

Tripartition of the Pantheon: A Latvian Perspective

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The task of modern mythology research has been to explain mythological phenomena based on inherent or perceived structural or other basic features, then arrange the mythological ideas and concepts according to those principles, thus recreating the mythological system in a modern way. Using an approach that is limited to a single principle has in some cases led to oversimplifications (like Max Mueller perceiving the sun cult as the basis of all mythology). The resulting “explanatory” mythological systems are usually either applicable to a single original mythology (or a group of similar ones) or they are selective in the features and characteristics they account for. Mythologies seem to follow their own inherent principles of logic that are incompatible with any modern and mathematical logic system. Or, as Lewis Spence (Spence 1921: 22) quotes Mueller: “Early man not only did not think as we think, but did not think as we suppose he ought to have thought.”

At the same time it cannot be denied that any body of deities or pantheon must have some organizing principles. There have been numerous discussions regarding the original form of mythology and the number of gods it might have involved, none of which could provide the final answer. From the existing accounts of different mythologies we learn that they include a number of deities that are related and hierarchically organized. Observing the relationships of deities researchers can derive some principles that are applicable to mythology as such though not universally. These principles can prove helpful in understanding mythology, so they are worth searching for. The question is—where and how?

There have been several attempts at structuring mythological notions. George Dumézil based his structural framework on the three basic social positions—the spiritual

leaders (priests), worldly leaders (warriors) and cultivators.¹ This also ties the system to a particular period in history when no other alternative existed, but it is undeniable that these three different social groups have fundamentally different interests and knowledge, resulting in different organisation of the body of deities they turn to in order to ensure success in their activities. While the cultivators and warriors may be regarded as opposites—one aimed at creation and promotion of life while the others excel at destruction and bringing about death—the third group, priests may be considered as some kind of synthesis of the two opposites. They cannot join the principally hostile attitudes (though every peasant knows that life is cyclical, and this involves death), but through the fact that the course of events in this world is supervised by the divine forces, both life and death is within their power, so it comes about in a time decided by the gods. Thus the divine order must be observed, and the deities addressed in case the current events take on an unfavorable course. While warriors and cultivators deal more with the practical life in the mundane world, the priests would mainly deal with the divine aspects of life. In order to do so the rest of the community must acknowledge their importance and provide for their worldly needs.

The structure of a nation's pantheon therefore could be expected to reflect this tripartition with the actual balance between the three showing greater or smaller deviation from equality. This should be a result from the actual course of the nation's history. Assuming that the priests were the ones to normalize this corpus of narratives called myths and to arrange (at least to some extent) the relationships between the different deities, one must allow for their influence upon the formation of mythology and pantheon.

Thus, in order to establish what the course of a nation's past may have been like, what has worried or haunted the people most, what enemies they had to fear and how they did cope with them, a researcher could study the relationships of the gods these people worshipped, deriving conclusions from these relationships as well as the main deities themselves. A

¹This approach also introduces an interesting aspect considering the divine world (at least to some extent) a reflection of this one, though the myths themselves would announce that gods (or some particular deity) created the world.

problem hindering such an approach is the fact that virtually no tradition has ever documented its cult and religious practices along with the deities. The available documentations are provided either by works of literary or scholarly significance or by some alien observers whose level of understanding and knowledge of the particular tradition is frequently questioned. The narratives that may have originally belonged to the realm of myths have been transformed into those of a more everyday-life level, like legends and folk-tales. The greatest difference between different cultures seems to be the amount of available information.

Latvians are among the nations that have practically no reliable documented data regarding their ancient cult and deities, with the few earliest descriptions still being as late as the thirteenth century. Until mid-nineteenth century all of the works describing different aspects of the life of Latvians were composed by people belonging to other nationalities and social classes (which was to some extent the same for a longer period of time). The very first Latvian authors had no significant collection of folklore and traditions at hand to derive their own conclusions, so they either used the writings of the previous authors or just more or less freely introduced poetical constructions into the Latvian mythology to be.

But Latvian oral folklore tradition also could not be of much help. There is not even a single narrative that could be classified as a myth, nor any traces of an epic. Therefore, the very issue of existence of Latvian mythology has been much debated, both in the nineteenth century when it was an issue of national self-esteem and very basic to the nationhood, and much later as strictly speaking there is no Latvian mythology in the classical sense of the term. The Latvian tradition exactly matches the description of *lower folklore*, with either remains of dying mythology preserved or mythology in some stage of its development. This was also acknowledged by the first Latvians who attempted to fill in this gap, saying that it will take at least a life-time of work to create a fully developed mythology out of the fragments available in folklore. Fortunately this was never done, as it would have resulted in just greater confusion—even the few poetical works created during the period and involving mythological characters display total disagreement with the data of oral tradition.

But it is not only the existence of Latvian mythology that has been doubted. Similar arguments regarding different

traditions have been expressed and countered by different scholars over a significant period of time. Let here be quoted just two of those, first, Jacob Grimm, the famous scholar of the nineteenth century. In the preface to his “Teutonic Mythology” he insists that for a nation language is equally necessary as belief in gods, and then continues “No one will argue from the absence or poverty of memorials, that our forefathers at any given time did not practice their tongue” opposing this to assertions that there might not have been any German mythology as there is no evidence to prove it. Then more than a century later, when the main scholarly objections are directed at the available sources Nikolai Mikhailov from Pisa, Italy, comments in regard to the Slavic and Baltic mythologies: “Though the main fact is that the pagan beliefs of ancient Balts and Slavs did exist, irrespective of whether it has been described in any documents”. Having noted the not-so-solid ground upon which the research of Latvian mythology must be based, let us turn to the available data.

The first ever author to devote any serious attention to the cult and deities of the Latvians was the Superintendent of Courland, Paul Einhorn. Between 1627 and 1649 he published three works mainly addressed to the problem of the proper christianization of the Latvians; in order to fight the adversary, he describes it. The deities described by Einhorn as Latvian also include a long list of obvious non-Latvian ones that will not be dealt with here.

Still leaving those out there remains a significant handful. The greatest number among those are several Mothers—female patronesses of some particular place, trade or activity. The tradition or model of personification used in the creation of these has been quite widely used, and was known also among the Livonians—the Baltic Finns who once made up a significant part of Latvia’s population. Of more than 40 *Mothers* documented in different folklore texts Einhorn lists seven: *Laukamāte*, *Mežamāte*, *Lopumāte*, *Jūrasmāte*, *Dārzamāte*, *Ceļa māte* and *Vējamāte* (correspondingly Mothers of Fields, Forest, Cattle, Sea, Garden, Road and Wind). Beyond them Einhorn describes the deity he explains as the Latvian counterpart of *Fortuna*, namely, *Laima*, who supervises childbirth and child’s future—and her assistant, *Dēkla*, who’s main task is to rock the cradle and to look after the newly-born. There are no other deities directly described, although some more can be derived from Einhorn’s description. He writes about the festivals of the

Latvians especially emphasizing feeding the souls of the dead in the month of October, the four-week period called *Dieva dienas* that practically coincides with *Wälla-Mānes* that being the Latvian term for October. *Dievs*, as indicated by folklore material, is the Latvian supreme deity, etymologically linked to the Greek *Zeus* and Latin *Deus*. (The same word is now used to denote the Christian God as well.) (The same word also appears in another compound given by Einhorn—*Mežadiēvs* that can be translated as ‘god of forest’ and is said to denote a wolf.) So while the first compound referring to the four weeks in October can be clearly translated as ‘God’s days’, the second remains a puzzle. “Mēness” stands for ‘month’ in Latvian. But what shall be understood by “Wälla”? As there was no sufficiently elaborate Latvian orthography at the time this work was written, it is impossible to discern between two principally different terms: *velis* meaning ‘a soul of a dead’ and *velns/vells*—‘devil’. An opinion has been expressed regarding these two words as related, with *Velns* being a deity dealing with the dead. Still, Einhorn’s data will neither back nor refute this assertion.

As it is obvious from what has been said earlier, the greatest number of the listed deities belong to the lower level dealing with the immediate needs of a peasant’s everyday life. *Laima* and *Dēkla* belong to a higher sphere of general divine power directing a person’s life, though not able to influence all the phenomena of the world. *Dievs* and *Velns* or *velis* are mentioned just as parts of compounds and not described in any detail—either because the author did not find any information about them, or there was no such to be found. Or maybe his aim was to conceal something? It appears this question is bound to remain unanswered. Still it is obvious that any warrior gods are completely missing from this picture, while higher deities are reflected with some uncertainty about them.

More than a century later a book containing a chapter entitled “Latvian Mythology” was published. For the first time in history such a notion appeared in print. This book is *Lettische Grammatik* verfasst von Gotthard Friedrich Stender. Zweyte Auflage... - Mitau, 1783. The previously mentioned chapter again gives many Prussian deities as Latvian, adding etymologies for the most incredible to prove their *Latvianness* still there are some aspects worthy of note. Stender is one of the greatest activists of the Enlightenment in Latvia, still remembered because of his poetry, songs, fairy-tales, and his encyclopaedia meant for the Latvians. His Latvian mythology,

though considered the most important source in the first decades of Latvian national movement and romantic attitude to all matters of Latvian ancient past, lost its attractiveness later, when the study of Latvian folklore provided material that contradicted much of it. It also became clearly obvious that Stender has used all of the material available to him in his creation of Latvian mythology, including deities only attested as Old-Prussian. Still several aspects displayed in his list are of great importance.

Stender's list includes all of the deities described by Einhorn, adding several that simply appeared to be missing from Einhorn's work. First, Stender mentions *Dievs* as a Latvian (highest) deity, adding a hint that *Dievs* has his own family and farm with animals. Stender also states that this deity is called *Wels* when he meets the dead. While also here his spelling is no clearer than that of Einhorn, Stender indicates that at that time this word has come to mean 'devil'—"Teufel" ("Wella mehness" = 'Teufels Monat' in Stender's translation). Second, Stender also includes *Pērkonis* in his list as the deity of thunder and fire. Third, he gives a short retelling of a possible myth of the Sun and the Moon being a married couple and creating the first stars; the Moon broke up their marriage and deprived the Morning Star of his beloved; in return the Sun punished it by cutting it with a sword, thus creating the different lunar phases.

As was previously explained, folklore is now considered the primary source that can be relied on in order to gather information on Latvian mythology. Though syncretism is also quite traceable in folklore, there are aspects researchers can rely upon. Interestingly enough much of the data provided by these earliest authors can be verified. *Dievs* is the highest Latvian deity, he has his own farm, there is much said about his sons, though not a hint as to who his wife might be. *Dievs* may both ride golden horses in heaven and walk the earthly paths in appearance of grey-haired and grey-bearded man. He is said to check the human ways and judge them by their work. *Dievs* acts together with *Laima*, who is the goddess of destiny, though even she herself cannot change her initial decision regarding a person. *Laima* helps in everyday work, at least giving humans the necessary strength or helping with the skills. *Pērkonis* also has a family, wife and sons. Though being warlike he grants the earth fertility and rain. Much can be found regarding the heavenly wedding—mainly between *Saules meita* ('Sun's Daughter') and *Dieva dēls* ('God's Son'). Interestingly enough, of

the myth related by Stender only the latter half, the one that could be humorously rendered “The Heavenly Quarrel”, can be verified—a great number of texts speaks of Moon being an untrustworthy husband and courting some other maiden. For this disgraceful deed he is punished by the Sun herself or by *Pērkons*. In other texts *Mēness* is also mentioned as a deity caring for warriors.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this information seem rather obvious. There is no clear tripartition in the Latvian mythological system, though the number “three” and its multiples are very widespread in Latvian tradition. Most of the known deities are connected with everyday life of peasants, cultivators, even the higher deities being occupied with matters of fertility.

The highest of the gods, *Dievs*, participates in heavenly activities, travels the *debesu kalns* (‘heavenly hill’) in his horse-drawn cart, attends the heavenly wedding, but also visits the fields of men, travels the roads of the earth and comes to visit human dwellings in order to see how they are fulfilling their day-to-day duties. Humans must greet him (whether he is visible or invisible) in order for their day’s work to be successful. Though this may seem to put more emphasis on *Dievs*’s farm and peasant character, his home is nevertheless in heaven, himself being the most powerful of all Latvian deities.

Then there is *Laima*, a prominent female goddess. Though she has the power over human life, she cannot change her decision later; this sometimes leads to her shedding tears for those whom she herself has condemned to a hard or short life. Isn’t she thus connected with contracts? The other three female deities—*Māra*, *Kārta*, *Dēkla*—are known in a much smaller area and the latter two are mentioned in very few texts. It is difficult to say whether these are memories of ancient deities or later introductions. *Māra* appears to have taken over *Laima*’s functions in one part of Latvia, while the other two may be just personifications of some of *Laima*’s functions.

The sword-bearing *Pērkons* (‘Thunder’) is warlike and dreadful, he appears to punish gods and humans alike. The *heavenly wedding* texts very frequently mention *Pērkons* cutting up an oak, spilling its blood on the wedding guests (which might equally well indicate a ritual deed, so could *Pērkons* be a priest?). The whole corpus of texts appears to be the basis for some ritual, though there is no information that permits one to establish surely the meaning of the divine activities. At the same

time, though dreaded for his thunderbolts and loud voice, *Pērkons* is also the bringer of fertile rain. And in some cases the functions and place of *Pērkons* and *Dievs* seem to be at least very similar, if not intertwined. Can they be brothers? And what would that mean?

Saule ('the Sun', female) is the counterpart of *Dievs* in heaven, while being frequently addressed by humans asking for good weather and fertility. It is mostly her daughter or daughters that are courted by *Dieva dēli*, most of the mythological texts mentioning *Saule* speaking of her in the function of a bride's mother. The "heavenly quarrel" with *Saule* punishing *Mēness* for betrayal may indicate some more ancient motif being preserved, with the two being a married couple and giving birth to all the stars. There are sources indicating that their gender could be inverted compared to the current understanding, and *Saule* be male. Though *saule* is among the most frequently mentioned words in Latvian folklore, in most cases it is either a personification or just the word straightforwardly denoting the great shining object in the sky. But it may be that the mythical connotations have plainly been lost for the modern people?

Latvian mythology is not a clear-cut, well-established system. There are quite a few texts standing in contradiction with others. But as said earlier, of matters mythology reflects, logic is not among the most important. Does it mean that the theory of tripartition cannot apply to all Indo-European mythologies? This is the question of whether the gods came to organize people's life according to that they lead, or people imagined heaven (the Otherworld) organized the same way as their own life was lead. With Latvians for several centuries having no power of control over their own lives and their (probable) priests being actively fought against, it is possible that most of the emphasis came to rest on one sphere alone—that of cultivation. Mircea Eliade² wrote that the higher god may seem to be forgotten until something extraordinary happened, being beyond the reach of those lower deities people turned to in their day-to-day activities. One may assume that this has been the case also with Latvians, gradually leaving

² „[...] If such intervention by a priest or a sorcerer yields no result, the parties involved recall the existence of the Higher Being, that might be nearly forgotten at other times, and they pray to it offering sacrifices.” (Author's translation from Latvian). In: *Mīts par mūžīgo atgriešanos* (The myth of the eternal return), Riga, 1995, p. 108

their higher deities in oblivion. At the same time it can also be taken as a proof of Dumézil's theory—a nation that has had no substantial social tripartition shows no clear sign of tripartition in its mythology. But it is also equally probable that the data available still waits for being reviewed, selected and interpreted in order to reveal the remnants of the ancient, clearly tripartite system. Will the time show?

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