

Biblical Motives in the Legend on Flood in the Mythology of the North-West Native Americans

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Abstract

The article covers the theme of flood which is found in the American folklore, namely, in the mythology of the Indians living on the north-west coast. The text "Mount Rainier" is provided as an example. Myths on flood are based on traditional folkloric motives and images of Indians. At the same time, the trace of influence of the biblical story of Noah is noticed in some texts. Appearance of biblical story elements in the text of Indians can not be attributed to the old epoch, since these peoples did not make a cultural unity in the past. This process must have begun after settlement of Europeans on the American Continent, especially after activation of missionaries.

Keywords: Folklore, Flood, Indian mythology, Biblical story

Clash of Civilizations

We often encounter universal motives and plots in the folklore of the world people. Sometimes this resemblance is typological; sometimes it is predetermined by neighborhood and relations of nations. In most cases, the core of the plot is similar, and decoration is different, as they exist within different cultures. But sometimes we encounter a close resemblance between creative works of nations which are rather far away from each other territorially and their historic homelands are divided by the Ocean. In such case, the following questions arise: what causes such resemblance? Did these nations have historic opportunities to communicate? How old is this meeting and do we have to do with a lately created event?

In the article we would like to cover the legend on flood found in the folklore of Native Americans of the North-West coast of America and which strongly resembles the biblical story about Noah.

The legend on the Great Flood is spread all over the world. Scientists assume that legends on the flood were based on really happened cataclysms (Kondratyev, 1984), however, it was given a religious meaning in mythology. The main scheme of myths on the Great Flood is as follows: The Lord punishes people for their bad behavior and sends flood on them. But He informs one sinless man (or couple) about the flood in advance and teaches him (them) what to do to survive (build a boat, climb the mountain or a high tree etc.). This couple becomes the origin of the new humankind or the origin of ethnic or cultural traditions (Toporov, 1992: 324-327).

The oldest among the known versions is the extract

from Sumerian version. It was discovered during excavations carried out in the city of Nippur. The legend is written on a small plate of unburnt clay and according to scientists, it might not have been created later than 2100 (Frazer, 1931: 75). Babylonian and biblical versions of the flood emerged on the basis of the Sumerian legend. Following the Antique period it spread all over the Eurasian Continent. Different decoration and local versions of this myth are found in different areas. This was predetermined by the fact that a borrowed plot was developed in different cultural settings.

Mytho-poetic theme of flood developed in the so-called "New Universe" in a peculiar manner. This theme is found in nearly all myths of Indian tribes (Frazer, 1989: 122-155). There are similar motives and episodes in them, however, there are more differences, as the tribes of different linguistic groups have formed their own mythological systems. American versions have a more regional character, which may be an indicator of their independent origin.

Diverse versions of the myth on flood are found in Native Americans residing on the north-west coast of the Pacific Ocean. There are many traditional images and motives of the Indian folklore, but there are texts where the trace of the biblical story on Noah is felt. We provide one text "Mount Rainier and Flood" to illustrate this.

"From time immemorial, when the universe was young, a Great Spirit became very angry with the people and beasts living on the earth. He used to live on the ice-capped top of Mount Rainier that time.

He became angry because humans and beasts were

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evil and often attacked each other.

The Great Spirit wished to leave one more family of kind people and kind beasts on the earth.

- Throw the arrow to the cloud under the top of the mountain, - He told to the kind man. The kind man did so. The arrow was stuck into the clouds.

- Now throw the arrow to the end of the first one.

The second arrow was stuck into the end of the first one. The man threw the arrows again and again. And the arrows were stuck into the end of each other.

So a long rope of arrows was stretched from the clouds to the earth.

- Now tell your family to climb the rope. Tell the kind beasts as well. But look around so that evil beasts and evil people do not follow them, - the Great Spirit ordered to the kind man.

The kind man told his wife to climb the rope. Their children followed her, and kind beasts followed the children. When everybody was up, the kind man also climbed.

When he stepped on the cloud, the kind man saw that evil people, evil beasts and snakes were also climbing the rope. He took the first arrow out of the cloud and broke the rope off. He saw the evil beasts and snakes rolling down the mountain slopes.

When the Great Spirit was convinced that kind people and beasts were safe, he ordered a strong flood to come to the earth. It was raining cats and dogs for many days and nights. The earth was covered by water; the water gradually raised up the slopes of Mount Rainier. Eventually it reached the height where snow does not melt even in summer. When all evil people and beasts were destroyed, the Great Spirit ordered the rain to stop and watched the flood decline together with the kind man's family. When the ground was dried, the Great Spirit told the kind man:

- Now you can go down with your family and kind beasts.

When the kind man took his family and the beasts down on the earth by the mountain pathways to settle there, they did not encounter any evil beasts or snakes. They are not on Mount Rainier even today" (Gogiashvili, 2010: 148-149).

There are motives and episodes in this myth, which are typical for the Indians residing on the north-west coast. For example, making a chain by arrows stuck into each other and climbing to the sky or a high tree using this chain, relationship of humans and beasts, demonstration of the omnipotence of the Great Spirit. These motives are largely presented in the folklore of Indians of this region (Romanova, 1997). The north-west coast Indians called the Great Spirit the Deity, whom they had imagined as their heavenly father and worshipped everything connected with

it – earth, water, fire and air. *Study of the issues of history and culture of Indians began late. Fundamental discoveries made in psychology and sociology excited the interest of Indians in culture. For example, the French anthropologists Lévy-Brühland Lévi-Strauss studied the consciousness of a modern human through the prism of Indians. Carl Gustav Jung and his followers studied the subconscious and archetypes on the basis of myths of Indians (Jung, 1928).

Today, many serious researches are dedicated to the issues of origin, language and culture of native Americans. Anthropologically they belong to American race. At the same time, the issue of Asian origin of Indians is actively considered. According to genetical studies, ancestors of the modern Indians and the Eskimo resettled to America from the north-east Asia via a narrow strip of land, which was called "Miocene Bridge" by American geologists. It disappeared 12 000 years ago and the Bering Strait emerged on its place (Kondratov, 1984). Migrations occurred by flows from the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic Ages. Settlement of Native Americans on both American continents was carried out over many millenniums. The linguistic structure of indigenous population of America confirms that the American race has not several, but one origin and its homeland is the north-east Asia (Spence, 1914). The Native Americans of the north-west coast are considered to be descendants of the final wave of migration. Therefore, particular interest in them is not surprising and their culture is better studied.

Comparative research of folklore of north Asian nations and Native Americans of the north coast of America has been more frequently covered by folkloric researches and it has confirmed similarities at the level of folkloric motives (Beriozkin, 2001, 116-149). Resemblance of text of Native Americans with the folklore of Siberian peoples confirms that tribes coming from Asia already had a certain fund of plots and motives, but according to these researches, the motive of flood is not found here. Similarity of motives to Semitic tradition, namely, motives of the biblical story on Noah, is felt in the given folkloric text. As in the Bible, the omnipotent God or the Great Spirit sends flood to people as a punishment for their sins in the legend "Mount Rainier". There is no ship, but like in case with Noah, the God warns the kind man about the flood and teaches him how to climb the Mount Rainier to save his family from destruction. He also advises him to take kind beasts with him to restore the life on the earth after the flood.

We do not know what mythological systems of Native Americans looked like in pre-Columbian epoch and whether they had the myth on flood. After Europeans settled on the American Continent and brought their culture

* This God is not forgotten today and a folk festival is dedicated to it. There is a large stadium "Red Rocks" in Gallup, New Mexico which fits 20 000 spectators. The Indian tribe of Navaho annually holds a festival dedicated to the Great Spirit here, which is followed by a grandiose procession. However, it has an entertaining function for modern spectators, not a religious one.

and beliefs, possibly the fund of plots also changed in the Native Americans folklore. Folkloric-ethnographic researches have shown that the myth on flood has a rather diverse meaning in the folklore of Native Americans. Next to traditional motives we often see the trace of biblical stories. When might details of Noah's story have been included in the folklore of Indians?

In the opinion of Franz Boas, folkloric plots (tales) consist of elements – motives, which have cross-cultural dissemination and overcome linguistic barriers (Boas, 1896: 1-11). Existence of common elements in geographically remote traditions can be explained by affinity, but in this case it is clear that inhabitants of America and the Semites did not make a cultural unity in the past. Therefore, appearance of elements of a biblical story in the text of Native Americans can not be attributed to the old epoch. This process must have begun after settlement of Europeans on the American Continent, especially after activation of missionaries. Most of *Native Americans* adopted Christianity. Primarily Catholicism was adopted in the South America and various directions of Protestantism were adopted in the North America. The same is true about Judaeans Indians. Relations with Christians and Judaeans must have been followed by familiarization with biblical stories either in oral or written form. In view of the above, it is not surprising that this acquaintanceship was reflected in folkloric texts of *Native Americans*, including the legend on flood.

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