

The Myth of the Bridge of Separator: a Trace of Shamanistic Practices in Zoroastrianism?

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The paper challenges the generally accepted attitude concerning a mystic trend within Zoroastrianism and aims to demonstrate that late Zoroastrian thought was an integral part of post-Hellenistic mysticism (Gnosticism, Cabala, Manichaeism etc.). Due to all kinds of visionary experience, including those rooted in the most ancient layers of mythology, some early myths were preserved in a relatively authentic form, notwithstanding changes in their systemic value. Subsequently, they have lost any connection with their visionary background, a process which ultimately put the lid on their transformation into folklore motifs.

As a case-study, the paper examines the myth of the “Bridge of Separator” (Avestan *činuuatō pərətu-*, Middle Persian *Činvad-puhl*). This archaic Iranian myth about a dangerous passage between the world of the living and the otherworld was re-vitalized by the late Zoroastrian visionary tradition and spread all over the Iranian cultural realm. The paper focuses on some peculiar shamanistic aspects of the myth, which lend themselves to comparison with some of the most archaic themes in other Indo-European traditions within the framework of the “initiation myths”, according to Eliade’s terminology. However, an examination of late-Zoroastrian versions of the myth brings the author to the conclusion that, in contrast with some modern scholars who treat it as an evidence of shamanistic practices in the Sasanian period, one should regard the reminiscences of shamanism in late Zoroastrianism as manifestations of mysticism characteristic of the last stage of its religious development.

The problem of the traces of shamanistic practices and beliefs in pre-Islamic Iran has its own history which could well become a subject for an interesting survey, but for the moment can be but briefly outlined. The first to suggest the shamanistic character of both pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion and the teaching of Zarathuštra himself was the eminent Swedish scholar H. S. Nyberg (see Nyberg 1938). This theory was subjected to sharp criticism by W. B. Henning in the third series of the Ratanbai Katrak Lectures, subsequently edited under the title “Zoroaster: politician or witch-doctor?” (see

Henning 1951). Henning's prestige and influence on Iranian studies in the second half of the last century was decisive, so that raising the issue of a possible shamanistic impact on Zoroastrianism became impossible for a long time. It was two Russian historians, Bongard-Levin and Grantovskij, and the French scholar Ph. Gignoux who revived interest in the question: in their opinion, traces of shamanism are found not only in the most archaic strata of Zoroastrian religious literature, but also in some Middle Persian sources composed as late as just before the Arab conquest of Persia or even after it (see Bongard-Levin and Grantovskij 2001; Gignoux 1979; 1981; 1984).

The main points of the arguments of these scholars will be outlined below and an attempt will be made to determine whether they accord well with established patterns of religious development or should call for another explanation.

The Zoroastrian tendency to mix the heritage of different stages of religious development, a phenomenon which enabled the abovementioned scholars to suggest the shamanistic character of certain Zoroastrian practices and beliefs of the Sasanian period, can be seen by noting some obviously pre-Zoroastrian notions contained in late Zoroastrian texts. In the course of my work on a Pahlavi prayer-book *Stāyīšn ī sīh rōzāg* (see Dhabhar 1927: 223-259),¹ I encountered a number of passages (IV, 3-5; VII, 5-7; XVI, 10; XVIII, 5; XXI, 4; XXIV, 8; XXV, 5; XXIX, 2) based on a common idea which may be stated as "integrated happiness", consisting of two aspects: the material, obtainable on earth while one is still alive, and the spiritual, manifested in the deliverance of one's soul from hell and its gathering into the assembly of the "blessed" (*ahlawān*) in Paradise.² As the content of all of these passages is very similar, it suffices to cite only one of them (XXIV, 8) for further discussion:

¹The transcription and translation of the cited passages of the *Stāyīšn ī sīh rōzāg* are mine, D. B.

²At the time the Pahlavi books were composed this idea had evolved into the doctrine stressing such a close link between body and soul that the salvation of one's soul depended on one's material prosperity (see Zaehner 1961: 276-278).

<p>...xwāhēm az weh dēn pānagīh ī-m tan ud ruwān kū-m gētīgīhā tan padēxw purr-rāmišn mēnōgīhā ruwān ahlaw ud abardar-gāh andar rōšn garōdmān bawād pad abāyist kām ī dādār ohrmazd.</p>	<p>...I implore from the good Religion protection for my body and soul so that as regards the material world, my body will be flourishing and full of pleasure, and as regards the spiritual world, my soul will become blessed and obtain a superior place in the bright Garōdmān according to the desire and will of Ohrmazd.</p>
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The restricted sense of MP *ahlaw* (usually meaning just “righteous”), referring here exclusively to the state obtained after one’s death, is striking. Bailey argued that the reference in MP *ahlaw* to the “blessed dead in Heaven” is characteristic of some Pahlavi texts (Bailey 1971: 87, n. 4). Gershevitch points out that this notion “...is most nearly rendered in Xerxes’ definition of Old Persian *artāvan*-. ‘The man who behaves according to the law which Ahuramazdāh established, and worships Ahuramazdāh in proper style in accord with *Arta*, becomes happy while living, and *artāvan*- when dead’, *Daiva Inscr.* 51ff., cf. also 48” (Gershevitch 1955: 483).³ As a key to this doctrine Gershevitch refers to *Y. XVI, 7* (trans. Gershevitch 1955: 483):

³It is interesting to compare these lines of the “Daiva Inscription” (XPh 46-56, text and translation according to Kent 1950: 151-152) with the above-cited passage of the *Stāyīšn ī sīh rōzag*:

<p>...tuva: kā: hya: apara: yadimaniyāiy: šiyāta: ahaniy :jīva: utā: marta: artāvā: ahaniy: avanā: dātā: parīdiy: tyā: Auramazd ā: niyaštāya: Auramazdām: yadaišā: a rtācā: brazmaniya: martiya: hya: avan a: dātā: parīdiy: tyā: Auramazdā: n ištāya: utā: Auramazdām: yadataiy: a rtācā: brazmaniya: hauv: utā: jīva: šiyāta: bavatiy: utā: marta: artāvā : bavatiy</p>	<p>Thou who (shalt be) hereafter, if thou shalt think, “Happy may I be when living and when dead may I be blessed”, have respect for that law which Ahuramazda has established; worship Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly). The man who has respect for that law which Ahuramazda has established and worships Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly), he both becomes happy while living, and becomes blessed when dead</p>
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<i>xʷanuuaitiš ašahe vərəzō</i>	We worship the radiant
<i>yazamaide</i>	quarters of Aša
<i>yāhu irstanəm</i>	in which dwell the souls of the
<i>uruuqno šaiienti</i>	dead,
<i>yā ašāunəm frauuašayō,</i>	the Fravašis of the <i>ašavans</i> ;
<i>vahištəm ahūm ašaonəm</i>	the best existence (= Paradise)
<i>yazamaide</i>	of the <i>ašavans</i> we worship
<i>raočanəm višpō-</i>	(which is) light and affording
<i>xʷāhrəm.</i>	all comforts.

Kuiper gave a somewhat different significance to this notion. On the basis of a comparison with the relevant Vedic data, he came to the conclusion that "...the use of (*a*)*rtāvan-* in the Old Persian Xerxes inscription (*utā mrta rtāvā ahaniy* XPh 48), where it denoted a quality of the Dead, tallies perfectly with Ved. *rtāvan-*, an epithet of Gods, the deceased Fathers and the initiated seers (*kavi-*). The essential point is that *rtā-* is connected with the realm of Death: 'it is regularly *hidden* where they unharness the horses of the Sun' (RS. V. 62. 1). Only he knows the Cosmic Order (as I still prefer to translate *rtā-*), who is initiated in the mystery of Death. Now the fact that *all* members of Zarathushtra's *Civitas Dei* are 'initiates' (*ašāuuān-*) shows more clearly than any other thing how deep a gulf there is between the Gathic religion and the Achaemenian one, which still retains notions of the Indo-Iranian religion." (Kuiper 1959: 215; cf. Gershevitch 1964: 18, n.30 and Gnoli 1979).⁴

This extended citation serves to reinforce the importance of the above passage of the *Stāyīšn ī sīh rōzag* for the history of the interaction between different trends within Zoroastrianism, in particular, for the superposition of Avestan notions onto properly Persian beliefs which, as Kuiper points out, descend from the Indo-Iranian period. It seems plausible that here we have a native religious idea which was grafted at some point onto the stem of Zoroastrian thought and thus survived into the whole Middle Persian period.⁵

⁴As regards the semantic field of Indo-Ir. **rtāvan-*, cf. also Khwār. *ʾrdw* "demon" (see Henning 1958: 117, n. 6). The above-cited passage of the Yasna (Y. XVI, 7), which Gershevitch judged to be a source of the concept of the "blessed dead in Heaven", should rather be interpreted as a relatively late reminiscence of Indo-Iranian beliefs, which survived Zarathuštra's reform.

⁵Zaehner cites moral commentaries of this type, which are drawn from the *Dēnkard*, i. e. as late as the 9th c. AD (Zaehner 1961: 276-277).

As we have seen, notwithstanding this crucial point in the history of Iranian tradition, these Indo-Iranian notions survived the Achaemenian, Seleucid and Parthian periods, so that their traces can be found in Zoroastrian texts dating from the Sasanian period. Strange as it may seem, an “earthly” concept such as the abovementioned “integrated happiness” theme proves closely connected with what I would call “late-Zoroastrian mysticism”.

The primary meaning of OP *(a)rtāvan-* (‘initiate’) traced (as shown by Kuiper) from the Indo-Iranian period, but almost totally dissolved in the later, widened sense of the Avestan term *ašāuuuan-*, is revived in another Pahlavi composition, namely *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, in which the visionary Wirāz is first called *ardā* (< OP *(a)rtāvan-*) by the deities Srōš and Ādur who receive him on the first night of his temporary death, i. e. after the initiation that removes the barrier between the world of the living and the Otherworld. The significance of this fact was first noted by Belardi and Sundermann (Belardi 1979: 112; Sundermann 1971) and afterwards emphasized by Gignoux who also reinforces the argument by his observation that in the Kirdēr inscriptions (3rd c. A. D.) the term *ardā(y)* (as well as its derivative of abstract meaning *ardāyih*) refer consistently to the Otherworld (Gignoux 1984: 9; cf. de Menasce 1974).

This and other observations brought Gignoux to the conclusion that both Kirdēr’s and Ardā Wirāz’s visits to the Otherworld should be interpreted as “shamanic flights”. He argues that although Kirdēr’s descent to the Otherworld is unique and exceptional, the fact that it was performed by a living being intruding into the realm of the dead suffices to establish its “shamanic” character (Gignoux 1981: 258). The same conclusion was reached by Bongard-Levin and Grantovskij in their popular book *“From Scythia to India”* which was made much of by Gignoux and translated by him into French. As the two Russian scholars claim, “...in the Sasanian period Zoroastrian priests during their religious rituals still performed the ‘flights’ to the same destinations as ancient Indian *munis* and *ṛṣis*, i. e. to the sacred mountains (Indian Meru, Iranian Hara) situated far in the northland. Thus, an analysis of the Sasanian inscriptions and early Zoroastrian books provides us with new data for a reconstruction of the most ancient religious and mythological beliefs of the Indo-Iranians...” And further: “Cosmological and mythological

concepts of Indo-Iranian tribes are widely reflected in their religious beliefs and cult. The ideas of the ‘northern cycle’ were closely connected with those archaic forms of the Indo-Iranian religions which may be referred to as ‘shamanic’” (Bongard-Levin and Grantovskij 2001: 153).

Ostensibly, this view can be underpinned with some additional data: thus, both Kirdēr and Ardā Wirāz reach the Otherworld by means of crossing a bridge called elsewhere in Zoroastrian literature “the Bridge (or Passage) of Separator” (Avestan *čīnuuatō pərətū-*, Middle Persian *Čīnvad-puhl*)⁶ and described as becoming narrow as a razor for a sinner but widening to the length of nine spears, each of which is three arrows long, for an *ašāwuan-* / *ahlaw*. This theme is exhaustively developed in two Pahlavi books, namely *Dādestān ī dēnīg* (XX, 5) and the abovementioned *Stāyišn ī sih rōzag* (XXX, 1-4), see Anklesaria 1911: 44-45; Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 76-77; Dhabhar 1927: 259.⁷

Dādestān ī dēnīg XX, 5:

*pad wuzurg xwarrah ī
dādār ud framān ī ōy rāst-
āmār ud puhlbān
ahlawān frāxw-puhlīh
bawēd and čand nō nēzag
bālāy ud drahnāy kēš jud
jud dagrandīh se nāy
druwandān tang-puhlīh
bawēd tā-z hangōšīdag ī ān
ī awestarag ī tēx.*

Through the great fortune of the Creator and by the order of him (who is) just in reckoning and a keeper of the bridge, the width of the bridge for the blessed becomes as much as the height and length of nine spears, each of which is three perches long, and the narrowness of the bridge for the wicked becomes like the edge of a razor.

⁶I translate MP *čīnvad-puhl* as “the bridge of Činwad” instead of the usual “Činwad-bridge” because, as Kellens points out, the Avestan (i. e. the original) designations of the bridge *čīnuuatō pərətū-* or *čīnuuat.pərətū-*, mean “the bridge of *čīnuuant-*” rather than “the bridge *čīnuuant-*” (Kellens 1988: 330).

⁷The transcription and translation, as well as the tentative isolation of the interpolated glosses (marked with square brackets) of the *Stāyišn ī sih rōzag* are mine, *D. B.*

Stāyīšn ī sīh rōzag XXX, 1-4:

<p>ān ī asar rōšnīh ud ān rōšn garōdmān hamēšag- sūd gāh xwadād [kē hamēšag ud hamēšag hamāg-xwārih pad-eš ud az-eš ō gētīgān rasišnīg ān- ez ī rāst rāh činwad-puhl kē ō ahlawān be frāxwēd nō nēzag dranāy kē dagrandīh se nāy ud ō druwandān čiyōn awestaraḡ-tēx bawēd ō dušaxw ōftēnd ahlawān ruwānān widargīhā frāxw rāh āsānīhā ō ān ī pahlom axwān franaft rasid tuwān] hamwār šnāyēnēm...</p>	<p>The Endless Light and Bright Garōdmān of eternal benefit, the Space, following its own law from eternity [whereby always is all bliss and whereof the straight path of the bridge of Činwad reaches the material beings, that for the blessed people widens to the breadth of nine spears, the length (of each) of which is three perches, and for the wicked persons it becomes as an edge of a razor, they falling to hell, (whereas) the souls of the blessed ones, passing by the broad way, can easily proceed and get to the Best Existence] we always propitiate...</p>
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The Iranian theme of “The Bridge of Separator” has parallels in various shamanic traditions, from the theme of the “chain of arrows” studied by Pettazzoni (see Pettazzoni 1924) to the bridge made of swords and knives which must be crossed by Vainamoinen and the shamans visiting the Otherworld in Finnish tradition, as mentioned by Eliade (see Eliade 1974: 482-486 with numerous references). The numerical code (27 = 9 × 3) is of great importance here. Its symbolic meaning can only be understood as an element of the complex surrounding of “initiation”⁸ manifested in the image of the “bridge” or “passage” of Činwad.⁹ As shown above, some traces of the

⁸The meaning given here to the term “initiation” follows that used by Eliade.
⁹Av. *činuuatō pərātu-* may be translated into Pahlavi both as *činwad-puhl* “the bridge of Činwad” and as *činwad-widarg* “the passing of Činwad” (as in *GrBd.* 26. 1.). In fact, only MP *puhl* “bridge” (< Av. *pərātu-*) testifies to the meaning “bridge” for Av. *pərātu-*: all its known cognates designate merely “passage, (river) crossing”, etc.: Lat. *portus* “harbour, customs, outfall”, *angi-portus* “narrow passage”; Old Welsh *rit* “ford”; Oldcel. *ffjorðr* “long narrow sea-gulf”, OHG *furt*, OEng. *ford* “ford” (Pokorny 1959: 817). It was also borrowed from one of the Germanic dialects by the Scytho-Sarmatian branch of Eastern Iranian: cf. Scyth. *Πόρατα* “the river Prut”, Oss. *furd* / *ford* “big river, sea” (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1984: 673, 946). This borrowing seems to have

ancient Indo-Iranian notion of death as an “ordeal” which must be passed before one’s arrival in the realm of Aša (OInd. *ṛtá-*, OP *arta-*), i. e. attainment of the state of *ašavan-*, survived Zoroaster’s reform and can even be found in some Pahlavi sources, including, in particular, the *Stāyīšn ī sīh rōzag*. At the same time, becoming *ašavan-* (= MP *ahlaw*) while still alive (as in the cases of Kirdēr and Ardā Wirāz) is conditioned on overcoming a “decisive obstacle” of the same kind as the one that had to be passed after one’s death, i. e. the bridge of Činwad. To put it differently, the “difficult passage” is here, as well as in many other traditions a necessary trial before one’s attainment of a new state of consciousness.

In this context the application of numerical symbolism to the bridge of Činwad becomes more explicable. Elsewhere Eliade points out that the characteristics of the means and stages of shamanic ascension are usually encoded by the numbers 7 and 9, the latter being a part of the more ancient, i. e. properly “shamanic”, symbolism based on the “triple” code (Eliade 1974: 274). An interesting example of the shamanic implications of the number 9 (as well as of the “spear motif”) in the Indo-European realm is that of agonizing nine-day “initiation” of the supreme Nordic god Óðinn before his acquisition of secret knowledge. The text (*Hávamál*, 138) is as follows:

<i>Veit ek, at ek hekk</i>	I know, I hung
<i>vindgameiði á</i>	on the wind-blown tree
<i>nætr allar níu,</i>	nine nights on end,
<i>geiri undaðr</i>	pierced with a spear,
<i>ok gefinn Óðni,</i>	offered up to Óðinn,
<i>sjalfr sjalfum mér,</i>	myself to myself,
<i>á þeim meði</i>	on that tree,
<i>er manngi veit</i>	of which nobody knows
<i>hvers af rótum renn.</i>	from what root it grows.

Yet the most striking parallel to the motif of “nine times three” is found in a Russian folklore motif studied by Propp:

been overlooked by Abaev, the greatest specialist of the “Scytho-European isoglossae” (see Abaev 1968). Thus, in the first volume of his dictionary he correctly rejects a direct link between Av. *paratu-* and Oss. *furd* / *ford* (Abaev 1958: 486); however, the possibility of the borrowing into Ossetic of a Germanic cognate of the Avestan word apparently escaped his attention: in Abaev 1968 Oss. *furd* / *ford* is not mentioned.

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the cherished aim towards which the hero of the standard Russian fairy-tale strives and which he attains only after having surmounted certain deadly obstacles (a typical “initiation”) is always found “beyond thrice-nine countries, in the thirtieth (variant: “thrice-ninth”) kingdom” (Propp 2000: 242-257). The “funeral” or “initiatory” symbolism of the number 9 derives from the basic characteristics of the number 3, which encodes the three cosmic spheres and in particular the Otherworld (see Eliade 1974: 274 n. 64 with reference to Coomaraswamy 1939; Toporov 1977: 54, 64, n. 96; Toporov 1979: 18-20). These connotations are emphasized all the more in the symbolic significance of 27 = the cube of 3.¹⁰

However, a thorough examination of late Iranian tradition against the background of consistent patterns of religious historical development brings one to the conclusion that an immediate (unquestioning) application of the term “shamanic” to its themes and motifs, as suggested by Gignoux (as well as by Bongard-Levin and Grantovskij) can hardly be accepted. As Eliade points out, a researcher approaching a highly-developed religious system using the same terms and notions as he or she a primitive religion, such as shamanism, lays himself open to confusion. To illustrate this warning, Eliade provides an apt example: while admitting a superficial similarity between shamanic initiations involving “dreams” in which the future shaman sees himself tortured and cut to pieces by demons and ghosts, and the temptations of Christian saints (in particular St. Anthony), he emphasizes the difference in spiritual content that separates the two “initiatory schemas”, however close together they may seem to

¹⁰The ritual, mythological and linguistic aspects of the “triple code” were examined by Toporov in two brilliant papers (see Toporov 1977 and Toporov 1979). One of his hypotheses is of interest for the semantic analysis of the Middle Persian vocabulary. Pointing out that the connexion of the number 3 with death, on the one hand, and with its overcoming, on the other, is manifested in Indo-European myth by the youngest, i. e. the *third* son of the Thunderer, being destroyed by *grinding*, but *overcoming* death and thus multiplying his fertile power, Toporov draws attention to the fact that no formal criterion makes it possible to distinguish between the derivatives of IE **ter-* “to rub, grind, drill”, IE **ter-* “to overcome, arrive, survive” (see Pokorny 1959: 1071-1075) and IE **tri-*, **trei-* “three” (Toporov 1979: 20). Bearing this in mind, one may wonder whether MP *widargihā* “passing, for passage (adv.)” (XXX, 3, see the passage cited above) and *widarg* “passage” (< **vi-tar-ka-* < IE **√ter-* “to cross, overcome”) referring to the “bridge” or “passage” of Činwad in *GrBd.* 26. 1 are to be regarded from the same point of view.

be on the plane of typology. “Unfortunately, – Eliade concludes, “if it is easy to distinguish the demonic tortures of a Christian saint from those of a shaman, the distinction is less apparent between the latter and a saint of a non-Christian religion” (Eliade 1974: 376-377).¹¹

Thus the question arises: how can one determine the significance of the late-Zoroastrian “quasi-shamanic” notions in their proper temporal context and with due consideration for their origins? The answer may only be found when not only certain synchronic state-of-being of a particular religion (in our case, Zoroastrianism) is borne in mind, but also if the consistent patterns of religious development are taken into account. The two journeys to the Otherworld, those by Kirdēr and Ardā Wirāz, as well as all the descriptions of the dangerous bridge in Pahlavi sources, are imbued with the spirit of mysticism, very similar to one characteristic of neighbouring religions in the same period, such as Gnosticism, Manichaeism, mystical trends within early Christianity and the Jewish Cabala. This stage in religious development is defined by G. G. Sholem as “romantic”, i. e. reviving archaic mythological themes but filling them with entirely different content, based on an approach meant to overcome the abyss between God and Man, a gulf which was totally ignored by the primitive consciousness, and realized only during the creative epoch in the emergence of a religion. The observations made by Sholem on the basis of his examination of the early stages of Jewish mysticism (in particular, the Hekhaloth literature), are also appropriate for the Sasanian period in the history of Zoroastrianism. Just as the primeval beliefs of the Jews are not attested in any contemporary source and may only be reconstructed by means of an analysis of the Biblical texts, so the pre-Avestan layers of Zoroastrian mythology (such as the myth of the Bridge of Separator) are reflected in the Avesta (especially in the Young Avesta, but partly in the Gāthās as well). The “creative epoch” in Iranian religion was Zarathuštra’s reform: as we have seen, he lent an entirely new sense to the term *ašāuuuan-* which

¹¹In return, one can note that the abyss between the Christian and shamanic mystic experience, still evident for Eliade almost 60 years ago (the first edition of his classical treatise on shamanism saw the light as early as 1951), nowadays might well be overlooked because of the tendency to neo-syncretism characteristic of the modern spiritual climate, as was almost prophetically depicted in 1975 by hieromonch Seraphim (Rose) (see Rose 1990).

earlier referred to all kinds of religious initiates, both live and dead, and extended this definition to all members of his community. Thus, he deprived shamanism any ground within the new-born religion. Notwithstanding the hybrid character of late Zoroastrianism, the abovementioned remnants of the pre-Zoroastrian beliefs going back to Indo-Iranian antiquity could by no means overcome the in-depth effect of Zarathuštra's message. This holds true in spite of the traces of the archaic usages in some Pahlavi sources and continues to hold true notwithstanding the occasional references to visionary experiences having only a superficial similarity to shamanic practices. The late period of development of both Judaism and Zoroastrianism are characterized by an intense interest in all kinds of visionary experiences, including those rooted in the most ancient layers of mythology. It is in this context of what we might call the "re-mythologization" of spiritual life that the obsolescent shade of meaning of MP *ahlaw* and *ardā* should be considered. As a result of this "romantic" interest in antiquity, some early myths, such as that of the Bridge of Separator, were preserved in a relatively authentic form, notwithstanding changes in their system value. Subsequently, they have lost any connexion with their visionary background, a process which ultimately led to their transformation into folklore motifs.

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