

Dyekiss, Virág

Personal history in epic folklore

Human beings have a deep desire to belong somewhere. Loneliness, being disinherited are serious punishments in every cultures. Lonely people always try to find someone to connect with, or a new community. But having fellows not necessarily means having community. This feeling can be experienced in several ways in our family, home, village, among our friends. Nowadays we can identify ourselves in many ways, social media offers us to lead an opened life, but in traditional life verbal communication, common symbols and stories, narratives were the main forms of building a connection.

We are all surrounded by stories, and we live in them. Texts, stories help us to make the surrounding world a friendlier place, in time and space as well. Stories give us a choice to understand the world, they offer frames for life, pass experiences, present us strong roots, so we can grow. The stories in our life form a special source material, our personal history, which can be seen as our identifying myths. Myths used to be the sacred basement of a community, so in this meaning our stories are our personal myths. These stories are about the surrounding places, about the previous generations, or the main events of our lives, which slowly take an unvariable form, and they enroot deeply in our soul. This is a very personal part, the micro-level of ourself, so a collection of personal myth can be regarded as a really tenuous knowledge.

Among the Nganasans, who live in Northern Siberia, the wisdom that is important for the survival sits in myths and stories. During the nomadic migration they have to face with dangerous rivers, important places, and they keep repeating the same stories every year, so it became part of the common knowledge of the community. Just like this, stories about shamans are not only about the glory and skill of the shaman, but it suggest a model how to solve a sudden crisis, or how to deal and heal a trauma.

Several personal stories can form a great communal text-basis, which can identify the whole community, or even a nation, as a national epos, that is often originated from folklore. There is a great possibility and responsibility in our personal and communal stories as well.

FULL TEXT

Dyekiss, Virág

Repeating is the mother of cosiness

When we are at home, we can hardly feel how familiar is everything around us, but it becomes quite clear, if we move away. Suddenly nothing is the same, and we need time until we feel us at home again. Every society, even every person has an unique strategy to tane the dreadful new places or situations, and this strategy ensue from the worldview and the traditional culture.

The surrounding nature becomes "landscape" as we call acordance of the culture antropology. A social area constructed by the personal activity, the surrounding where he moves and works. We get closer to the environment, have encounters, and after a while we have new stories, memories from the place, which can be told again and again. The repetition of the activities and stories makes us getting closer and closer to the place. Don't need to know about it. It comes natirally, as talking about the surrounding world is part of the most elementary communication. It is getting to be fixed increasingly throught the generations. There are stories beeing told again and again in connection with a particular place, so we pass on the knowledge of the landscape to our children, to our friends. Simple stories of the family creates a small microcosmos. These stories sare liveing for 2-3 generations. Everybody has a collection to these personal myths and becomes the part of his own identity. There are also stories which known in wider circle of the society. In the folklore we know places, especially exiting geomorphological elements such as a beautiful tree or a characteristic rock, mentioned in several legends. For example in Hungarian folklore the unsuspecting victim can meet witches in the crossroads in the dark, who may cause a big noise, singing, dancing etc., so it is really a frightening situation, which can be told again and again. After a while the stories set together past and present, they help to interpret the surrounding world, and create a network in time and space, and we can be part of it. These stories are part of the identity, gives roots, believe, norms. There are legends that help to solve problems, for example the legend of the Dog-lake in Nganasan folklore (North Siberia), where the reindeer caravan got lost in the snowstorm, and it seems that they would get drawned in the lake. The leader of the group suddenly cuts a dog in two halves as a sacrifice. The bloody halves froze on the icy side of the lake, and it holds the sleighs, and the people are saved. From that time, people always sacrifice a dog by crossing the lake. The story is not only about the origin of a rite, but it offers a solution for a dangerous situation.

The stories of the great acts of shamans or other healing men demonstrate the power of these person, and preserve the belief for the next generation. They contain the answer for a problem that has to be solved: illness, hunger, bad weather, mental problems and so on. The perpetrators of the big act became heroes of the community.

The legends of these big heroes can make a cycle that became part of an epos. As Lauri Harvilahti tells: The term epos has normally been used of literary epics created by known or unknown authors, in some cases even of oral-derived epic collations or conglomerates. In fact, the borders between these categories are flexible. Sometimes the term has been used to refer to a cycle of epic poems (for example, incorporated around one main hero) belonging to some particular nation or ethnic group; this takes place when the poems have an epic-like significance for the community in contact with them. Such significance can reach from mythic and cosmogonic meanings to the contemporary use of folk epics, for instance to propagate national identity and integrity. It is possible to identify a whole network of epic genres serving the purpose of epos: oral and literary creations, short epic poems, and long conglomerates. The works also vary in genre: sacral texts and secular forms, poetic forms but also prose-texts and mixed forms in which verse and prose alternate. In addition to these, as a rule, excerpts from different genres play an important role (chapters in verse hagiography or panegyric, fragments of lyric elegy or laments, for example). In oral epos narrated, recited, and sung modes are possible—with or without the accompaniment of

an instrument. There are evidently folklore-based written versions, but also abundant examples of literary creations in which the poet has used only a limited number of the basic elements of folk poetry. Whatever the case, the desire to reinforce the people's self-esteem and to arouse respect for their own heritage and culture is among the main tasks of an epos (even within an oral epic poetry culture): the hero is unconquered, invincible, since he is ours—and even if he was once defeated, he will be back one day, as a liberator of his people, driven by revenge. When events warrant—in times of political awakening, conflicting ideological interests, or even a state of war—an epos may be employed as a kind of myth-like weapon for ideological purposes, but that is only one of the manifestations of the use of epics in the folklore process. The political role of the epics in strengthening cultural and national identity varies over a large spectrum according to the prevailing sociocultural situation. The use of epics in cultural life involves many positive values but also elements demanding careful deliberation. But we may well ask who will conduct the deliberations, since we are dealing with a phenomenon capable of surviving historical periods, empires, and ideologies. (Epos and National Identity, = Oral Tradition 11/1 1996. 46.)

Several personal stories can form a great text-basis, which can identify the whole community, or even a nation, as a national epos, which often originated from folklore. There is a great possibility and responsibility in our personal and communal stories as well.

There are several more ways to get closer to the unknown, to the dangerous. All of our senses work on this process. Odours, sounds, well-known roads – if we repeat the elements, they become reference points in a short time. But perception is a culture based process. Every moment offers uncountable information from the surrounding world, but we can comprehend only several of them. The methods of the selection are developed in the early years, motivated by the feedback of the adults, by the expectation of the society. Maybe we know the short story about two friends, an American and an Indian. They walk on a crowded street in New York, when the Indian suddenly stops. He asks his friend: Do you hear it? – No, I don't. What are you thinking about? What do you hear? – Somewhere a cricket is singing. – I don't hear anything. And it is impossible to hear the chirping of a cricket on such a noisy street. Though, the Indian friend tries to find the insect, and it is really there, hidden under a stone. The American wonders, how sensitive is the hearing of the Indian man. After a few steps the Indian drops a coin in secret, and it tinkles silently on the floor. The American stops immediately, and tries to find the coin. The Indian smiles: – Do you see? It wasn't louder than the cricket.

So we choose the relevant pieces of information of the perception, and the tiny experiences form quickly conclusions. Our brains prefer familiarity, simplicity and closure, and our mindsets affirm situations that comply, and give us the good feeling of everything is right. It means that we create our personal cognitive or mental map. We all have mental maps to be carried around in our heads to make sense of the geographical world. These mental or cognitive maps help us make some sort of personal sense of the world, where we've been and the places we've never seen before. Mental maps are the way to combine our objective knowledge of places in addition to our subjective perceptions, or opinions, of locations around the world. Mental maps are tricky, as each individual person has a different set of perceptions they have in their heads about the same exact world we all live in. What one person associates with a city or country could be precisely opposite of the person standing right next to them.

Living, moving and working – so human activities give another way to create a useful mental map. Tim Ingold, famous social anthropologist suggests: "just as the landscape is an array of related features, so – by analogy – the taskscape is an array of related activities." So the taskscape is a socially created area, which is formed by activities. For example in a traditional Hungarian village a woman's taskscape contains the house, where she does the everyday works, the church, where she goes to worship, the fields, where the fieldwork is done, the river where she does the washing, etc.

We can imagine the surrounding world as concentric circles. In the center of the circle there are us, our most inward place, maybe our room or our bed. In the wider circle there are places like our house, street, the village or city where we live, maybe some outlying places too. In the traditional landscape model people precisely knew the borders between the „own” and the „stranger”. These borders were protected by supernatural shelters, like crosses or holy places. These places were often sacrifice places, and the community visited them on main feasts. Borders were extremely important, they separated the safety and the danger. They were often marked by stones or other marking objects, for make them quite clear, and they were told to be the places of mythical creatures.

The border selects in and out. In the middle of our life we find the place where we sleep, pray or think. In traditional communities fireplace had a central role in the house. Fire served as a communication place with the deities, it is regarded as a spirit, people afraid of its anger, they ask its advice, feed it, protect it. The first piece of the meal was given to the fire. The traditional place of the fire is against the entrance, and the place behind the fire is the most holy part of the tent. In the traditional Hungarian furnishing – just like in other Fenno-Ugric nation etc. - the holy corner of the house was also against the door entrance, often between two windows. Icons were placed in the corner, and it was decorated by embroidered towels, which had symbolic meaning. Some times there were small shelves where keepsakes had been placed. Objects, that the person kept associated with it's owner. They are mementos of beautiful or painful moments, each guard a secret story.

Just like the collection of personal legends, personal objects, especially the mementos and pictures, keep our personal history. Our inner story, that is the most important part of our lives. Everything can be part of this history, even very simple objects or situations, which are somehow significant for the person. It can be good to know our own history, keep the main stories alive, from our past and present. The world has been built of personal histories, family histories, national histories. And the most interesting and beautiful parts are always the most simple. Just think about the chirping of the crickets.

Thank you for paying attention.