

THE CULT OF THE EAGLE METAMORPHOSED- A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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Abstract: *Although the symbols of a country do not necessarily have a vital importance for the welfare of its existence and its priorities do not side with symbolism, it is hard not to consider them as a study element as long as they constitute the DNA of the culture, heritage and history of a certain civilization. A special history is the century-long journey of the symbol of the eagle, mostly due to a deep relationship of various peoples with its cult as a mythical bird. As the numerous archaeological records show, the symbol of the eagle, often referred to as the backbone of the personality of the peoples, has been part of the earliest world cultures. Not in vain, do we encounter it either single or double-headed in Sumerians, Hittites, Persians, Arabs, Romans, Byzantines and Seljuks without forgetting Pelasgians appearing with such representative symbols of the eagle cult. In this long journey of its, the symbol of the eagle has frequently been metamorphosed by converting from one configuration into another. But as a symbol whose natural environment is the flag, what does it represent in the mythology of the respective peoples? Why was it considered a holy bird? Can it be considered as a converging element within the context of cultural structuralism, since its myth or symbol is present everywhere? Through the language of symbols, this paper aims at giving a semiotic insight of the underlying significance that the many metamorphosed versions of this cult acquire on the basis of difference within the cultural context.*

Keywords: *emblem; national flag; intercultural context; symbol; semiotics*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the current climate of intercultural communication and cultural relativism appears to be very influential and not easy to argue about, when a lot of emphasis is placed on “diversity” and “identity”. The present paper comes in the form of a descriptive study based on some qualitative research incited by a curious personal inquiry on the emblematic symbol of the eagle which in the position of a modest traveler the author found metamorphosed from one configuration to another within its own natural habitat, the national flags of some of the countries of the Balkan region, namely Albania, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia.

Although the symbols of a country do not necessarily have a vital importance for the well-being of its existence and its priorities do not side with symbolism, it is difficult to not consider them as a study element as long as they form the DNA of the culture, heritage and history of a civilization. Every region or country has its own traces, histories, legends, mysteries and truths. Everything comes from antiquity as a continuous chain until present and is preserved everywhere as a rare value.

Understanding our past determines actively our ability to understand the present. Symbols are a language that can help us understand our past and then write our own histories personally or culturally and thereby define ourselves. A special history is the century-long journey of the symbol of the eagle, mostly due to a deep relationship of various peoples with its cult as a mythical bird.

2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT AND CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

In this long journey of its, the symbol of the eagle has frequently been metamorphosed by converting from one configuration into another. But as a symbol whose natural environment is the flag, what does it represent in the mythology of the respective peoples? Why was it considered a holy bird? Can it be considered as a converging element among the concerned countries within the context of cultural structuralism, since its myth or symbol is present everywhere? A tangible fact though often avoided or not studied thoroughly by the official historiographies comes from the language of symbols. Through the language of symbols, this paper aims at giving a semiotic insight of the

underlying significance that the many metamorphosed versions of this cult acquire on the basis of difference within the cultural context. The methodological approach implied here is of an obvious semiotic character.

The targets under scrutiny, the national emblems, are taken apart so that their constituent elements- the various signs that make up the structure become visible, after which the author will analyze how they acquire meaning because of their difference from other elements in the chain. First of all, the relationship between sign and meaning is arbitrary. Secondly, flags have no inherent meaning, but that meaning is enabled by difference. Thirdly, the sign "flag" only acquires meaning on the basis of difference within a certain context and it functions here within the relationship between the poles of structuralism's basic binary oppositions: those of freedom/ submission, identity/ anonymity, similarity/ diversity.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A lot is said about the eagle, from the characterization of it as an omen bird, to the qualifying designation of it as the backbone of the personality of the peoples. The fact is that the eagle symbol as the numerous archaeological records show has been part of the earliest world culture. It can be found in the remainings of the Hittite civilization dating from a period that ranges from the twentieth to the thirteen century BC.

Not in vain, do we encounter it either single or double-headed in Sumerians, Hittites, Persians, Arabs, Romans, Byzantines and Seljuks without forgetting Pelasgians appearing with such representative symbols of the eagle cult.

The division of the Roman Empire in 395 AD in the West Empire with Rome as its seat and the East Empire seated in Constantinople imposed the transformation of the single-headed eagle into a double-headed one. The Hittites drew upon a double-headed eagle so that they would never be surprised. The mysterious two-headed eagle, one of the most intriguing and powerful ancient symbols, has been present in the archaeological imagery for many centuries. It is believed to be one of the world's oldest symbols used by a number of different ancient cultures. Byzantium was created by cultures, artifacts, conventions and cultural events with stratification of Balkan populations among which the Illyrians were one of the main peoples. Byzantium made use of this emblem and acknowledged it as an official heraldic coat of arms at the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth century AD.

The form and colors of the Byzantine flag were designated during the rule of Justinian I, the Illyrian emperor. In this period, the eagle seems to have been adopted as an imperial symbol by the West Empire, during the rule of Frederick II, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Several Eastern European nations adopted it from the Byzantines and continue to use it as their national symbol to this day, the most prominent being Russia. However the design was in use in the East for centuries before it was officially adopted by the Byzantines and was independently adopted as the symbol of several other historical states.

Documented with archeological artifacts that are subject to art, the double-headed eagle in Albanian lands dates back to the 6th century BC.

The eagle symbol finds its natural passage from the time of antiquity to that of the Middle Ages. The double-headed eagle has been used as an emblem by countries, nations, and royal houses in Europe since the early medieval period. The official data speak of an adoption of the eagle symbol from the Byzantine despots to the Serbs and in the 15th century to the Russians. Later this eagle was also used by the Austro-Hungarian Empire as did the German and Austrian confederations.

The most historic moment that concerns Albanian people is exactly when the League of Lezha chaired by George Kastrioti Skanderbeg in 1444 chose this flag this time with the ancient symbol as a unifying element. Skanderbeg wanted to make a union of the southern and northern tribes. From that moment on the Albanians would succeed the red and black flag of the Kastrioti family to the following generations without ever changing it. For the sake of this heritage it is nowadays one of the oldest national flags in Europe and consequently even in the world. Worth pointing out is the fact that the national flags were designed really late: the national flags of France, Italy and Germany date to the 19th century.

Meanwhile, in Albania the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century coincide with the organization of some of the most important leagues in the Albanian lands which consequently brought about a variety of flag production. It is almost impossible to list all Albanian banners that were identified in this period. They represented areas and provinces, patriotic organizations, societies and large lobbying that had linked their life to the strengthening of the national identity. To be noticed during this period are the changes in the number of the eagle's feathers, the horizontal or vertical placement of the

emblematic bird on the flag's field, changes in the placement of the head, beak, eyes or other elements. Thus, we do not have a definite consolidation of the form of the flag, but it does consolidate over the years. There will continue to be changes in the flag's stylization as all the regimes will try to add their identifying elements. However, over the centuries, these changes did not affect the essence of the flag with respect to the preservation of its identity.

4. THE EMBLEMATIC SEMANTICS

The eagle with one body, one heart and two heads is a very powerful ancient symbol that is believed to be one of the oldest in the world.

The double-headed eagle is a common symbol in heraldry with esoteric meanings connected to it. So what does the ancient symbol as we know it signify? What is its implication and what does its use intend to show? First of all, it is most commonly associated with the Holy Roman Empire, and with the Byzantine Empire.

Bicephalic beings imply a semantics of powerful attribution, of the power-controlling omnipotence, a symbol that shows duality which is displayed mostly in the shape of an eagle or in the configuration of twin brothers at times. In Byzantine heraldry, the heads represent the dual sovereignty of the Emperor both in secular and religious matters and/or dominance of the Byzantine Emperors over both East and West.

In fact, from the visual point of view, the emblematic eagle is the image of double eagles, of two joined eagles. Whereas from the symbolic point of view it is the image of one eagle with two faces i.e. two opposite angles like in the binary oppositions of white and black, day and night, good and evil, i.e. two opposites that hold the weight of the universe.

Moreover, the two-headed eagle is a strengthening of the symbol and a duplication of its powers, a symbol for leadership and vision. It could not be mere coincidence that such different cultures across thousands of years have adopted the same symbol and accommodated it on the fields of their flags and banners.

The flag abstracts a nation's past memories in an unwritten language understandable by the eye and the heart of a sensitive person. Which memories does our flag reveal fluttering? They are neither blows against the neighboring countries, nor memories of greed and plundering. They are memories of unwearingly self-defensive efforts and inexorable long-lasting bravery that have left

traces in the recordings of all civilized peoples. (Konica, 2001:105).

With these extraordinary words would Faik Konica define his idea of the national flag, its symbolism and the very truths that it brings from the centuries.

The symbol of the eagle is not unique to any single culture. Rather it has been more of a universal symbol that is held in high esteem and worshiped in many different cultures around the world. The chemistry between the various peoples with the cult of the mythical bird has been rooted and sealed, through generations, in heraldry, archeology, ethnography, biblical scriptures, legends, literature and songs.

In early Christianity the eagle was seen as a symbol of hope and strength, representing salvation. Whenever the eagle appears in the book of Revelation, it does appear in a context that suggests it is on the side of God.

... but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah, 40:31).

As the chief over all winged creatures flying higher than any other bird, the eagle is believed to convey the powers and messages of the spirit serving as man's connection to the divine. Articulated in one of ABBA's song lyrics, the feeling of soaring high up in the sky, dizzy heights and stately majesty like would sound like the following:

They come flying from far away
now I'm under their spell
I love hearing the stories that they tell
They've seen places beyond my land
and they've found new horizons
they speak strangely but I understand
And I dream of an eagle
And I dream I can spread my wings.
(ABBA, *The Eagle*: 1977)

The emblematic bird is symbolic of the importance of honesty and truthful principles. The fierce beauty and proud independence of this great bird aptly symbolizes the strength and freedom historically aspired by the people and convey the philosophy of living life at its fullest, freely and independently.

The following poem by one of Albania's most notable modern poets, Xhevahir Spahiu seems to perfectly arrange and capture the sense of freedom and euphoria of this deep relationship.

The Eagle

Out of the azure heavens
the eagle swooped down one day
Onto the flag.

The heart

said to the hand: carve!
And the hand carved it in stone.

The eagle

from its refuge in the cliffs
Penetrated the expanses of song.

Penetrated

the hero's breast
And replaced the heart.

(Spahiu, 1993:135)

But let us go back to the starting point of the issue in question.



Fig.1. The national flags of Albania, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia respectively.

Let us take a look at the overall common features of the four national flags listed in the above graphics. Each of the referred emblems has its own history and beliefs associated with the national eagle symbol.

In the two-color Albanian flag the red is considered a divine color, symbol of the blood and consequently war as it associates with the idea of warfare. In its universality the black color becomes symbol of the historical trinity referring to the past, death and sustainability.

The three-color Romanian flag represents the blue sky under which its people live free, the yellow represents their fertile -and-grain-rich plains and the red represents the blood spilled to preserve the former two. The banner/shield on the eagle holds the emblem for the five main Romanian lands/territories. Whereas the eagle itself holds in its claws a sword to represent the army's might, the scepter for the ruler's legitimacy

and a cross in its beak, a token to represent the orthodox-Christian pride of its people.

The flag of Montenegro features the country's coat of arms against a red background. The coat of arms is a double-headed golden eagle wearing a golden crown. In its right claw, it holds a golden scepter while on the left it holds a blue orb, a sign of Episcopal authority. In combination with the scepter it symbolizes the unity or the close connection of Church and state. On the eagle's breast, there is a blue shield that has a lion passant in the centre on a green field in front of a blue sky. Derived from the same motif present in the arms of Venice, which had considerable influence in the history of the area, it represents the Biblical theme of the Resurrection, or Christ Victorious.

The national flag of Serbia is a horizontal tricolor of red, blue, and white with the coat of arms consisting of two main heraldic symbols placed left of center. The principal field featuring a white double-headed eagle on a red shield with its tongues, beaks, legs and claws in gold, between two golden fleur-de-lis, stands for the Serbian state. The red shield with a cross in the midst of four firesteels, stands for the Serbian nation. The four cyrillic S-es (which are actually betas) is that it means Samo Sloga Srbina Spašava (Only Unity Saves the Serb)

Undisputedly, the most common characteristic among the four is the presence of a bicephalic Aquila being a symbol of imperial power of Byzantine and ultimately Roman origin.

Nevertheless, with reference to the ornamented stylization of the other three emblems, the Albanian one has got a distinguished form, that of a very dynamic eagle, somehow aggressive but quite unique and which does not seem to match with either the symbol of the Montenegrin neighbors, the Romanians' or the Serbians'.

From the most ancient symbols we can understand what a people thought of themselves. What were the characteristics that they wanted to reveal by selecting that symbol. Differently from the flags of Montenegro, Romania and Serbia, which seem to suggest the historical succession of the status quos of the respective countries, the Albanian flag with the simplicity of its design being the defamiliarizing element in the chain of the referred emblems seems to be placing emphasis on the significance of its two colors, thus blood, past, death and sustainability. Certainly, within this national spirit the most important families of an Illyrian origin could not choose but the most ancient symbol, the one which had mostly been proudly succeeded by their ancient predecessors

and make of it a token of immediate selfidentification for centuries. For instance, at the beginning of his work titled "Une race oubliée; les Pélasges et leurs descendants" ("A forsaken race: Pelasgians and their descendants") published in Paris in 1894, Edouard Schneider (former chief engineer in Shkodra) would write about Albanians in terms of their relation to the eagle, a bird whose designated territory was called "Shkypnie" (the Albanian word for "Albania" in the Gheg dialect):

In Albanian the eagle is called "shkybe". The noun suffix "-tar" of the word "shqyptar" defines the action of an eagle watchman or eagle hunter. "Shkyptar" would either be an eagle guard or an eagle hunter. Even Albanians themselves are called "eagle's sons". Furthermore, "Shkypnie" designates the eagle's territory and the sons of this territory are the "Shkyptarët" (Schneider, 1894:22)

This denomination originates from an old legend about a young boy who while hunting in the mountains saw a big eagle flying above his head with a snake in its mouth which the eagle took to its nest and left it there. Out of curiosity the boy approached the nest in order to see the eagle's shelter by near. Being still alive the snake was about to pinch and poison the baby eagle that was inside the nest when the young boy intervened and killed the snake by drawing an arrow at it. After having saved its life the young boy claimed the baby eagle as his own and headed home. In order to take back its baby, the mother eagle promised to reward the young boy with the sharpness of its eyes and the strength of its arms and the people would call him in its name. The deal was settled and as the years passed, the young boy grew up being recognized by its land people as strong and heroic. During these years, the little eagle grew up too and accompanied the young boy in hunting for wild animals in wild forests and in each battle with enemies.

The locals were amazed by the bravery of the man and used to call him "The son of the eagles" and the lands where they lived were called The Land of Eagles (Shqipëri) – Eagle (Shqipe).

5. REDEFINING THE CULT OF THE ALBANIAN EAGLE

As a matter of fact, the symbol of the eagle, as the many archaeological data reveal, was a crucial component part of the earliest cultures. Even though it did not constitute a unifying canonical element, its myth or symbol was present everywhere. There are many elements that show its presence in various archeological and ethnographic

objects but also in the construction domain of the time. Fortunately, to this day, they continue to find expression through these domains.

In shape the stylized eagle of the flag is very different from that carried through ethnography, but it remains a fact that the symbol of this bird has traveled in ancient times in the form of worship. The configurations that in the following centuries were translated as an eagle shape was preceded by other such forms that were identified as eagle shaped symbols. These are symbols that metamorphose by transforming from one version to another. For instance, when we talk about ethnography and its antiquity, it is enough to remember that the "xhubleta", (an undulating, bell-shaped folk skirt, worn by Albanian women), in which the symbol of the eagle is presented in all its forms, has a 4000 year old heritage making it the oldest garment still preserved in the Albanian tradition.



Fig.2. The Albanian "xhubleta"

So in the canon of the representations of the eagle symbol, "xhubleta" comes across as an expression of the longstanding worship and admiration for this powerful bird. Recently, the metamorphosis of the emblematic double-headed eagle has generated in a widely used hand signal meant to visually illustrate the double-headed eagle and denote Albania in International Sign Language as well.



Fig.3. Albanian double-headed eagle hand gesture.

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