

# SYMBOLISM

by Mircea A. Tamas

SOMETIME ago, on a beautiful, fresh morning, I was riding my bicycle in a park, close to my home. I was thinking of everything and nothing. Suddenly, like a bolt, a picture came into my mind and made me freeze; I realized, at that very moment, the secret meaning of my harmless physical exercise: a modern paraphrase of the traditional symbol of the Chariot of Light.<sup>1</sup> The bicycle, a modern, profane vehicle, was revealing a new, deep significance, a sacred one: the front wheel became the symbol of Heaven, the rear wheel the symbol of Earth, and the crossbar was the *Axis Mundi* itself. Riding the bicycle changed into a spiritual journey, along the axis of the universe. A very challenging query was coming to life from the intelligence of my heart: is it possible to still have a sacred kernel hidden in our Western modern existence?

The main difference between our modern civilization and the traditional ones is that now we play at being gods, imposing our individual desires, ideas and originality, unaware that, in fact, we are puppets and God, the supreme Principle, is the Master Puppeteer. The modern world has cut its ties with the Principle; on the contrary, God was close to the members of traditional civilizations, and they knew that individuality was nothing compared to the One-and-only, they were just puppets on a string. In a traditional society, their whole life was a reflection of God. The myths were real, the beliefs were certitudes, and the rites were not superstitions, but spiritual instruments. In a traditional society, every gesture, every activity was a sacred one, imitating what the gods did *in illo tempore*, at the beginning of the world.<sup>2</sup> Eating, working, hunting, dancing, singing, playing, each one represented a sacred rite, an organized activity (Sanskrit *rita* = “order”), following a divine model and having a spiritual meaning. A traditional person knew that mankind, at the moment of birth, was blessed with a holy lore, the Tradition descended from Heaven. For the modern person this descent is just another legend.

Our modern society is terribly “human” and *ipso facto* profane; most of the traditional *karma* (Sanskrit *karma* = “ritual activity”) becomes show business and entertainment, while the supernal kernel is forgotten.<sup>3</sup> Is it possible then, without error, to transmute symbolical, sacred significance (“showing through signs”) to our present world, to charge a bicycle with mythical signs? The answer is definitely affirmative for a very profound reason: the sacred hidden marrow of the World is the projection of the supreme Principle, One without a second, who wants to play and creates the universal Existence as a sport in his image.<sup>4</sup> The spiritual, sacred sparks, coming from the everlasting divine Fire (Hindu Agni as *Ātma*, kabbalistic *Ein-Sof* as dark flame) to support and give life into the Cosmos, will always be there. It only seems that they are missing because human mentality has changed and turned away from the traditional knowledge of the celestial

<sup>1</sup> See René Guénon, *Symboles fondamentaux de la Science sacrée*, Gallimard, 1980, p. 267, and Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1977, p. 380.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, Gallimard, 1979, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Physical activity, so appreciated nowadays, has also a sacred origin. See Ghazi bin Muhammed, *The Sacred Origin of Sports and Culture*, Fons Vitae, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> “Brahma’s creative activity is not undertaken by way of any need on his part, but simply by way of sport, in the common sense of the word” (Brahma Sūtras II.1.32-3). See Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers: Metaphysics*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1977, p. 150.

principles.<sup>5</sup> It doesn't matter if the modern and profane people label the sacred heritage of the traditional societies as superstitions, myths or legends. The spiritual kernel, inviolable and unchangeable, is alive. We just have to see it with the Eye of the Heart.

There is yet another question to be answered: is it possible for any kind of object (such as a bicycle) to be considered an expression of the divine archetypes or is it only the human imagination that plays tricks on us? To answer, we introduce the "metaphysics of *ekapâda*." *Ekapâda* means "one-footed" in Sanskrit and represents the *Axis Mundi* as celestial Ray (or as the "seventh Ray") of the spiritual Sun. Before manifesting itself, the supreme Principle (Hindu *Brahma nirguna*, Brahma without qualifications and attributes) is a Dragon without eyes or feet, a "black hole," a turtle retreated inside its shell, the peacock with its tail folded. Producing the universal manifestation (the whole Existence), the Principle opens its eyes and forms one foot, the axis of the universe, with this foot jumps (like Vishnu) three steps, manifesting the "Three Worlds" (corporeal, subtle and angelic). The *Axis Mundi* – the solar Ray, the unique foot – producing the Existence, multiplies itself into "one thousand feet" (Sanskrit *sahashrapâda*),<sup>6</sup> i. e., a multiplicity of solar rays, reflecting the unique Ray. *Ekapâda*, like Brahma, is neutral. *Ekapâda* is father and mother, and son and daughter, and friend and fiend, and dragon and hero, and brother and sister, and husband and wife, and alive and dead, and one and multiple. That is why the "feet," the things existing in the Cosmos, are explanations of *ekapâda* and symbolic assistants in the quest for the supreme Truth. A tree, a bicycle, a house or a vase, are all projections of the only foot and, therefore, represent operative aids during a spiritual task.

Between *ekapâda* and *sahashrapâda* there is a "broker," archetype of the multiplicity, the "two-footed" (*dwapâda*), by definition the World being the domain of duality (in the Cosmos, all the couples coexist: good-bad, warm-cold, etc.). The primordial duality represents the two fundamental principles called Heaven and Earth and is symbolized by the two wheels of the bicycle, principles that are actually One without a second, and two only from a mundane point of view. But the "two feet" could express, from a spiritual point of view, the immortal and the mortal "soul," the sacred kernel and the profane skin. Therefore, in some initiatory rituals the neophyte has one foot uncovered (the axis of the universe, the naked truth) and the other one covered (the world). Titian's famous painting, "Sacred (the nude woman) and profane (the dressed woman) love," perfectly illustrates this meaning.

We see the beauty of the science of symbols: it gives us "a thousand feet," better, "a thousand eyes," a multitude of points of view, all valid, like the indefinite number of solar rays; for that reason, the Hindu doctrines are called *darsanas* – "points of view." *Kabbalah*, the Hebraic tradition, selects three as fundamental meanings of any symbolism: the Cosmos, the Year and the Man (Sepher Yetsirah III.2), and they can be traced in any orthodox doctrine of any traditional society. Moreover, any rite has as kernel this triple significance and it is a good exercise to come back to the bicycle symbolism. First, from a cosmological point of view, the bicycle is the entire Cosmos or universal manifestation, the two poles, Heaven and Earth, and the axis representing the principles sustaining and developing the World; as well, the wheel itself is an image of the Cosmos, the hub being the Principle, and the rim the World, created and supported by

<sup>5</sup> We understand "tradition" and "traditional" defined as "what was transmitted" from the beginning of the World, as an unbroken golden chain anchored to the supreme Principle.

<sup>6</sup> Coom., Metaphysics, p. 391. See also Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, La doctrine du sacrifice, Dervy-Livres, 1978, p. 47.

transfer from One (the center) to many (the spokes). Secondly, the rotation of the wheels simulates the movement of the Cosmos, the whirled development of the worlds starting from the immutable Principle. This rotation is also an emblem of the Year or Time, because the production of the Universe obeys the law of cosmic cycles (that is why after night comes day, and again night, the whole Existence being governed by cycles). Thirdly, the bicycle is Man's vehicle, the rider being the immortal "soul" of any human being. Riding the bicycle means a divine initiation, a spiritual voyage from Earth to Heaven, redemption, and liberation (Sanskrit *moksha*).<sup>7</sup>

Another important fact is that a symbol is universal, and so is not affected by particularities such as geographical location, nationality, religion or culture. For example, meditating in front of a Christmas tree or in front of a standing Ganesha statue makes no difference. The Christmas tree is in Christian tradition a symbol of the *Axis Mundi*. All the ornaments, which are hanging from the boughs, represent the multicolored elements of the Cosmos, comparable with the colors radiated by the secret flame of *Ein-Sof* (Zohar I.15a). The standing Ganesha is usually "one-footed," this foot being the axis of the universe, the unique Ray. His four arms, the trunk and the other foot (lifted) are the manifestation rays, the innumerable spokes that produce the Universe; they are the boughs of the Christmas tree. The main difficulty is not selecting the symbol, but rather our qualification to recognize it. The less profane our mentality is, the deeper our comprehension of the absolute Truth gets. Thus, by choosing a bicycle to sustain our spiritual efforts the effect is not going to be less efficient.

---

<sup>7</sup> We must define the meaning of the word "initiation," which was used in many ways. Initiation, etymologically speaking, is a "beginning" and an entrance into a new domain. The profane scholars used the term for all kinds of fields. We have to stress, though, that initiation is primarily about spiritual achievement and not about social rites. For a traditional society, initiation represented a series of sacred rites leading to a spiritual realization. The neophyte, the Man, can be male or female; here Man should be understood as Sanskrit *mânavâ* "a mental being," image of Hindu *Manu*, the "Lord of the World."