

PROLEGOMENA TO AN IMAGINARY OF THE SEA

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Abstract: The study of mythology and folklore is an integral part of the study of the imaginary. By identifying the basic myths of a group or people, we can actually recognize the logical sequences of the images and the assimilation of these images by archetypes belonging to the collective consciousness of a group. Elements belonging to the system based on the constellations of images that make up the paradigm of the maritime imaginary will be presented and developed so that we can show that they are globally specific to the maritime culture and sea imaginary. This system may help us understand the anthropological dialectic of the maritime imaginary, this being achieved by demonstrating the universality of maritime images, symbols, beliefs or myths. These elements are continuously told and re-told and they are constantly repeated in world literatures, therefore we may conclude that the imaginary represents a social vector based on the fact that images, symbols and archetypes should have the same common meaning amidst a group or people.

Keywords: imagination, imaginary, myth, sea, water.

The imaginary allows the conceptual construction of the world, being a subtle mixture of history and memory that forms the culture of a group or people. Imagination plays an important role in the psychological, social and cultural motivations. In other words, art, and in this case - literature, has imaginary support and can be regarded as an “original manifestation of any psycho-social function.”¹

The study of the phenomenon of imagination reinforces the heritage of the imaginary reflected in literature and in the morphology of religions. In his work *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter (L'Eau et les Rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière, 1942)*, Gaston Bachelard presents an interesting concept regarding the imaginary. For the French philosopher, the imagination has its own organizational dynamics, and this represents a factor of homogeneity in the imaginary representations. There is a dialectical coherence between the symbol and the ways in which this one is perceived. And yet, no matter how confusing or abstract an image may seem, there is always an underlying logic behind it. Following this symbolic perspective of language and based on Gilbert Durand's research on the anthropological structures of the imaginary, we can analyze some fundamental archetypes of the imagination related to water and especially related to the marine environment.

To achieve this, we must follow the path of subjective assimilation of the chain of symbols that is used in the sociology of the imaginary. Edgar Morin, among others, argues for the idea that the human species began to exist when human beings began to imagine and believe.

The imaginary of humanity has its sources in cosmogonic myths, using complementary antithetical procedures to obtain a unity and a symbolic completeness. The unity of the antithetical elements constitutes a perfect logic that is repeated in mythology

¹ Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*. Translated by Margaret Sankey and Judith Hatten. Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1999, p. 27.

within relations of interdetermination. In order to integrate harmony and the absolute in these processes, man had to consider several dialectics, among which, the first would be hypothetical dualistic oppositions as forms of logical thinking: good and evil, masculine and feminine, day and night, etc. Thus myths and symbols, the founding elements of ideologies in the sense given by Georges Dumézil in *Mythe et Épopée* (1968), were born, that is a vision of the world in which the collective consciousness recognizes itself by discovering the expression of its unity and of its own existence.

The myths of world's organization show that man has become aware at some point throughout the history of humanity about his integrative role amidst nature, as well as in his social environment. Mythologies reveal the similarities between the myths of the moon and the sun or the myths of the feminine and masculine, of the migrations, the oceans, etc. These myths can be understood as man's attempts to understand his own existence as well as the existence of his entire universe. In these contexts, religions have translated certain visions into the relations between man and nature, between man and the society in which he lives and between man and everything that transcends his existence. According to Emmanuel Anati, in *La Religion des origines* (1999), there are three common elements between animal behavior and religious life: rituals, specific attitudes when facing death and the reaction to spectacular natural phenomena. According to this logic, the maritime imaginary, which allows explaining the seas and oceans through the fabulous, was born from the direct experiences of man with the sea.

Water is one of the four mystical elements that Gaston Bachelard divides by a rational dichotomy into: clear and deep waters, calm waters and violent waters, fresh waters and dark waters. These binary oppositions reflect the primary dichotomy between life and death. Gods of the ancient religions also represent this opposition: in Assyrian-Babylonian mythology there was the god Apsu - the primordial ocean or god of fresh waters, and goddess Tiamat, which symbolized the salty sea waters; in Hellenistic culture, Nereus represented calm waters, and Poseidon violent waters; In the Scandinavian mythology Aegir was god of the sea, and his wife Rán was the embodiment of the deceptive sea. However, to accept this dichotomy means to limit the classification of archetypes, which is a simplification of the imagination, which in reality is infinitely more complex due to its evolution through the assimilation and imitation of images. The gradual metamorphosis of the images is done through a linkage, but this linkage is not a linear one: an image is matched with the following in relation to its social function, its historical motivation, its relation to the cosmological epiphanies or are determined by their anthropological dialectic.² For example, the representation of the mermaid was assimilated in a first phase with the image of the shipwreck and in a second phase with the fish as a food source.

According to Gilbert Durand, this kind of knowledge is found in anthropology, because people share globally the same myths and logical sequences of images. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the "anthropological dialectic"³, which the philosopher defines as "the ceaseless exchange taking place on the level of the imaginary between subjective assimilatory drives and objective pressures emanating from the cosmic and social milieu."⁴ The assimilation mechanisms allow a physical-mental accommodation to the environment that surrounds them. This is the fundamental purpose: to acknowledge nature with mind and body, through art or technique, constituting the imagination - a reversible path between man and the world, provided that the world allows an evolution of the imaginary, and thus the imaginary allows a continuous adaptation to the surrounding world. In the case of the marine

² *Ibid.*, pp. 33-43.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

theme, man invented the boat to face the waters and to discover what lies beyond the horizon limit, and the violence of the seas caused the man to use his ingenuity to invent the caravel - a bigger and more resistant boat. In this regard, *homo faber's* inventions have departed are rooted in the imagination, in a logical and imitative movement. This is the genesis of the permanent interaction between man and his environment.

In order to understand the anthropological dialectic of the maritime imaginary, it is necessary to develop a system of constellations, which is made up of images that represent the base of the paradigm of the maritime imaginary. These images are shown in "vast, almost constant, constellations of images structured by the isotopy of convergent symbols."⁵

This system is a schematic and simplified example of the human manifestations of the imagination and it can be compared to dreams in which images follow one another in a psychological cohesion. The universality of maritime images is emphasized by the anthropological analysis of maritime symbols, beliefs, rites and myths.

This system constitutes into the maritime imaginary may represent a cultural paradigm that can be schematized based on several important aspects related to the marine world: a marine fauna rich in extraordinary animals and fantastic marine creatures (whales, sharks, huge octopuses, mermaids, etc.), marine elements (waves, winds, currents, tides), marine space (seas, oceans, cruises, coastal voyages), elements related to the technique and architecture of a ship (sailing vessels, steam or Diesel propulsion vessels), elements related to the social life on board a ship (sea life, stratification of the crew on board according to the rank of each crew member, sex, race, age), but also the nature of the activity carried out at sea (geographic discoveries, maritime trade, war, piracy, fishing or whaling and shipwrecking), and not least the superstitions and beliefs of the sailors. This scheme may seem incomplete because the marine space may also cover areas in the sphere of history, politics or legislation, which are more concerned with ideas, concepts, norms or socio-political values than literature and the imaginary of the sea as it is reflected in literature, so that one can say quite clearly that the topics of maritime literature are virtually impossible to fully cover.

The violent gods capable of causing waves, winds, storms lead to daydreaming with hostile, dark and deep waters. Dark waters symbolize night and death. The feeling that nourishes the vision of the dark sea is the fear that unites the epiphany of death and the epiphany of time, for the dark water is an invitation to a journey without return, as a fatality of fate. Dark waters may also have a viscous, coagulated consistency. The coagulated sea is the symbol of blood. Dark waters are a source of despair and are closely linked to tears and blood. The isomorphism of the symbols of drowning and shipwreck converges towards creating a context of sadness. The sea is the place where even heroes disappear. But a hero must die on duty with a weapon in his hand, and not disappearing into the sea. Death in battle is a reason for posthumous glory, but death by drowning is lacking any glory. At sea, life, glory and even the name are lost. Even worse, the sailor who perishes in the waters of the sea is never dead, even if he has lost his life. For as long as he doesn't get a proper burial or his honors, he cannot be received in the underworld. He is not dead, but he is not alive either. He's gone or disappeared. The feelings provoked in those who remain behind or those who fear death in this dramatic situation are present from the Homeric epic poems and are felt to the present. The extreme drama of the narration of the shipwreck is a pillar on which the construction of national memory and identity is based on.

The incredible image of a sinking boat evokes a devouring monster. The aquatic ferocity takes the form of a monstrosity that lives in the deep waters of the seas and it is seen only when attacking boats and people. The monsters of the violent waters "lie within the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

limits of knowledge, and form a last barrier to the annihilation of human reason.”⁶ They express terror and instinctive repulsion. By associating the monster with the sea waves, the malignant representation of the siren can be explained: the wave is an animation of the water as the curling of the siren's hair is representing her charm and attractiveness, and this waving of her hair evokes the phantoms related to the fatal women to whom sailor become victims. The appearance of a viscous sea as thick and dark as blood is also the symbol of toxic femininity. Women's fatality with their hair waving overlapping over the image of a violent and dark sea brings into the human mind the image of a seductive siren that inevitably leads to a catastrophe. The fantastic being reflects the phantoms and darkest visions of man's mind. The mermaid can also be regarded as a type of ideal, if we take into account Max Weber's definition of feminine, the seeming physical perfection, created to lead men into temptation, hides a monstrosity - in our case, an underwater fish tail. This illusory perfection is extremely destructive. It is interesting to note that most of the aquatic destructive monsters are females. This is perhaps because these myths were created by men, reflecting the misunderstanding of the opposite sex and their fear of female seduction.

“The necessity of the fantastic function is explained by the faculty of the imaginary to overcome temporality and death.”⁷ As we have already mentioned, to some extent, fantastic beings represented unknown natural phenomena. For example, the rocky promontories and strong sea currents around them gave birth to the image of devouring monsters. The faculty of imagining these phenomena as monsters also allows the creation of solar heroes (saints, warriors, demigods) capable of defeating these creatures. In this regard, imagination is a rational form of struggle against anguish facing death. Victory against monsters, but especially against giants, proves the triumph of the progress of human civilization.

Adamastor, the giant, like all the fabulous giants in the Middle Ages, lives on the known border of the world, symbolizing the dangers of the sea and the extreme forces of nature. In German mythology, giants lived on the edge of the cosmos, beyond the seas that surrounded it. The giant represents the border between the known world and the emptiness and enigmatic spaces. He is the aggressive guardian of the wild world and still unknown to man.

If man wants to conquer new territories, he must defeat the giant guardian and overcome the terror it causes. St. Augustine defined the monster as a deviation from the norm. Everything that deviates from normality is monstrous. In fact, the monster is the Other, it is the otherness within our human condition, it is everything we are not. The savage was considered monstrous based on the anthropophagous tradition. Thus it may be noticed that the devouring monster is a constant myth.

The abyss of the sea evokes the possibility of being swallowed. Depth is a structure of the imaginary of descent. If it is not done with mastery or under control, it can turn into a fall. The descent is slow and laborious, while the fall is fast and painful. Heroes can descend into Hell, but they never fall into it, so they can get out of it anytime, as is the case with Jonah who is swallowed by the whale. The abyss symbolizes the fall - the “microcosm of sin”⁸, which reveals yet another anguish when facing death and mortality. Falling or being devoured are dynamic imaginative processes directly linked to fear (see Bachelard and material dynamic imagination). The fear of being devoured is felt not only when confronting monstrosities, but also facing cannibalism, associated with peoples of Africa.

⁶ Patrick Legros, Frédéric Monneyron, Jean-Bruno, Renard, Patrick Tacussel, *Sociologie de l'imaginaire*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2006, p. 204.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁸ Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*. Translated by Margaret Sankey and Judith Hatten. Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1999, p. 196.

Finally, for many devouring monsters, the highest figure in this classification is the sea itself. And yet, the oceans are also the origin of all things. This reversal of images brings peace because, on the one hand, the sea wipes out any life forms, on the other hand, it also gives birth to life. The perpetual movement of the waters reflects the myth of the eternal return. So, after every storm, peace and clarity are reinstated, and in this way it is hope that dies last.

Also, the water evokes the image of the boat that is not swallowed up in the depths of the seas. Therefore, the boat is *par excellence* the object of rescue or salvation. It is therefore the first mystical means of transport. Isis and Osiris were traveling aboard a funeral boat ("Neshmet" bark); Charon, the ferryman of Hades, carried the souls of the dead in his boat to the underworld. For the Germans, souls came into the world of the dead with the help of mysterious boats steered by shadows. In this context let us remember that St. Vincent was carried by a funeral boat escorted by crows. From this point of view it can be considered that death is the first navigator, it is the old captain of the maritime adventures of the living.

All ships can turn into ghost boats or visions of death. In the tradition of the Vikings, the kings or the dead warriors were put in a boat that was launched on the water, allowed to float and which was set on fire. The idea of a coffin-boat leads us once again to the feeling of anxiety when facing mortality and death.

The joy of sailing on the water is always accompanied by the fear of becoming a castaway. But the coffin-boat can also be a boat functioning as a container. The ship represents a protective shell on the dark seas. This protection against the immensity of the waters is found in the myth of the Great Flood, which is told in many ways by different peoples all around the world. The most famous myth in Christian Europe is that of Noah's Ark, which offers shelter and salvation to a pair of each living species. In fact, the first texts that talk about the great floods appear in *the Epic of Gilgamesh*, an epic of Sumerian origin, in which the immortal hero - Utnapishtim, has a vision in which god Ea appears, in which reveals to him that gods have the intention to destroy humanity sending them a flood. Thus, Utnapishtim gathers his entire family, builds an ark and fills it with provisions so that he can survive the flood that will destroy humanity. The rain, says the story, would have fallen six days and six nights, but on the seventh day the flood ended. That morning, Utnapishtim sent a pigeon that returned without finding land. Then, as he was wise, he sent a crow, but this one did not return. Then, the survivors were able to land from the ark on land, starting another stage in the reconstruction of the world.

The Greek myth of the Flood tells us how Zeus, tired of human perversity, decides to flood the earth with Poseidon's help. Only the summit of Mount Parnassus remained uncovered by the tumultuous waters. But Prometheus finds a way to save his family. Knowing Zeus' plans, he ordered his son Deucalion to build an ark for himself and his wife, Pyrrha. When the waters calmed down, and the ark stopped on Mount Parnassus, the rescued couple began to glorify Zeus because they had escaped death, but their biggest sadness was that they were alone in the world and so were condemned to solitude. Their tragedy is solved by the goddess Themis, who appears to Deucalion in a dream, telling him that if they throw stones, those stones will turn into human beings. So, following the advice from the goddess, Deucalion threw stones giving birth to boys, and Pyrrha created girls from the stones she threw. So, the two are considered the parents of a new generation of Greek people.

This legend is also present in the Aztec culture in which a couple, Coxcoxtli and Xochiquetzal, escape the flood by using a boat. The Hindu myth of the Great Flood says that a divine fish - Matsya, the avatar of god Vishnu, warned the wise Manu about the flood that was to follow and sends him a boat to embark on, saving his family and a pair of living creatures of each species and seed of plants. When the earth sank beneath the ocean's waters,

a golden unicorn fish came, and Manu tied the boat to his horn. And so, humanity and all living things were saved from that catastrophe. We also find at Eskimo, legends related to this mythical event. Invariably, the symbolism of the flood, a great aquatic drama, reflects the idea of the reabsorption of humanity by the waters and the beginning of a new era, thus transforming it into the concept of rebirth in which the boat is the object that allows the purification of humanity.

Jesus' Biblical account shows us how he controlled the winds and the water, walking on the water and often traveling by water in a boat with his disciples. These boat trips from shore to shore are the defining moments when Jesus proves that he has a divine constitution and shares his ideas and knowledge. The sea and the boat have an initiatory and spiritual value. Crossing the sea involves knowledge, courage and inner conviction as in the cases of Odysseus, Moses or Jesus.

Lima de Freitas sees in marine mythology the richness of the "thread of natural initiation"⁹ since man - navigator, hero or saint - must overcome a moment that is almost equal to death, in the abyss of the dark sea, in order to reborn. Navigation is regarded as an initiating path having as final destinations the earthly paradisiac locations. For these reasons, the boat, apart from being a symbol of the great departure, is also the symbol of the great voyages. Boat is also the means of moving the celestial bodies. In Ancient Egypt, Ra embodies the rising sun every morning to cross the earth in his boat. The boat of the solar god is swallowed by Apophis, a monstrous snake describing the sunset and the darkness. However, the snake is not winning the battle with Ra and the solar god sails with his boat each morning. The image of the boat leads to the archetype of travel either to discover the world or as a transition from one stage to another (the transition from adolescence to maturity). The poetics of the journey reflects the idea of the inner journey to the infinite of the soul. Crossing the sea includes leaving home, finding oneself, contemplating, reinventing oneself and hoping for a return.

Journeys to the unknown are paths to the future that evoke both freedom and loss. Hence the reconciliation or joy of seeing an island, when the traveler is lost in the infinity of the ocean or in the boundlessness of reason.

Some islands were the theaters of shipwrecks, such as Saint Helena, the islands of Cape Verde in the Atlantic Ocean, Zanzibar and the Island of Mozambique in the Indian Ocean. There are several stories about shipwrecked sailors on the shores of remote islands, which were later discovered and rescued by other ships passing through the area. But the most famous castaway is undoubtedly Robinson Crusoe, a fictional character created by Daniel Defoe.

In addition to monsters, storms and shipwrecks, the island is also a central theme that marks the constellation of the imaginary of the sea. The island can be a prison from which it is not possible to escape, but most of all, the island is a wonderful space.

At the time of the great discoveries there was no mention of Atlantis, which was considered to be Saint Brendan's Island or the island of Ceylon, which in the Muslim tradition would be the Garden of Eden. The paradise island was indeed a common dream. In the seemingly deserted surface of the sea or the ocean, the emergence of an island is assimilated with the end of a long period of hard work, offering a sense of relief because it was a sign that sailor haven't reached the end of the world yet. The image of the deserted island and the paradisiacal island still feeds the imaginary. It is sufficient to look at the posters of the travel agencies that illustrate the already ordinary image of the paradisiacal island with its palm trees

⁹ Lima de Freitas, *Porto do Graal. A Riqueza Ocultada da Tradição Mítico-Espiritual Portuguesa*. Lisboa: Ésquilo, 2006, p. 192.

leaning over a calm and clear water, with beaches with fine golden sand and much tranquility. The island symbolizes the unity rediscovered and protected by peace, it is an allegory of meditative isolation, a break from urban agitation. As the shipwrecks meet, the island makes spiritual retreat possible, protecting those who seek peace and are lost in their inner ocean.

The island can also be the place chosen by pirates to hide and store their fabulous treasures. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1882) is by far the best-known literary work dealing with island imagery and piracy. The story created images and symbols that have become very popular around the world, such as the chart that shows where the treasure is hidden and the spot was marked by an X, the parrot and the pirate's wooden leg, the black flag, the skull, the barrels with rum.

It should be noted, however, that this constellation of images and symbols is not a static and immutable one. On the contrary, social media makes this constellation move continuously because the imaginary is malleable and adaptable. What remains constant is man's eternal anguish in front of Cronos (time) and Thanatos (death).

Man's ability to create and understand symbols is imposed on the level of the collective unconscious in an intersubjective form: the symbol is not significant for man, but for the whole humanity. Intersubjectivity feeds on myths whose repetitions reveal constellations of isomorphic images.

Stories are told and re-told through oral communication, written literature, painting, sculpture, film, music or dance. Researching the myths, observing their cyclical repetitions, highlighting the archetypes allows us an understanding of the collective consciousness.

Bearing this in mind, we may consider that the imaginary represents a social vector; for the imaginary to be considered a social element equally agreed upon at any group level, there must be a common understanding of the symbols. That is why we can find or rediscover at the imaginary level some of the great figures belonging to "the imaginary museum throughout the whole history of humanity"¹⁰. What varies are the different semantic aspects we project on these monsters or fantastic beings. They are in each epoch the reflection for each of us of the image of the universe misunderstood and most often distressing (death, infinity), through which we tend to understand the meaning of our existence. It is interesting to note that man constantly oscillates between the desire to believe in *the imaginary museum* and the desire to discredit it in the quest for a balance between good and evil. It's a kind of moving back and forth between the human and the imaginary.

Many people associate the sea with ancient times, with the past and with what it meant for mythology, and some strongly reject the maritime imaginary in modern times. But now, postmodernism is witnessing a re-mythologization of the world, the rediscovery of the new charms of our daily life. The sociology of the imaginary plays a central role in proposing a path of mythical intersubjectivity to shed light on the still dark parts of the sensitive world. The radical thinking of the postmodern era is the "revival" of the world. By including living and dynamic thinking, contrary to classical and static sociology, one recognizes that our passions and desires form the living and dynamic social structure, because in most cases life is driven by such feelings. The sociologist of the imaginary is aware that he has no control over the subject of the inquiry, but by accepting the passions of rationality and thinking, he can access the social life of a group at a sensitive level.

Facing a contingent society, the sociologist must go beyond dialectical boundaries. For this it is necessary to overcome the explanatory and Cartesian disfunction of the world and to take into account the complexity of each individual and of the whole world. The sociology of

¹⁰ Patrick Legros, Frédéric Monneyron, Jean-Bruno Renard, Patrick Tacussel, *Sociologie de l'imaginaire*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2006, p. 92.

the imaginary and its approach to mythology in order to study the present ways of thinking and feeling, invites us to a return to formal thinking and to archaic symbolic forms that allow an understanding of the amazing social vitality.

The study of mythologies and folklore reflects the activity and thinking of any chosen era and people. It is not at all absurd to believe that myths and legends once transmitted orally and then in writing prove and support theories about everything around us: natural or cultural. In a more or less amusing form, these narrative forms not only delight, but also educate. Stories usually follow history. If the latter reports the facts by exposing them with chronological rigidity, the former reflects the ardor of a people's feelings. Legends became popular when they crossed the borders of temples and monasteries. Almost always based on realities, over time they became rich and beautified. Stories thus transformed by tradition are the unconscious product of the imagination: the hero or god reflects the concerns of a group or people and their behavior allows the creation of a set of moral values common to that group or people.

Fables (in which animals have the gift of speech), stories (wonderful stories with romantic plot), legends (stories distorted by popular imagination) and myths (stories based on the deities' deeds) are categories of the imaginary that endlessly interpose in a society and they are in continuous evolution. All these forms of communication are teachings, despite the fact that they distort the truth to a lesser or greater extent.

These forms of "entertainment" are at their core a continuous search for spirituality and social values. It is a "revival", a return to the earthly paradise, in times when the triumph of hyper-realism hides and degrades myths and is abandoned by our social consciousness.

Lima de Freitas says in *Porto do Graal. A Riqueza Ocultada da Tradição Mitico-Espiritual Portuguesa*: "Every poet, every nation, every way of feeling will have to translate the timeless myth into the rationality of its times, otherwise myth will lose its moment, it will lose its wisdom, it will lose its national identity and reason."¹¹

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¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

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