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1996, p. 35



Înmormântare cu steag - Rogoz - 1970; foto: Colecția Pamfil Bilțiu

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