

The Mythical and Legendary Symbolism in Traditional Artistic Carving



Visual Art

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to record some of the traditional artistic works carved in wood containing mythical symbols as well as the artistic values that this popular art can reveal. In these motives, popular carving artists have expressed feelings, desires and dreams, myths and beliefs, virtues and habits, etc. In one word, they have revealed many aspects of their spiritual worlds. Taken in general, all of these motives with their symbolism are quite diverse, ranging from the most ancient to the most recent of motives, customs, pagan rituals, Christian or Islamic symbols, social stratum virtues and peculiarities, etc. Traditional carving contains many artistic symbols, unique forms and shapes, original ornaments, and decoration styles that give distinguished characteristics and artistic value to this craft. In this paper we will present the main symbols and the symbolism in general used by popular artists of carving, which we believe they serve not only to the artists and scholars of this craft but to a range of readers and other interested subjects. Of the main symbols that can catch one's eye are eagles, snakes, the head of a horse, the head of a goat, stars, etc. Decoration in these pieces reflects the Albanian ethno-psychology, including freedom, national attachment, combative spirit for self-defense, trust, faith, etc. In the wood carving art, they transmit messages, viewpoints (mythical, ethnical, and historical) in order to recall as such as well as to utilize it as a decorative art. Their analysis is made along two main lines: the symbol and symbolism and signs and the second line is reflection through their decoration. Methodology: The monitoring and observance of several ethnographic museums, traditional markets, literature review, and interviews with popular artists in this field, etc.

Introduction

Symbols are signs that transmit ideas and opinions about someone or something. At the same time, they can represent popular art, i.e. they contain artistic values too. Often, the repetition and insistence on a sign, such as the eagle, or the historic figure of Scanderbeg, or his helmet are all signs of identity. Mythical symbols comprise a real treasure of knowledge for our predecessors. They keep the entire knowledge of traditions and especially popular psychology. The myth is the approach of a psychological and/or spiritual reality and usually gives a message that connects the past with the present. Original evidences and pieces of writing by different scholars belong to the 19th and 20th centuries, and even to the Albanian Medieval age, even though they have sometimes been fragmented with myths, rituals and customs in our ethnic lands and the Diaspora. Some of the Albanian myths include eagles, snakes, the head of a horse, the head of a goat, stars, fairies, and even religious symbols and signs. In this respect, the mountain fairy is an Albanian mythological creature with very original autochthonous features. There are usually two good features in this figure such as charity, when helping the heroes in their battles, and the ability of stoning destructive people. A wild goat's horns represent both the fairies' protection and weakness. The Albanian mythology has an ancient origin and just a portion of it has come to our days through the word of mouth and thanks to popular tradition. That portion that has been managed to be maintained till now is realized through characters with different possibilities, messages and features, almost always supernatural in nature and placed in the function of the events of the time and place.

This long continuation has made it possible to preserve lots of ancient beliefs, customs and rituals of that time and to see the intercultural communication of people then. Popular wood carving artists have always presented this treasure of the Albanian ancient mythology with much love and respect in their pieces of art today.

Development

Mythical symbols: *“A special pulsing current,”* Mark Tirta called the myths that flow across all veins of the ethno-cultural complex...¹ Myth researchers have concluded that *“...the essence of the myth does not lie on the side of the narrative tale, but on the ‘structural message’, whereas the narrative side of the myth serves only for the symbolic presentation of its message or the determined logic as such.”*²

A folk’s mythology is one of the most complicated processes in its own history. It is not by chance that popular artists represent it through works of art – some in paintings, others in stories, and wood carving artists – in figures made by their own skillful hands. In musical tools, such as the lute, one can see the carvings of characters of Gjergj Elez Alia, Rozafa, or the Castle of Rozafa.

The carving decoration – a reflection of the Albanian ethno-psychology: In the Albanian mythology, some animals and birds, or reptiles and insects have been given attributes of cult by the people. This has been transmitted to our days, conveyed through word of mouth by one generation to another. We will mention some of those creatures which have been valued through the carving art by different artists. They are: the wild goat, the roe deer, the eagle, the bee, etc. In the popular culture in general and in ethno-culture in particular, there are no seals placed once and for all. E.g. today, myths appear quite vague; some have been replaced by others, some others have transited from one social group to another, etc. This means that they are mobile and they always change and transform. *“In their maintenance or modification there are many material and spiritual factors that influence these states, and as such they represent an expression of laborious attempts for survival, development, change and progress, in order to get stronger through social and spiritual bonds.”*³

The wood carving artist tries to represent his symbols as good as possible, based on his opinion and impression about what he is going to work on.

The figure of snake on apartments and other objects of practical use: The apartment is a living document that speaks about one’s socio-economic conditions. That shelter has always been adapted and improved not only to meet one’s living needs, but also express their aesthetical

¹M.Tirta ,Mitologjia nder shqiptare, T.2004, p.13

² Levi-Strosi, p12. (cited according to M.Tirtës, Mitologjia nder shqiptare... p.108)

³M.Tirta , Mitologjia nder shqiptare , T.2004, p12

and artistic spirit. Their decoration has been made in full conscience, including national figures inherited by previous generations, as well as others that have emerged in time. This mythical figure can usually be found on door vault surfaces, on both sides of chimneys, on window shutters and ceilings, on musical instruments, on working tools, etc. The carving of the figure of the snake can be seen in different areas of the country such as in Permet, Laberia, Cameria, Malesi e Madhe, Dukagjin, Kosovo, Malesi e Tiranës, etc.

The horse, its cult and symbolism: Horses are not only beautiful creatures but wise, noble and lofty too. The horse knows his lord with whom he creates bonds of friendship. He never forgets his lord. They are gentle in nature, quite often playful and able to learn a lot. People used to say that *“The horse even knows his lord’s destiny”*. Having used it as a domestic animal, old people say that *falling from a horse is not that painful, and it suddenly stops so that you won’t get hurt any further*.

There are opinions that the name ‘horse’ (kalë – in Albanian) (hipus) originates from Albanian. The Austrian scholar and researcher, Karl Treimer, says: *“The name itself hipus, which is kalë – in Albanian, has to do with the verb ‘hip’, meaning to ride.”*⁴

Based on this great importance and relevance of the horse in people’s lives, the wood carving artists have placed its figure on various different musical instruments, house doors, work tools, etc.

The cult of goat: The cult of wild goats has been preserved mainly in the mountainous region of Northern Albania, including the Mount of Tomorr, Highlands of Laberia, etc. The wild goat appears to have had the attributes of forest deities. This has been shown in several variants of the *“Kreshniks’ Cycle”* where it is said that fairies base their strength on the Three Wild Goats. They told Muji’s bride: *“We only have three wild goats whose horns are made of gold, and all our strength comes from them.”*⁵

The goat’s head can be found on the lute and on the shepherd’s stick handle. *“The goat’s horns are connected with the Sacred Illyrian-Pelazg Goat, that Zeus is still honored in Northern Albania, if not consciously, then out of ignorance...”*⁶

The symbol of the eagle carved on wood and stone: The two-headed eagle motif became the representative of the Albanian popular art. *“Some objects in the guests’ room (because as it is already known, hospitality has been a distinguishing feature among Albanians), not only are aesthetically fine-tuned, but they are also decorated with certain symbolic elements that express*

⁴ A.Stiptevic, "Iliret ,historia ,jeta ,kultura dhe simbolet e kultit ", T.2002 , p. 322. Cituar sipas M.Tirta Etnologjia e Pergjithshme, T.2001, p.256

⁵Q.Haxhihasani , "Epika Legjendare ", v.1 T.1966, f.347-349

⁶J.Brahaj , " Shtjefen K. Gjecove , Shtyllat e Kombit "

certain viewpoints and ideologies. Such are different ceiling decorations, chairs, tables, musical instruments, spoons, tobacco boxes, coffee trays, children's cradles, brides' arks, etc."⁷

In the environments of Albanian apartments (flats and houses) "*it occupies about 60% of doors and fireplace chimneys.*"⁸

Mountain fairy: Through wood carving, popular craftsmen reconstruct mythical and legendary figures in various ways. We certainly see the carved wooden objects on the artist's hands, even though we are not so sure if he really knows that specific figure or not. When we asked Jonuz Delja (a lute producer) about the figure on a specific lute and what it actually meant, he said: "It is the mountain fairy; the one that curses and also helps people."⁹ The decorations on these carvings represent a reflection of Albanian ethno-psychology that preserves the tradition of its predecessors through symbolism and by carrying forward the customs and rites up until today's time.

The sun, the moon as cosmogonic/mythical symbols: The sun and the moon are a symbol and motif in the Albanian popular art. They can be found on different objects such as chairs, tables, musical instruments, spoons, tobacco boxes, coffee trays, children's cradles, brides' arks, etc. as symbols of life and productivity. It seems that the sun is the symbol of cleanliness, long life and protection from the accidents. This magical feature of the sun can also be found on chairs, forks, doors, etc. Apart from the sun, the cult of the moon has also existed. Quite often, the elderly were heard of swearing, "*By the sun and by the moon*". Its cult originates in ancient times. It has been used a lot among our people. It can also be found carved in various different things and objects, as mentioned above.

Conclusion

The craftsmanship of artistic wood carving with mythical symbols dates back a long time ago. In general, mythical symbolism has to do with the psychology and tradition of our nation that comes from ancient times, where the 'genesis' is explained, followed by the continuation of divine rulers, people's ages, the origin of people's problems, sacrificial practices, as well as help and support in difficult times.

Symbolism as artistic tradition appears in popular art in a unique way, with the object itself that it decorates. They can be animals, reptiles, birds, stars, as well as parts of human body, such as fingers or hands.

Artistic wood carving with mythical figures contains cultic as well as artistic values. That is why popular wood carving artists have always taken in consideration that the decorations in

⁷M.Tirta, 'Simbolika ne art jane zbatuar popullor', "Kultura popullore", nr.2 -1990, f.93

⁸Ibid., p.109

⁹Bisede me rapsode ne festivalin e Lahutareve, 2008, Lezhe

their pieces of art should present meaningful symbols, such as eagles, Scanderbeg's helmet, snakes, goats, horses, etc.

The most complete mythical and historic figures can be found on lutes, as the oldest popular musical instrument. These symbols and the symbolism in general represent "a language" of communication with antiquity, history as well as actuality.

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