

Teona Samkharadze

SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF WOOD SYMBOL IN GERMANIC AND GEORGIAN MYTHOLOGY

Abstract

The present paper aims at identifying parallel motifs between Kartvelian and Germanic mythologies. For this, main similar and different characteristics in myths of both cultures are explored as an empirical material. It is maintained that according to the data analysis Propp's mythology of fairy tales and Levi Strauss's theory of the myth seem appropriate for analysis. On the basis of these mythological models the symbol of the world tree as a universal mythological notion is compared and contrasted in Kartvelian and Germanic mythologies. Distinctive versions of the world tree are presented according to their functions such as Life tree, fertility tree etc.

Thus, Myth as a unique and universal model represents a mythological tree as an essential symbol. Common traditions associated with the world tree are compared and contrasted that leads us to a conclusion that tree is a universal symbol in both mythologies with lots of common characteristics like planting tree, tree as a symbol of life etc.

Keywords: Yggdrasil, Tree of life, planting tree, oak, structuralism

Introduction

Mythological analysis is definitely a difficult task. The study of mythological universal symbols was based on the two major Germanic and Georgian mythological analysis of world mythology. We studied the opinion of several researchers like Vladimir Propp and Levi Strauss who put a lot of effort

in mythology as a science. The novelty presented in this work is discussion mythological symbols in their linguistic and semantic sense.

1. The theory by Propp

1.1 The morphology of a fairy tale

According to Vladimir Propp there were 31 structural elements “functions” (e.g Absentation, interdiction, violation, reconnaissance, delivery, trickery etc) within Russian fairy tales. These functions occurred in a specific, ascending order. This type of structural analysis of folklore is referred to as syntagmatic. The sequence of events on the syntagmatic level became a basis for Levi Stauss to present a paradigmatic level of the myth. Levi-strauss sought to uncover a narrative’s underlying pattern, regardless of its linear, superficial syntagm, and his structure is usually rendered as a binary opposition structure.) Myth as a unity is adapted from a fairy-tale structure as a whole. **(Propp, 1884)**

1.2 Sturcturalism as a theory.

As for myth's structural approach, Levi-Strauss is a representative of structuralism. In his article Levy-Strauss argued that "myth is usually operated by opposition and seeks to gradually eliminate it through mediation," and that "myth is aimed at creating a logical model to solve confrontation." Levi-Strauss has remained faithful to this definition of myth and mythological thinking. The fourth (last book) of mythology, in the chapter titled "Binary Operations," myth topics are discussed and it is considered that any theme, regardless its diversity should be carried out under Binary Operations as such operations represent specification of meanings which were created by the nature and allow functioning of language and thought " (Propp, 1984 , Simek 1993, Strauss 1995)

The combination of two models (Prop and Levi Strauss) led us to work on a new model how the tree is represented as a mythological symbol in both Germanic and Georgian mythologies. Tree as an example of a core mythological model can be categorized syntagmatically and paradigmatically as follows:

Syntagmatic
Different Kinds of

			trees
Paradigmatic Link between symbols	Identical symbols in both cultures		Oak
Tree as a life continuation	Tree as a strength of household	Tree as a symbol of rebirth/revival	Ash

My model of the tree is based on the syntagmatic and paradigmatic interrelation of the symbolic meaning associated with the particular species of the tree. While comparing and analyzing the material, it was obvious that the widely spread kinds of trees were oak and ash. Oak in both mythologies symbolizes revival and strength. Thor's magic hammer was made of wood and with its magic power he was able to defeat lots of enemies. On the other hand, in Georgian mythology an oak is described as a symbol of strength that can endure pain, struggle and still stay strong and powerful. Syntagmatically, it is worth noting that ash is a relevant tree in Germanic mythology as well as in Georgian. Yggdrassil is an ash tree. According to myths, it is a foundation of the whole world. It is an essence of life too. An ash tree at a paradigmatic level is depicted as a symbol of the household. In Norway, Planting ash trees in their yards demonstrates its importance as strength of the household. In Georgia If the ash is grown in the household, it is a sign of some problems in the family and it is necessary to make some changes e.g A birth of a child. It is logically associated with the strength of the household and a life continuation as well.

Thus, observing the symbolic portrait of the tree syntagmatically and paradigmatically demonstrates the connection between the symbolic connotations certain trees may have. Furthermore, at the paradigmatic level, the symbols that are analyzed in the article, illustrate the common features and characteristics in both cultures. Tree as a whole is presented as a mythological model including the functions of certain species of trees and specifications such as the strength of the household, life revival, etc.

2. Tree as a symbol

2.1 Definition of a tree

On the background of discussion of general form and content theory of myth, we considered to represent the specific aspect of the general formula, for example, tree as a mythological symbol in Germanic and Georgian mythologies. In the dictionary of Herder's symbols, the tree is defined as the symbol of mother, as well as the symbol of spiritual and intellectual development, the symbol of death and rebirth. According to Carl Jung, the tree is a symbol of integration and of the principles of male and female and equality: "A tree is one of the best examples of a motif that often appears in dreams (and elsewhere) and that can have an incredible variety of meanings. It might symbolize evolution, physical growth, or psychological maturation; death (Christ's crucifixion on the tree); it might be a phallic symbol; it might be a great deal more. And such other common dream motifs as the cross or the lingam can also have a vast array of symbolic meanings..." (Surguladze. 1986)

2.2. Theoretical research of the world tree in Germanic mythology

Let us briefly consider what the meaning of the tree is in Germanic mythology. The so-called Yggdrasil is a tree of life that stands in the middle of Asgard. Asgard is a place where the gods exist. Its branches reach to the nine worlds. Yggdrasil has very deep roots. Its deepest root is in the place of the gods. Near this root, there is URD well in front of which gods gather every day. Yggdrasil - the name itself in the Norwegian language means the horse of Odin. The word "drasil" means horse, while "ygg" presents one of the names of Odin. Edda explains that Odin sacrificed himself by hanging on the tree. Scientists' theories are different in relation to the Yggdrasil. According to one of the theories, the full name of Yggdrasil is an ash tree, i.e., "askr yggdrasils" which means a world tree. (Simek. 1993)

As for the written sources where Yggdrasil is mentioned, we can claim that one of the written sources is the poetic Edda. In the second stanza of the poetic Edda, Volva tells the poem to Odin, in which Volva remembers the old time, recalls the nine worlds, the Yggdrasil tree, when Yggdrasil appears. Yggdrasil tree is recalled as a glorious tree with glorious measure. ("Glorious tree of measure, under the ground")

In the poem Havamal, 137th strophe, Odin describes how he sacrifices himself to a tree and hangs himself on it.

„I know that I hung on a windy tree
nine long nights,
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
myself to myself,
on that tree of which no man knows
from where its roots run“ .

In the Douglas Holmes's research about the traditions of the tree, there was an important tradition like planting a family tree in the middle of the yard. According to him, this tradition relates to the Viking period and myths about the world tree. Caring for a family tree is a kind of expression of respect for our ancestors.

Variations of Yggdrasil or world trees are revealed in Norwegian and Swedish languages, mythology and traditions Tree of Life, Family Tree, etc. There are relevant terms, such as "Tuntre" in Norwegian and „Vårdträd“ in Swedish as micro-cosmic elements of the world. These terms contain much information about the importance of tree planting in the family yard. There are myths, according to which the place of planting of these sacred trees was the place where the pagans paid venerated to the Norwegian gods.

While visiting the Norwegian Public Museum in 2004, Holmes tried to find out if there was a tradition of tree planting again. Many did not know about the tradition, but he found a worker who used to restore old buildings and he had information about family tree tradition. Interested researcher asked about the tradition to the museum gardener. According to the gardener's answer, he concluded that this tradition is still maintained in several Norwegian districts. **(Holmes, 2002)**

2.3 Theoretical research of a tree as a symbol in Georgian mythology

In parallel to Germanic mythology the purpose of family tree in Georgian mythology should be noted. There are many varieties of sacred wood symbols in Georgia. All types, or varieties of this

symbol, have some intensity and exposure to different aspects of sacral tree symbolism. In myth-poetic consciousness of Georgians (as well as many people), human life cycle is often related to certain aspects of wood symbolism. One of the findings of this union was the tradition of the last century, concerning the rule of tree planting in the name of a new born baby. The tree planted on the child's name was mostly a walnut tree (although it was possible to have other species of trees such as *Fraxinus* and others). Growing this tree was directly associated with the baby's luck. Before the tree planting in the name of the newborn, a special ritual was preceded which is widely remembered in Western Georgia and is known as Nerch's prayer(Angel's Prayer) 'Nerch' can be identified as home angel in English.(Kiknadze,1999)

It is also noteworthy that the tree in the mountain of Georgia with its vast aspect, despite the Christian faith, is quite strongly remained, but, of course, as customs and traditional rituals. It should be mentioned that planting and maintenance of wooden trees in the ancient shrines was considered to be more important ritual than animal sacrifices. "Such sacred trees were called" Khemkhivani "- the fertility tree which is a symbol of mythological tree that gives life and that is why they were planted near the icon (Kiknadze,1995, Elashvili 2008)

As we can see, the world tree is distinguished by many common and distinctive characteristics in both mythologies. It is interesting to consider the values of sacred trees according to two cultures. In Germanic mythology, ASH is the world tree which represents a symbol of life, death and reincarnation. It is associated with sea power, love, protection, health,well-being. „Oak, Ash and Thorn were called the 'Fairy Triad': Where they grow together it is said that fairies live...!“ Yggdrasil means the ash tree (Simek. 1993, Propp 1984)

3. Common and distinctive characteristics

3.1 Ash Tree

As we can see, the world tree is distinguished by many common and distinctive characteristics in both mythologies. It is interesting to consider the values of sacred trees according to varieties. In German mythology, ASH is the world tree which represents a symbol of life, death and reincarnation. It is

associated with sea power, love, protection, health, well-being. „Oak, Ash and Thorn were called the 'Fairy Triad': Where they grow together it is said that fairies live...!“ (Simek. 1993, Propp, 1984)

In Georgia the ash tree was honoured in the past. Zurab Kiknadze in his stories (Andrezebi) tells us about "Crossfeeding" (Appearing ash in the household). According to the legend, ash tree grows in household (frequently, a snake might appear in the household) which means that the son of god is the patron of household and the family should leave the house. This area becomes a sacred place. Below there is one of the versions of this story, according to the narrative (the legend is related to the creation of Gudani cross): “The cross was in one village. In the household of one of Kavkazauri the ash tree was grown. Kavkazauri cut it, but the other day the ash grew again. Kavkazauri cut it again. On the third day a snake appeared near the ash. Kavkazauri cut the tree and killed the snake too. Hence to this, we assume that the story about the symbol of ash in the household was widespread in the mountains of Georgia. Also, its appearance again after cutting may imply that the place became sacred and it should have been just for the son of the god, not for ordinary humans.(Kiknadze 1999)

3.2 The oak tree

The oak tree represented in the Germanic mythology is mainly related to God Thor who is the god of the thunder and the sky, the oldest son of Odin. Thor was a defender of people against goliaths, dwarves, demons, and other evil forces. Thor had a magic hammer, which was made of oak by dwarves. This hammer had a magic power to stop the storm. Thor could pour the divine fire from heaven. Because of the size of oak trees, it was thought that the tree was most attracted to lightning and thunder. Some researchers will link the oak to Thor, as he is a god of thunder. The information about Thor and its wooden hammer is given in poetic Edda where the dead Volva tells Odin the story of his death and his struggle against reptiles. As he was defeated, the sky was red, the stars disappeared but another universe was created in the water, everything became green and flourished and with his magical hammer, his sons would live longer. Therefore, the wooden hammer was given the function of renewal and rebirth. In German mythology the oak is the symbol of life continuance and strength.

God bless you midge to oak

Have Easter and Christmas, midge to oak

[Lazare Mchedlishvili, village Saro 1962]

According to Makvala Kotchlamazashvili's article "Mumli Mukhasao", trees were worshipped. The trace of faith related to the wooden culture is preserved in Georgian folklore. The song "Mumli Mukhasa" ("Mamli Mukhasa"/ in English: Midge to Oak) has been sung along with dances in Meskheti-Javakheti, Adjara, Kakheti and was the appraisal of the dead and the resurrected spirit of oak. (Surguladze, 1986)

4. Results

As the results of theoretical research of Germanic and Georgian mythologies show there are following common characteristics in both cultures:

4.1 The tradition of tree planting

The tradition of tree planting is a common tradition of Germanic-Georgian mythology on the family name. There are different myths concerning the tree planting. This can be a tree planted in the name of a newborn child that is connected with fate or luck, or a tree planted in honour of decedent's succession on the grave, and a tree planted in the yard of the house as a symbol of strength and firmness of the family.

4.2 The tree as a symbol of household

In both cultures the tree was a symbol of the household. This is evident in both Germanic and Georgian mythology. Even tradition of tree planting is still observed both in Scandinavian countries and in Georgia. In Georgian mythology we encounter a lot of stories about how Ash is grown in household.

4.3 Tree as a symbol of life continuance.

In German mythology, the term "Tree of Life" and its related myth (about 3 goddesses) indicate that the tree is a symbol of life continuance in German mythology. Many literary monuments, such as Poetic Edda confirms this symbol. Of course this is similar to the Georgian myths. The symbol of the continuance of life is represented with Oak in Georgian mythology. (For example, the history of creation of Svetitskhoveli)

4.4 Oak as a symbol of strength

Oak as a symbol of strength is identified in Germanic and Georgian mythologies. Thor's oak hammer as well as the oak as a symbol of strength in Georgian mythology (Kochlamazashvili, 1962)

5. Conclusion

The tree of life as a common symbol is represented by ash in German mythology. Yggdrasil is an ash tree and holds the whole world. Even in Georgian mythology, if the family members die after growing the Ash tree, the child as a sacred creature shall survive. In addition, because of the survival of the baby, Ash is perceived as a symbol of life continuation.

Thus, in conclusion, we can say that the myth as a model, unity of uniqueness and universality in the topic discussed by us can be implemented as one of the novelties based of semantic analysis of a tree symbol. The meaning of planting tree and its association with new-born baby in both cultures, oak tree as a symbol of strength and life continuation, tree as a strength of the household semantically connects core universal symbols by which the entire Germanic and Georgian mythologies are represented as a structure. It is like a chain in which without one symbol, the others lose their importance as well. That is why Levi Strauss argued about mythology as a whole structure. This sample is simply adapted to the myths in the context of the tree in both cultures.

References:

1. Douglas Forrel Holmes 2002 “Sacred trees of Norway and Sweden
2. Elashvili Ketevan (2008) Georgian Folklore
3. Havamal, El. Book, 2005 Translated by James Alan Chisholm
4. Kiknadze Zurab 1999 “Andrezebi” (Myths -Written or Oral heritage of Georgia) Religious-Mythological traditions pp 91. 391
5. Kiknadze Zurab 1995 “Cross and Serfdom” Volume 1
6. Literary Texts 1963, Old Hagiographic Literary Texts edited by I. Abuladze
7. Propp Vladimir 1984 The Morphology of Fairy Tale
8. Simek Rudolf. 1993. Dictionary of Northern Mythology pp 232-233
9. Strauss Levi 1995 “Myth and Meaning”
10. Strauss Levi 1955 ” The structural study of a myth”, Article, The journal of American Folklore, Vol 68, No 270, 1955
11. Sturluson Snorri, 2005 Edda, edited by Anthony Faulkes
12. Surguladze. I 1986 Symbolism of Folk Ornamentations
13. Javakhishvili Ivane 1937 The history of Georgian Nation
14. Jung Carl, 1993, Man and his Symbols p147

Author’s email:

Author’s biographical data

The author is a PhD student at Tbilisi State University. She teaches English as a second language at Ilia State University and Georgian National University SEU. Her major profession is English Philology. She started her teaching career 8 years ago while participating in a state program “Georgian Language for Future Success”. After that project Teona worked as a teacher at different schools and language centres. At present, she is working on her thesis “Germanic- Georgian Mythological parallels”.