

HOMO SIMBOLICUS. CONSIDERATIONS ON THE SYMBOLISM OF THE ARCHAIC THOUGHT REFLECTED IN THE WORK OF MIRCEA ELIADE

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Rezumat: *Textul de față este rodul familiarizării autorului cu lucrările lui Mircea Eliade, însoțită de o meditație, uneori critică, nefiind în intenția sa să urmărească cronologic prezentarea gândirii savantului. Textul propus este structurat în mai multe părți. Astfel, în prima parte autorul a discutat despre diversele teorii referitoare la simbolurile întâlnite în opera lui Eliade, sistematizând observațiile savantului referitoare la simboluri. În continuare, autorul a analizat legăturile care există între simbolism și anumite obiecte, pentru ca, în final, să exemplifice câteva mostre ale gândirii arhaice (mituri și simboluri referitoare la anumite meserii), așa cum au fost ele prezentate în lucrarea „Făurari și alchimiști”, mai ales.*

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) born in Romania and nationalized as an American citizen in 1966, was a writer, a philosopher and a historian of religions, a professor at the University of Chicago from 1957, holder of the chair *Sewell L. Avery* from 1962, and honored with the *Distinguished Service Professor* title. He was the author of 30 scientific volumes, literary works and philosophical essays translated into 18 languages and of about 1200 articles and of very well informed reviews with extremely various themes.

We consider Eliade's work¹ as being a whole, without trying to dissect it into stages, or to divide it in any way. We refer especially to his scientific work (we try to eliminate the word “scientific” referring to “religion/History of religions” or we used it with the pragmatic meaning of “academic” or “accepted” in the academic language). The present text represents the result of a familiarization with Eliade's works, accompanied by a meditation, sometimes critical and it is not our intention to present Eliade's thought in a chronological order. We intend to organize the present text in many parts: thus, in the first part we intend to discuss about different theories which refer to symbols met in Eliade's work, as well as to systemize the scientist's observations referring to symbols, then to observe the relationship between symbolism and certain objects and in the end, to exemplify, we present some samples of the archaic thought (myths and symbols

referring to certain occupations), as they are presented to us in the work *Făurari și alchimiști/Forgerons et alchimistes*.

The essential feature of the scientific strategy constantly foreseen by Eliade is the side attack of the sources and of the themes: the author comes from the field of religions' history, of mythology and of ethnology and, after long and stressed intellectual adventures he breaks into the heart of philosophy and gives unusual, well grounded answers to the most important problems of the contemporary abstract thought². The present problem wasn't explained properly in a certain text, thus remaining almost all the time an indirect presence, sometimes ambiguous, provocative, and always asking for the reader's imagination and the ability of thinking.

The systematic research on the mechanism of "the primitive mentality" has set off the importance of symbolism for the archaic thought as well as its fundamental role in the life of any traditional society. The symbols never disappear from the psychic reality, they can change their appearance, but their function stays the same³. In fact, even if most of the religious behaviour and "principles" of the primitive society and of the archaic civilizations were exceeded by history long time ago, yet, they didn't disappear without leaving traces: "they have contributed to the achieving of what we are today, thus, being part to our own history"⁴.

The symbolic thought is not the exclusive attribute of the child, the poet or the unbalanced, it is consubstantial to the human being, it precedes the discursive language and thought. The symbol reveals some aspects of the reality, the deepest ones, which rejects any other means of knowledge. The images, the symbols, the myths aren't arbitrary creations of the psychic; they respond to a necessity and fulfill a function: to reveal the most private means of being of the human being. Therefore, studying them allows us to know the human being better, "just the human being", who hasn't been affected yet by the historical conditions⁵.

The primitive man⁶, just as the man of any society, makes an effort to integrate into existence, to submit nature, to form itself and the society. He lives the existential problem in his own way, with the material and spiritual resources which he has⁷.

The metaphysical ideologies of the archaic world weren't always put in a theoretical language; but the symbol, the myth and the ritual express, on different planes and with their own resources, a complex system of coherent statements on the ultimate reality of things, a system which can be considered to be metaphysics. However, it is essential for us to understand the profound meaning of all symbols, myths and rituals in order to succeed in translating it into our current language.

Even if the word is missing, the *fact* still exists: only that he is said – revealed in a coherent manner – through symbols and myths⁸. The symbol is important because, it itself is sometimes a hierophany, that is, it reveals a sacred or cosmological reality which no other “manifestation” can reveal⁹. One of the distinctive features of the symbol is the simultaneity of the senses it reveals. That’s why the symbol is presented as a “language” at the hand of all the community members and out of reach to strangers, but, anyway, a “language” which simultaneously expresses the social, “historical” and physical condition of the person who bears the symbol and his relation with the society¹⁰. A symbol always reveals, irrespective of the context, the fundamental unit of more reality areas. Thus, on one hand, the symbol continues the hierophany dialectic, transforming the objects into “something” different than they seem to be to the profane experience; on the other hand, these objects, changing into symbols (signs of a transcendental reality), cancel their concrete limits, they stop being some solitary fragments and integrate into a system. More, they themselves embody the whole system, in spite of the prudence and its fragmentary condition¹¹. The symbols of any nature are always coherent and systematic regardless of the plan they manifest into¹².

Eliade’s observations on the symbolism can be summarized as following, using his own words:

- The symbols can reveal *a modality or a structure of the world, which are not obvious on the plan of the immediate experience...*
- ...for the primitives, *the symbols are always religious, directing towards something real, or towards a structure of the world...*
- An essential characteristic of the religious symbolism is *the polyvalency, its ability to express multiple meanings simultaneously, whose connection is not obvious on the plan of the immediate experience...*
- The most important function of the religious symbolism may be *its ability to express some paradoxical situations and some structures of the ultimate reality, otherwise impossible to express...*
- Finally, *the existential value of the religious symbolism should be underlined, that is the fact that a symbol always refers to a reality or to a situation which engages the human existence*¹³.

We always have to take into account the multiplicity of the possible interpretations of a document which has a plausible magical-religious intention. The visionary activity of the prehistoric man, unlike that of the modern society men, was gifted with mythological dimension. A large number of supernatural

figures and mythological episodes, which we will meet in the subsequent religious traditions, are very likely to represent “findings” of the prehistoric ages¹⁴.

One of the fundamental characteristics of *the archaic man* is the ability to live in a world whose *reality* is not given by the simple existence of things, but by their participation to paradigmatic models, to celestial archetypes... Any activity, ritual or “profane”, has its model in an action which confers reality¹⁵. If we study the general behaviour of the archaic man, a fact amazes us: the objects of the external world don’t have an intrinsic autonomous value just like the human proper acts. An object or an action attain a *value* and become *real* at the same time, only because they take part in a way or another in a reality which overtakes them. Among so many other stones, a stone becomes sacred and it is penetrated by Being consequently—because it constitutes a hierophany or because its form denounces a certain symbolism or commemorates a mythical act. The object appears like a receptacle of an exterior force, which differentiates it by its background and confers it sense and value; this force appears either in the substance of the object or in its form¹⁶. The human acts (those which aren’t related to a pure automatism), their meaning, their value isn’t related to a given body, but to their quality of reproducing a primordial act, of repeating a mythical model¹⁷. These objects cancel their concrete limits; stop being solitary fragments to integrate into a system by becoming symbols, that is signs of a transcendental reality¹⁸.

The symbolism of the *archaic thought* can be found in Eliade’s ideas about the prehistoric societies; but this symbolism, tackled from an archaeological point of view, is as inaccessible to us as that of a Paleolithic funeral. The characteristic of the archaeological documents restricts and diminishes “the messages” which are susceptible to be transferred. This fact mustn’t be lost when we are confronted to poverty and to the opaque character of our sources¹⁹. Becoming the producer of its own food, man had to modify its ancestral behaviour²⁰; the religious values of the space were important as well, firstly, of the dwelling and of the village, because a sedentary existence organizes life different from a nomad one. For a farmer, the space where he lives: the house, the village, the field represent “the real world”. “The centre of the world” is a dedicated place through rituals and prayers, because through it, the communication with supernatural beings takes place. We may say that, the History of religious ideas and beliefs has been mistaken for the History of civilizations, since Neolithic to the Iron Age. Each technological discovery, each economical and social invention seems to be “doubled” by a religious value and meaning. The Neolithic religions (and at the same time the Neolithic rites and rituals) take the risk to look simple and monotonous if they are reduced only to

archaeological texts and without any explanation of the texts or the traditions of some agricultural societies. The archaeological discoveries present us a fragmentary vision and a deformed vision of life and of the religious thought. Moreover, once the first texts add up to the archaeological documents from the Near East, we can determine in what way they reveal a universe of meanings, not only complex and profound, but also long mediated, reinterpreted and often on the verge of becoming obscure, almost without any sense. In some cases, the first texts which are accessible to us represent the approximate recollection of some immemorial religious creations, which have become out-of-date or half forgotten²¹. It is important not to forget that the great Neolithic spirituality is not “transparent” in the documents we have. The semantic possibilities of the archaeological documents are limited and the first texts express a vision of the world which is influenced by the religious ideas in solidarity to metallurgy, to the urban civilization, to royalty and to a sacerdotal organized body²². Almost any essential occupation of the prehistoric man contains symbolism, and agriculture, is not an exception, although is not a profane technique. Agriculture is firstly a ceremonial²³ and it manifests in life and it aims to the prodigious rise of this life which is present in grains, drill, rain and spirits²⁴. With agriculture, the life’s rhythms and the religious beliefs change completely. At hunters, the human destiny is related to that of the game; but, at farmers, the object of the mystic solidarity is the vegetation. With agriculture, the woman’s mysteries²⁵ return to the centre of religion: she is compared to the nourishing land, her pregnancy symbolizes the hidden life of the seed and the regeneration; her menses is related to all the nature’s cycles, as that of the Moon, of the tide, of plants and seasons²⁶.

We want to present shortly, a study of a case²⁷, which we consider to be relevant, to illustrate the way in which Eliade treats the symbolic thought specific to mining, metallurgy and blacksmith’s trade, although it is difficult enough to try to have an overall look on the symbolism related to the three trades.

Thus, in this work²⁸, the author tries to understand the behaviour of the archaic society man towards Matter and to trace “the spiritual adventures which he lived from the moment he discovered his strength to change the way of being of the Substances”²⁹. What is common to the three tradesmen (mineworker, smith and metal worker) is the fact that all of them claim a specific magic- religious experience in relation to substance; this experience represents their monopoly, and the secret is delivered through initiation rites of trades; all three tradesmen work on a Matter, on its “perfecting” and ‘transformation’³⁰. As it often happens, the symbol, the image, the rites anticipate and sometimes make possible the utilitarian

applications of a discovery. Regarding **the blacksmith**, he is first and foremost a craftsman of metal, and his nomad condition – he always travels in search for crude metal and orders – makes him come into contact with different people. The blacksmith is the main agent of spreading metallurgical mythologies, rites and mysteries. This assembly of facts introduces us into a prodigious spiritual universe³¹; the beliefs related to blacksmiths don't stop only to the sacred power of metals, they extend to the magic of tools. Besides these, at all the Siberian people, the blacksmith has a rather high social status; his trade isn't considered to be a commercial one: we are talking about vocation or hereditary transmission, thus implying initiated secrets; the blacksmiths are protected by special spirits³².

We also see at **miners** that there rites with regard to the state of Lent, meditation, prayers and cultural acts. All these conditions are imposed by the nature of the proposed operation because we enter in a sacred area, known as inviolable; the underground world and the spirits which arrange it are troubled: we come into contact with a sacred entity which doesn't take part in a religious familiar universe, a more profound and yet a dangerous sacred entity.

Principally, there is the feeling of encroachment in a natural order directed by a superior law, the feeling of interference in a secret and sacred process. That's why, all the precautions necessary to the rites of passing are taken³³. These myths, rites and traditions assume an originary, mythical theme which precedes and justifies them: the metals come from the body of a god or of a sacrificed supernatural being. And because the rites are only the repetition of an event, more or less symbolic, which, *in illo tempore*, inaugurated a behaviour or unfolded the phases of work – the metallurgical work ask for the imitation of the primordial sacrifice. The same way in which sacrifices for harvests symbolically repeat the offering to the primordial Being which, *ab origine*, made the appearance of seeds possible, the sacrifice (concrete or symbolic) of a human being, on the occasion of the metallurgic work, has as the main aim the imitation of a mythical model³⁴.

The metallurgists' activity is accompanied by a series of symbols and rites; the idea of an active collaboration between man and nature, maybe even the belief that man is capable to substitute, through his work, the processes of Nature is underlined in the symbols and the rites of the metallurgical work³⁵. Starting from these ritual experiences related to the metallurgical and agricultural techniques, it was specified, little by little, the idea that man can interfere in the temporal, cosmic rhythm, that he can anticipate a natural result and precipitate the rising. Of course, we are not talking about vivid, well formulated ideas, but about forebodings, speculations and "likings". Yet, here is the starting point of the great discovery that

man can assume the work of Time, idea which I found vividly expressed in the late western texts³⁶. Since 1880, Richard Andree, having the documents from those times, had marked out the fact that the metallurgist workers from anywhere formed a special group: they were mysterious beings, whom the community was obliged to isolate³⁷. In the whole presentation an element is constantly met, that is the sacred feature of the metal and, therefore, the ambivalent, eccentric, mysterious feature of the miner and metallurgist's work.

The study of the symbols is not a work of pure erudition and, at least in an indirect way, it only interests the knowing of man³⁸. Eliade explicitly suggests in his volume *Imagini și simboluri*, that this study can, more than psychology; prove scientifically *a new humanism* or *a new anthropology*³⁹. After Eliade, the symbol always aims at a reality and a situation which engages the human existence, a "limit-situation" which man discovers when he attains the conscience of his place in the universe⁴⁰. The symbol (religious, a pragmatic mark) doesn't reveal a structure of the reality or a dimension of the existence, but it gives, at the same time, meaning to the human existence. From this point of view, an abyss separates the human existence in its traditional sense, in which the symbols play the part of some existential marks, by the existence of the modern man, who proves not to be symbolic or even against symbolism, "desacralized"⁴¹.

¹ In order to write this text I had only the translated texts of Eliade's works, except for the work *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Paris, Publishing House Payot, 1968.

² Petru Ursache in Mircea Eliade, *Meșterul Manole*, Ed. Junimea Iași, 1992, p. 5; Florin Țurcanu, *Mircea Eliade prizonierul istoriei*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 2005.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Meșterul Manole*, p. 20.

⁴ Adrian Marino, *Hermeneutică și istorie la Mircea Eliade*, în "Revista de istorie și teorie literară", 28/1979, 3, p.424; Mircea Eliade, *Cosmologie și alchimie babiloniană*, București, 1937, p. 16-17; *Idem*, *Fragmentarium*, București, 1938, p. 108; Petru Ursachi, *Camera Sambô, Introducere în opera lui Mircea Eliade*, București, Ed. Coresi, 1993, p.24

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Imagini și simboluri*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1994, p. 15.

⁶ Primitive, in our opinion, means the man from the beginning of history, the man from the first periods of history.

⁷ C. I. Gulian, *Mit și cultură*, București, Ed. Politică, 1968, p. 79.

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Eseuri*, București, Ed. Științifică, 1991, p. 13.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Tratat de istorie a religiilor*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1992, p. 406.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 410.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 411.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 413.

¹³ Ioan Petru Culianu, *Mircea Eliade*, București, Ed. Nemira, 1995, p. 79; Mircea Eliade, Ioan Petru Culianu, *Dicționar al religiilor*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1996, p. 212.

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- ¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, vol. I, București, Ed. Științifică, 1991, p. 44.
- ¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 90; Mircea Eliade, *Morfologia religiilor, Prolegomene*, București, Ed. Jurnalul literar, 1993, p. 191.
- ¹⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Eseuri*, p. 13.
- ¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 14.
- ¹⁸ Adrian Marino, *Hermeneutica lui Mircea Eliade*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Dacia, 1980, p. 187; Mircea Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, vol. I, 1976, p. 204.
- ¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Istoria credințelor...*, vol. I, p. 22.
- ²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 46.
- ²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 59.
- ²² *Ibidem*.
- ²³ It was like this during its first periods and it has still remained the same in the popular societies.
- ²⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Morfologia religiilor...*, p. 191 and the next ones.
- ²⁵ It is believed that agriculture was a woman's discovery, while, at the beginnings, man was occupied more with hunting; thus, we can explain the preponderant role played by women at the beginning of agriculture.
- ²⁶ Mircea Eliade, Ioan Petru Culianu, *Dicționar al religiilor*, p. 212.
- ²⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, Paris, 1956; *Idem, Făurari și alchimiști*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1996; to avoid big texts, we will not present the ethnographic demonstration made by Eliade.
- ²⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Făurari și alchimiști*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1996.
- ²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.
- ³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 8.
- ³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 24. At the beginning the metal was rare (and as valuable as gold) and its use was more of ritual importance. The discovery of melting raw ore was necessary to ensure a new stage in the mankind history.
- ³² *Ibidem*, p. 81; In Sugnan and in other regions of Pamir the art of the blacksmith is considered to be a gift of "David, the prophet" and that's why the blacksmith get more respect than the mullah; but he must be **pure**, physical and spiritual. The blacksmith's trade is worshiped as a place of cult and where there isn't a special house for prayers and meetings, the people meet at the blacksmith's shop.
- ³³ *Ibidem*, p. 58.
- ³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 69.
- ³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 76.
- ³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 77.
- ³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 88; this thing is well known at the tribes of the Indians from America, and also at the people from Africa; in this way, there is a vast bibliography, such as Walter Cline, H. Baumann, D. Westermann etc.
- ³⁸ Ion Goian, *Antropologia lui Mircea Eliade: Homo religiosus între universalitate și creativitate*, în *Revista de teorie socială*, București, 5, 2001, 1-4, p. 28.
- ³⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Imagini și simboluri*, p. 24.
- ⁴⁰ Adrian Marino, *Hermeneutica lui Mircea Eliade*, p. 199.
- ⁴¹ *Ibidem*, Ion Goian, *Antropologia lui Mircea Eliade*, p. 24.