

Damjan J. Ovsec
Slavic Mythology and Belief
(Slovanska mitologija in verovanje, Domus, Ljubljana, 1991)

In human activity it is possible to distinguish the conscious functioning of I, our primary interaction with others regulated by our psychical states; more superficial role-playing of me, which is directed by cultural conventions; and a part of our activity of which we are not even aware, which is automatic and where the motives - perfectly evident to our ancestors - have long ago sunk into oblivion while the activity nevertheless persists. Fernand Braudel, for example, holds that the majority of our activity is unreflective in this fashion.

For example, it is still a costume in this country for mourners at a funeral to throw earth on the coffin (p. 241). The original meaning of this act has been lost. But our ancestors knew very well what they were doing - they threw the earth because they were afraid of the deceased. The same reason led them, according to Valvasor, to put a stone above the head of the deceased and by his legs - so that he would not return home and wander about.

Our recollection of the natural world which surrounds us is also changing. Did the highest Slovenian mountain, Triglav, obtain its name from of its shape, or is its name connected with the worship of the god Triglav (p. 175)? There are some indications that people were afraid of the mountain and that it was thus connected with demonic beliefs and superstition. From similarities in language it is possible to deduce close connections between Slovenes and the people of the Baltic, and it is known that the latter worshipped the god Triglav (p. 146). It is very likely that the first Slovenes believed in a god with three heads who commanded three worlds (the sky, the earth and the underworld), and named the mountain after him. Climbing the mountain is still a pilgrimage to many Slovenes and the mountain in general has an important symbolic status for many of them, even though the ancient beliefs have long since died out.

These ancient beliefs can sometimes return, in a perverted form, as our present motive of activity. Young Polish Nazis proclaim as one of their goals - besides the extermination of Jews and capitalists, in which they were inspired by ideologies of the near past - the liquidation of the Catholic Church "as we have our own, Slavic god. Svetovid is not merciful, but he is just" (Delo, 21.3.1992: 16).

The book by Damjan J. Ovsec deals with a segment of our "collective unconscious" in a way that is at once professional and accessible to a wider audience. Ancient beliefs, mingled with later Christian beliefs, influence our present modes of living (p. 19). Modern man is obviously not so different from ancient and traditional man as we are sometimes led to believe. The author defines myths as bridges between reason and emotion, head and heart (p. 9). They continually appear and disappear. According to the author, they also exist today. He sees modern consumerism as a myth, a belief in continuous human material advancement (p. 11). We have reduced the myth of the "Golden Age" into a myth of an Affluent society.

Slavic mythology is constituted from the totality of the mythological beliefs of the Slavs in the period of new unity (p. 23). When they migrated from the Proto-Slavic territory into Eastern and Central Europe, the unitary mythology disintegrated into separate local variations. The author points out that there are few examples in the history of religion which are as unexplored as the beliefs of the ancient Slavs. There are two reasons for this (p. 28). Slavs were without their own states for too long to be able to constitute their own Olympus. Slavic paganism became a topic of writing only with Christianization. As the Proto-Slavs were not united politically or economically, they were unable to constitute unitary beliefs. It is likely that every tribe practised forms of worship that were in many ways unique. The second reason for the present research problems lies in the fact that the ancient Slavs were illiterate and that as a consequence, no pagan writing could be preserved. As a result, the main source on Slavic mythology are Christian ecclesiasts, most of them of Germanic origin. Researchers today also base their work on current folklore, theological writing on 'pagan' rituals, mediæval chronicles and language analysis.

Nevertheless, the basic questions concerning Slavic mythology remain unanswered. It is for example still not clear whether they worshipped a supreme deity (p. 92). It also remains unclear whether they borrowed their religious orientations from Iranians in the Indoeuropean core, in the Arctic cultural circle or whether we are dealing with a combination of the two.

The author deals separately with the deities of the Eastern, Baltic-Polabic and other Slavic nations.

The supreme god of the Eastern Slavs was Perun. Most of the written sources concern him, which is why he became a sort of a trade mark of Slavic mythology in general (p. 110). But this does not exclude numerous uncertainties concerning his nature - was he for example borrowed from Germanic mythology or was he authentically Slavic? Whatever, Perun was the god of thunder and lightning and his cult was connected with agricultural chores. Volos (Veles) was the god of cattle and herds (p. 119), while the function of other gods (Dažbog, Hors, Simargl, Svarog etc.) is less certain. Among the Baltic-Polabic Slavs, the supreme god was Svantevid (Svetovid) (p. 135). It seems that he was initially the protector of vegetation and trade, but with time he also assumed certain attributes of a god of war. God Svarožič (Redigast) seems to have been the protector of cattle (p. 143), whereas the function of others (for example Triglav, Črnobog, Rujevit, Gerovita, Porevita and Živa etc.) is obscure.

The author also deals with other aspects of Slavic mythology and belief systems: places of worship, idols, celebrations, prophecies, sacrifices (which, as in other pagan belief systems, were of great importance), priests, sorcerers, magicians, witches, magical healing (which the Christian church had little success in combating), the cult of ancestors and the dead (Slavs believed that the soul went to *nav* or paradise), the cult of fire and water, of natural spirits (forest demons, werewolves, fairies, water-nymphs, vampires, dragons, snakes etc.).

The sources from which the author is forced to draw his conclusions are, as was already mentioned, very scarce. This makes his alternative approach all the more understandable

(p. 230-231): "In certain ethnological fields, above all folk costumes and beliefs and superstitions, researchers should progress from collecting, describing and comparing, which is the legacy of 19th-century positivism, to complex explanations of certain phenomena. When dealing with Slavic beliefs, neither old or new authors tell us where the fairies, goblins, water-sprites, giants and vampires come from. Nor do they describe, still less explain, why certain people today still see goblins and dwarfs. (...) How can Slovenes, Malayans and Indians (having never heard of each another) hallucinate about dwarfs, but having all heard of dwarfs and described them in a similar fashion."

The author suggests an answer in establishing that phenomena and concepts are made up of protosymbols, which call not only for applied ethnology and history of religion, but also for psychology, philosophy, theology and esotericism (p. 122).

On the basis of such interdisciplinary parallels, the author connects Iranian, Indian and Proto-Slavic - Indoeuropean and pre-Christian - thought (p. 101-104). Let us take an example of two words: 'dih' (breath) and 'duh' (spiritus, Holy spirit, demon and smell). What is also interesting is the connection of three verbs in Slovene - dihati (to breath), duhati (to smell) and dišati (to smell pleasantly). Ovsec makes the parallel between Indian yogis who connect the spirit with the body through breathing.

In the introductory part of the book, the author cites sources for Slavic mythology and relevant literature on Slavic religion and mythology, while at the end of the book he offers us an extensive bibliography (some 200 items) as well as an alphabetical list of all known Slavic gods and demons.

Slavic Mythology and Beliefs by Damjan J. Ovsec is one of the basic texts of current Slovenian social scholarship. Personally I regret the lack of a concluding chapter in which the author would interpret one of the presuppositions expressed in the introduction (for example the thesis regarding the psychical genesis of mythic material, or the thesis that the mythic material persist in us). If on the one hand sociologists are too prone to generalisation, then ethnologists are apparently too cautious. As Herman Bausinger has said (*Jezik v etnologiji* (Language in Ethnology), *Traditiones*, Zbornik inštituta za slovensko narodopisje, Ljubljana, 1987, p. 35): "Language in ethnology (...) is simple, concretist, theoretically modest. In the concert of sciences, ethnology has for a long time had the ascribed role of eliciting heterogeneous sounds from various instruments; the strong, dominant chords come from elsewhere." But as was already pointed out, this is less true of the work of Damjan J. Ovsec than of other Slovenian ethnologists.

Gregor Tomc