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#### The archaic concept of the universe and its echo in Russian traditional embroidery

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# THE ARCHAIC CONCEPT OF THE UNIVERSE AND ITS ECHO IN RUSSIAN TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERY

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This paper is a brief account of the hypothetical concept of the stages of development of ancient cosmology. An attempt to interpret the original semantics of Russian folk embroidery has led the author to a reconstruction of archaic cosmology, based upon the idea of the Universe as a live autoreproductive organism/being. This approach allows to clear up some 'dark spots' in mythology and to consider separate cults as elements of the whole system. The rudiments of such system manifest themselves in different cultures of the world.

**KEY WORDS** Cosmology, zooanthropomorphic model of the Universe, semantics of traditional Russian embroidery, mythologemas of Axis Mundi, Island in the Sea, the Flood, image of the serpent

Traditional motifs and images of folk art is one of the rudimentary fragmentary reflections of the very complicated process of learning and comprehension of the world by human beings. Even in the earliest stages of this process, as contemporary studies show (D'yakonov, 1990, 21, 37, 44; Shakhnovich, 1971, 9–10), both the logical mode of thinking and the systems approach were already characteristic for man. The systems approach is supposed by B.A. Frolov, investigator of primitive art, already in the Upper Paleolithic (Frolov, 1982, 57). As O.M. Freidenberg, who studied ancient mythologies, noted: 'In the earliest historical epochs we meet man with systems perception ... This is his radical distinction from a gregarious animal. The culture is more ancient, the last one has more internal coherency, immobility and seclusion.' (Freidenberg, 1978, 24)

However this systems character and logicity are of a special kind. In the beginning the research thought of humankind, whose means of cognition were very limited, was developing in the direction of associative-image-bearing/figurative thinking, i.e. complicated phenomena of the world were imagined in their coherence-through concrete, easier to perceive images, mainly images from the animal and plant worlds, creating mythology, in which at first cosmogonical and cosmological myths played a leading role. The complicity of phenomena sometimes resulted in its description through, at first glance, completely different images, which, however,

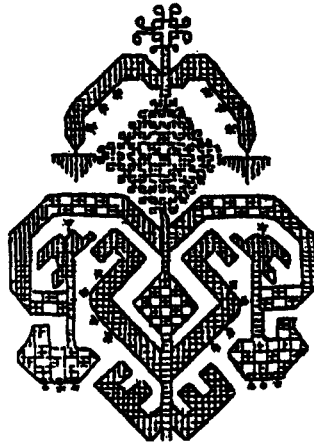


Figure 1

could be well combined even within one mythological system. They were perceived by the archaic mind as intersupplementary, reflecting different aspects of the same phenomenon (e.g., the sky as a roof, a river, a field, a sea, an animal skin, a bent body of a goddess giving birth to heavenly bodies; the stars as fires, eyes, souls, peas, herds of animals or their traces, flocks of birds or shoals of fishes, holes in a tent, and so on), though, of course, such sets of images might also be chronologically heterogeneous.

During millennia the mythological model of the world was developing and changing, some of its elements were recomprehended, the content of other elements was forgotten, but in most cases diachronic images and motifs continued to exist side by side, because of their traditionalism, increasing the number of 'dark spots', which are so numerous in ethnography and the history of religion. One can enlighten the majority of these 'dark spots' only on the basis of vast comparative typological and historical studies (Maslova, 1978, 154; Evsyukov, 1990, 9–10; Okladnikova, 1995, 5, 8, 11–13), because mankind, most probably, had a common primary motherland and has a common psychophysiological basis. Traditional images and motifs of Russian popular art, in most cases, are exactly these 'dark spots'. As they are inherited from archaic – perhaps, pre-Indo European – culture (because many of them occur among very distant peoples of the world) they form something like a text in code, which decoding requires different materials from other spheres of culture. But if the chosen 'key' for the code is correct, then the motifs of the ornaments themselves can help to find system and structural interconnections in the reconstruction of the archaic model of the world, also enlightening some 'dark spots' in other areas of contemporary traditional cultures and the cultures of the ancient world.

An example of such motifs strongly fixed by tradition, is the group of complicated figures in folk embroidery of the Russian North. Some of these figures remind one of a woman in the position of birth: in scientific literature they are called 'Rozhenitsa' or 'Rozhanitsa' (woman in childbirth); others figures remind one of a complicated



Figure 2

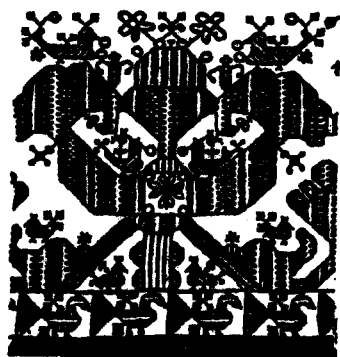


Figure 3

multi-elemental composed tree, and they were called by embroideress 'Tree' or 'Tree of Life' (See Figure 1-5, 7). One can find a clear genetic kinship between these two groups: their centre is marked by a similar way in different variants; both their general silhouette and certain details are comparable, in such way that it is possible to make an almost complete evolutionary row of smooth conversion of one image to another; that was the reason for B.A. Rybakov to suggest considering all the variants of such images as a representation only of the goddess Rozhenitsa (Rybakov, 1981, 477-483).

However both popular etymology and evident diminution of anthropomorphic features in the second group side by side with the increase of tree features, as well as the complication of the whole figure because of additional elements, all argues that we meet here the same image of some mythological Tree, comparable with the

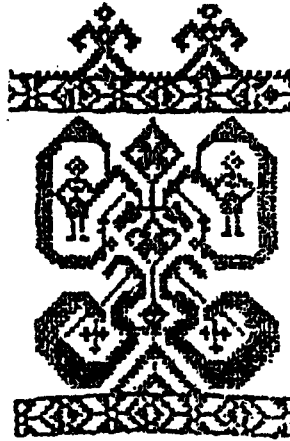


Figure 4



Figure 5

wide-spread mytho-ritual and early philosophical concept of the World Tree, which reflects the idea of the three-level structure of the Universe, expressed through this image (see the analysis of the Tree figure of embroidery from this point of view in Denisova 1995, 186–201). But this image is very speculative, almost semiotic: as long ago as XIX century V.V. Stasov noted on such embroidered figures of the Tree that they were composed ‘on the basis of certain idea or concept’ (Stasov, 1872, 204). Undoubtedly, it already reflects enough high-degree development of the human abstract mind; as for the preceding image of the World, we must look for one in which internal connections between its elements would appear evidently and naturally enough. The common features of the images of Tree and Rozhenitsa provokes the supposition that it was the last one which might be this predecessor, because for ancient people the model of the coherent active life system was represented by a living human organism itself and, first of all, a human female organism as being capable for autoreproduction, as well as an organism of an animal female.

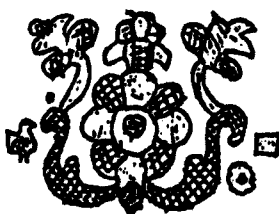


Figure 6

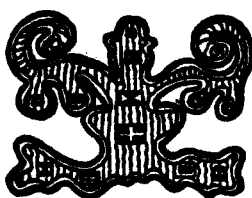


Figure 7

The significance of the Russian embroidery Rozhenitsa figure in general has been determined by scholars as a reflection of the very archaic image of the Great-Mother-the-original-mother-of-all-life (Rybakov, 1981, 70–71, 475–489; Maslova, 1978, 120, 160; Zharnikova, 1991, 20–21, 24; and others), and once the popular name among embroideresses for such figure was ‘the Original/Pre-Mother’, in particular in the region of Onezhskoe Lake (I thank V.N. Polunina for this data); in archaeological materials this figure has been known at least since Neolithic times (see Figure 16).

But, besides this general meaning, one can see in it more concrete content, if compared with some cosmological ideas of different peoples – the Russians also have rudiments of such ideas. For example, according to Nganasan beliefs (Siberia), on one of the levels of the Underground World there is a women clay deity lying with spreading legs, catching human souls and passing them through herself. According to another variant of the same myth, the mistress of the earth Fannida lives under turf, and the dying people or shamans during their travels enter her open mouth, finding themselves ‘in the very abdomen of the earth’ or ‘in the light earth’ by analogous beliefs of Evenks (Anuchin, 1914, 4–6; Okladnikova, 1995, 241–242). Similar beliefs were recorded for ancient China, ancient Egypt, the American Indians and in some other countries. The Dogons in Africa, for example, have myths in which the earth itself is a spread body of an enormous woman whose limbs are disposed to cardinal points (Kotlyar, 1975, 95, 208–210). In this typological row the Russian riddle about the earth goes well: ‘Here is me, I have sprawled; if I stand up, then I would reach the sky’ (Ya syo, ya rozglyaglasyo; kaby vstala, to by do neba dostala: Earth) (Sokolov and Sokolov, 1915, 518). Southern Slavs have the idea that settlements on the earth are connected with different parts of God’s body (Plotnikova in: SD, II, 314). These beliefs have something in common with the words of ‘Rigveda’ (X, 72, 4): ‘...The earth arose from the original mother



Figure 8

(pre-mother), and from the earth the space of the world arose...’ Was it not this mythologema that created Upper-Paleolithic rock pictures of a lying women? (see Figure 15 – Abramova, 1972, Figure 4).

The idea of ‘the Mother-Wet-Land’, as one knows, is deeply rooted in the Russian cultural tradition; it was even considered that a human being has three mothers: the native mother, the god-mother, and the ‘mother-wet-land’ (Tul’tseva, 1995, 285). And in ritual life there are evident rudiments of beliefs about reincarnation through the womb of the earth: so a sick child was dragged through the hole dug in the earth, and the cattle in the time of the epizootic were driven through a tunnel dug in a hill or in a steep river bank (Zhuravlyov, 1994, 116). By the way, the image of mountains as lying giants like Svyatogor (giant warrior of Russian tales – Translator.) were called ‘velety’ or ‘voloty’ (sng.: velet, volot) in legends, and sometimes as a giant women, is also a rudiment of this archaic ‘layer’ of cosmology: caves were thought of as the entrances to their belly, and the strange peoples (like dwarfs, often with 1–3 eyes (Afanas’ev, 1994, II, 454, 684–696)) who lived in them, by Slavic legends, are one of the images of the souls of dead persons, waiting for reincarnation.

According to many legends, the giants slept in the beginning of the world, which has something in common with East Slavic apocryphal legends where God is pictured as sleeping before the Creation of the World (Afanas’ev, 1994, II, 476), as well as with the widespread spiritual poem ‘Dream of Our Lady (Bogoroditsa)’, because that was the Virgin who inherited many beliefs about the ‘mother-earth’, and sometimes it is said in the verses that she created ‘both sky, and earth, and sun, and moon, and numerous stars’ (Fedotov, 1991, 56).

This motif of the creation of the Universe by the Goddess was evidently the next stage in the evolution of mythology (we shall discuss this below); originally, most probably, one may speak about presentation in the woman image not of all the world and even not of all the earth, but only a clan earth, directly digested by

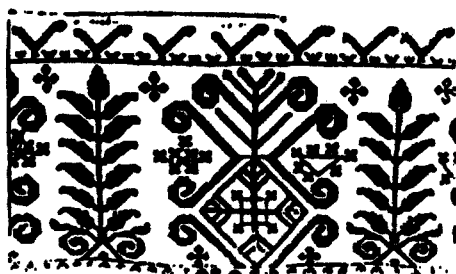


Figure 9

a clan community: as scholars note, a characteristic of the primitive mind is the inseparability or great proximity of the concepts of clan territory, earth, country, Universe, goddess of earth, of home, of clan, etc. (Anisimov, 1959, 42, 43; Chagdurov, 1980, 151, 180). In the myths of many people in different parts of the world the appearance of the first human beings is pictured as going out from under the earth, from its womb. In real topography the places of such a mythological exodus were marked as totem centres of clan territory: crevices, entrances to caves, sacral trees and stones, sometimes with drawings incised on them; there are circles, concentric circles, spirals, crosses, rosettes, etc., among these pictures (Okladnikova, 1995, 87, 107, 185 and others). These points of exodus were thought of as being in the centre of the world, and they marked 'the navel (hub) of the Earth' or 'the navel of the Universe', which in many mythologies was identified with the umbilicus of the mythological first man (Toporov in MNM, 350).

We also meet analogies of the signs mentioned above in the marking of the centre of the Rozhanitsa figures, as well as of the Tree, in Russian traditional embroidery (see Figure 1–9, 11), for all that these signs, often include a cross, connected from the earliest times with ideas of life, birth, and the four cardinal points (Gimbutas, 1974, 89, 90). It has been established that the crossed rhomb – the most characteristic for our figures – has the meaning of an ideogram of fertility, connected with earth, or even an ideogram of the earth itself. One can find a parallel in the mythology of the Zuni Indians (Pueblo group): an image of a Mother-Land containing before the Creation of the World all the forms of life inside herself, or 'in a four-section womb of the World' (Eliade, 1987, 224).

However, to gain a deeper understanding the image of cosmic Rozhenitsa and the symbolical meaning of her 'viviparous' centre, one must pay attention also to the fact that she was often portrayed with horns on her head (see Figure 10). In Siberian materials one knows well the images of halfwomen–halfmoose females, the mistresses of the world, but the Siberian peoples also had very concrete idea of the inhabited land as a great hooved animal, moose female, or elk/deer (Anisimov, 1959, 14–48). The horns of the Russian embroidered Rozhenitsas show rather their connection with the image of a cow. These images were close in Russian folk-lore: there was the mention of a 'marvellous beast, tur[wild bull]-deer', and one knows the dialect name 'alyn'ya (cf.: olen' - a deer)' for a cow.





Figure 10

Many ancient peoples worshiped a cow or a bull, and that was not a simple cult, but indeed giving them universal traits, in which we can see obvious rudiments of the model of the world represented in these images. The earth itself is sometimes called a cow in 'Rigveda', identified with Aditya, mother of gods, and in 'Atharvaveda' (IX, 4) there is a special hymn for a cow, where it is said: 'The waters are guarded by a cow... The gods are contained in a cow... A cow is that which is called immortality... A cow is the Universe...' (Cited by Erman, 1980, 89, 125). In 'Zendavesta' an initial bull is the keeper of the seeds of all that is real, and in a German fairy-tale a marvellous bull moves mountains, drinks a sea, eats stars (Afanas'ev, 1994, I, 657, 674–678). In some variants of the Serbian cosmological myths the earth is supported by one or four oxes (cows) (SD, II, 314, 315), which has something in common with Northern Russian legends about four cows living in a lake and sometimes going out to an island.

Studying the Eastern Slavic worship of a cow one can find its connection with worship of ancestors, mother (Zhuravlev, 1994), earth and earth fertility (Afanas'ev, 1994, I, 653), as well as with the idea of reincarnation (getting through the ear in the fairy-tale 'Little Khavroshechka' and through the inside of a killed cow in the direction to the head, in the rite of curing (Zabylin, 1880, 420)). Also one pays attention to the name 'Zemun' of the celestial cow in the 'Veles' Book' [see: Veles' Book, 1992, chpt I, 147], even taking into consideration the controversial character of this book and its translation. This name resembles the name of the Lithuanian goddess of the earth, Zhemina, and the Latvian 'Zemes mate' – mother of the earth (MS, 1991, 215). One can also find the resemblance of the images of the cow (Russ.: 'korova' – 'cow' – translator) and the world in the charms for milking: 'As earth does not move, so let you...', 'Stand like mountain, be milked like a river, a lake of sour cream, a river of milk' (Zabylin, 1880, 380–389), as well as in the decoration of Belorussian wedding bread, 'korovay', which represents a model of mythological world (a round earth with a tree in the centre, heavenly bodies, and symbols of the ancestors).

The sky with sun, moon and stars was comprehended as being inside such a cosmic animal or periodically passing through its body. Thus, the sky in Russian riddles is associated with a skin or a fur coat (one can meet this motif also in

the Bible), and in some particular riddle the stars are drawn by a cow into its body: 'Peas scattered in a clear field, nobody can gather them..., brown cow came, lifted its tail, gathered all the peas' (Rybnikova 1932, 155). This image surprisingly resembles the Egyptian goddess of the sky, Nut (her presumptive prototype was also connected with earth) who swallows up the sun, the moon and the stars and then gives birth to them; she was often identified with the cow-deity Khatkhor. By the way, in ancient Egypt a bull selected for the role of the sacral bull Apis must have a black skin with white spots, which represented a 'map' of the starry sky, and besides two large spots must represent the crescent as well as the sun in the image of a bird (Belyaev, 1998, 98–99). And on the side of Russian clay figurines of a cow (Kargopol area, Arkhangelsk region) the stars, 'znamena', were painted. ('Znamena' here means sacral signs.) Perception not only of the earth, but also the sky, as a 'bosom' is reflected in many Oriental legends and poems, in particular in Vietnamese ones (Nikulin, 1995, 130).

Evidently in the process of the widening and complicating of ancient man's idea of the world, the archaic zoo-anthropomorphous model of the clan world is also growing gradually, gaining the scale of the Universe and, at the same time, losing the clearness of shape and later recomprehending in the spirit of philosophical concepts. All the 'widened' Universe is comprehended inside of such a colossus: it is said in 'Yadzhurveda' ('Zhasaneyi-samkhita' 23, 48): 'Brakhman is a light similar to a sun. The sky is a river similar to a sea. Indra the god is more than earth. The cow is something that does not have any measure' (Cited by Erman, 1980; 142). This cosmic being includes also the primeval ocean or khaos, from the waters of which the primordial island-earth appears; and, evidently, this being itself retrospectively is recomprehended in some cosmogonies in the image of primary khaos from which the elements of the world are created by means of its auto-development, as one can see, for example, in the concept of the ancient Chinese Dao, and it is worth noting that the Dao is often likened to a maternal bosom, containing all forms of real world in their potentiality. Khaos by Hesiod is a primary womb which bears itself and all the rest (Evszlin, 1993, 152).

One must pay attention to the fact that primeval water space, correlated with khaos, is referred to in many cosmogonical myths as milky or white, or its waters are converted in milk by churning and then all the basic elements of the Universe are extracted from this condensed milk: brilliant examples of this mythologem are known in the Hindu and Mongolian mythologies; in some variants of Altaian myths a white foam flies up at the beating up of of the 'Moon sea' (L'vova and others, 1988, 120). A sea with Buyan Island or the Alaty' stone on it, is sometimes also called 'white' in the initial parts of Russian charms; then we also know well a fairy tale motif of a rejuvenating milk lake; one can catch the rudiments of myths about churning and the Creation in beliefs about witches who, stirring water in sources by a stick, can bereave cows of their milk, and by beating up of milk in bowls can make a magic ointment or a special cheese (Afanas'ev, 1994, III, 489–490); that reminds us of the making of amrita, and other blessings, including the earth, at churning. The concept of 'the Cosmic Being' shows a profound semantic parallelism in the ideas of a primordial earth and of a cheese or curds: there is a significant myth-

ritual complex connected with 'clan/family cheese' and first of all based upon the element of its making as fermentation (Bushkevich, 1995, 328).

The thing is, that the archaic worldview included the idea of a woman's body or a female milk animal's body as containing a significant amount of milky liquid, and the creation of an embryo was imagined as a condensation of this liquid in the process of beating up. Probably, that was the very way of the primeval perception of the man's role in conception: for example, in North Mongolian legends the mother of the protagonist is compared with a milky sea, and the father is compared with a Sumer mountain (L'vova and others, 1988, 132); the idea of conception from seeds or fruits, etc., was probably characteristic of earlier stages (Propp, 1976). This idea of a milky liquid explains the connection of the images of a child and of cheese or curds in Eastern Slavic folk-lore: the lost girl in the songs comes back in time 'with white cheese, with a small son' and the pregnancy is asked in a riddle through an earthenware pot with curds, situated under the floor.

However, one knows that the creation of the primordial earth was also imagined by analogy with conception: thus, for example, one of the Talmud texts says: 'God created the world like an embryo' (Cited by Evsyukov, 1990, 84) and the word 'curds' (Russ. 'tvorog'); derived from the word 'to create' (Russ. 'tvorit' – Translator), also had the meaning of soft dirt (Afanas'ev 1994, II, 468). The primordeal island-earth 'was considered as a sacral embryo of the Universe, a peculiar cosmos inside a cosmos' (MNM, I, 467), i.e. as an embryo in the body of a cosmic being: this explains why in Russian charms the island or the stone Alatyř' in a sea, is white, and why, according to some Eastern Slavic legends, the snakes, spending winter around a white or light Alatyř' stone underground, are licking it during all the winter (Afanas'ev, 1994, II, 546–549). The image of Alatyř' is very polysemantic: it is a mythological centre of the world, a concentration of all blessings and a general source of life, an analogue of paradise (Slav. 'vyriy'); 'a great power is hidden under that stone, and this power has no limit', is said in charms (Afanas'ev, 1994, II, 142–149). The Slavs at the time of Danube unity as well as the neighbouring peoples, including the Frakians, had a real analogue for this mythological image – an island in the Black Sea near the Danube delta. This island was called Levka or Belyi ('White'), and also Zmeinyi ('of Snakes') (Pyatysheva, 1966). So, the embroidered figure of Rozhanitsa with a marked centre may also be considered as a peculiar mythological 'map of the world'.

There was not only an embryo of the future earth that one could imagine inside of this 'cosmic being' correlated with khaos and the primogenious ocean, but also a source of birth of heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon, and the stars, as well as of thunder-storms and winds, because an eternal inextinguishable fire blazed in the centre of this being (by analogy with body warmth and breathing). According to one of the hymns of creation in 'Rigveda' (X, 129) the primordial 'Something One' 'was breathing by itself', 'it was born by the force of its own heat' (Norman Brown, 1977, 293). According to Russian legends, the world was creating by fire and water, and according to charms the eternal fire is included inside of the Alatyř' stone; sometimes Alatyř' is described as shining with the god of a thunder-storm over it (Afanas'ev, 1994, II, 142–143). Apparently, the fiery river from tales and

charms, which is flowing 'from all four cardinal points, from the earth to the sky' (Zabylin, 1880, 387) is none other than the blood in the veins of this primordial being. This concept explains well why the heavenly bodies are got from the bottom of the sea-ocean in the myths of many peoples of the world (in Slavic myths, by two birds later replaced by the God and Satan). The Russian riddle about the bottom of the Black Sea says: 'Vo vremya ono uvidalo solnyshko v more dno' ('In those days the sun saw the bottom in the sea'), (Sadovnikov, 1876, N 2189 and 2190). It is significant that the ancient Russian word 'bottom' (DNA) meant also the female womb and in general the human belly. Probably this mythologem could be identified with those in which heavenly bodies go out from caves or are born by the first women, a goddess – the last motif is also known both in ancient Chinese and in ancient Egyptian mythologies, as well as in Melanesian and in some others (see Luk'yanov 1992, 24; Shakhnovich, 1971, 202; MS, 586).

In the ancient Indian myth about the victory of Indra over Vritra one can see the junction of all these three mythologems: the released cosmic waters, 'divine mothers', went out from the caves 'as a herd of mooing cows' and were pregnant with the sun (Norman Brown, 1977, 288–289). In Russian fairy-tales, side by side with the motif of liberation of the heavenly bodies from the great serpent's belly by a hero, there is also a subject when the moon is buried in earth, and it was the moon which is later personified with the image of Zhar-ptitsa (Fire-Bird) who helps the tsar's daughter to escape from the underground realm and later dies by the light of the sun (Volozova, 1992, 158–159) and in Western European fairy-tales there is a motif of birth of the sun and the moon, brother and sister, by a sleeping virgin (Afanas'ev, 1994, II, 427). However caves were also comprehended as the keepers of winds and snow-storms, and, for example, according to Khorutanian belief, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, lightning and the winds were in water depths before the beginning of the world (Afanas'ev, 1994, II, 357, 468, 660).

So, all four elements, indicated as the basis of the Universe and Creation in the most ancient philosophical systems (water, fire, earth and air), were being imagined formerly as a component of the 'sacral centre' or life-giving bosom of the cosmic being. This idea is also confirmed by the words of an orfic hymn devoted to all-creating Zeus: 'Powerful base of the world and single divine body in which all is circulating: fire and water, earth and ether, night darkness and day light...' (Evsyukov, 1990, 75). Resuming a story about the symbol of the 'centre' in Russian embroidery, we, comparing variants, can find in them graphic ideograms of all four basic elements. Thus, there was often a cross over rhomb or square, the sign of earth, in the embroidery patterns; and in Russian popular culture there was a name 'ognivets' (from 'ogon', a fire – Transl.) for a diagonal cross (Kuftin, 1926, 67); and ancient Russian 'kryos' meant a fire, a camp fire. As for symbolical representation of the idea of air, wind – the breathing of a deity to which 'inspiration of life' was ascribed – it is necessary to pay attention to the whirl rosette which in popular art was placed in the centre or in the low part of tree-like figure (often with features of Rozhenitsa). Sometimes such a rosette is replaced by a swastika (Figure 11); one can see the swastika as a marker of the bottom of goddess' belly both in Buddhistic representations of Maya and antique statuettes from Troya (Dunare, 1979, pl. XXIII, N 13).

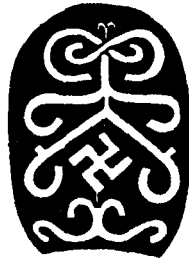


Figure 11

The latest studies on the swastika (Bagdasarov and Durasov, 1996) reveal that in early Christian culture this sign correlates with the idea of the Saint Spirit which included the concept of the life-giving connection of three elements (as a minimum): fire, wind and water (descending to the earth in the form of fire tongues, whirlwind and warm rain).

It is most probable that among the symbols of the 'centre' of the examined figures was a snake-like motif that served as the ideogram of water. This motif often rounds the rhomb, the oval or the circle from below and from both sides (see Figure 1, 2, 4-6), because the image of the Serpent is associated in the first instance with the water element in the myths of practically all peoples of the world; sometimes it is the first being living in the primary Ocean (see Toporov and Ivanov 'Serpent (Zmei)', 'Dragon', 'Ocean' and others in: MNM 1987-1988). But the symbolic meaning of the Serpent is even much more complicated and multi-aspected. In Old European fine art its image has been known since the Paleolithic, but it is most characteristic of the Neolithic epoch; it is connected with the ideas of fertility, immortality, with images of ancestors and the Great Goddess (Gimbutas, 1974, 93-95, 101, 124, 136-148). In our decorative art context first of all we pay attention to the fact that the Serpent rounds 'the centre' and they together make the integral whole. The image of the great Serpent winding round the primary Earth (or the Earth in general) and supporting it, is widespread in mythology: it is Scandinavian Ermungand, and ancient Egyptian serpent 'Surrounding the Earth' and antique Uraborus, biting its tail, and the ancient Hindu serpent Shesha, and analogous to them the serpents girdling the Earth in the myths of the African tribes Fon and Dogon (Kotlyar, 1975, 40, 117). In Russian fairy-tales we meet evident rudiments of this image: a great serpent wound round a garden with marvellous apples and 'life-giving water' or round a city or a stone under which the invigorating ointment had been hidden (Afanas'ev, 1994, II, 313, 549, 551). There are also mentions in charms about a snake, a couple of snakes or 'a girl - snake's sister' on a stone or an island in a sea. The location of this decorative motif in Russian embroidery perhaps will prompt us to ask why, in different cultures, has the image of the Great Goddess been so closely associated with the image of a snake from the most ancient times? It is a question which in many respects is still a puzzle for scholars.

If one proceeds from the concept that the sacral centre of the world was imagined formerly as an eternally birthgiving and regenerating womb of a deity (a clear



Figure 12

example of the survival of this idea is the Hindu rituals that include the making of a large 'golden womb' of a goddess or a cow for symbolical regeneration of the initiating person (Freser, 1985, 243–246); cf. above, the Russian ritual of getting through the body of cow), then the snake-like motif that marks this 'bosom' may have a direct functional relation to this idea (numerous examples of the connection of the image of the snake with fertility, regeneration and immortality are well known). The ancient man's observation of human and animal physiology and his associative mode of thinking could create the idea of identification of snakes and internal organs like intestines and, probably, womb (uterine) ducts and milk ducts, etc.

One can recollect that in a variant of the Chinese myth of the Creation, at the creation of the world from the parts of the mythical man's body, the snakes were created from his internal organs (Evsyukov, 1990, 80), and in Buddhism there is a name 'intestines of Buddha' for the complicated endless cross-like 'Knot of Life'. One can meet the drawings of snake-like spirals on the bottom of women's bellies of Neolithic statuettes (Gimbutas, 1974, ill.196, 201). In Russian riddles the snake, the intestines and water sometimes are asked through a single image – a caftan with gathers (Sadovnikov, 1876, N 1604, 1792), and also in Russia there was a New Year ritual dish – the so-called 'intestines of Malan'ya (woman name)' (pig intestines stuffed with different cereals – probably one of the images of regeneration). The role of this physiological organ was symbolically reinterpreted and, being associated with the image of the snake capable of changing its skin (which in the eyes of primitive man was evidence of eternal life and youth), this reinterpreted role created a great myth-ritual 'stratum' of ancient culture including, undoubtedly, an aspect connected with rites of passage: a neophyte was passing through the image of a snake-like deity or spirit (this semantics with its rudiments in Russian fairy-tales has been thoroughly analysed by V. Ya. Propp (1946). Scholars believe that labyrinths of the Ancient World as well as their images were also connected with rites of passage; for example, the well-known Knossos labyrinth with Minotaurus who symbolically 'devoured' neophytes, was in its way a map of the under world (Okladnikova, 1995, 193–197), and passing the narrow underground passages by the initiated person correlates, probably, with passing through the 'internal organs of the earth' to the following regeneration into another being.

We know that rites of passage reflect more general ideas of regeneration of the human soul and the endless circulation of life, and it was a snake-like image – probably, because of its characteristics mentioned above – which played a leading part in this semantic complex. This its 'regenerative' role organically enters into the total cosmological system of some peoples and correlates with celestial phenomena.

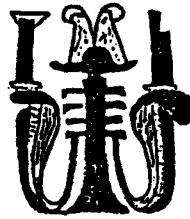


Figure 13

So, the Maya imagined the Milky Way as a double-headed reptile-snake, through which the souls of the dead must pass; in their imagination a cave could be associated also with the Milky Way (Ershova, 1997, 75–80). The Eastern Slavs, as well as all European peoples, also considered the Milky Way as the road of the dead; in Russian folk-lore one can meet its name: ‘Way to Paradise (Vyrey)’, and according to a Russian legend ‘soldiers (veterans) (‘sluzhivye’, literally, ‘people in service’ – Transl.)’ live on it, and ‘they cannot control neither their hands nor their legs because of old age’ (Rut, 1987, 14, 48) in which one can find a hint of the snake-form. In ancient Egyptian myths Ra, the God of the sun, passes through the giant Serpent underground every day, fights against Apop, and also in one myth it is said that the enormous serpent Apop is ‘winding like an intestine...’ (Wallis and Budge, 1997, 126). Among Slavs there are many beliefs about giant snakes, including double-headed ones and there living among the stars (Gura, 1997, 298–301). Most probably, the double-headed snake-like motif of our figures in embroidery is directly connected with the sphere of such ideas of reincarnation. The semantic significance of this decorative complex has led to its separation from the feminine figure and its being as an independent motif, including in embroidery (Figures 6, 8, 12). One can see this very motif in the pictures of gnostic amulets of the ‘divine womb’ (Neverov, 1981, 24, 36–37); we also meet analogies to them in Russian embroidery (Figure 8).

In many mythologies the image of the world serpent is either separated from the image of the goddess, or merged with her (like in Akkadian Tiamat), or altered and entered a new pantheon. Ambiguity (ambivalence) is characteristic of this image from the very beginning (a clear example is Eastern Slavonic beliefs about the horned tzar of serpents, one of his horns is resuscitating, the other is killing (Gura, 1997, 324). This ambiguity transforms more and more into htonism and its negativity is accented, though the positive significance is conserved as a survival (for example, in the image of a grass-snake or ‘domestic snake’ of Russian folk-lore). This significance was fixed in artistic symbol, and in veiled form revealed in the image of the Christian ‘blooming’ cross (Figure 18). In ancient art we meet the closest analogies to this ‘snake-like giving-birth complex’ in ancient Egypt (the pillar of Osiris ‘Jed’ with two urei) and in pre-Indian culture Mohendjo-Daro (Figures 13, 14, 17). In both cases, as in the majority of our variants, from the centre of the snake-like motif the vegetable motif arises, which make us pass to the last one and, proceeding from the concept mentioned above, try to outline the basic characteristics of its development.

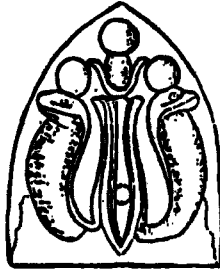


Figure 14

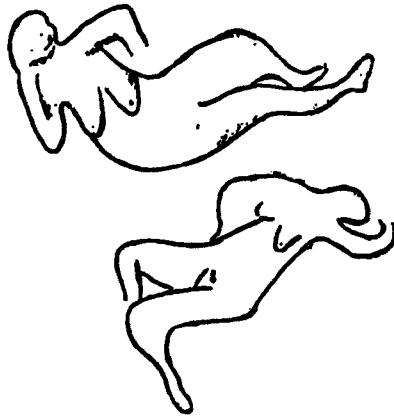


Figure 15

The idea of a vertical connecting the worlds is fruit of the same associative mind and, undoubtedly, must have a very concrete prototype and a history of formation. Scholars usually write about images of Axis Mundi as about the identical ones (tree, mountain, stem, string, etc. – see Eliade, Semeka, Toporov and others). However, in our opinion, it is possible to distinguish different chronological 'layers' in this scope (not to mention that images of a mountain and a tree are more often mutually supplementing). The Creation of the World is imagined in the majority of mythologies as having two stages, and probably one may consider as the most archaic the idea of prehistoric man's stay in the bosom of the earth and his subsequent going out to the land surface (this mythologema is known in Africa, America, Asia, and in cultures of the Ancient World – see V.V. Ivanov *Anthropogonic Myths* in (MNM, I, 88). This going out often happens via the vine and its roots, reed, fibres, etc. (Cook, 1974, 17). Fairy-tales and legends about the protagonist's going out from underground (including the way via strings, threads, girl's plaits) link to this idea. Similar motifs are well known also in Russian folk-lore: in Russian fairy-tales the most characteristic image of the 'fragile vertical' is a pea stalk with which an old man climbs upon the sky; in other variants it is replaced by an oak growing from



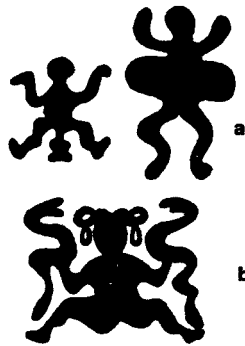


Figure 16

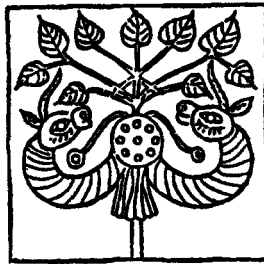


Figure 17

an acorn. The idea of a thin vegetable vertical connecting at first two worlds and passing through the womb of the earth, arose, most probably, by analogy to the umbilical cord – there is a remote echo of this archaic idea in Russian charms/spells: ‘...There is the ocean–sea, there is the Latyr’ stone situated on the sea umbilical cord...’ (Poznanskiy, 1995, 202). Probably the image of the sea’s umbilical cord is the most organic for the ideas of the world as a cosmic animal; in this aspect it is important to note, in particular, the image of lotus and its stalk which one meets both in Egyptian, Indian, and Tibetan mythologies – the primary earth risen from the waters of khaos was imagined in this image to which the idea of regeneration was also connected (Semeka, 1971, 114; Pomerantseva, 1985, 74–77).

In connection with this we must pay attention to the fact that the centre of the Russian embroidered *Rozhenitsas* is sometimes marked with an eight-petal flower (see Figures 3, 6). This semantic context helps us to understand images such as the Tibetan tree of Life, *Yambu*, which grows on the bottom of a lake, and growing on the ocean bottom the Sumer tree of Life, and the sacral fir with nine roots, situated, according to Siberian Tartar beliefs, in hell (Eliade, 1987, 156), and *izba* (wooden house) of the sea *tzar* – ‘large, as the whole tree’ seen by *Sadko* (a protagonist of a Russian legend – Transl.) on the sea bottom (Afanas’ev, II, 212). We can see an example of this mythologema’s development in Mayan culture where one can see that first the World Tree was a ‘cave’ – ‘with its roots the tree feeded on virgin

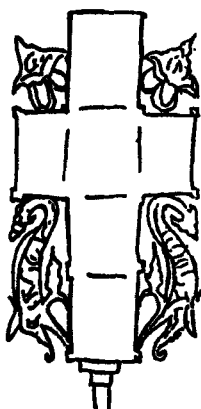


Figure 18

waters which went out from the ancient motherland of the ancestors; souls could rise via the trunk and the branches to the world of the living'; later the Maya came to consider the World Tree as growing on the land 'and the levels of its top crosses the sky spaces' (Ershova, 1997, 75).

In this concept we can distinguish one more mythologema: at the finish of the mythical, 'prehistoric' stage and birth of the World, imagined by analogy to the birth of a human being, the primary 'umbilical cord' or Axis Mundi must be torn. With this one can evidently explain the motif found in some mythologies: the motif of a fall, the destruction or pulling out of the Tree of Life by a deity at the beginning of Creation and the following regeneration of the Tree or growing of a new one (Eliade, 1987, 168, 220; MS, 354; L'vova *et al.*, 1988, 120). This motif of the tearing of the umbilical cord, or of the fall of the primary Tree of Life, one can also find in the old Russian apocryphal story of the late XIII to early XIV centuries, the 'Reading of St. Varukh' which in general is distinguished by many archaic features. It says that at the time of the Flood, water flooded Paradise and carried out to the land surface a vine twig (Old Russian Literature, 1995, 194). (By the way, within this concept myths about the Flood may have a solely mythological origin.) We meet the same motif in a riddle about the road: 'When the world (svet) was born, then the oak fell, and now lies', and the motif of reconstitution of the cosmic axis – in another riddle: 'A beam (brus) lies along (or: as long as) all the Rus', if it rise – it will reach the sky' (Sadovnikov, 1876, N 1326, 1322).

The idea of the establishment of a vertical Axis Mundi in the three- (or more) level world, is the next stage of development of cosmological ideas; in this stage the deity is imagined already as the standing one (cf. above the motif of rising in the riddle about the earth), his head – as the sky; his eyes – as heavenly bodies, etc. Clear examples of such images of the Universe as a standing woman's figure have been preserved in Indian religions – Jaina and Shakta (MS, 564; Norman Brown, 1977, 321). On this stage of the evolution of ancient cosmology, the tree is likened mainly to the spinal column or the whole body of the deity; in ancient mytho-

ritual culture scholars distinguish 'basic isomorphous row, connecting and likening a tree, a woman ... and the World', i.e. the mastered part of space, all existence in which is imagined as born and protected by it (Al'bedil', 1991, 150). In our case – Russian embroidery – this process is revealed both in 'sprouting' of the Rozhenitsa figures with branches and shoots, and in the appearance of the central figure of a standing goddess, which preserved the marking of a womb on the clothes. Also it is revealed in the forming of a complicated motif of the World Tree from the Rozhenitsa image, where, while the basic symbols of the 'centre' are maintained, the top already represents the sky sphere, and the side complexes are probably connected with the idea of the circulation of souls and all vital forces in nature (Figures 1, 2) (Denisova, 1905). A comparative study of these figure-systems shows us the existence of the complex cosmological concept of our far ancestors; undoubtedly these systems are far from revealing all their secrets.

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