

ASPECTS AND VIEWS OF THE EARTH IN THE TRADITIONAL ROMANIAN CULTURE

Gheorghe SECHEȘAN *

**Banats University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Timișoara, Romania
Corresponding author: Sechesan Gheorghe, e-mail: gheorghesechesan@usab-tm.ro*

Abstract: *We must state, from the very beginning, that few elements have such a popularity in traditional Romanian culture, as the earth element does. Mother Earth, which gave birth to us, which feeds us, and then in the end welcomes us to her bosom for our eternal rest. Every crucial moment in man's existence is correlated with the earth, generating a sum of ceremonial practices, rituals etc. Small boys were taken to the boundary of their village (vatră) and beaten with a cane, so they would never forget their land. In what concerns the funerary ceremonial, representing the return of the individual to the earth he was born from, we emphasize the large number of funerary practices in Romanian folklore. They are extremely well preserved (because of the importance which the funerary rituals had in the collective imaginary), and supposed extremely old, probably dating from our pre-Romanian ancestry. It is also necessary to mention the fact that most of these rituals are still being practised today in numerous parts of the country. There is no paramount ceremony in man's life, be it birth, right of passage, marriage or death, in which the earth is not only invoked, but is represented as the „central figure” of the scenario. We will present and analyze, in the paper at hand, the customs and traditions associated with the agricultural practices. Agriculture represents the oldest human occupation in the world, and is in close connection with the earth. Plowing, seeding, growing and gathering the crop have generated traditions of an inestimable beauty and value. It is also necessary for us to remember that in every area, genre and type of Romanian folklore there is a bind, and a strong one at that, with the earth. Fairy tales, legends, dances, the „doina” (a traditional form of poem and song), all types of ceremony, these genuine „miracles” of thought and sensibility all have as a central element the earth. This is what our paper will try to demonstrate, illustrating but a small part of a grand ensemble.*

INTRODUCTION

Out of the multitude of beliefs regarding the surrounding environment, we can say that the earth element benefits, in Romanian mythology, from some of the most interesting, complex and fascinating texts. Through the passage of centuries, a certain variant has attracted the attention of folklorists and analysts, in which it is said that, at the act of creation, Satan, the Devil himself, participated alongside God. The Devil tries to get rid of his partner (fărtat) by throwing God into the sea while the Divinity is resting on a piece of land. But the more he struggles to do his deed, the wider the earth becomes, thus reaching its current size:

...a sum of stories and beliefs regarding the state of the world warping and the manor of the warping of the world: on the boundless surface of the water without beginning, arise God and Satan and, in partnership, build the world. From the bottom of the sea, the Devil brings a fistful of sand that, through the blessing by God, swells and expands into “the black surface of the earth” - most stories tie the growth of the earth with the Devil's attempt to throw God;¹

Another fact that we consider interesting in the layout of our paper, is that in His creation God was aided by such animals as the hedgehog, the bee or the frog. We can state that, in Romanian fauna mythology, there are a sum of sacred animals which should not be touched, killed or afflicted in any way. In the case of the aforementioned animals, we are

dealing with a replacement of divine origin. We can say that the hedgehog owes its place in the Romanian zoomorphic pantheon due to the following event: The almighty God made the Earth perfectly round. Due to these circumstances, the waters were not retained by the Earth, but flowed directly into the seas. Man was dying of thirst, the animals were perishing, and the crops, trees and plants were withering. In this difficult situation God summoned all creatures asking them for their help. The hedgehog then said: I will help, God! and thus he flattened both of the Earth's poles, so that the surface wrinkled, and ever since there are valleys, hills and mountains that retain the water, making the existence of man possible. Because of this episode, the hedgehog became a sacred animal protected by a series of taboos and interdictions:

...according to other stories, God is helped by the hedgehog, by the frog, or by an Andrew (Andrei), or only He Himself fathers and expands the Earth, as is in the biblical story.²

At first sight, we are dealing with a "simplistic" legendary mythology with the purpose of explaining, in a somewhat sympathetic manner, the way in which "all of the Earth" were created, be they animals, plants or men.

In fact the problem is much more complex and profound, and it refers to the very essence of creation itself. In general, it is believed that life, existence, creation etc., the universe in the final instance, are constructed in a manicheistic way, based on the principle of Good and Evil. Even the fundamental element of Christianity refers to this duality: in man, there is both good and evil, it is solely up to his device which path he chooses. The fact of the matter is that the problem is far more complex. In the Kabbalah texts stands written a fundamental truth. The Divinity, at the moment of its manifestation, "shattered" into an infinity of fragments, each containing both the principle of good and evil. Black and White, Good and Evil are halves of the same whole. We frequently find the principle of Evil as being active, while the Good principle takes a passive role. For example, in fairy tales, we are taught, from an early age, to hate the "negative characters": witches, dragons, ogres. We probably never asked ourselves the simplest of questions: what would the main character (extremely helpless in the first instance) be in the absence of bad characters? In fact, the "negative" character in the traditional fairy tale is an officiant, a priest, a magistrate. He passes the novice through initiating trials.

Coming back to our "narrative", Satan is the evil man. But in the aforementioned legend he represents the active principle:

...The Devil will sink to the deeps, at the bidding of God, and will bring forth wet earth (or sand, or dust, a clay substance in which the possibilities of manifestation can be imprinted) for the creation of the Earth, with the binding of the world being achieved only upon the uttering of God's name. The divine name representing the essence without which the manifestation could not have occurred. From the mud brought by the enemy and updated by the uttering of the Word, of the name, God will create a patty of earth around the Tree (He will create the world first as an island, as the center), and on this central patty of earth, the navel of the Earth, they shall both rest. As God sleeps (with open eyes, lying in inaction) the Devil frenetically tries to throw God into the Water, but, to his surprise, as he attempts this, the patty of earth expands and grows in the very direction the Devil pushes. From this central "egg", the whole of existence is explained, first as smooth and broad space, then as a manifold, as, by the Devil's advice, God, to shrink the indefinite landmass,

subsides and creates the Earth to such a degree that the mountains and valleys, the lakes and swamps, the plains and hills, are formed.³

Viewing things from this perspective, the hedgehog ceases to be a "simple" mythological animal or "just" a helper of creation, be it of divine provenience. It becomes much more, it becomes part of the original act of creation:

(...) The hedgehog (...) is a replacement of the Devil, Haşdeu himself underlined in texts the identity hedgehog=Devil; on the other hand, the hedgehog is a wise creature, all knowing in matters of becoming, ancient Greeks considering the creature as the wisest of all beings ("poll'oidalopex, all'ehinos en mega" said Archilochos; meaning "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows more"). In Romanian culture the hedgehog knows "the grass of the bests", and because of his involvement in the creation of the Earth it is a sin to hit or kill him. In other words the hedgehog appears as a symbol of the inferior pole, but as special as the principal badge of the manifesting Being.

(...) When we say that the Devil battered the patty of Earth or that he tissued the Earth we imply an act of "creation" (from the sanscrit Karma, with the root word Kri, comes the word "creation"), this is actually an archetypal ritualistic action recreated by man in a multitude of circumstances (arts, craftsmanships, gestures, all representing sacrifices). In every society the traditional rituals mirrored the actions of the "civilizing hero", deity or avatar at the beginning of the cyclical period. This way the world was always refurbished, recreated, time was renewed, the solstice and equinox were celebrated, the wedding, birth, death, the building of a house, the making of a carriage, the burning of pot, all these occasioning the symbolization of Creation of the World, a New World, a New Plantation. And also - an important aspect - the creation of a New Man, because the divine craftsmanship represents the creation act which produces not only the Cosmos, but also man.⁴

On the other hand, nothing from the Earths "morphology" is random from a popular mentality point of view. The form is not accidental (as we have seen), but neither is the color. In the beginning the Earth was black and, "in its image and likeness", so were men. To put it another way, people were also black. This situation did not remain unchanged due to man's original sin:

In some beliefs in the beginning the Earth was black, as were the first men created by God, Adam from clay and Eve from Adam's rib; the color of man changed later on, since Cain and his progeny, due to the horror caused by the sin of fratricide.⁵

Even more so, before the Earth was black, it was translucent. The sense of this legend is overwhelming. In the beginning man was much closer to divinity, but with time, because of his sins and mistakes, he was slowly distanced from the secrets and mysteries of creation:

In other beliefs the earth (pomântul as it is called in Ardeal) was as translucent as glass, showing all eyes to view what it encompassed. As Cain killed Abel he buried him as not to be seen, he covered all with branches and leaves. All his work was in vain because the body could be seen beneath. Then God darkened the earth and thus all traces of the first murder faded.⁶

The earth cult gains major valence in Romanian popular culture:

A number of Romanian popular beliefs in correlation with the Earth - with the dirt of the Earth under our feet and in our vicinity - seem to justify many in discovering the

remnants of an age-old cult of a living Earth. The Earth, through its material and through man's work, gives him all he needs for his daily nutrition

- when man turns to God in a justified gratefulness to thank him by praying („bătând mătâni la pământ”), who can say with certainty, that through these customs, a cult of the earth is (not) perpetuated.⁷

The structural duality of the original creation that we have discussed can also be found in that of the Earth. In Romanian mythology this duality is both part woman and part man, the same as in the platonic myth of the androgen:

The Earth is half woman, half man, "because God out of Adam's rib made Eve".

(...) The manly part of the Earth lays on top and the womanly part is beneath the Earth, which is created from the first uttering words such as these: - It is bad for me, for people work me, they cut me with their plow, their shovel, they throw and cant me every which way, while you lay still, feeding - you who should not deserve any food - with their departed bodies.

Another saying considers the earth as being a woman, in which bosom God sets all kinds of seed from which man can choose those which he needs for his daily food. This would mean that man himself draws his life from the earth, thus acknowledging the funerary ritualistic saying "from dust to dust".⁸

Thus, by no random act, the earth is regarded with great respect in the popular mentality. "A set of rules" is generated, of taboo behavior, meant to protect it from profanation. The sacred nature of the earth is extremely evident, even if we were to judge merely considering these interdictions:

Taking into consideration these accounts the earth has a right of honor from man. Not reaping the bounties of the earth, as we have seen, is considered a lack of respect that even God does not forgive. There are a sum of forbidden acts:

The earth shall not be kicked, as it is a sin, in vain and enough it is beaten by the stone!

"It is of great sin to scorn the earth, because... you shall enter it when you find your end. And when it grabs a hold of you, it shall fall heavy on you, and instead of laying light on you it shall be a... heavy burden!"

"Who ever shall break the earth's boundaries and take a hold of another's land commits a great sin; and in the next world he shall carry the burden of the stolen land."

One who shall suffer greatly in the next world is the potter; this man, in the next world shall be punished for this indecent grievance, because how can he be allowed to work the clay - man made out of clay - by clay.

The earth is especially scorned by the treading of unjust men. It burns seven yards from where the charmers walk, from where a bear headed woman walks - act allowed only by virgins - one who had not made her prayer after giving birth, or another from those who live in carnal sin. One such as this "shall not be sent to work the fields, as nothing shall be left behind her. Wherever she treads, everything is disturbed, there is no gain. As the cow treads behind her everything spoils."

The earth also scorns 9 feet under the man who sins with a priestess.⁹

It may seem unbelievable but, after centuries, millennia under the grim specter of starvation, after it appeared that this problem had been eradicated from human existence, it seems that this specter is looming again. It seems even more unbelievable considering the modern equipment and efficient techniques of cultivating the earth, and also the constant growth of arable land. It seems as if mans unquenchable lust to rip as much bounty from

the earth as possible shall lead us to our doom. Ancient people nurtured not only a certain respect towards the earth through attitude, but also through their ways of cultivating the land. First of all they did not work all day. There were certain periods in the day in which man was not allowed to "hurt" the earth. Then, there is the tactic of "crop rotation", which was designed to let the earth rest. In the same purpose there was the so-called policy of "barren lands", through which certain surfaces of land were left uncultivated for several years, so that the earth could replenish. The resting of the earth was considered to be a real problem, which seems to have been a serious preoccupation of our ancestors:

As a sentence being the earth, even with God's blessing towards its working, it needs its time to rest. When the sun is in the midday position, man must not dig, as the earth will cry and so cannot rest. Lunch time - midday - must be kept and the shovels laid downwards. In some regions it is said that it would be better that man work by the light of the moon, rather than not respect the midday resting period of the earth; in other parts the contrary is stated, it is said that it is a great sin to work the earth after sunset, especially during the night, the most beneficial period for the earth after suffering man's labor during the day.

In Bucovina, it is said that after several years of labor and bearings, the earth demands a year of rest; if man does not offer this break, the earth shall take its own rest and men shall suffer a dry spell from the earth that does not wish to bear fruits.¹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

We have, in this limited space, presented some of the Romanian rituals regarding **the earth**. It is clear that there are many more, one more interesting than the other. We also believe that the bulk of meaning is not the focal point of these, but rather the relationship of man and divinity. In the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, in the perfect world immediately after the Creation of the World, man was not made to strain himself in obtaining the necessary for his existence. Even more so, the fruit of the earth came easy. Following the original sin this became no longer possible, to the degree that even today man can obtain from **the earth, only what God gives him**:

God gave Adam the plow and told him that he needs to turn the earth only three times and he shall have plentiful. He plowed as God told him; then he let loose the wild oxen. Then the Devil comes: "What have you done, you shall need to plow again, as you shall have children." "What shall I do, I have already let the oxen loose?" "Give me all of your sons and nephews and your children's children after they die and I shall catch your oxen!" Adam agreed, as he thought that after death who shall need them? The Devil took dirt in his hand - as a contract - and hid it in darkness. Now Adam, after receiving the oxen, started to plow as far as the eye could see. Then God comes and says: "What are you doing Adam, plowing? Plow, plow; you shall plow hills and valleys, but you will still receive as much as I give you!" And so we now have as much as God will give us! If only he had listened as God said, to plow only three times, and now we would have plentiful.¹¹

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. PAMFILE, TUDOR, *Romanian Mythology (Mitologie românească)*, București, Ed. All, 1997
2. TĂMAȘ, MIRCEA, A., *About creation (Despre facere)*, Târgu-Lăpuș, Ed. Galaxia Gutenberg, 2010
3. VORONCA, ELENE, NICULIȚĂ-, *Customs and beliefs of the Romanian people (Datinele și credințele poporului român)*, Polirom, Iași, 1998