

THE THREAD METAPHOR IN THE LINGUISTIC IMAGINARY OF FOLKLORE

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ABSTRACT. *The Thread Metaphor in the Linguistic Imaginary of Folklore.*

In our study, we analyse the conceptualization of the idea of creation in the linguistic imaginary of traditional Romanian communities, with the help of certain metaphors from the sphere of household industry, namely *the thread, the linen, the towel, the handkerchief, the kerchief, the girdle* and others. By exploring a number of theories from the field of cognitive linguistics and ethnolinguistics, we research not only the manners of representing genesis, but also those of other forms of “creation”, such as creating human connections, both between the living and between the living and the dead. To this end, we follow certain linguistic data that encode the concept of creation, identified in folkloric texts, such as dirges, incantations, carols, fairytales, or cosmogonic legends. For their correct interpretation, we invoke their relation with popular beliefs, with ritual practices or elements of material patrimony, without which we would not be able to understand the deepest meanings. Finally, the results of the analysis highlight the significance of the *seed-thread*, as a core-metaphor responsible for the production of several types of creation, at different levels of existence. The *thread* metaphor supports the imaginary scheme of *warping* and *weaving*, which has modelled the representations about the birth of the vast canvas of the world. By analysing the multiple items, the connections and correlations created with the *thread’s* help, we can better understand that the folkloric world is itself a vast canvas whose threads often remain visible only to the initiated.

Keywords: *creation, cosmogony, thread, linen, towel, handkerchief, kerchief, girdle, footbridge, bridge, connection.*

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REZUMAT. Metafora firului în imaginarul lingvistic al folclorului. În studiul nostru, analizăm conceptualizarea ideii de creație în imaginarul lingvistic al comunităților tradiționale românești, cu ajutorul unor metafore provenite din sfera industriei casnice, și anume *firul, pânza, prosopul, batista, basmaua, brâul* etc. Exploatând câteva teorii venite dinspre lingvistica cognitivă și dinspre etnolingvistică, cercetăm nu doar modalitățile de reprezentare a facerii lumii, ci și ale altor forme de „creație,” cum ar fi crearea legăturilor umane, atât între cei vii, cât și între vii și morți. În acest scop, urmărim câteva date lingvistice care încifrează conceptul de creație, identificate în texte folclorice precum bocete, descântece, colinde, basme, legende cosmogonice etc. Pentru o corectă interpretare a lor, invocăm corespondența cu credințele populare, cu practicile rituale sau cu elementele de patrimoniu material, fără de care nu am putea înțelege semnificațiile cele mai adânci. În final, rezultatele analizei scot în evidență însemnătatea *firului-sâmbure*, ca metaforă-nucleu responsabilă de realizarea mai multor tipuri de creație, la diferite niveluri ale existenței. Metafora *firului* susține schema imaginară a *urzirii* și a *țeserii*, care a modelat reprezentările despre nașterea pânzei uriașe a lumii. Analizând multiplele obiecte, legături și corespondențe realizate cu ajutorul *firului*, putem înțelege, mai bine, că lumea folclorică însăși este o vastă țesătură, ale cărei fire rămân vizibile, adesea, doar pentru cei inițiați.

Cuvinte-cheie: creație, cosmogonie, fir, pânză, prosop, batistă, basma, brâu, punte, pod, legătură.

1. Preamble

The present study was born under the image of a funeral ritual from Romanian traditional communities from the beginning of the 20th century. The image was recalled in 1995, by an 82-year-old woman: “hundreds of women and girls had a headcloth² of mourning. All you could see was white. No other colours were worn for the dead” [sute de femei și fete aveau pe cap ștergari de doliu. Numai alb vedeai. Altî culoari nu sî purta la mort]³ (Ciubotaru 1999, 71). Despite this image’s almost surreal beauty, we need a serious effort to be able to imagine death completely dressed in white. To the eye of the modern individual from the European space, who is used to associate death with a “sea” of black, this unending “sea” of white represents an atypical, disconcerting image.

² These *ștergari/ștergare* [headcloth] were white, cotton towels weaved in five warp threads, homemade, especially for mourning. For instance, in Bacău county, they were one and a half metres long and forty centimetres wide. At the ends, they had some *vrâsti* [black stripes], also called *poduri* [bridges], probably due to formal similarities.

³ All translations in the present article are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Although, due to ethnographic research, we know that, in other cultures such as Asian ones, white is the colour of mourning, our recent memory, modelled by Western symbolic patterns, seems to refuse such an association. In the Romanian space, black has asserted itself in the past few decades as a sign of mourning, so that few people know that, at one point, it replaced the immaculate white that has been, until quite recently, present in Romanian villages. Here too, white, a colour related to the spectral paleness of death, which preceded life, any birth being a rebirth (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1995, 76), but especially to ritual purity,⁴ compulsory for the initiation into another stage of existence, flooded, until recently, the entire space in the vicinity of the dead.

Practically, the room in which the dead was placed in the three days until the burial, was entirely decorated in white: the linen on the catafalque was of an immaculate white, the mirrors were covered by white linen, the portrait of the dead was surrounded by a white kerchief, especially in the case of an unmarried young man. The deceased themselves were dressed in white from head to toe: even the socks were white, while around the head a white towel or kerchief was placed, according to sex, and a symbolic wedding ring, that was also white, was worn around the finger. There is also ethnographic data that shows how, a few centuries ago, the naked body was wrapped in simple, white linen, reminiscent of the ancients or of Oriental rituals (Ciubotaru 1999, 72).

The space outside the house was also marked with symbols of the same colour: at the entrance door, especially for young people, white linen is put up or, if a black kerchief was put up then, over it, several white ribbons were placed as well (compulsory for unmarried individuals). White curtains were put on doorframes and white cotton linen was put on the houses' eaves. Even the horses that transported the coffin to the burial ground were adorned with white headcloths, and the fir tree cut from the forest to be put at the head of the departed was white as well. Thus, according to the descriptions of ethnographers, all of Moldavia was in white mourning, for three days, in the period between the death and the funeral.

⁴ The *dalbul de pribeag* [wandering white] metaphor, consecrated in Romanian funeral texts for the deceased, has a taboo motivation since the pronunciation of the word "dead" is not allowed. It clearly speaks about the ritual purity specific to any passing rite and it is compulsory especially in the case of post-existence initiation. The term *dalb* [white] is considered "a Romanian organic formation" [o formațiune organică românească], having a prosthetic "d". It has various meaning nuances according to the combinations in which it functions: "white, candid, delicate, proud, brilliant, charming" [alb, candid, delicat, mândru, strălucit, încântător] (Șăineanu 1999, 160-163), and it has been related to the "spectral paleness" [paloarea spectrală] of the deceased, as well as to the use of white as a sign of mourning in Moldavia.

However, in other counties such as Argeş, Brăila, Buzău, Mureş, Sălaj, Tulcea, Ilfov, mourning in white had a significant weight in the second half of the 19th century. For instance, in certain Transylvanian villages a white *flag*⁵ was hoisted on the eastern corner of the house or on one of the gateposts as a sign of mourning. We know that this custom is still practised today with the difference that, now, the flag on buildings or above the door or gate is black (Marian 2000a, 60). Although this flag is *raised*, being placed higher, the expression used for this gesture suggests a descending movement, according to Sim. Fl. Marian, who believes that a *închina steagul cuiva* [*to surrender the flag to someone*], means “to bow it,” being synonymous even with “to die,” “to capitulate before death.” The explanation offered by the author in 1892 can be subsumed to a military logic: as long as soldiers saw the war flag, they would courageously fight, following it in the fight. The moment the flag was *închinat* [*bowed*], meaning taken down, it meant that they had lost the battle, that their life was forfeit, that death had won (*cf.* Marian 2000a, 72). This ethnolinguistic interpretation attempts to explain not only the metaphoric transfer that supports the option for the word *steag* [*flag*] (where the similarity in shape with the piece of linen hoisted up probably mattered as well), but also the symbolic significance of the gesture of *bowing* (*surrendering*) the flag. However, considering that the verb *to bow* means, in Romanian, *a aduce o ofrandă cuiva* [*to bring an offering to someone*] (DEX) as well, it is not out of the question for the expression to have accumulated valences from this semantic area.

Added to this image of hundreds of women enveloped, similar to the deceased, in white, there are our memories from villages in Maramureş,⁶ in which all participants in a funeral ceremony, men and women, were wearing a towel, usually white, attached to their left arm. The children, in turn, received handkerchiefs instead of towels from the family of the deceased, *pentru sufletul mortului* [*for the soul of the deceased*]. For that matter, this custom is still maintained not only in villages, but also in smaller, neighbouring towns where former villagers moved, taking funeral customs with them: the only difference is that, now, the towels are more colourful and, at times, they are held in one’s hand instead of attached to the arm. The possibility to use a different colour has probably appeared once white lost its funerary value.

2. The footbridge-towel or the bridge-towel

No matter how impressed we might have been by these pictures in white, a colour specific to spirits as well, the chromatic of death does not

⁵ In Bucovina, the correspondent of this *flag* is called *prapor* [*a church banner*], probably under the influence of the church language (Marian 2000a, 70).

⁶ It is the case of the area named “Fişcuşaş”, situated between the cities of Baia-Sprie and Căvnic.

represent the object of the present study. Another element, in fact, activated our reflection on the topic of the linguistic imaginary of traditional Romanian culture, specifically the name of the white linen fabrics, which are omnipresent at a funeral. It seems that, paradoxically, in many areas of the country they are called *punți* [footbridges] or *poduri* [bridges]. Or, if not, at least the black stripes that decorate the headcloths carry this name. In certain villages in Moldavia, the very strip of linen that is longer than and covers the deceased is called a *footbridge*. Furthermore, the interdiction to cut this linen with scissors (it must be ripped and not cut in order to unveil the face of the deceased), having as a motivation the fear of a *nu-i tăia calea mortului* [not cut off the path of the deceased], meaning not to interrupt their path to the afterlife (Ciubotaru 1999, 109, 111), represents a piece of ethnographic information that is precious in order to understand the logic of the footbridge/bridge metaphor.

In the absence of such a metaphor, we could unilaterally interpret the presence of white towels, taking into consideration another role that is attributed to them in popular beliefs: that of resting place for the soul or of instrument meant to purify it. Thus, many beliefs show that the soul is not represented as something immaterial. On the contrary, it is seen as an entity that suffers from hunger and thirst, having a voice as well, so that, in the moments of greatest suffering, it can scream from pain, the expression ... *țipă sufletu-n noi* [our soul screams within us] being extremely suggestive in this sense (Ursache 1975, 217). Most often, the soul is represented as a bird, butterfly or dove. At the moment of death, it is believed that it is extremely confused, tired and uneasy, and it needs support on which to rest,⁷ and the towel, on which a pipkin with water and a candle are placed, offer the soul the ideal place to sit. Therefore, at the moment of crisis when passing through to the afterlife, the soul appears to the folkloric individual as being anguished and covered in blood since death, even when natural and not brutal, is represented in the folkloric imaginary as a violent act “the blood being consubstantial to the soul”

⁷ According to the beliefs from Northern Moldavia, the headcloth is placed in the window so that, three days after the soul has separated from the body, it has where to rest. Together with the headcloth, a comb is placed there as well, so that the soul could comb their hair (Marian 2000a, 294). In other villages, right after the person has died, they place a kerchief, a ring-shaped loaf, and a pipkin of water, “it being believed that the soul stays there during the three days, while the deceased is placed in the house. While sitting on the kerchief,” they taste from the ring-shaped loaf and drink water from the pipkin and only after do they go to the heavens (Marian 2000a, 295). With the same purpose, when removing the coffin from the house, a *lăicer* [wooden peasant rug] and a *pernă* [pillow] are placed on the threshold “so that they would have what to sleep on in the afterlife” [ca să aibă în cealaltă lume pe ce se culca] (Marian 2000a, 215).

[sângele fiind consubstanțial sufletului] (Ciubotaru 1999, 157). However, considering that the soul cannot pass into the afterlife if it is not clean, it is in great need for a towel, in order to wipe itself.⁸ Moreover, a purely hygienic explanation is offered as well: if no towels are found at hand, the bloodied soul could stain the walls of the house with blood in its anguish and struggle (Ciubotaru 1999, 42).

We might think that this belief about the bloodied soul is an isolated one and that it does not deserve attention since it is not a part of the patterns that mould traditional mentalities. However, fairytales also bring the confirmation of the force that the bloodied towel has enjoyed as a symbol of death. Thus, when leaving for a difficult and dangerous journey, the hero would leave a kerchief or handkerchief (often the very kerchief that was offered to their beloved at the wedding ceremony, as a symbol of the communion⁹). In turn, the one left behind looks daily for the ominous signs of death or, at least, of the fact that the one who left is in deadly danger: the three drops of blood or even a large stain of blood on the kerchief (Șăineanu 1978, 57-58, 394, 404).

Nevertheless, the term *bridge* or *footbridge* used for these funeral towels does not achieve coherence by means of the above explanations. In order to discover the imaginary scheme that has generated this metaphor, one must go to a different level, a deeper one, reaching the texture of the fabric from which the towel is made, the warping that arranges the threads to give birth to the house linen. There, in the warping technique that is capable of cancelling nothingness, building the world itself, in a completely empty space, as told by cosmogonic Romanian legends (Pamfile 1913, 1915), other truly fascinating explanations are found. It is only by researching the symbology of the *thread*, meant to create not only the material world but also an entire network of family and social relations to strengthen the solidarity of traditional communities, that we can better understand the *footbridge* quality attributed to textile fabrics, present in all threshold moments of passing from one cycle of existence into another: birth, wedding and death.

In order to explain the logic of the linguistic imaginary that has created solidarity between *the towel* and *the bridge*, with the help of a metaphorical transfer, we will make use not only of Lakoff and Johnson's theory of the

⁸ Certain beliefs also speak of another purpose of *ștergătoare de moarte* [death towels] (Țara Oașului), most often homemade, believing that the deceased will use them in the afterlife to wipe after toiling there (Berindei 2015, 271).

⁹ In the majority of Romanian ethnographic areas, *the kerchief* and *handkerchief* were the main objects exchanged at the engagement by those who were to be married, the wedding bands or the ring appearing much later.

*conceptual metaphor*¹⁰ but also of ideas from ethnolinguists. We resort to the latter because they urge us to search, in addition to the universals of the human mind highlighted by proponents of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, for those beliefs and cultural practices encoded in the linguistic data. At the same time, we must also pay attention to the manner in which linguistic expressions have, in turn, modelled the vision of people over the world, providing it with order. For instance, one of the key-concepts of ethnolinguistics, called *the linguistic image of the world* or *the linguistic representation of reality* and defined, among others, by the representative of the Polish school of ethnolinguistics, Jerzy Bartmiński,¹¹ cannot be reduced to a simple *reflection* of the world in the language, but rather must be understood as an *interpretation* of the world *in* and *through* the language. From this perspective, words are not simple photographic representations of objects from reality, but rather their “mental portraits” that are associated with a semantic content based on the segmentation, categorization, and interpretation of phenomena, conducted by the human spirit (Viviand 2014, 30). Thus, in essence, this linguistic image of the world, presented according to ethnolinguists, expresses more or less exactly what American representatives of Conceptual Metaphor Theory called “the conceptualization of the world present in the language,” and Russian linguists called “the naïve image of the world, fixed in the language” (Cholewa 2008, 21).

At the same time, the reconstruction process of the linguistic image of any object or of a world phenomenon proposes to remake the cognitive

¹⁰ This type of metaphor is also named a *conventional* or *everyday* metaphor, being different from the poetic metaphor. It demonstrates that “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff, Johnson 2003, 3), that the metaphoric transfer is not only related to language, but it constitutes the very essence of the manner in which human thought functions, regulating our entire daily activity and structuring both the manner in which we perceive things and that in which we behave in the world or interact with one another. In a very wide sense, the essence of this theory is that any new concept is understood and, thus, configured in the terms of another concept: “We claim that most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured; that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts” (Lakoff, Johnson 2003, 56). Adapting things to the *thread* metaphor, we could say that this is an ontological metaphor, through which the nothingness is materialised, achieving substance and, thus, contributing to the appearance of different forms of existence.

¹¹ According to J. Bartmiński (2017), the linguistic imaginary of the world represents the core entity of the linguistic imaginary, understood as a precise conceptualisation of reality, fixed *in* the language, realized by a community that is well-defined geo-linguistically: “the entirety of fixed (stereotyped) ideas about the individual and the world that can be reconstructed from various types of linguistic data: the grammar system (inflexional, morphological, syntactic and textual categories), the semantic system (the meaning of words, but also of more complex lexical units), the usage and also the “perilinguistic” elements, the beliefs and attitudes, namely all the relevant data traceable during effective communication” (*apud* Koselak 2007, 5).

structure of an *already formed* concept, in order to understand how the linguistic consciousness and the human mind's most general tendencies to categorize function. For this reason, the study of cultural information is very important as well, information that is understood as traits that are intimately associated with words and impossible to separate from them. By considering them, one can reach a kind of "maximum density" of the made description and what can be created is not only a *linguistic* image of the selected object, but also an *encyclopaedic* one. This way, the final "product" will include everything that is now about that object. The only condition is for the information to be fixed in the language, and for the traits that define the prototype to be recognized as "typical" by all speakers. For this reason, *linguistic stereotypes* (Bartmiński 2017, 115-135) are especially suited for such an investigation, since they contain certain *standardized empirical knowledge* (Wierzbicka 1985), that is unscientific or pre-scientific. From this perspective, the ethnographic data may be considered to be strong nuclei of a certain object-concept, being essential in outlining it both from a linguistic and encyclopaedic point of view.

Evidently, from the multitude of representations related to a certain object of the world, we cannot exclude the universal judgements, the experiences and convictions that are common to the entire human race. Ethnologists, in turn, have realized, a long time ago, that certain elements of folkloric poetics cannot even be understood by resorting only to ethnical criteria, since "in the primitive culture, artistic experience depends on one that is generally human, wider" [în cultura primitivă, experiența artistică depinde de una general-umană, mai largă] (Ursache 1975, 166). However, what the reformed and improved ethnolinguistic variant proposes is that, starting from the forms specific to the linguistic code, we identify certain judgements, more or less individualized, that are owed to the differences between the conditions to exist in the world that are specific to each linguistic community.

Thus, from a genetic point of view, the linguistic imaginary would be the reflux of the cognitive experience of a society and, from a pragmatic point of view, a specific form to model the world, which allows people to move inside it, regulating its behaviours. This appears simultaneously as a *mirroring-description* of the world *in* the language, and as an *interpretation* of the world *through* the language, specific to a certain community. In fact, for this reason, the linguistic imaginary has been connected with the appearance of certain "internal" cultural values, which invest language with the particular power of functioning as a basis for the identity of an endangered culture-ethnicity (Viviand 2014, 24-27).

Respecting these methodological reasons, but also relying on ethnological readings, we will not hesitate to bring ethnographic arguments in order to

decipher the logic of the *bridge/footbridge* metaphor used in traditional Romanian communities to refer to funeral headcloths. Its wide circulation and long-lived use enlist it in the series of *institutionalized metaphors* (Ursache 1975, 219), which any member of the community treats as natural elements of the vocabulary. For the logic of the folkloric individual, the term *bridges* or *footbridges* given to these towels is part of their daily language, being automatically associated with the ritual gesture of placing, transversally, on the path of the deceased from home to the cemetery, these pieces of homemade white linen, that are three ells¹² long. In other areas, the same metaphor is used for a pair of *mânci* [*sleeves*] from a shirt or for a *năframă* [*kerchief*], invested with the same valences.

The ritual gesture of placing the bridge-headcloths¹³ in the path of the deceased is explained through the belief that moving away from this life, [...], before reaching the Heavens, each person has “to cross a multitude of rivers and streams, some smaller, narrower and easy to cross, and others bigger,¹⁴ wider and deeper, over which no one can cross without help” [să treacă peste o mulțime de râuri și pâraie, unele mai mici, mai înguste și mai lesne de trecut, iar altele mai mari, mai late și mai adânci, peste cari nimeni nu e în stare să treacă fără de ajutor] (Marian 2000a, 212). The number of bridges placed differs from one area to another or according to the socio-economic status of the deceased: for instance, three bridges were placed for the poorest, while twelve or even twenty-four for those well-off, who can even benefit from linen shirts instead of

¹² The ell represents an old measuring unit for lengths, equal to 0.664 metres, in Muntenia, and 0.637 metres, in Moldavia, meaning the distance from elbow to wrist (DEX).

¹³ The bridges built, miraculously, in fairytales, show us that they can also be vertical, not just horizontal, unifying the earth with the sky (Evseev 1998, 380). In fact, the semantics of the word *pod* [*bridge*] confirms this: it means both “staircase” but also the part under the roof of a house [*attic*], where the souls of the mythical ancestors were believed to live. Here is where mothers would go to give birth as proved by the mentioning of the *facere în pod* [*birth in the attic*] in fairytales (Șăineanu 1978, 276).

¹⁴ The dirges speak even of a sea that separates this world from the other world. In the Dacian-Romanian mythology, it is imagined as a river that encircles the earth, called *The earth's whirlpool*, marking the realm over which “a person must cross from one world into another, from one realm into another” (Marian 2000a, 309). The river absorbs the souls of the deceased, reason for which they need the help of the various ritual objects in order to cross. According to other beliefs, the bridges are connected to *Heaven's footbridge*, the last of the footbridges that separate the two worlds, which is also the narrowest and the hardest to cross. There, before Heaven, the soul spreads the linen that had been placed before it and so, it can go forward. Folkloric beliefs explain the placement of the linen before the deceased through a reasoning of the magic through similarities: the linen is also *chinuită* [*tormented*], just like the soul, since when it was weaved, it was “beaten” in the loom. As a result, the soul will find ease in the future world for the linen has already paid through its torments (Marian 2000a, 213).

plain headcloths. These *poduri [bridges]* are placed at main thresholds, meaning where the passing from one space to another is done, a fact that attests their function to ensure a smooth path without sudden interruptions or dangers.¹⁵

The first bridge, marking the space-limit between inside and outside, is placed on the house's threshold that is crossed by those who carry the coffin with the deceased, exiting the space of the intimate universe. Another bridge is placed at the gate where the crossing of the community space begins. Next, they are placed at every crossroad where, in fact, the convoy takes pauses, called *rests* in some places. These crossroads, which are either way haunted by evil spirits, are considered very dangerous because the soul is very confused and does not know which way to go. Thus, the purpose of the bridge is to spare them this dilemma and show them the right path.

Not least, the bridges are placed in every location where any type of hindrance that is susceptible to interrupt the deceased's path to the afterlife appears: a gutter, a valley, a stream or a river, even where a "real" bridge already exists. In all these situations, the white linen symbolically substitutes the wooden or metal bridge,¹⁶ magically transforming into a real bridge,¹⁷ in the more dangerous places. Other times, it just complements the material bridge, the linen being placed right on the bridge¹⁸ the convoy is crossing.

¹⁵ The reason for forbidding the making of knots for the deceased is the same: the kerchief or the shoelaces should not be knotted, or the buttons should not be fastened (Berindei 2015, 256). From magical practices, it is known that knots have the power to stop the crossing of demons, diseases or witchcrafts (Eliade 2019, 124). It is precisely why, in this context, they must be unfastened in order to allow the soul to have free crossing. Just as an individual's life means a set of connections, death must bring a liberation, a detachment, an unbinding of all connections with this world, so that the post-existence integration could be made without issues (Eliade 2019, 130).

¹⁶ Folkloric beliefs also explicitly speak of the magical properties of the linen bridge to turn into a real one. Thus, these linen bridges are placed with the purpose that "when [the deceased] will reach the rivers or streams from the afterlife, they will not have to cross swimming or, if they cannot cross, to not be compelled to wander there and here on earth, but, on the contrary, to have what to cross over, *believing that, in the afterlife, every piece of linen or towel turns into a bridge or footbridge that extends over the widest and most difficult to cross waters and over which the soul can then cross just like on any other bridge or footbridge from this world*" (Marian 2000a, 213, s. n. Elena Platon).

¹⁷ This chameleonic trait of the linen is extremely interesting since it can, magically, turn, according to need, both into a body of water, to protect the fairytale hero from chasers, and into a bridge so that the hero could cross the dangerous water. Moreover, fairytales speak even about the power of the linen to dry a big body of water, in order to ensure the crossing to the other side.

¹⁸ *Puntea fântâniei [The well's footbridge]* is also made at the crossing over waters, and it is also created from white linen, having some coins knotted in the corners, which remind of the omnipresent coin in the funeral ceremony, placed in the hand of the deceased for toll payments. Unlike *puntea mortului [the deceased's footbridge]* that is placed several times before them on the path to the cemetery, *the well's footbridge* is placed vertically in order to touch the water, meaning the funeral medium (Ghinoiu 1999, 264).

The presence of the linen bridge close to waters has clearly been connected to the universal beliefs in the existence of waters that separate the two worlds, especially since in the representations of Romanian communities, the world itself is represented as a succession of plateaus separated by waters (Prut 1991, 40). Under these conditions, the linen footbridge is placed before the frail soul to support it in its passing to the afterlife, but also to protect it,¹⁹ to be “protected from the trap of imaginary waters” [ferit de capcana apelor imaginare] (Ciubotaru 1999, 111). The last *bridges* are placed before the cemetery gates and church doors, and then are given as alms to a poor man or woman (who usually also place the bridges) or placed in the coffin next to the deceased, depending on the area (Marian 2000a, 213). The explanation of fulfilling this ritual with strictness is related to the unfortunate effects that not respecting it would have: “Those who do not have bridges placed, will not be able to cross the waters from the afterlife, and will forever wander along their banks” [Cui nu i se pun podurile, acela nu poate trece peste apele din cealaltă lume, ci rătăcește neconținut pe lângă țărmurile lor] (Marian 2000a, 214).

The custom of replacing the bridge with a piece of fabric is attested with other peoples as well: in China, for instance, they use a white toile, the Hittites use some linen strips. For this reason, we must think of another core-concept that probably supports all these universal funeral practices, similar to the linen-bridge metaphor. This could be the fabric’s thread that some ethnologists have connected to the Fates’ thread: “The linen of the bridges is, at the same time, a sure reference to the linen of the Fates, the fabric of destiny that death tears” [Pânza podurilor este, în același timp, o referire certă la pânza ursitoarelor, țesătura destinului pe care moartea o sfâșie] (Ciubotaru 1999, 110). That it is associated with the thread of life is proved not only by the belief in the thread spun by the Fates, but also by the existence of *firul morții* [*the thread of death*], braided in fairytales in someone’s hair in order to cause their death (Șăineanu 1978, 495). This ambivalence allows the thread, which has life and death in its two ends, to also have the extraordinary power to connect the various sides of the world between them. Furthermore, it is also the one capable of creating interpersonal relations, of guiding a person’s soul in all kinds of labyrinthine

¹⁹ At birth, the linen (more precisely the white kerchief) also intervenes with the same protective role. When the newborn is very sick, a white kerchief is placed on their head and then, while saying the consecrated formula: *The servant of God N. is baptised, in the name of the Father... [Botează-se robul lui Dumnezeu N., în numele Tatălui...]*, they are baptised so that they will not turn into a *moroi* [*evil spirit*] (Marian 2000a, 65). It seems that the purpose of these kerchiefs is that of substituting the linen in which the godmother wraps the child after being removed from the font.

spaces through which it moves throughout life and, especially, at the end when it travels from the world *cu dor* [with longing], to the one *fără dor* [without longing].²⁰ Finally, the thread also has the force to cancel the barriers between the two worlds, creating a single one that contains the two faces: the white and the black one.

3. The seed-thread

We would not, however, be able to completely understand the deep meanings of the linen *bridge* metaphor without concentrating as well on the symbology of the thread used to weave the linen. In fact, the thread is nothing more than a micro-metaphor that is just as humble as the *yielding seed*, which has been discussed in a previous study (Platon 2020a). Nevertheless, it plays a major role in the representations related to creation, whether it is the case of the genesis of the material world or about installing some connections between various components of the world or between the various states of human existence.²¹ If, in a different cosmogonic scenario, genesis is explained through the self-development of the universe from its own substance (in line with the theories of modern astrophysics about the expansion of the universe), namely from a *yielding seed* removed by the Devil from the bottom of the seas, legends (for example, the legend *Zidirea pământului* [Building up the Earth], in Pamfile 1913) present another imaginary model that is extremely consistent: that of the *warping* of the earth from the thread unravelled by a hedgehog from a yarn ball received from God.

Therefore, when God wanted to create the earth, He first started “to warp it under the sky, so that they would both be just as big” [să-l urzească pe sub cer, ca să fie deopotrivă de mari amândouă] (Pamfile 1913, 22). However, like most fairytale heroes, God cannot manage on His own, and needs some help²² and, thus, a more unusual participant in the act of creation comes into play, namely the hedgehog. It received *un ghem de ață* [a yarn ball] from God

²⁰ In the Romanian linguistic imaginary of folklore, the world of those who yearn represents the world of the living, and the world of those who do not yearn, the world of the dead.

²¹ To this end, we invoke the widely spread custom of burying people in the same clothes in which they also got married, in those cases where those clothes still fit the person who has reached old age. They were kept throughout their entire life in a special chest, having in mind the thought that they might be used when they leave on the great journey.

²² Some legends say that, out of a mistake made by God, the earth comes out bigger than the sky, reason for which He sends the hedgehog to measure the earth with a thread. Then, God *gathers* in his fists the fresh earth, creating the mountains and the valleys, in order for the earth to fit under the sky (Niculiță-Voronca 1998, 32).

and was sent to *depene* [*unwind*] the earth under the sky.²³ It is possible that the circular form of the hedgehog, similar to the yarn, played an important part in it receiving the role of cosmic creator. Nor should one neglect the spines on its back, which are similar to the stakes used by hedgehogs from other variants of this legend, to measure²⁴ *acres*²⁵ of land.

There are other folkloric texts as well that contain linguistic clues regarding the warping of the earth. Thus, popular beliefs tell us that people avoid killing a hedgehog, since it is considered *un animal binecuvântat* [*a blessed animal*], precisely for having “warped the earth” (Coman 1983, 62). Proverbs, in turn, immortalize the image of a wise animal, since it has contributed to the warping of the earth. As a result, a “skilled” and “very wise” person is said to be “like the *hedgehog when God warped the earth*” [*ca ariciul când a urzit Dumnezeu pământul*] (Ursache 2014, 64), but also that they are a *genuine hedgehog* [*un arici și jumătate*] (Pamfile 1913, 29).

The representation of the creation of the universe after an imaginary scheme modelled by weaving, one of the most archaic domestic activities from the Romanian territory, considering that the loom is attested here as early as Middle Neolithic (Butură 1978, 286), obliges us to give more attention to the humble metaphor of the thread and the warping, equally. Here we can notice that the *weft* created from the threads, usually from hemp, represents another image through which the archaic individual has represented for themselves the manner in which *the nothingness* can be annihilated. Who has ever witnessed the warping act, better understands why it is so fascinating. A completely empty space is filled and, simultaneously, modelled creating an entire network of threads. This same impression of the archaic individual may have led to the birth of the imaginary scheme of *warping* the universe.

However, the weaving of the world is attested with other peoples as well. For instance, in the Indian space, the air is the one that “wove” the

²³ This is how a zoomorphic cosmogonic myth was born, of which Romanian mythologists claim it to be “Pagan and autochthonous” [păgân și autohton] (Coman 1983, 64).

²⁴ The *pace* earth measuring motif is found in carols as well. These ritual texts speak of beforehand calculations that the perfecting of the world needed, since it was initially built crooked: “Ci Ion-Sânt Ion/Trimes de la Dumnezeu/Ca să măsoare pământul,/Pământul cu umbletul/Și cerul cu cugetul./Măsurară, isprăviră,/Ș-a găsit pământ mai mult./Ce să facă cu pământul/Să facă dealuri și munți/Și fântâni cu ape dulci...” [But John-Saint John/Sent from God/To measure the earth,/The earth by pace/ And the sky by thought/They measured and finished/Land was found in plus/What to do with the land/Make hills and mountains/And fresh water fountains...]. Although these elements also have, it seems, collateral influences from the Bible (Kernbach 1994, 197), some ethnologists conclude that, in folklore, the earth is measured materially, *cu umbletul* [by pace], while the sky is measured spiritually (Ursache 2014, 117).

²⁵ This is the reason why it is believed that the hedgehog carries the nickname of *arici-pogonici* [*hedgehog-driver*], which frequently appears in children’s games (Evseev 1998, 36).

universe, connecting, “like through a thread, this world to the afterlife, as well as all beings together” [ca printr-un fir, lumea aceasta cu lumea cealaltă, precum și toate ființele laolaltă] (Eliade 2019, 126), while a *breath* “wove” the human being. This dense symbolism of threads that connect the entire universe shows us that, in the Cosmos and, similarly, in an individual’s life, everything is connected to everything, through an invisible fabric, making up a vast cosmic “weave” [*legat cosmic*].

There are also other scenarios about genesis developed in traditional mediums, which have shown us how important daily experiences were in modelling the manner of thinking. If we think about the influence these experiences have had on the imaginary, we do not do it to minimize the creating role of fantasy, but rather we are aware that it always makes use of data from concrete experiences that it reorders and reinterprets in an original manner. This shows that Claude Lévi-Strauss was right when saying that “even the wildest fantasies are products of the human mind, which is part of the world and which, before knowing it from the outside, contemplates within itself some of the world’s realities, believing that it is engaging in pure creativity” [până și fanteziile cele mai extravagante sunt produsele minții omenеști, care face parte din lume și care, înainte de a o cunoaște pe aceasta în exterior, contemplă în sine însăși unele dintre realitățile lumii, crezând că face un act de pură creație] (Lévi-Strauss 2014, 118).

By comparing the two cosmogonic scenarios invoked here, we notice that, this time, the role of the seed is played by the *thread* with which the hedgehog *unwinds* the earth under the sky. This thread however has a vegetal origin as well, considering that, often, the thread is made from hemp or cotton (not necessarily from sheep wool). The expressions that associate the thread with plants, present especially in fairytales (Șăineanu 1978, 693), and preserved in everyday language, suggest the thread’s intimacy with the vegetal field: *trei fire de usturoi* [*three threads of garlic*], *trei fire de grâu* [*three threads of wheat*] or *trei fire de piper* [*three threads of pepper*], where thread successively substitutes “cloves”, “straws” or “grains”. For that matter, even today we still buy a few *fire de flori* [*threads of flowers*], thread standing-in for “stem”. Furthermore, in everyday language, *the thread* designates as well the smallest part of a material or substance, something proved by expressions such as *a fir de nisip* [*thread of sand*] or *fir de mac* [*a thread of poppy*], where the meaning is that of “grain.” This might be the reason why some ethnologists have spoken of a state of the thread other than the strictly textile one, specific to the pre-Homeric vision, namely that of the *seed-thread*, considered a more complex symbol of the flow of life in Romanian tradition, which semantically implies “the cyclic vegetal area” [zona vegetalului ciclic] (Crețu 2014, 288). The custom of watering the

warper on which the hemp was warped or the place where the warping took place, or of hitting the wooden water pail against the spool from the warper, so that “the linen might grow like water” [să sporească pânza ca apa] (Bot 2008, 69) confirms certain similarities with the fertility practices applied to the grain of wheat as well, thus consolidating the intimacy of the thread-seed relation in the traditional-archaic mentality.

To understand the entire imagistic complex of the thread, we must recall that it is capitalized not only for the creation of the material world, but also for interpersonal relations, meaning for the modelling (making) of the world socially. Thus, the thread from the *girdle* appears, in incantations, as a genuine snake-vehicle of the predestined husband, having the purpose to reunite the enamoured couple: “Brâne, brânișorul meu,/Fă-te șarpe laur,/Șarpe balaur,/...Pas’ la ursitorul meu;/...Cu limbele/Să-l împungi/La inimă/Să-l străpungi/Și la mine/Să-l aduci...” (Teodorescu 1985, 55) [*Girdle, my lil’ girdle,/Turn into a laurel serpent,/Dragon serpent,/...Go to my predestined one;/...With your tongues/Poke him/In the heart/Pierce him/And to me/Bring him...]. The incantations meant to bind and unbind fully harness the thread as well, the enchantress binding²⁶ and unbinding partners: during the incantation, she actually ties the thread from her magical props or unties the knots, in order to potentiate the strength of the word. This way, she thaumaturgically contributes to building the future families: “Să fie (cutare) legat/Cum leg eu este nouă noduri;/De toate să fie legat,/Numai de (cutare) să fie dezlegat...” (Gorovei 1990, 279) [*Let (so-and-so) be bound/As I tie these nine knots;/By everything to be bound/Only by (so-and-so) to be unbound...].**

Moreover, as it happens, in the love lyricism or in carols, the girdle functions as a symbol of the communion of the two or even a metonymic substitute for the girl herself (Herseni 1977, 224). Even the attraction towards the beloved is rendered, in fairytales, with the help of the thread metaphor that is present, even today, in everyday language, where the expression *a-l trage ața spre cineva* [*the thread pulls them towards someone*] is used.

With the help of the same metaphor, the ethereal nature of the thought is embodied as well, in order to control it better. If, in traditional lyricism, the thought appears metamorphosed in meteorological phenomena, such as: *wind*, *whirl*, *lightning*, or, in other register, as *năluca* [*a ghost*] or *săgeată* [*arrow*] (Ursache 1975, 144), in order to symbolise the immaterial and swift quality of its movement, the situation in incantations is different. For instance, in the

²⁶ Here, the meaning of the verb *to bind* is that of “to bewitch,” “to charm,” the etymological information of the words that mean “to bewitch” in Turkish-Tatar languages, Latin or Greek also send to the verb *to bind*, *to make a connection*, which attests that the action of *binding* is “fundamentally magic” and universal (Eliade 2019, 127).

incantation to *silence the man*, the thought can be bound, immobilised, so that it would not go to another person, except towards the woman who resorted to the enchantress, to be loved by a man: “Ce leg și cu ochii nu văd?/Gândul cutăruia îl legai;/Îl legai,/Îl frecai/Îl amuții,/Îl împietrii/Îl încremenii,/Să nu mai aibă gând asupra (cutăruia)” (Gorovei 1990, 238) [*What do I bind and with eyes don't see?/The thought of so-and-so I bound;/I bound,/I rubbed/I silenced,/I froze/I petrified,/So he would have no more thoughts about (so-and-so)*]. However, it is not only the thought that is embodied by resorting to the thread metaphor, but also the sky. In carols, the Virgin Mary frequently appears and spreads the sky over the earth, like a canvas: “Tinse ceriul pe pământ./Cumul tinse,/Nu-l cuprinse...” (Kernbach 1994, 197) [*She spread the sky over the earth./As she spread it,/It didn't cover...]*.

Textile fabrics are present in the ritual of birth as well, *the kerchief* or *head-kerchief* representing the compulsory gifts offered to the midwife for all the help given to the mother (Marian 2000b, 179). They have the purpose of strengthening for life the connection already created between the midwife and the mother of the newborn, but also between the midwife and the *nepot* [*nephew*] (the child baptised by the midwife).²⁷ The mentioning of this gift is done even in the ritual texts that accompany the offering of the ritual ring-shaped loaf and of the *zadie* [*apron*] meant for the midwife, recorded in the Chioar area (Marian 2000b, 215).

For the sake of symmetry, at the end, we return to the funeral ceremony. Regarding the connecting role the thread has in joining two persons, we have proof in the farewell dirges. Here, the deceased is required to leave “un fir” [a thread] in the domestic universe, so that communication could be maintained with loved ones even after their final passing into *the beyond*: “Miresucă, trandafir,/Lasă-mi și mie un fir./Să ți-l pun eu în grădină/Că eu te-oi plânge cu milă./Ți l-oi pune pe ogor/Te-oi plânge când mi-o fi dor” (Prut 1991, 56) [*Little bride, rose,/Leave a thread for me as well./To plant it in the garden/For I'll weep for you'n compassion./I will plant it in the field/I'll weep for you when yearning*]. Other times, with the help of the silk thread, an opening is projected in the impenetrable walls of the afterlife, projected as a *door* or *staircase*, through which a descending access will be ensured between the two worlds: “Roagă-te la săpători,/Să-ți faci groapa cu flori,/Să-ți faci ușa de mătase/Să mai vii și pe acasă” (Caraman 1982, 147) [*Beg your sextons,/To make you a grave with flowers,/To make you a silk door/So that home you might come*].

²⁷ From the information gathered by us in Maramureș (Cetățele village), when the kerchief is offered, the midwife's hands are washed and wiped with a clean towel, in order to restore her ritual purity that was compromised through her involvement in the birth act. It is only after this that the gift is offered.

This thread that has certain magical properties was said to be a clear archaism, gathering in its symbolic content both the fascination for the golden wool that led the Argonauts on a fantastical itinerary, and the mystery of returning from the labyrinth (Prut 1991, 56). Indeed, this shows that the path of the essential journey to the afterlife is in solidarity with the thread metaphor.²⁸ The path, as it is configured in dirges through the advice given to the dead, to go straight and to the right, but never to the left, is mapped in the shape of a labyrinthine spiral. But, in this case, the leading path-thread is a saving one, ensuring the “safe” arrival at the destination. In fact, there is even a decorative motif that is widely spread in the Romanian folkloric creation, found on ceramic, textile or wood objects, called *calea rătăcită* [*the strayed path*] or *drumul pierdut* [*the lost road*], which has been interpreted as a genuine “graphical transcription” of this obstacle-filled path towards the afterlife, a path that is sprinkled with “numerous crosses and unexpected twists *drumuri încurcate* [*the convoluted paths*]” (Prut 1991, 52). We remember however that even the passing of the fairytale hero from this realm to the other realm, found underground, is done with the help of a thicker thread also (more precisely, with a rope). In fact, here, the role of connector of worlds attributed to the thread appears with even more clarity, the journey of the hero having place, physically, in the imaginary scenario of the fairytale.

4. Conclusions

We have thus followed the thread metaphor, taken over from the field of domestic industry, more precisely, from weaving, and used to render the idea of creation, both of the entire world and of the relations between its numerous facets. The concept of *creation* or *genesis* has been proven to be one of the most important imaginary generating nuclei (Platon 2020b, 233). In fact, we could speak of an entire family of metaphors, since *urzirea* [*the warping*] and *pânza* [*the linen*], in its various aspects as *ștergar* [*headcloth*], *basma* [*kerchief*], *batistă* [*handkerchief*], *cămașă* [*shirt*] or *brâu* [*girdle*] are in line with the same imaginary scheme. Without a doubt, these linguistic expressions have contributed to the structuring of the manner in which the individual from our traditional communities has imagined the numerous relations that connect both the elements of this world and its connection with the afterlife. With the help of

²⁸ The thread that appears in dreams is also interpreted as a symbol of the path: “Dreamt thread shows paths. White thread is your path, black thread is the hidden path your enemies continue to take towards your doom” [Ață visând arată drumuri. Ața albă-i drumul tău, ața neagră-i drumul ascuns al dușmanilor ce-1 tot fac spre pieirea ta] (Gorovei, Ciaușanu 2012, 23).

these concepts, the relations between those alive have been established and consolidated, while the relations with the departed have been maintained. It is interesting to ascertain that the folkloric individual has exploited the conceptual scheme of the warping, with which they were familiarised from their daily activities, in order to “seize” the world in their own hands, like a piece of linen, in order to be able to mentally grasp.

By performing a magic act (for any act of creation contains a dose of magic, inevitably associated with the process of transforming the non-existent into the existent), the individual from traditional communities has accomplished a fundamental leap, transforming common everyday gestures, into cosmogonist gestures. In this light, we could say that the bridges weaved from threads not only ensure a calm passing in the afterlife, but also spread out some footbridges towards another, unseen side of the universe, which is otherwise inaccessible to people. For the individual, nothingness cannot be found beyond this world, since it is, in fact, a modern invention (Rudhardt 1990, 310), being unknown to traditional societies. For them, there are numerous footbridges beyond this world, which can be crossed back and forth.

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