The symbolism of the linden tree

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Abstract This paper presents in a synthetic manner aspects regarding the importance of the trees in the cultural and spiritual life of the civilizations during the history. The organic link between humans and wood, as a primordial material can be found in the oral creation and beliefs of the traditional craftsmen, in different symbols and rituals during the centuries. Linden trees have a special place in symbolism (sacred tree, the tree that is a symbol of love, fertility, prosperity, fidelity, friendship, peace, justice, altruism, good luck) and also in the popular traditions due to the positive aspects (healing trees, protective trees, trees that are keeping away the diseases and the evil spirits). Their numerous usage as universal and renewable raw material, (wood, bark, fiber), medicinal plant, one that is important in beekeeping and also as ornamental trees, are well known. In this respect the symbolism of the linden tree is detailed in the traditional religious doctrines, astrology, legends and folklore. The linden tree is presented as a Romanian cultural and literary symbol in various situations. There are also described some linden trees with an important local symbolic value.

Key words linden trees, symbol, legends, traditions, culture

Wood as a physical material, has an important symbolic connotation and that of being the universal plastic material (Burckhardt, 1998). The organic relationship between man and wood, that brings life or announces death appears in all cultures since the beginning of time. Wood is important for art in at least three cultural hypostases: mythical, ritual and poetical. In the history of any religion, in the popular traditions of the entire world, in the archaic metaphysics and mystics, iconography and in popular art, there are sacred trees, rituals and vegetal symbols. The sacred texts of the main religious doctrines represent the most important source of the presence of wood as a subject in literature, and also in the ensemble of mentalities regarding the relation between man and wood (Eliade, 1992).

Between the trees of the Romanian mythology that were invested by the tradition with special virtues (the beech, the fir, the locust, the walnut, the apple tree) there is also the holy linden tree. The linden tree has an important place in the Romanian imaginary and it symbolizes divine presence. Linden tree is a sacred tree, an element that accompanies various rituals „a symbol of life and death” (Todoran et al, 1981); it is „the cosmogonic tree” or „the image of the cosmogonic vegetation ” (Vrabie,1975), that embodies existential horizons. There are 40 genders and over 350 species of the Tiliaceae family that can be found, especially in the tropical and subtropical regions. In Romania, lime trees are represented by a single genus (Tilia) with three species: T. cordata Mill. (the most common), T. tomentosa Moench. (the most drought resistant), and T. platyphylllos Scop. (the most water demanding) (Şofletea et al, 2007).

Linden trees can be found in forests together with beech and oak, along the roads or in green spaces, as a solitary tree, in alignments or in grups. The linden tree contributes to the amelioration of the soil and its shade maintains a wet microclimate that is favorable to natural regeneration. The linden trees and also various parts of it, can be used in many ways, both traditional and innovative.

From the pollen and the nectar of the linden tree, a type of greenish, perfumed honey is obtained. The dried flowers are used for medicinal tea and calming baths. From the bark of the tree the fibers were extracted and were used to support the grape wine or the fruit trees. Ropes and mats were also made out of linden tree bark. The fibers are used to treat the inflammation of the legs of the sheep. In constructions, lime tree beams have the role to protect the building against lightning. The wood of the linden tree is used today for making furniture, matches, pencils, drawing boards. Out of the flowers a yellow paint is obtained and the coal made from this wood was used for making the black color in which the peasant’s furniture was painted.

Material and Methods

A bibliographic research was conducted in the fields of culture and science that refers to the symbolism and importance of the linden tree for
various civilizations during history. There are mentioned and analyzed legends, traditions and customs that are practiced by various communities that have as a central element the linden tree. It is analyzed the symbolic importance of this tree and also the way in which it has been present and has influenced the cultural and spiritual life of humanity during history. There are described linden trees that are even now symbols for the places where they can be found.

Results and Discussions

\textbf{The cult of the tree}

The greek philosophers of the Antiquity considered wood as the most important raw material and the alchemists situated it on the same step with the primordial ether (quinta essentia) from which the Logos made at the genesis the four essential substances: earth, water, air and fire (Bailly, 1984).

The most common image of wood is its hypostasis as a sacred tree. Gilbert Durand mentions the presence of the axial tree, or the tree as axis mundi, in all the cultures and beliefs of the most archaic sacred places: the Australian totems, the Semitic, Greek and Hindu primitive temples in which the image of the tree is always presented in a double aspect (as a resumed cosmos and as verticalized cosmos) (Durand, 1977).

Mircea Eliade distinguishes seven groups of images of the „vegetation cults”: the ensemble stone-tree-altar (Australia; Indochina-China-India; Fenicia-Egeea); the tree as an image of the Cosmos (India; Mesopotamia; Scandinavia); the tree as a cosmic theophany (Mesopotamia; India; Egeea); the tree as a symbol of life, of endless fecundity, identified with the fountain of immortality, the tree as a centre of the world and as a support of the Universe (Altaic and Scandinavian peoples, etc.) the mystic connections between the trees and the people (the tree as a genesis of man; the tree as a receiver of the ancestors’ souls; the marriage of the trees; the presence of the trees in the initiation ceremonies etc.); the tree as a symbol for the vegetation rebirth, regeneration, spring and “the years regeneration”.

In the oldest texts of the indian tradition the Cosmos is represented as a giant tree. In the „Upaniṣade”, the Universe is a „reversed tree” that has the root in the sky and the branches spread over the entire earth and in „Bhagavad-Gītā”, the cosmic tree symbolizes not only the Universe but also the position of man in the world (Eliade, 1992).

According to the ancient (6000 years old) asian Feng Shui (the wind and the water), the trees and the shrubs are considered a source of sentiments and hope, while wood is a symbol of new life. In order to attract good luck, prosperity and health, in the practice of Feng Shui art, the trees with long rich and multicoloured inflorescences are much used. They offer a good chi and they contribute to the balance of the environmental elements.

The arabian legends of the 8th century tell about trees that create living beings, some of which have on their branches the heads of the Adam’s sons.

René Guénon gives details about the primordial connection between wood as a material, and the cross as a symbol. He shows the resemblance between the Sefirotic Tree of the hebraic Kabbala and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (René, 2003). A legend of the cross from the Middle Age reveals that wood might come from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and this way it is transformed from an instrument of decadence into an instrument of redemption.

\textbf{Tilia spp in legends and traditions}

In the classic astrology and paganism, the linden tree has the following representations: Sign of the Zodiac (Gemini, Sagittarius, Taurus); Specific Planets (Jupiter, Mercury and Sun); Holidays (Beltane, Litha, Ostara); Element (air); Energy (Yin); Gem (Agatha); Gods (Odin, Arainhod, Freya, Frigg, Ostara, Venus); Bird (turtle dove); Magical use (the attraction of love the balancing of the energy, the neutralization of the negativity).

In China, the linden tree is named the tree of forgetfulness because its energy is soft, gentle and it offers the sensation of warmth and peace. The linden tree clarifies sentiments, tames the rebel hearts and protects love.

The greek mythology links the origin of the linden tree with the story of the fairy named Filira. Filira seduced by Cronos (metamorphosed in horse) gave birth to the centaurus Chiron and transformed herself in a linden tree. Another example of metamorphosis where a character has been transformed in a linden tree is the legend of Filemon and his wife, Baucis. Their marriage and constant love were a model and they wanted to remain inseparable even beyond death. Zeus transformed their house in a temple, Filemon was transformed in an oak and Baucis in a linden tree as a sign of gratitude for their hospitality. The branches of the two trees were united and became inseparable.

According to the greek legends, the linden tree, was a symbol of marital love and of the perfect wife, of simplicity, innocence and kindness. Due to the perfume of its flowers, linden tree became in the Greek mythology the sacred tree of Aphrodite.

In the Hellenic period of Egypt, the masks of the sarcophagus of Fayoun were made of linden wood, which proves the sacred nature of this tree since ancient times.

Herodot mentions the Scythian soothsayers using the leaf of the linden tree in order to obtain inspiration and to guess the future. Herodot also mentions a strange androgynous population, the enarei, they were claiming that they received from Aphroditis the gift of soothsaying and they were practising the divination with a linden tree bark.
In the mythology of Ancient Rome, the linden tree was a symbol of marital love and fidelity in the couple, being in the same time the tree of Venus (the goddess of love) and of Junona (the goddess of wisdom). Young couples were decorating the altar of the house with blooming linden tree branches, in order to have wisdom and stability in love. The poet Ovidiu said that during the holiday dedicated to the goddess of fertility the maidens had crowns with linden tree flowers.

The linden trees had a very profound signification in the early European world. In the European imaginary it was a capital sin to cut this tree because the linden tree was a symbol of friendship and fidelity. Under the crown of the linden tree the sick people hoped to obtain healing, this tree was both a masculine and a feminine symbol.

In the Celtic astrology the linden tree symbolized altruism. The people that were born under the Linden Tree sign (11-17 march) are talented and they love life, they have a rich imagination, are very loyal in love and hate fights and laziness.

In the pre christian Germanic mythology the linden tree was considered a holy tree that had a great symbolic value because it was associated with Freya, the guardian of life, the goddess of fortune, fertility, love and truth. As the legend says, the linden tree could not have been struck by the lightning because Freya was the wife of Wotan, the most important god of the Germanic pantheon. The german tribes that lived two thousands years ago considered the linden tree a tree of peace and justice. The tribal judgement was made under a linden tree. During the blooming, the linden tree was adored and celebrated with dances and music. An old linden tree was the central place where ceremonies for bringing back the justice and peace between people were held. This is a reason for which the tree was associated with the jurisprudence. Linden tree was associated with judgements, even after christianity appeared, the verdicts in some germanic regions were given "under Tilia" (under the linden tree) until the period of Enlightenment.

In the west European Middle Ages linden trees were planted near the churches. The linden tree is associated with the Holy Walburga whose chapel was surrounded by trees.

During the Middle Ages it was a tradition that people that were in love should swear eternal love at the shadow of a linden tree, because it was believed that this tree determines them to say the truth. The Germans considered the linden tree as a "sacred" tree of the lovers because it had the capacity to give fertility and prosperity. According to a popular French belief, a marriage would never fall apart if the grooms were passing at their wedding under two linden trees that had their treetops together.

In many archaeological sites in Switzerland there were discovered clothes impregnated with linden tree extracts. This custom was also preserved by the Slavic peoples until modern times.

In the Slavic mythology, the linden tree (lipa), was seen like a sacred tree, in Poland there are many towns that are named "Święta Lipka" this means "The Holy Linden Tree". This is a national emblem in Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic and the area of the Sorbs. The traditional Slavic name for the month of june in Croatia is lipanj, for july in Poland the name is lipiec and in Ukraine it is lypen/липень. From the name of the linden tree in the Sorb language comes the name of the German city Leipzig. Also in Croatia the currency is kuna which is divided in 100 lipa (linden tree).

In Polish folklore the belief still exists that the linden tree planted in front of a house protects the family from the evil spirits and the lightnings and helps people not to lose their belief in God and not to be overwhelmed by various temptations. The tree is a symbol of peace, good luck, belief, family and happy life. In an ancient Polish legend it is said that it is not good to cut a linden tree because it will bring bad luck to the one who cuts the tree and to his family. In some Polish regions small chapels ca be admired on the side of the road, sheltered by the branches of linden trees, because it is believed that the prayers made under the linden tree are more likely to be listened, because these trees are the favourite trees of the Virgin Mary. It is said that she has often been seen under the linden tree.

The female significancce of the linden tree is certified by the fact that in Estonia and Lithuania the women were bringing food offerings at a blooming linden tree asking for fertility and tranquility in the family.

In the Slavic Orthodox world there is a tradition that the statues of Virgin Mary and the altar screens must be carved from the linden tree wood (lignum sacrum), that is considered holy. This wood was preferred for painting the icons on it, because it is soft, easy to work with and it is not parched. The works of the famous painter Andrei Rubliov “The Holy Trinity” and “The Saviour” that were painted on linden tree wood can still be seen today in the Tretiakov galleries in Moscow.

In Christianity, the linden tree is sacred due to the delicate scent of its flowers. In the folklore of the countries of Western Europe it is said that the linden tree wood protects the house from the evil spirits and also against hailstone. Linden tree branches are very appreciated in the last Sunday of the Easter Fast being used for the decoration of the icons in churches and houses.

In Romania, at the Pentecost, the blooming tree branches are consecrated and then they are brought home by young people in order to be kept near the icons. They last for the entire summer and they can keep away the hailstone and the storms maintaining calm atmosphere in the house. It is said that they protect from the evil and they heal the def ones. At
Easter, according to an old custom inherited from the Jews, the houses were decorated with flowers and green linden tree branches and eggs were also painted with the linden tree flowers. At Saint George’s holiday, the tree branches were used for decorating the households and also for keeping away the evil spirits. In the villages of Bucovina the tombs are decorated with blooming tree branches in order to bring peace to the ancestors.

**Linden tree, a Romanian cultural and literary symbol**

The oral texts of the Romanian traditional lyric and epic present the tree in various stages as motives that are setting in order life, universe the micro and macro cosmos and also as connection points between the earth and the sky.

The presence of the trees in the popular lyric has its origin in the „archaic dacian and dacian-roman mythology” where it is explained the „feeling of communion between plant and man” or „the myth of the forests and the sacred trees” (Vulcănescu, 1985). Romanian culture and traditions were formed in a continuous dialogue with nature. „The civilization of wood”, „The forest is brother with the Romanian” are formulas that express the traditional Romanian beliefs and customs that are influenced by the cohabitation with the forest. Folklore studies notice some notions such as „blessed” or „cursed” trees, this theme being also present in the elevated poetry (Băieşu, 2004). In Basarabian writings, the tree is presented as being sacred and having unusual qualities and features, a protector of the house, a symbol of the continuity of the nation and strengthes of the feelings and human emotions (Evseev, 2001). The permanent relationship between man and wood, the attribute of a living material added to it and also the personification of the tree, are symbolically presented motives in the Romanian customs, rituals legends and fairytales (Botezatu, 2008).

In the traditional fairytale „The sturdy from the linden tree” the main character is a „Tree-God, symbol of fertility who is meant to ensure growth and fecundity, the immortality” (Rusu, 2005). The traditional fairytale The Swung Linden Tree is inspired from the healing and life giving qualities of the linden tree and it describes three crucial moments of the history of the redemption: The Miraculous Birth, The Descending from the sky of Jesus and His Resurrection. In The Story of Dochia and the fortune tellers, the linden tree is planted in order to replace the presence and the eternal love of the disappeared husband. The Legend of the linden tree flowers reveals the eternal love between Albin and Teia metamorphosed in bee and linden tree after their death. In the fairytale The Girl of the Forest, having a linden tree rope is the only way through which men can protect themselves from the evil spirits of the forest.

The beginnings of the traditional songs in which the linden tree is mentioned („The leaf of the linden tree”, „The leaflet leaf of the linden tree”, „The leaflet wood of the linden tree”, „The green leaf of the linden tree”) prove the special importance given to the linden tree during time as a symbol of forest and the gods of vegetation.

The linden tree is present in the lyrics of the traditional poet, suggesting freshness and natural vigour “Green as a flower of the linden tree”.

In ballads it is expressed the solidarity and the love of the brigands for the linden tree. In the folklore of the winter traditions, the wood of the linden tree is associated to the divinity in the carol „Plușașoral”.

The linden tree of Eminescu symbolizes both the cosmic and the earth elements. „The holy linden tree” is presented as a symbol of the infint or of the dilemmas of life. The best known hypostasis of the linden tree of Eminescu is the one of the tree that watches the tomb of the poet, symbolizing life, in which every end is a new beginning „Above me the holy linden tree!Should shake its branch”. In the poetries of Mihai Eminescu, the sentiment of love is associated with nature which resonates with the feelings of the poet. In the lyrics of Grigore Vieru’s poetry the linden tree symbolizes the germination and it has feminine features that enhance the idea of fertility (Rotaru, 1965).

**Linden trees with a great symbolic value**

Urban trees play an important role in the urban living space, by bringing social benefits, improving environmental quality (e.g. removing PM10 from urban air) and also contributing to local identity (McDonald et al., 2007; Nowak, 2007). Tilia ssp. as ornamental trees have a privileged place in European mythology and traditions and this is the reason of their constant presence in urban landscape. Due to its special shape Tilia ssp. are used as main elements in designing solemn, grandiose, inspiring green areas. In Europe, there were identified multi-secular and millenary linden trees. Of all these linden trees, we mention a few examples with a great symbolic value:

A plantation of Tilia cordata, of Westonbirt Arboretum, Gloucestershire, United Kingdom, is approximately 2.000 years old.

The linden tree of Neuenstadt am Kocher, in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, is supposed to have 1.000 years.

The old linden tree of Naters, Switzerland, has been mentioned in a medieval document of 1357 (described by the author as a magnam - giant).

The linden tree of Najevnik (Najevska lipa) has been reported as the thickest tree of Slovenia (a 700 years old Tilia cordata).

Eminescu’s linden tree - (Tilia tomentosa) with an age of approximately 500 years, is located in the Copou Parc of Iasi and is one of the most important monumental trees of Romania (Foto1).

The hybrid linden tree of Bărnova, is a natural hybrid linden tree Tilia x haynaldiana Simk. (T. platyphyllos x T. tomentosa) 660 years old. It is located
10 km south-east of Iași, near the monastery of Bârnova and it competed for the national title "The tree of the year" in 2011 (Foto 2).

The 500 years old linden tree of Leliceni, Harghita county, 20 m height, 390 cm the circumference of the body, won in 2011 „The tree of the year in Europe” contest. During the centuries, the story of this linden tree went hand in hand with the destiny of local people and the history of the place. The tree was a witness of Tatar invasion, surviving the drought of 1717 and the hailstone of 1854. This legendary tree is an important symbol of the region, being declared a monument of nature, according to the Registry of the Harghita County monuments in 1992 (Foto 3).

St Lawrence’s Linden Tree is a multisecular linden tree, protected by law, 30 m height, grown inside the cricket court of "St Lawrence Ground" in Canterbury, Kent. It fell naturally because of a storm in 2005 (Foto 4).

Edigna’s linden tree ("The 1000 years old linden tree") - (Tilia platyphyllos), is declared a monument of nature and is situated near Sankt Sebastian church in Fürstenfeldbruck, Germany. The name of the linden tree comes from the name of the St Edigna von Puch, the daughter of Henry the First, king of France, who fled to Bavaria (according to tradition), in order to avoid the marriage that her father has planned for her. It was said that she lived for 35 years as a hermite in the cavity of a tree (Foto 5).
Conclusion

In mythology, folk tradition and literature there is a cult of the sacred tree, of the natural primary landscape where the linden trees have a special place and role, due to their beauty and also to their numerous uses. The symbolism of linden tree is vast and has positive connotations in universal culture. In the Romanian imaginary the linden trees are a constant presence as they are in the traditions connected to religious celebrations. The positive ritualic role of the linden trees is well determined in different doctrines and legends all over the world. Linden trees make it possible for us to be closer to the sacred archaic places and traditions, but also to nature and life in general.

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