

Place of myth in traditional society

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Abstract

The article deals with the place and function of mythology in traditional society. It is mentioned that mythology has defined the structure and lifestyle of society together with religion. The main universal themes are outlined based on which it became possible to classify myths, i.e. group them by the content. A description of these groups is provided and it is mentioned that a great role in the formation of mythological thinking was played by advancement of farming in agricultural activities. On its part, mythology played a significant role in the development of culture in general and in literature in particular.

Key words: mythology, deities, traditional society, culture

Mythology is one of the first fruits of human artistic thinking, however, it was not considered to be fiction in old times, but it was believed that the story in the myth had actually happened. Mythology is a picture of the universe perceived by a human being, which facilitated the development of poetic thinking later. It is the product of collective poetic thinking and we will never be able to identify its author.

Myth (mythos) is a Greek word, it means a story, legend, saga. A Greek verb (mytheo) well reflects the attitude of people to these stories. Its meaning implies narration, but the narration which is a conveyance of what other people have said. Indeed, myths were transferred from generation to generation over centuries, like other monuments of folk art. Creation of the universe, creation of gods and their activities, birth of humans and creation of things, i.e. everything that exists are conveyed in myths. This existence, the vivid reality was the evidence of genuineness of myths. Mythos conveys the first creation and the use of things and phenomena. It narrates a story whose result is perfectly seen by a human being, as he sees before him all those things which are described in the mythos (wood, mountain, river, nature, tools, etc.) and they contribute to its credibility. Characters of myths are supernatural creatures. They became famous by what they did in the times of “the initial” (Eliade, 2009, p. 24).

The time of phenomena conveyed in mythos is indefinite. Even though everything was created in the far past, in the past time, “in the epoch of dreams”, but they exist now and will exist in the future. So, a myth equally includes the past, the present and the future. On the other hand, its geographic space is defined. The story of mythos takes place in a specific country (apart from cosmogonic stories). This is about the creation of a specific mountain, lake, or river. So there are Greek, Georgian, Iranian, etc. mythologies, which cover their geographic space, in addition to being created by these peoples.

Mythology is a combination of myths (stories), but they are not mechanically connected. Mythology is a system, i.e. there is an inner connection, logical interaction between myths, as they are constituents of entirety. This entirety is the universe. Human notions of the universe are widened according to people’s knowledge. Therefore, mythology was also changed, i.e. not only mythology of various people is different, but mythology of the same people used to change over time. Naturally, the universe initially perceived by a human being covered the environment which he had been in direct touch with. A human being is a son of the earth, living on the earth and nurtured by it.

The earth and chthonian creatures occupied the first place in his world vision. So it should be thought that the earth, the mother of place and patron deity of the house were the first objects of worship for the human being. Accordingly, the earth deities and the mythological stories connected with them belonged to the first religious systems. One of the main images of emanation of earth deities is a snake, which is a universal and meaningful mythological image. House angel – the patron snake of house which is connected with wellbeing of family is the character of myths of many peoples of the world.

The human being directed his mind towards cosmic spaces much later. This was strongly facilitated by land farming. Proximity to land made the human being realize that the universe is unified and integral. In general, creation of mythology was mainly predetermined by human curiosity. Mythological consciousness is based upon the ancient religious beliefs – animism, totemism, magism... The ancient and the most important of them is animism, which means “to animate” (“anima” – soul). A well-known English scientist Edward Burnett Tylor dedicates the central place to animism as the beginning of religious thinking in his book “The Primeval Culture” (Tylor, 1983).

According to notions of ancient humans, everything in nature is alive and has its soul, so it acts the same way as a human being. Accordingly, it is possible to establish a contact with it and give it presents. The ritualistic sacrifice originated from here. Such beliefs gave the human being an impetus to create stories which were given a name of a mythos. It must be mentioned that the myth was a living reality, an actually happened story in the ancient society which the ancestors conveyed to their descendants and which it continued its living in their surrounding universe.

Mythos and mythology had a significant function in the traditional society: it was an oral story (even though, invented, but there was a certain truth in it) and a model which defined the structure and manner of living of society. There are no peoples without mythology. If a language exists, so do myths. Initially, myths must have appeared as a simple oral story, but after they were connected to religious systems, they acquired a sacral nature. They also acquired a hidden content which was known only to priests which secretly disclosed it to adepts.

Comparative studies of myths have made it clear that the main themes and motives are repeated in mythologies of various peoples. The myths about the origin of the sun, the moon and stars are very old (myths of peoples of the world). In some

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myths, they are presented as human beings who used to live on the land and rose to the sky for some reason. This motive is found in mythologies of peoples of the world, including the Caucasian mythology (Sikharulidze, 2006).

As it has been mentioned, mythology covers everything which is seen and perceived by a human being, so the content of numerous myths is also diverse. However, despite the multitude, it became possible to classify myths by content and outline the main themes, which represent the axis of the mythological system. Four main groups are outlined which represent the main elements of mythology in general and a mythological mosaic is created by processing these four elements. It is the main theme that unites each group, not the means of conveyance of the theme. These groups are: cosmogonic myths, etiological myths, myths on cultural heroes, myths on deceased and resurrected deities.

Cosmogonic myths. “Cosmogony” (Greek) means the origin of the universe and, naturally, stories on creation of the universe belong to this group. This process is differently conveyed in myths of various peoples (though, similarity often occurs), but they are located in one group as each of them conveys the creation of the universe. The process of cosmogony is dramatically presented in mythologies of peoples of the ancient civilization as gods of the old and the new generations oppose each other here and the universe is created as a result of their confrontation. For example, according to the Greek mythology, initially there was a chaos from which the cosmos – organized universe was created (but it is not mentioned, why and how it happened). The first deities were Gaea (the Earth) and Uranus (the Sky) – wife and a husband who created gods and other creatures. Uranus was deprived of power by his son – Cronus who cut off his father’s phallus and deprived him of fecundating ability. Wife of Cronus was Rhea. They created the new generation of gods but Cronus knew the prophesy that his son would deprive him of ruling the universe and he swallowed the new-born children. Rhea managed to hide Zeus on the Island of Crete. When Zeus grew up and gained strength, he deprived Cronus of his crown and occupied his place. He forced Cronus to release the swallowed children and they became the gods of the new generation residing on Olympus under leadership of Zeus. So they were called Gods of Olympus.

Monstrous creatures, as well as spouses – Absu and Tiamat – existed in the Mesopotamian Mythology before the creation of the universe. Children rebelled against the parents representing the chaos and killed them under the leadership of Marduk. The body of Tiamat was dismembered and the universe was created from these parts. Another picture of the creation of the universe is presented in mythologies of other peoples, but, as it has been mentioned, they belong to cosmogonic myths (Kiknadze, 1979, p. 62).

The fight between generations of gods was a rather widespread topic in mythologies of ancient peoples. The story reflecting the fight of the confronted represents a variety and transformation of this topic, which is the leading topic of mythology (on its part, it gave origin to many mythological stories) and occupies an important place in religious systems (Grinzer, 1971, p.25).

Cosmogonic myths originated comparatively later as such stories are created by already developed societies. Two main ideas are outlined in these myths – ideas of creation and development.

Cosmogonic myths include dualistic myths, in which two deities participate in creation of the universe. They often confront each other for ruling the universe. As a rule, one of the confronted personifies kindness (light, cosmos), the other – the evil (darkness, chaos). They fight each other. Sometimes one of them wins, sometimes – the other. According to beliefs of some people, sequence of day and night is the result of this fight (for example, the fight of the Sun God (Ra) and the Snake (Apop) in the Egyptian Mythology. If the negative creature wins, the universe will be destroyed and darkness and chaos will reign.

Dualism is observed in mythology of all peoples, as it is the basis of the motive of fight of the confronted. This motive is one of the main impetuses for the plot development. The most clearly expressed confrontation between the evil and the kind takes place in the Iranian Mythology, in the form of Ahuramazda and Ahriman groups (Mythology, 1991, p. 562).

In Georgian Mythology, the cosmogonic myth repeats the biblical story, but with a certain change: the God created the universe. The Devil competed with Him, but everything he created was ugly. Therefore, what is beautiful and good, was created by the God, what is ugly, was created by the Devil (Nizharadze, 1962, p.138).

The ancient cosmogony, i.e. the process of creation of the universe is not seen in the mythology of Caucasian people. In these stories, the human being already resides on land and gods have distributed their functions. However, it is explained in one legend why the earth surface is unlevelled: after the God created the universe, he made a sky to cover it over the earth, but it did not fit it, as the earth appeared to be larger. The God squeezed the earth to fit it to the sky. So mountains and ravines were created and that is why the earth surface is unlevelled. This legend should be attributed to the group of cosmogonic myths. Echo of cosmogony is seen in the name of the highest deity of the mythological system of the Georgian mountaineers – the duty god, i.e. organizer of order of the universe (Kiknadze, 1985, p. 32).

Etiological myths. The second group of myths is etiological myths which are also called natural. Etiology means “giving a reason for” (“aitia” (Greek) – reason). These stories convey the origin of the sun, the moon, meteorological phenomena or animals, plants and as it deals with nature, these myths are also called natural. By their structure and content, these myths are short and simple, primitive in some cases. Such myths include, for example, the Greek myth about Apollo and Daphna, Narcissus, etc. We also find etiological myths in the Caucasian mythology, for example, “Why a rabbit has long ears”, “Origin of a Peacock”, “Creation of a Lake”, etc. The majority of etiological myths are deprived of highness and profound meaning which are common for a large part of cosmogonic myths. Naturally, what is narrated in etiological myths, is invented by people and does not correspond to reality, but they represent credible stories for the ancient society. In this case we are talking about one of groups of myths, the myths included in it, whose main theme is the origin of some specific phenomenon or thing. As for etiology in general, all myths are etiological by their essence, as they contain explanation of why the universe was created in this form. By profound meaning, all myths are cosmogonic as well, as they convey not only the creation of the universe at a cosmic scale, but also the creation of everything constituting the universe. Origin of any thing or phenomenon is the continuation of the cosmogonic process.

Mythos of cultural heroes. The third group contains myths on cultural heroes which occupy a significant place in mythology of many people. They convey obtaining such things or introduction of such customs and traditions which contribute to the formation and development of society, i.e. its familiarization with culture. As a rule, elements of culture are introduced in the society by any character (deity, human being, animal or bird), so it is called a cultural hero. But this is a scientific term, not a popular one. Cultural heroes teach farming, crafts, bring fire, as well as establish certain social institutions, establish rules of marriage, etc. It is noteworthy that if a cultural hero gives knowledge to people, he is the bearer of this knowledge, but if he brings a thing (for example, fire, tool, hieratic things etc.), it does not belong to him and he takes it away from other people as a rule. It is thought that a great role in originating the heroic epos was played by this group of myths as actions of the cultural hero (depriving the owner of his property) is connected with great risks, as he is a powerful creature and the perpetrator may die or be strictly punished, like Prometheus, for example. In fact, this is great heroism.

The gallery of cultural heroes is rather diverse. First of all, Prometheus comes to our mind, who stole fire from Olympus rulers and brought it to people. In Indian tribes, the raven brings fire from the sky. The raven caught fire on embers and that is why it is black (as we can see, etiological element is present here). Similar characters are encountered in Caucasian myths as well. According to a Rachian saga, a divine blacksmith descended from the sky. He put iron on his knee and forged it by his fist. So he taught people how to forge, and they made an anvil and hammer so that they resembled a knee and a fist (Rekhviashvili, 1953, p. 159).

Children of the God sent by the God to the Earth create interesting images in the Caucasian mythology. After defeating the Devs (Giants), the children of the God establish a cult and form a community and define a lifestyle for it. In this regard, children of the God appear to be cultural heroes as well.

Myths on deceased and resurrected deities. The fourth group comprises myths on deceased and resurrected deities. These myths are very old by origin, but their meaning and symbolic understanding improved and became more complicated over time. Deceased and resurrected deities personified nature-deities and alternation of seasons was predetermined by their death and resurrection. These myths were called "agrarian" sometimes, as the calendar cycle of agricultural activities was connected with them. Among reviving deities we may mention Osiris (Egypt), Adonis (Phoenicia), Atis (Asia Minor), Dionysus (Thrakia, Greece). This myth was especially disseminated and developed in Asia Minor. Initially the reviving force of nature was personified by a goddess and death and resurrection was associated with her name. When she died, more exactly, when she moved to another universe, winter dominated on the land. Her return was followed by resumption of life in the entire universe. An the annual cycle began from here, so the New Year was celebrated in spring in the ancient era. The Fertility Goddess was met with abundant gifts to receive the same from her. The first harvest was celebrated together. This ritual was held in the North Caucasus in the early 20th century as well (Bulatova, 1984). This seems to have been a part of celebration of meeting a deity.

Over the time, when the goddess lost her priority, she was replaced by a male deity. However, the goddess, as his mother

or beloved was left in the myth. We can see an interesting transformation in the Greek myth about Demetra and Persephone.

Creation of a myth is the most significant phenomenon of the cultural history. In the primeval society, mythology represented the main instrument of understanding the universe. A myth expresses the world perception of the society which created it and the contemporary epoch as well. It played a great role in the formation of traditional society and development of culture in general. It particularly enriched literature which is nurtured by mythological themes, plots and characters even today.

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