

Elements of the magical-religious universe, specific for the architectural ornaments in the traditional societies

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Abstract

The architectural ornaments are characterised by certain symbols and signs, an interconnection that generate elements specific to the magical-religious universe, belonging to the traditional societies. Between sign/symbol, in its quality of bearer of magical-religious significations, and the sign-ornament, which includes aesthetical functions exclusively, there are established specific relations that generate the originality of the architecture or the inside of the traditional peasants' house. In Oltenia, it is well-known the use of the specific architectural ornaments such as: the circle, the wheel, the five or six sides rosette, the cross, the rope, the tree of life, the motif of the snake. The persistence of certain symbols along hundreds or even thousands of years, and the fact that they have been used for generations, by different communities, do not reflect an ethnical continuity, but an archetypal one. Although we come across different populations, some of the symbols have been absorbed and have emerged in the collective thinking,

sometimes suffering semantic mutations. Very often, they are found applied on support-materials, of different types, but they have been arriving from a distant past, habitually preserving the same type of significations.

Key words: the architectural ornaments, the traditional societies, the magical-religious universe, symbols.

The architectural ornaments are characterised through certain symbols and patterns, decorative motifs met constantly, which go beyond the area represented by the pure aesthetics, and gain a specific meaning if we regard them as systems of symbols. These symbols used to belong to the magical-religious universe of the Romanian peasant.

The traditional societies used to be considered societies in which the conformism lingers. Durkheim was even supporting the thesis depicting the existence of two types of social solidarity: a “mechanical” one, specific to the traditional societies (in which the individuals share the same values and principles, the main feature of the societies being that of conformity) and an “organic” one that characterises the modern societies (Gèraud, Leservoisier & Pottier, 2001: 53).

Although these theories were combated by the representatives of the anthropological empiricism (for example Boas), they nevertheless constituted a starting point for the theories of C. Lévi-Strauss. In his book, *The Savage Mind*, the author makes an interesting analysis with regard to the “warm” and “cold” societies. He considers that the traditional societies were permanently looking for an equilibrium that would defend them against the changes, struggling, consciously or not, to preserve the “historical zero temperature”, to avoid revolutionary thoughts, which are frequently present amongst the “warm” societies. The dualist position of Lévi-Strauss was criticised by Balandier and most of the Anglo-Saxon anthropologists, who were trying to bring forward the importance of the hierarchical relations and the different “inequalities” from the traditional societies. For these communities, the remembering and the oral transmission of the traditions allow them to permanently make from the past an actuality, and the present to be interpreted according to the traditions. “We are witnessing interpretations and interventions of the traditions, in order to insert and justify the modifications. The tradition also interferes for granting meaning to the novelty” (Gèraud, Leservoisier, Pottier, 2001: 56).

The permanent process of structuring and de-structuring of the mythical past, or the historical one, in the collective thinking, but nonetheless in the specific modalities in which the different elements of the material culture are transmitted, can become relevant for the affirmation of group identity. More often than not, we find ourselves placed before a system of signs that expresses ideas and is similar, from the formal point of view, to the symbolic rites or myths. "If the myths bear a significance, this cannot be related to the isolated elements that make them, but the manner in which these elements are combined. The myth is in the same field with the language, is an integrant part of it; nevertheless, the language, in the manner it is used in the myth, presents specific features" (Lévi Strauss, 1978: 252).

In the archaic cultures, the signs and symbols are integrated into a sacred order, with magical functions and powers, the metaphor feeding the myth, which, in its turn, reveals itself as a metaphor. As M. Eliade shows: "the sacred validates the reality through excellence", and the man can live but "in a sacred world, because only this type of world participates to the state of being, and truly exists". This is the reason for which the myth "depicts only the reality, only what really happened" (Eliade, 1982: 14, 62).

It has been intensively discussed, in the specialised Anglo-Saxon literature, but not only here, on the fact that the contemporary archaeologist judges, unavoidably, the objects and the concrete situations from the archaeological digs, according to criteria radically different from the cultural context that they study, because the archaeologist belongs to another "world", with other psycho-socio-cultural features, than the people from the distant past. The cultural and temporal distance that is interposing between the contemporary researcher and the artefact, determines the opacity of the imperviousness of the later one. This is the level of knowledge where archaeology comes extremely near ethnology, both trying to enter into unknown worlds and to decipher behaviours and symbols, fundamental for the traditional societies. The "stylistic" or "aesthetic" criteria that we consider significant, did not have the same signification for the members of the traditional societies.

The same as the myths and the religious practices, the objects bear symbols specific for the cultural environment that they belong to, encompass a symbolic reality in themselves. In other words, the symbols can gain different significations in different cultural environments, the collective thinking enriching, or modifying the symbolic meanings.

Cassirer, through the concept of “symbolic form”, transforms the theory of the symbol into a semiotics of culture. Understanding the forms of culture as “artificial environments”, he was noticing that “the man lives in a symbolic universe, and not a natural one. The language, the myth and the religion constitute parts of this universe ... The man does not have, as the animal does, an immediate reference to the reality. ...He lives so much amongst the forms of the language, in the art creations, in mythical or religious symbols, that he cannot, under no circumstances, encounter or catch a glimpse of something, but through the intercommunication of these artificial environments” (Cassirer, 1960: 39, cited by Boboc, 1997: 9).

Any approach of the symbols is based on the contribution of several studying subjects: anthropology, psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics, logics, semiology. Each of these subjects brings its contribution to the definition of some basic notions that are tightly connected to the existence and the functionality of the symbols. A sign or a symbol is a cultural convention that implies the use of a significant and a signified factor (the concept) (Saussure, 1998: 123-127).

The studying of the traditional societies, urges us to make the observation that the study of the symbolic significations, of the relations significant-signified, can represent an important starting point for the research and the understanding of the changes that occur inside these communities, along the time.

In the southern part of Oltenia, it is mentioned both as regarding the surface houses and the huts, and the use of some special architectural ornamental elements, the entrance of the house being decorated with elements inlaid in the poles of the veranda, similar to the gates from Gorj or Maramureș (Enache, 1992: 211). As it has been underlined, “the embellishment of the interior with solar geometric motifs, heads of horses, similar to those from the entrance, increases even more the difficulties to understand the process of genesis and evolution of the ornaments in architecture, the hut being identified, as it is known, with the image of a squalid dwelling place” (Enache, 1992: 211) (Sketches no I, II).

When we discuss about the ornaments of the traditional architecture, it must be emphasised the relation between sign/symbol, in its quality of bearer or magical-religious significations, and the sign/ornament, which encompasses exclusively aesthetical functions. The circle (Sketches no I, II, IV) is frequently met (for the complex symbolistic of the circle, on which we

do not comment further, see Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993, I: 295-300), the same as the wheel, the rosette with five or six sides, the cross, all being *solar symbols* (Petrescu, 1963: 114; Vulcănescu, 1985: 370; Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993, III: 238-243).

The motifs of the solar circle appears in the distant past, in the southern part of Oltenia, in most of the Neolithic and Metal Age archaeological cultures. It is present on the ceramics found in Verbicioara, Gârla Mare, Insula Banului, Basarabi type settlements, to mention only few examples. These symbols are frequently met on different architectural elements (veranda, gate, door, beams), inside the house on the fireplace, on the furniture, on the pottery or fabrics. The circle, with all the associations mentioned above, is a masculine solar symbol, representing the force, the life, the resurrection, the supreme divinity that has deep roots in prehistory, which was taken by the Christian symbolistic.

The motif of the rope (Sketches no III/1,2) is met on gates, beams, window frames, poles, where it is alone, or in association with other apotropaic elements, protecting the spaces against the evil spirits. The rope, the string are symbols of the ascension, the same as the tree and the ladder. If knotted, the rope symbolises any form of connection and implies secret and magical virtues (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993, I: 340).

The tree of life (Sketches no I, III/1,2, IV) is represented by the fir-tree or oak branches, different dendromorphic stylisations, columns or rhombus or hachured elements, all suggesting the cycle of life, death and rebirth of nature. From the extremely rich literature that approaches this theme, we mention here only two works in which it is analysed the signification of the tree of life. (Frunzetti, 1961: 42; Vulcănescu, 1985: 482-488). This symbol, frequently approached by the Romanian ethnological literature, is considered to be making a connection between the three cosmic levels: the underworld, the hidden world where there are thrust the roots, the terrestrial world and the height of the sky. As an element of connection between the sky and the earth, the *cosmic tree* is also *axis mundi*. It is the central pole on which it is supported, in the Jewish-Christian tradition, the temple or the house or the spine that sustains the human body, the temple of the soul (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993, I: 124-125). Present in the rites of building, or in those related to the agrarian feasts, it can be found represented on the poles from the veranda, on gates or on the walls of the houses. All these categories of vegetal symbols, which include the tree, the fir-tree, the oak (the oak leaf or the acorn), must

be associated with the symbol of the vine. They suggest the same idea of death and rebirth.

In Oltenia, there were used in the traditional architectural ornaments, both in the case of the huts (Enache, 1992: 211), and that of the surface houses, zoomorphic and ornitomorphic symbols. Zoomorphic representations have been found since ancient times in the Neolithic plastic art (clay figures). In the study area, the archaeologists have noticed the frequent presence of the ornitomorphic representations, since Prehistory, in Gârla Mare culture, from the Bronze Age, and in the area of Basarabi culture from Hallstatt.

From the category of the zoomorphic motifs, a special attention must be given to *the heads of horses* (Sketches no III/3). The horse is a masculine symbol, often related to virility, or seen in connection with the symbolistic of the fire and sky (the winged horse). It was considered a psychopomp animal, which makes the transition to the other side world. It becomes the symbol of renewing of nature, being related to the earth, along with the fertilising waters. It becomes a symbol with apotropaic, protecting and regenerating function, we can find it placed at the entrances of the huts (Focșa, 1956: 20, 22), usually carved in wood.

The motif of the serpent is sometimes represented symbolically by a winding line. Although it is considered that it had emerged from a pagan cult (Gimbutas, 1989: 34), it is invested with positive attributes, as "the guardian of the house" or "the serpent of the house" (Focșa, 1956: 20, 23; Olteanu, 1988: 29-41). A polyvalent symbol, "it is very well integrated into the agrarian-lunar constellation. The serpent is a triple symbol of the temporal transformation, of fecundity and, in the end, of the ancestral perennality" (Durand, 2000: 311) (Sketch no. III/1).

Along with these symbols, a frequently in association with them, on the poles of the verandas, gates door and window frames, or on the items of furniture (dowry trunks, shelves, chairs), we meet different signs with a symbolic value, such is the triangle, the rhombus, the zig-zag, spiral (Sketches no IV, V).

The persistence of certain symbols along hundreds or thousands of years, the fact that they have been used by different generations and communities, do not necessarily reflect an ethnic continuity, but an archetypal one. Although there are different population taken into consideration, some symbols have been accepted and have emerged into the collective thinking, sometimes suffering even semantic

mutations. Very often, we find them applied on support-materials, of different nature, but they derive from a distant past, preserving the same type of significations.

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