

# CONNECTING THREADS

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**Abstract:** The paper is about symbolic meanings of spinning, the material (fibres – un-spun wool) for spinning and the results of this activity (thread, yarn). On the basis of comparison of the records of beliefs from different sources – ancient poetry and treatises, European folklore and ethnological data, and iconographic material – the author argues that in European traditional folk conceptions, spinning and the material and products associated with it refer to basic aspects of human existence, birth, fate and death. While un-spun wool is related to the otherworld, spinning and thread refer to the world of the living, link this world and the otherworld, and allow the transition between the world of the living and that of the dead.

**Key words:** birth, death, fate, otherworld, spinning, supernatural beings, thread

The paper is about symbolic meanings of spinning, an activity which formed an essential part of women's work at least from the early Neolithic period onwards, when the technique of continuous-draft spinning spread, probably in association with wool<sup>1</sup> (Barber 1991: 50). Regarding the importance of this work for human beings it is no wonder that the activity itself, as well as the implements for spinning<sup>2</sup> (such as distaff, spindle, spindle whorl, and spinning wheel), and also the material for spinning (i.e. un-spun wool, flax, hemp etc.), as well as the result of the process (thread, yarn) acquired many symbolic connotations, which are associated with the very basic foundations of human existence such as birth, death, and fate.

However, in order to understand the symbolism of the activity, which was known almost worldwide, I do not believe that it suffices to stay within the framework of the data given in any particular micro-ethnographic context. Europeans (and in many regards also peoples from a wider geographic region than Europe) shared many aspects of their worldview as has been convincingly argued in abundant research so far (see, e. g., Pócs 1999: 25; 2008: 89, 100; Vaz da Silva 2002: 2–10; 2003: 335; 2008: 2) and only by comparing ethnographic and folklore particularities from different places can we disclose a common core of beliefs related to spinning. Since records of belief, related to spinning and thread, stem from a vast period of time and very different places and genres, I found it necessary to compare all the sources – from ancient trea-

tises, poetry, folklore and ethnological data, to iconographic material. Naturally, there are variations and specific details which differ, but essentially the same or similar ideas keep cropping up, in spite of geographic and temporal gaps between the sources.

## SPINNING AND SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

One thing that is immediately striking, when taking into account European folklore, is the frequency with which spinning and spinning implements, yarn, thread, balls of wool, are associated with supernatural beings. Usually they are associated with female mythical beings and only exceptionally with male ones, a fact which is certainly understandable, as spinning was generally considered women's work (cf. Barber 1991: 4). Let me first make a brief overview of these beliefs, whereby I will deliberately choose those from widely distant times and areas so as to demonstrate that widely distant beliefs, attached to quite different supernatural beings, are in fact very similar.

In a Serbian folk poem<sup>3</sup>, recorded by Vuk S. Karadžić, a well known 19th century Serbian folklorist, a *female fairy* is invited to spin:

*Oh, cherry tree, little cherry tree,  
Raise your branches,  
Beneath you fairies  
Dance a wonderful round dance,  
At their head is Radiša,  
With a whip she shakes the dew,  
She leads two fairies,  
And to the third she says:  
"Come with me, fairy!  
At my mother's place  
You will sit in the cold,  
**And spin the thin thread  
On the golden spindle.*** (Karadžić 1972: 189, no. 25)

A spindle is a frequent attribute of various eastern Slavic supernatural beings, such as *pjatnitsa*, *kikimora*, *mara*, even *domovoi* who is male (cf. Valencova 2001: 103). According to folk beliefs from 19th century northern Russia (Olonetsk and Vologodsk provinces), *mara* (*kikimora*, *shishimora*) sits on the stove and spins yarn at night when everyone goes to sleep, but may also weave, knit, crochet and sew. Sometimes she pounds hemp or yarn and people may see her with a spindle or spinning wheel or assuming the shape of a wheel. A mocking verse referring to lazy girls also mentions *kikimora* in relation to

spinning: *Sleep, girl: kikimora will spin and your mother will weave for you.* (Afanas'ev 1994 (1869)/2: 101–102; Maksimov 1989 (1903): 41–42; Krinichnaia 1995: 5–6)

*Rusalka* is similar to *mara* and *kikimora* in this respect: according to folk beliefs in the Kiev environs (Ukraine) *rusalka* works with thread, yarn, and un-spun wool, and she likes to spin or knot the yarn. Similar is the Ukrainian *nichka*, a supernatural female being who, especially on Friday nights, spins where women leave their sheaves of hemp. Ukrainians also know a local variant called *komokha*, who likewise spins (Afanas'ev 1994 (1869)/3: 139; Krinichnaia 1995: 6–7).

Baba Yaga who otherwise appears only in fairytales and is not a subject of folk belief, is also associated with spinning. Her hut is continually turning around on its axis like a spindle and rests on a bird's (usually a chicken's) foot which sometimes has a spindle for a heel (Kilbourne Matossian 1924: 332). In a fairytale published by Nikolai Onchukov in 1908<sup>4</sup>, we read: *A hut stands on a chicken's leg, on a spindle heel, it spins in circles and you can't see the door [...] in the hut sits a woman, spinning silk, spinning long threads, the spindle spins and the threads fall beneath the floor.* This is a depiction of Baba Yaga spinning with a spindle. The result of her spinning is a golden or silver ball of thread, which she also has the ability to turn herself into. In some fairytales she appears in a form of a spindle, or her hut is shaped like a spindle (Krinichnaia 1995: 9–11). In addition, Baba Yaga carries the implements used for the fabrication of cloth which relate to divination through the “spinning of fate” practised by her and her sisters (Farrell 1993: 735).

According to traditional German beliefs, an invisible little goblin (*lutin*<sup>5</sup>) was supposed to put a spinning wheel in motion if people did not twist the drive band of it<sup>6</sup>. In Scotland people used to pull the drive bands off the spinning wheels at night to prevent supernatural beings from spinning on the wheels (Sébillot 1981: 143).

In France (Saintonge), a belief was recorded at the beginning of the 19th century, among the peasant population, that *fades* and good spinners (*bonnes filandières*) walk around at night with a spindle in their hands and foretell the future (Devlin 1987: 84). Other supernatural beings, such as *fées* or *lutins*, came looking for yarn at night or worked on spinning wheels (Sébillot 1981: 142). In a French legend a fairy hides inside the yarn and is “locked” inside it as if she were in prison – if someone caught her and wrapped her up into a ball, the fairy would escape from the ball and free herself (Borghini 1999). In the province of Berry, George Sand (born 1804) recalled from her childhood speaking of a female spirit – a dwarf or a bad fairy – who liked to mix and knot the yarn (Devlin 1987: 87).

In Italian legends, balls of yarn are associated with witches (who can appear in the form of balls of yarn, or can use balls of yarn as a sort of evil means for casting spells), but also with other supernatural beings that have negative and demonic abilities (Borghini 1999). According to Portuguese legends, recorded from the 19th century onwards, enchanted maidens called *moura encantada* endlessly weave and participate in spinning evenings (Cardigos 2008: 113).

In the Finnish tradition, the *pleiades* were pretty young women who were highly skilled at spinning and weaving (Catháin Ó 1995: 123). In Lithuanian legends recorded in the 20th century, weaving is performed by witches and female supernatural beings called *laumė* (Vėlius 2002: 21–22).

In addition to supernatural beings, who themselves spin or are in one way or another associated with spinning, spinning implements or products, we find throughout Europe many beliefs about the supernatural beings (Pechtra, Holda, Holle and others), who in certain periods of the year, according to folk beliefs, watch over spinning, punish lazy spinners, make sure that no spinning is done on days when spinning is forbidden etc. Many legends tell of the visits of these beings, and how they punish spinners who violate spinning taboos or fail to finish their spinning on time etc. They are frequently described in the act of spinning or as being equipped with flax, spinning tools etc.<sup>7</sup> (Rumpf 1976; Kuret 1997, 1989/II: 458; Timm & Beckmann 2003; for an overview see Mencej 2010).

When all across Europe we find such a wealth of legends and records of folk beliefs about supernatural beings related to spinning, then there must obviously be a significant relation between them. Surely it cannot be a mere coincidence that the link between supernatural beings and spinning is repeated across such a vast geographic area. The question, however, remains what the meaning of this relation is and why we come across it so often. Spinning certainly played an important economic role in traditional communities, but the answer undoubtedly lies in its symbolic rather than its economic function. In the following section I will argue that spinning is a typical activity of supernatural beings, which by definition dwell “in between” – precisely due to their liminal position between the two worlds.

## SPINNING AND THREAD CONNECTING THE TWO WORLDS

The Portuguese legends about the *moura*, the enchanted women who spin and weave their “endless thread – the signal that their job is endless” (Cardigos 2008: 113) – make their liminal status very clear:

*... A woman found a golden thread on her way to church. She pulled it and realised that the thread never came to an end, so she said to herself*

*“this is enough for me to be rich”, and she cut it off, for she did not want to miss the holy mass. As soon as the thread was cut it melted into blood and the woman heard shrieking and cursing. Had she delayed her pulling of the thread until mass was finished, the moura’s enchantment would have finished.* (Cardigos 2008: 113)

In her discussion of this legend Isabel Cardigos places particular emphasis on the connection between the *moura*’s state of enchantment, which is already in itself a liminal position, and her endless thread: “We can see the clear homology between the *moura*’s endless thread and her endless unholy state of enchantment ...” (2008: 113). The thread that never came to an end thus obviously indicates *moura*’s liminal, “in-between”, status.

In fact, we often find a (ball of) thread that never comes to an end in the hands of supernatural beings (fairies) in Slavic folklore, even if the fairy herself is not always the one doing the spinning. The balls of thread or cloth seem to stem from the otherworld as they never end and keep coming up as long as the winding up is not broken by cutting the thread or trespassing on a taboo. The thread thus creates a link between this and the otherworld.

In Russian folklore forest women give people balls of thread, which never run out unless being purposefully unravelled completely (Krinichnaia 1995: 7).

Slovenian legends tell about a fairy (*vila*, *žalik žena*), occasionally about a fate (*rojenice*)<sup>8</sup> giving those who were kind toward them a ball of thread or yarn that never runs out, as long as they never say that it has “come to the end” or that they have “found the end”<sup>9</sup>. The following legend was recorded in Slovenia in 1857:

*One of the fates, who lived at the top of the Mladi vrh mountain, was walking with a silver jug to milk Groselj’s cows, which were pastured thereabouts. None of the herdsmen dared to say anything, because who knows! So, since none of the herdsmen said anything bad to her, she once brought Groselj some yarn and said: “This is in payment for your hospitality: wind it and it will never run out, only you may never say: “It has come to the end” or “I found the end”. You had better say: “The thread has run out” or “I found the thread”. If you don’t say it like that the yarn will run out immediately.” They did what the fate told them to and they became rich. They wound and they wound, but there was always as much yarn as they had started with. The herdsman who drove the cattle home in the evening had to wind the yarn until late at night<sup>10</sup>. Since herdsmen are usually lazy, one evening this one got sick of it and complained: “If only once, by the devil, just once this yarn would end!” And in fact that very evening the yarn ran out.* (Kelemina 1997: 169, no. 139)

A Lithuanian legend about *Laumė* from 1961 likewise tells of a woman who found a piece of cloth stretched out for bleaching on the ground, obviously in the form of a band which she wound up like a ball of thread:

*She [a woman] bent down and started rolling one up when she heard a [Laumė's] voice say: "Cut and sew from this cloth, but don't look at the end. Then it will last you as long as you live." So she took the roll of the cloth home and cut and sewed from it many years. One day she became bored and unrolled the cloth all the way to see what was inside. She didn't find anything interesting, just the end. And so ended the Laumė's cloth. (Vėlius 2002: 23, Laumė's Cloth)*

In all three legends, Portuguese, Slovenian and Lithuanian, "finding the end of a thread or yarn or cloth" by breaking it and thus "making" it end (Portuguese), literally "finding the end" (Lithuanian) or verbally "wishing for the end" (Slovenian), obviates the eternal winding of the yarn (cloth). This way the connection with the otherworld from which the yarn or thread is clearly coming is cut off and riches are prevented from entering this world (the golden thread becomes bloody, i.e. useless, in the Portuguese, and the cloth in the Lithuanian and thread in the Slovenian legend run out). That it is precisely the thread which makes a link to the otherworld is particularly obvious in the Portuguese legend, since breaking the thread before it is pulled up completely makes it impossible for the *moura* to finally release herself from her enchanted state and keeps her stuck in the liminal world, which according to traditional concepts of space already is a threshold to the otherworld.

A ball of thread in fairytales has similar symbolic value of also making a link between the worlds. In the Russian fairytale, about Prince Ivan and White Polyanin, a small ball of thread which an old man gives to Prince Ivan unwinds through the dark forest and leads Ivan in his search for the hero – in fairytales forests usually represent the hero's entrance to the otherworld<sup>11</sup> – where his supernatural adventures begin. Similar is the function of a rope which was, however, not made of a thread, but which Ivan and White Polyanin made from strips of bull's hide; it is so long that "one end is in this world and the other is in the otherworld" (Afanas'ev 2007: 216–23; cf. Borghini 1999: 238–40).

The idea that thread or yarn can create a connection between the worlds is illustrated in a different fashion in a Croatian (from the parish of Križevci and Zagorje) record of belief from 1851 about a fairy (*vila*) who teaches women how to cure and help people:

*[...] on every old Friday a fairy (vila) came from the heavens in order to teach women how to heal people and help them. These women have to go with un-braided hair to a green grove, and there two of them would climb*

*any old tree with the fairy and while they were listening to the fairy they had to eat yarn in order to better remember what the fairy was teaching them; when they had learned, they became vilenicas. These two women in the tree, and everyone else who was listening beneath the tree, are connected by a thread from the yarn which they hold in their hands, and as long as the fairy is speaking, they have to spin together, or as the people say, pound the thread. (Those beneath the tree do not eat the yarn). Anyone who doesn't do so can't hear the fairy, and doesn't learn a thing. (Čiča 2002: 90)*

The women thus become *vilenicas*, i.e. they are given a name that is derived from the word *vila*, because they acquire some of her abilities and characteristics. In order to understand at all and to better remember what the fairy taught them, the women have to eat yarn, they are connected by a thread which they hold in their hands, and at the same time they have to spin together or at least pound the thread. Clearly the connection between the world of people (women *vilenicas*) and the world of supernatural (*vila* – ‘fairy’) was made possible only through various activities related both to spinning and to thread.

What all the folklore material so far shows is that spinning and spun thread in folk beliefs and legends (and in fairy tales) have a role of providing linkage between the world of the living and the world of the dead, that they connect the two worlds. Since supernatural beings, by definition, dwell in-between the worlds, a frequent relation between supernatural beings and thread (ball of thread, spun yarn, spinning ...) should not strike us as unusual but rather as obvious.

## **THREAD AND THE SOULS OF THE RESTLESS DEAD**

If thread therefore forms a connection between the world of the living and that of the dead, it should come as no surprise that thread, yarn and spinning are also attached to the souls of the dead, although I have found only a few examples of such a belief. These refer to the restless dead, who according to traditional folk beliefs cannot pass into the otherworld and are stuck in liminal space between the two worlds (cf. Vinogradova 1999: 48), just as supernatural beings are. According to the most common scholarly interpretation, supernatural beings actually evolved from the souls of various categories of dead (Vinogradova 2000: 22–26; cf. Briggs 1978: 35, cf. also 26–38).

In the French *L'Évangile des Quenouilles* from the middle of the 15th century one reads that, besides supernatural beings, revenants too return at night in search of a thread or in order to work on spinning wheels (Sébillot 1981:

142–143). Similarly, two narratives, recorded at the beginning of the 21st century in the Sora Valley in Slovenia, state that the souls of the dead spin or even appear in the form of a ball of thread or wool. Thus in Spodnje Danje (Sorica), whenever people heard strange noises on the roof, they said that they were hearing the rolling of bloody balls of wool which were spun by dead sinners:

*She was spinning. She kept on going up and back as if she was spinning. She spun the wool and that woman must have done something, I don't know what, so that her conscience was bothering her. [...] Whether it was some bloody crime she committed, God knows what, nobody knows. (Pintar 2007: 28–29)*

Another narrative tells of a man who came back after his death in the form of a ball of thread to scare his grandson:

*[...] Even in his old age, Gustelj would talk about how death came for his grandfather. He was left with his grandfather, whom he never obeyed and always annoyed. His grandfather warned him that he would come back to haunt him after he died, because he was so naughty. And he actually did. Whenever Gustelj lay on the stove at night<sup>12</sup>, there was a rustling sound in the bench by the stove and a ball of wool rolled out across the floor and disappeared through the closed window. (Pintar 2007: 28–29)*

The connection of the restless souls, who for various reasons (usually untimely or violent death, suicide, sins, incorrectly performed or incomplete funeral rituals etc. – cf. Risteski 1999: 92–96; Vinogradova 1999) cannot proceed to the otherworld after their death and remain in the liminal space between the worlds, with thread, yarn, balls of wool, spinning etc. additionally indicates their “in-between” status, as we have already seen in folk beliefs about supernatural beings.

## **THREAD AS A BRIDGE TO THE OTHERWORLD**

Now, if a result of spinning – (balls of) thread, spun yarn – symbolises a link between the world of the living and that of the dead, as we have seen in folk legends about supernatural beings and restless dead, then it is noteworthy that we find the same idea explicitly represented in folk notions of a *bridge* which souls have to pass on their way to the otherworld – which can be depicted in the form of a thread.

In Thompson's Motif-index we find the motifs *Bridge of thread on way to world of dead* under number F152.1.7 and *Rope bridge to otherworld* under number F125.1.5. An old English song sung at wakes compares the bridge,

along which souls must travel to the otherworld, to a thread: *the bridge of dread, no broader than a thread* (West 2007: 390).

In French folk beliefs related to the feast of Saint Cordier (the name derives from the same root as “cord”) we find the same idea. If an interpretation of French folk beliefs and customs by Claude Gaignebet and Marie-Claude Florentin is to be believed, celestial rope allegedly twisted by St. Cordier on the 25th of January (the feast day of the Conversion of St. Paul, celebrated as Rope-makers’ Day in France), i.e. on the day when according to their interpretation souls circulate between the worlds, creates a link between the two worlds: people and gods climb and descend on the rope (Gaignebet & Florentin 1974: 65).

In the account of an initiation of a Nganasan shaman he describes his path during a shamanistic séance: “When I am looking for a sick man, the road is narrow like a thread [...] on this (road) you go for the breath of the man.” (Tolley 2009: 43) Obviously, during the shamanistic healing performance the shaman’s path leads to the otherworld, be it the upper or lower one, so here, again, we have the road to the otherworld depicted as a thread<sup>13</sup>. Similar notions about the rope leading to the sky which is being lowered specially for the shaman to climb up are found in ritual poems of Ostyak (Khanty) and Yurak (Nenets)–Samoyed shamans as well as by Yakuts (Sakhas) shamans (Elijade 1985: 178, 183).

However, hair seems to have the same function of a bridge to the otherworld as a thread does. Especially in Greek (Parpulova-Gribble 1996: 172; cf. Dundes 1996: 195) and South Slavic folklore hair is more frequently found than thread, perhaps additionally emphasising the narrowness of the passage.

According to beliefs from Serbia (several regions) Paradise is entered by crossing Hell (both *interpretatio christiana* of the otherworld). A long hair is laid over the pit of Hell and the souls of the dead must travel across the hair: the righteous make it across and sinners fall into Hell (Zečević 1982: 28–30). In a Serbian folk poem from the 19th century we read about St Peter’s mother who would like to enter Paradise and is told by St Peter to come to Paradise along the hair – however, when she starts climbing the hair it breaks and she falls into Hell (Karadić 1969/I: 100–101, no. 208, Majka Svetoga Petra). In the village Dupljaja near Bela Crkva in Serbia, a poem was recorded in 1969 which speaks of a hair leading to the otherworld:

*There is a thin hair,  
Across which every soul must pass,  
All pass, one cannot,  
When it gets to the middle of Hell,  
The thin hair breaks,  
And it falls into the middle of Hell.* (Zečević 1982: 29)

Ideas about (foot) bridges, beams, and hair that the soul must cross on its way to the otherworld are frequently interwoven in Serbian, Montenegrin and Bulgarian folklore. In villages along the Danube in Bulgaria, for example, a belief was recorded that the way to the otherworld leads along a hair or a narrow footbridge (Zečević 1982: 29). Montenegrins in Kosanica say that upon death, the Archangel Michael sits on the chests of sinners, takes their souls and carries them up to heaven, and ....

*[...] as soon as he comes to the first wall, he allows the soul to pass over a single **strand of hair**, which passes like a **bridge** over an enormous abyss, but it looks like a **beam** to people, and is attached to the other wall, on the other side of which is Heaven. If a sinful soul walks on the hair, the sins are too heavy, the hair breaks and the soul falls into Hell where devils await it and torture it.* (Vukanović 1935)

A belief from Podibar, Serbia, is quite similar to the Montenegrin belief: people say that the Archangel waits for souls in the otherworld and measures their good and evil deeds, then sends the souls towards Heaven, on a path which leads across Hell. If the soul is righteous, the path across Hell seems like a wide bridge, but if the evil deeds outweigh the good it seems to be “*as thin as a hair*” and the soul then falls into Hell (Nodilo 1981: 523).

However, the idea of a hair (which acts as a bridge to the otherworld) is not as far from the idea of a thread as it might seem at first glance. Apart from an obvious likeness between a thread and a hair, hair was once used as fibre material for spinning and weaving. Archaeological findings show that human hair was used as a fibre material in, for example, a few objects from the 7th millennium BC site Nahal Hemar in the Judean desert (Barber 1991: 25, 30). Pieces of cloth woven from human hair were also found in a grave from the 9–10th centuries in Staré Město in the Czech area (Moravia) (Kostelníková 1973: 3–7).

Hair can also represent the material for spinning in folklore. A Lithuanian legend tells of a woman who invites “spinning goddesses” to spin flax for her. When the spinning goddesses were spinning her flax [...] *the woman realised she was in trouble, because no matter how much flax she brought, it was never enough to keep them busy. She knew if they ran out of flax **they would start spinning her hair*** [...] (Vėlius 2002: 19–20, The Spinning Goddesses).

Likewise, the equation of fibres with hair is obvious in the Lithuanian variant of the fairytale type *The Household of the Witch* (ATU 334). A girl observes the witch’s homestead:

*[...] the gates are closed with a human arm and the door with a human leg; human heads hang out on the fence; inside the house a human stom-*

*ach full of blood is put on a table and human hair is bundled all over the floor. The witch asks what the girl has seen and explains the true meaning of the strange phenomena observed: the gates are closed with a bolt; the door is secured with a hasp; the heads are her pots instead; the stomach is her bowl of sauce; and **the hair is flax fibres for spinning.*** (Racénaité 2008: 135)

## THREAD AND CHILDREN

We have seen so far that the symbolic role of spinning, thread, and yarn, lies in their providing a link between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This can be seen in spinning etc. related to supernatural beings and the restless dead who dwell in the liminal space between the worlds, but also in folk beliefs about a thread (and hair) making a bridge to the otherworld. A thread, according to traditional folk conceptions, can thus lead from the world of the living to the world of the dead as a bridge which souls pass on their way across. But the thread also leads in the opposite direction.

As Francisco Vaz da Silva has convincingly argued in his book, *Archaeology of Intangible Heritage*, according to archaic European mythological conceptions new souls come to this world from the world of the dead: "... new life is a recycling of soul, so that procreation involves cyclically wrenching life out of death." (Vaz da Silva 2008: 46) In Slavic folklore we sometimes find folk beliefs about newborn children arriving from the otherworld via a thread. It is perhaps not without significance that such folk notions have been recorded in Polesye, a region on the border between Belarus and Ukraine, where most archaic Slavic linguistic and folklore elements have been preserved. Typically, parents' responses, to their children's questions about their origin: *Where do children come from?* contain the motif of children descending from Heaven (the Christian otherworld) by a thread: *God lowered [you] on a **thread*** (Khomorsk); [He] *lowered you from Heaven on a **golden thread***; *God lowered you from Heaven on a **red thread*** (Golubica) etc. (Vinogradova 2000: 351).

In relation to these beliefs about a thread, by which children are lowered from the otherworld to ours, one possible interpretation of the magical practices of Serbian and Turkish women, who tie threads onto their children when they are born and make knots on them<sup>14</sup> believing that they will not give birth to another child until the knots are undone (Saintyves 1987: 88), would be to understand this praxis as a symbolic binding of the thread which could potentially allow the arrival of more children to this world.

## SPINNING AND THE MAKING OF A CHILD

In the context of spinning, the relationship between a child being born into this world and its state before birth, i.e. in the otherworld, is associated with the opposition between *spun thread* and *un-spun wool* – which again connects the symbolism of spinning and thread to the link between the worlds.

On the basis of a passage from the Old Norse saga from the 14th century, Karen Bek-Pedersen argues that the image of the wool-basket is “an image relating to birth with the wool-basket as a symbolic womb and the un-spun wool in the basket as a piece of textile that is not yet made or a person who is not yet born or fully made”:

*Sigurðr went to consult his mother, who was skilled in magic. He told her that the odds against him were heavy, at least seven to one. She answered: “I would have kept you for a long time in my wool basket if I knew that you would live forever; but it is fate which rules, and not where a man is from; better to die with dignity than to live with shame.”* (Orkneyinga Saga 11, Flateyjarbók, ca 1387–1395; from Bek-Pedersen 2008: 176)

The making of a textile would then be akin to the making of a person, a kind of a birth-process, and the wool-basket would be the space in which this work took place, namely the *dyngja*<sup>15</sup> or the womb. As keeping a person inside a wool-basket is presented as an image of ensuring that he would live forever, this would, according to Bek-Pedersen, mean that what is in the wool-basket has not been born yet. So Sigurðr’s mother is actually saying to him that being born means that one must eventually die and that no one who has been born can live forever (Bek-Pedersen 2008: 173–174).

Mary Kilbourne Matossian argues for the same symbolic connection between the spinning of a thread and body tissue: “Understanding the un-spun wool in the basket as a piece of textile that is not yet made or a person who is not yet born or fully made, and the making of a textile as the making of a person, a kind of birth-process, helps us understand yet another parallel: a symbolic connection between thread and body tissue.” She emphasises that “in the primitive symbolism of Western Civilisation, to spin and weave is to create body tissue.” (Kilbourne Matossian 1973: 331)

The idea seems, indeed, to be reflected already in some of the very oldest texts. In the Vedas, for instance, there is a notion in which, according to Martin L. West, the continuity of human life is conceived as a drawn-out thread or lengthening strip of fabric (West 2007: 380): *Who set the seed in him and said, / Still be the thread of life spun out?* (Atharva Veda 10.2.17)

In Slavic folklore a mother is often represented as a distaff, but the relation between, on the one hand, spinning yarn on the spindle and, on the other hand, a child is the same nevertheless. Riddles present the distaff as an allegorical image of a mother who is spinning the thread of life, while the yarn on the spindle is considered a child growing in her womb, e.g.: *The mother shrinks, the child grows. What is it? Spinning. / The mother thins out, the child grows* etc. (Badalanova Geller 2004: 231).

This image, in the opinion of Badalanova Geller, also shaped the metaphorical representation of “life-span” as “yarn-spun” (2004: 231). She claims that the image of the basket is often allegorically intertwined with the image of the womb. Such a parallel is attested in Christian iconography; icon painters persisted in painting a basket full of yarn as a necessary attribute of the Virgin Mary at the moment of the Annunciation, thus emphasising an allegorical image of the Virgin as “the basket of the flesh of Christ” (Badalanova Geller 2004: 221–222). The source of this image is considered to be the apocryphal Book of James (The Protevangelium of James) from the mid-second century:

*Mary took the scarlet and spun it.*

*And she took the pitcher and went out to draw water, and behold, a voice said, “Hail, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you, you are blessed among women.” And she looked around to the right and to the left to see where the voice came from. And, trembling, she went to her house and put down the pitcher and took the purple and sat down on her seat and drew out the thread. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before her and said, “Do not fear, Mary; for you have found grace before the Lord of all things and shall conceive by his Word.” (Protevangelium 10:2, 11:1–2)*

Badalanova Geller argues that the *spinning=conceiving* mythological pattern actually forms the substructure of the Annunciation to the Spinning Virgin in the Protevangelium (Badalanova Geller 2004: 231). The pattern must certainly be older than the 2nd century. Many scholars claim that Mary here (and elsewhere) actually inherited many characteristics from an ancient Mother Goddess. As Anne Baring and Jules Cashford point out, “the dynamic of this story is ... the image of Great Mother, who spins life out of herself, giving form to and clothing incarnation in the person of her son ... she weaves the great web of life in the image of a mother with a child in her womb, who weaves life into form out of her body ...” (Baring & Cashford 1993: 559). St. Mary thus seems to have incorporated in her image and cult many of the aspects of the Great Mother Goddess who “herself spins and weaves because she is the primal embodiment of ... growth, of time, of destiny. The primordial lady spins, out of her

own being, the thread of time and weaves it to make the tissue of things, just as a woman spins in herself the tissue of another being's flesh ... spinning and weaving are occupations proper to the Virgin Mary as the Great Mother ...” (Wilkins 1969: 96–97 from Baring & Cashford 1993: 559). Likewise, Hilda Ellis Davidson recognises in this image “echoes brought into Christian tradition of the spinning goddess who could influence the fate of the new-born and the destiny of the world” (Davidson 1998: 115).

Even though the Protevangelium was later rejected in Western Europe, the scene is frequently portrayed in Christian iconography, especially in Byzantine art, but not exclusively – see, e.g., a disc brooch from Byzantium from about the 6th century AD; a mosaic from Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome from 432–440; an ivory relief from Castello Sforzesco in Milan from around 700; an illuminated manuscript from ca 1130–50 from Biblioteca Vaticana; an icon from the 12th century in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, etc. But the motif persisted even in much later works of art, for instance in Eugène Emmanuel Amaury-Duval's *Annunciation* from 1860, William Adolphe Bouguereau's *Annunciation* from 1888, Jake William Waterhouse's *Annunciation* from 1914, to name but a few. All these paintings show Mary with her spindle or spinning wheel and/or a basket and a thread (cf. pictures in Baring & Cashford 1993: 560–561; Davidson 1998: 113–115; *Annunciation* 2004: 5, 7, 21, 205, 209, 227; Badalanova Geller 2004: 215–234).

Just as Christian iconography relates the Virgin Mary to spinning, so it does for Eve, Mary being considered a redeemer of the First Eve (cf. Baring & Cashford 1993: 572–574): spindle and distaff were considered classical emblems of Eve after her expulsion from Paradise, as they were of the Virgin Mary during the Annunciation. Florentina Badalanova Geller argues that “in this the image of the spinning Virgin Mary, as the Mother of Christ, together with that of the spinning Eve<sup>16</sup> as “the mother of all living things” stands for emblems (both celestial and terrestrial) of motherhood while the act of spinning is recognised as tantamount to the act of (pro)creation.” (Badalanova Geller 2004: 213, cf. also 216, 235–239)

Woman, according to the traditional European worldview, gives life and relates also to death; “the dead rejuvenate from tomb to womb, afterwards to reincarnate so as to progress from womb to tomb”, and this gives a semantic bundling of tomb and womb (Vaz da Silva 2008: 75, 78), the otherworld and the womb. The wool-basket therefore represents the womb, i.e. the otherworld from which a child is yet to be born, while un-spun wool in it is related to its “before-birth” state in the otherworld. On the other hand, the thread spun represents its living existence in this world. Again, the spinning, fibres for spinning (un-spun wool, flax), and its result, a thread, are related to the link

between the worlds since the new life, as a spun thread, actually stems from the otherworldly existence, i.e. from the un-spun wool.

### SPUN THREAD AND “TURNING HUMAN”

But while spinning thread, as we have just seen, can account for creation of the child’s body, it can metaphorically also represent an integration of a child into society, into its human status, into “culture” – in opposition to raw flax or un-spun wool which represents “nature”. Spinning is typically understood as an activity which separates “nature” from “culture”, since yarn is made into clothing, one of the most characteristic aspects of human culture (Petreska 2006: 225).

The turning motion of the spindle is therefore loaded with strong symbolism. Pieter Plas’ ethno-linguistic inquiry in traditional folk culture of the Western Balkan Slavic area has shown that

... the downward movement of wool from the distaff to the spindle, while it is spun into yarn, can be conceived of as a movement from “wild” to “domestic” space.” As the movement of spinning is equated with the movement of wolves from forests to people’s abode, women in Kosovo were not allowed to spin in the week prior to the holiday of Saint Sava<sup>17</sup> “lest the wolves be dragged over from the woods and find themselves around the folds”. (Plas 2004: 265–266)

Since according to traditional conceptions, “wild space” (where wolves live) is equated with the otherworld, it is actually a threshold to the otherworld (cf. Radenković 1996: 47), spinning therefore represents a symbolic movement from the otherworld into this world.

Such notions about spinning, as a movement from nature to culture, from the otherworld to this one, can be applied in folk magic, for instance in the technique of “turning human”. This is a necessary procedure in case a *zmej(če)* (‘dragon/dragon child’) is born. As is known by Macedonians, Bulgarians and Serbs, *zmej(če)* is a child born with special signs who is predestined for the role of a mediator between the community and the otherworld. But for him to be able to function as a mediator protecting the world of culture, he needs to go through initiation rites first. Here is how a Bulgarian initiation rite of a magician related to spinning and weaving is described:

If after a pregnancy of 11 months<sup>18</sup> a *zmejče* (‘dragon child’) is born with a tail and wings, twelve maidens, or nine old women, need to weave a shirt for it in one night. They tear the hemp using pine cones, spinning

and weaving it in complete silence. When finished, they put the shirt on the baby in order to cover its tail and wings. If the baby is not dressed in a shirt like this, it will not develop into a *zmej* ('dragon') and thus will not become a patron saint to the village." (Pócs 2008: 97)

While, according to Pócs, the raw technique of tearing the hemp with pine cones is a sign of the potential mediators' bond with nature, they must, in order to successfully fight the world of demons, become assimilated into a properly human existence as well, to become members of human society and represent the world of culture. Éva Pócs argues that their assimilation into human society happens exactly when they go through the act of the female group weaving the shirt for him. The technique of "turning human" therefore shows that, of the basic working processes of human culture, it is mainly spinning and weaving<sup>19</sup> that "play a vital role in taming or ennobling the demonic world of nature and the initially demonic aspects of human nature and in protecting human culture". (Pócs 2008: 97–98)

Spinning is a means of "humanisation" not only in magic and folk beliefs but also in fairy tales. In the Grimms' *The Nix of the Mill-Pond* (ATU 316), for instance, the heroine restores a bewitched creature to his normal human condition by spinning flax on a golden spinning wheel. As Maria Tatar claims "spinning, weaving, and sewing ... appear to have the power to turn animals into men and to domesticate the most ferocious beasts". (Tatar 1987: 114–115)

## THREAD AND FATE

Spinning is therefore related not only to the existence of man in this world, as we have seen in relation to the making of a child's body, but also to the acceptance of a child into "culture", with which "this world" is usually more or less synonymous. However, not only was the child's body conceived as being spun, but also his/her fate, which was bestowed upon the child at birth. Just like the skin was, according to traditional conceptions, wrapped around the body of a child the same way as thread is wound around a spindle, as was argued above, fate was also considered to be wrapped around a man by the Greeks who allegedly conceived fate and phases of fortune (such as misfortune, marriage, age, disease, death etc.) as threads spun by the gods or fates and given by them to men in the form of a wreath of wool, a thread or a bond (Onians 1954: 376, 378, 395, 429). In many places the expression "thread of life" means man's fate.

We find beliefs in supernatural females attending the birth of children to determine their fate throughout Europe. Indeed, M. L. West claims that these

beliefs go back to the deepest level of Indo-European tradition. More importantly, these female beings very often spin: the Hittite goddesses Papaya and Isdustaya spin the threads of fate (West 2007: 380). In the *Odyssey* Odysseus [...] *shall suffer whatever fate (Aisa) and the dread spinners spun with their thread for him at his birth, when his mother bore him (Odyssey 7.197–198; cf. also Odyssey 11.139)*. In the *Iliad* the same expression is used with *Aisa* or *Moirai* as the subject: [...] *but thereafter shall he suffer whatever Fate (Aisa) spun for him at his birth, when his mother bore him (Iliad 20.126–8); On this wise for him did mighty Fate (Moirai) spin with her thread at his birth (Iliad 24.209; cf. also Iliad 24.525)*. Hesiod writes about a trio of *Moirai* who give mortal men both good and ill (*Theogonia* 904–906) and who were imagined to be spinners<sup>20</sup>: one carries a distaff, the second a spindle and the eldest scissors; their names were Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos (Davidson 1998: 98; West 2007: 380–381).

As Richard Broxton Onians emphasises, the activities of fates were the as-signing of the portion of un-spun wool (by Lachesis<sup>21</sup>), the spinning (Clotho) and lastly the binding or weaving of it (Atropos) – the fate has thus been something spun, which has afterwards been inflexibly fastened to the person in a binding or weaving process (Onians 1954: 416–417).

The *Parcae*, Roman goddesses of fate, were supposed to be present at child-birth, spinning the threads of fate: *This was the destiny for sure that the Parcae, who spun the fatal thread, twice ordained for you, at your double birth. (Tristia 5.3.25)* and Petronius mentions *the three Fates (Parcae), spinning their golden threads (Satyricon 29.6; cf. West 2007: 381)*. When, however, they were assimilated with the Latin goddess Dea Parca, who is traditionally associated with birth, and the goddess Fata Scribunda, the spindle usually disappeared as their attribute – and in its place a book or a globe appears (Cottica 2004: 191).

The question is whether we can also speak about spinning in connection with the *nornir*, the female beings who play a similar role in Scandinavian mythology – beings deciding fate and are at the same time related to birth and death: they give life, but also take it (Belmont 1971: 176; Bek-Pedersen 2007b: 22–37, 63). Although they generally have the reputation of spinners, there are no clear and unambiguous data about them spinning or weaving in Old Norse mythological texts (Simek 2007 (1984): 237; Bek-Pedersen 2007a, 2007b). However, in one (and it seems the only) instance<sup>22</sup> we can read in the *Poetic Edda* about the *norns* attending the birth and shaping the life of a child, operating the *threads* or *strands*:

*Night fell on the place, the Norns came,  
Those who were to shape fate for the prince;  
They said the prince should be most famous,  
And that he'd be thought the best of the warriors.*

*They twisted very strongly the **strands of fate**,*

[...]

*They prepared the golden **thread***

*And fastened it in the middle of the moon's hall.*

(The First Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani 2–3, *The Poetic Edda*; cf. Davidson 1998: 119–120; cf. West 2007: 382).

Similar notions about fates spinning are also frequent in 19th and 20th century European folklore. In Greek folklore, the fates figure as three old women – at least one of which is always engaged in spinning, one of the remaining two sometimes bears a book wherein she records the decrees they jointly utter, while the other carries a pair of scissors wherewith to cut the thread of life at the appointed time. Sometimes, however, the last two spin, and in these cases one of them carries a basket of wool or a distaff and the other fashions the thread (Lawson 1964: 123–124). Alternatively, Clotho spins the thread of life, Kalomoira apportions luck, and Kakomoira misfortune (Schubert 1982: 92).

The Latvian *laimas*, who appear most often in mythological songs (usually there is just one, but sometimes there are three), determine a child's life, and the involvement of spinning imagery is obvious from the following stanza:

*Laima, Laima for the boy,*

*Who is born to the world!*

*For him Laima **twisted the flaxen thread**,*

*Steeping it in silver.*

(LD 1176=Jonval 1929: no. 774, from West 2007: 384)

Similarly, the Lithuanian tale recorded in 1839 tells about the *deivės valdytojos* ('ruling deities') who seem to create as well as end men's life:

*The first one spun the lives of men out of a distaff given her by the highest god, the second set up the warp, the third wove in the woof; the fourth told tales to tempt the workers to leave off, for a cessation of labour spoilt the web, the fifth exhorted them to industry, and added length to the life, the sixth cut the threads, the seventh washed the garment and gave it to the most high god, and it became the man's winding-sheet. (Grimm 1882–1888/I: 416, note 2, from 1839)*

Slavic folklore, too, often represents spinning fates. The following narrative about the fates (here called *parkas* instead of the more common Slovenian *rojenice* or *sojenice*) in the Gorenjska region, Slovenia, was recorded in the 19th century:

*Of them they say there are three, who when a person is born come into the house in order to decide their fate. A loaf of bread must always be left on the table for them on this occasion. One of the parkas **starts spinning the thread of life, the second spins further, and the third cuts the thread** upon the person's death. The names of these parkas are not given. (Matevž Ravnikar-Poženčan 2008: 238)*

Idiomatic expressions in the Slovenian language also indicate the connection between spinning and fate, e.g. the proverb “to spin the threads of a man's fate” (*presti niti človekove usode*) figuratively means ‘to decide a man's fate’ (SSKJ 1986/3: 138).

Yarn is, according to Macedonian and Bulgarian beliefs, spun by fates called *orisnice*, *narečnice* and *rečenica*. The spindle and distaff are understood to be their attributes, they are said to decide fate while spinning, and the length of the thread spun around the child's head embodies his or her destiny<sup>23</sup> (Badalanova Geller 2004: 231–235). In a legend from the Ohrid area in Macedonia, the fates (*narečnice*) are depicted as three women sitting in front of the fireplace and spinning the thread of life: the first and the second one spin, and the third one cuts the thread with her scissors after the three of them jointly have made their prediction (Petreska 2006: 225). A monument<sup>24</sup> in Orahovac, to the northeast of Prilep in Macedonia, shows three women in national costume with their left hands raised and right hands lowered and holding a spindle – they are pictured the same way as Bulgarian *orisnice* and seem to represent the fates (Schubert 1982: 90–91, note 12). On the other hand, Irina Sedakova found only little evidence of this connection in the Bulgarian archives and fieldwork and claims that it is a rare belief – there is, however, a narrative about the first *orisnice* who gathered sun rays, gave them to the second one who spun a thread out of them and predicted fate while the third, the oldest one, cut the thread. There are also legends indicating that three *orisnice* play with a ball of thread and unwind the thread of life (Sedakova 2007: 209–210).

Traces of belief that the fates spin the life thread of newborns can also be found in the legends from the former Czechoslovakia. The length of the golden threads represents the length of a person's life, whose end is determined by the eldest fate (*sudička*) who cuts the thread (Brednich 1964: 184). The Czech folklorist Alexandra Navrátilová writes that the belief in fates spinning the fate of a man, with a thread symbolising the length of a man's life, was very well known in the Czech state; records from the 19th century mention that people also set out spinning wheels and scissors so that the fates would decide a more pleasant fate for the child (Navrátilová 2004: 53).

According to Ukrainian belief recorded in the 1930s and 1940s the fates (*sudci*) are playing with a ball, unwinding the thread of life (Archive of St. Romansky, Univ. of Sofia<sup>25</sup>).

Among the Romanians, the eldest of the fates, Ursitoarea, was believed to spin the thread of life, the middle one, Soartea, to foretell the events in the life of the newborn and the third, Moartea, to decide the moment of death by cutting the thread. According to another record of belief the first, Ursitoarea, holds a distaff and spins on the wheel, the second, Soartea, spins the thread, and the youngest, Moartea, cuts the thread of life with her scissors (Brednich 1964: 171).

## THREAD AND DEATH

Spinning and thread are therefore related to notions about birth, the creation of a body and the fate of a newborn child who, according to traditional folk beliefs, is spun from un-spun wool, which symbolises a child's prior existence in the otherworld, in a wool basket, or womb. As such, spinning a thread or child's body from un-spun wool actually means creating a link which stems from the otherworld (un-spun wool) into this world (spun thread). The spinning continues while a man is still alive. When the spinning stops, a man dies, the length of the thread which is to be spun being, as we have seen in numerous beliefs around Europe, past and present, determined by spinning fates at birth.

Beliefs about a thread of life which is cut by the third fate can also be found in language. Many idioms directly connect the end of a thread with the end of life, i.e. with death. The Slovenian language knows sayings such as “to cut/to break the thread of life” (*prestriči / pretrgati nit življenja*) – figuratively: to cause death; or “his/her life is hanging by a thread” (*njegovo / njeno življenje visi na nitki*) which means that his or her life is severely threatened, he/she is very ill (SSKJ 1986/3: 138). Ukrainians (from Galicia) similarly say about the death of a person: “his thread is being torn” (*urvalas' my nitka*) (Il'kevich 1841: 97<sup>26</sup>).

In French, expressions such as “to be at the end of his roll” (*être au bout de son rouleau*), “to be at the end of the length of his ball of thread” (*être au bout de sa doigte (aiguillée de fil)*) (l'Ille-et-Vilaine; Van Gennep 1998/1: 574) have the same meaning.

When someone dies the Greeks say: “His spindle is wound full” (Kilbourne Matossian 1973: 331). John Cuthbert Lawson argues that Greek expressions such as “his spindle is wound full”, “his thread is cut” or “his thread is finished” (meaning ‘to die’) seem to imply the idea that the fates apportion to each man

at birth a mass of rough wool from which they go on spinning day by day till the thread of life is completed (Lawson 1964: 124) – which is well in accordance with what was stated above.

When the spinning stops and the winding of thread around the body is completed, death ensues.<sup>27</sup> Death is therefore a (start of a) process of (drying<sup>28</sup> or) *unwinding* the thread of life from the spindle of the body or spine (Kilbourne Matossian 1973: 331–332). A human life from birth onwards was, according to traditional conceptions, conceived as a continuous winding of bands of thread or body tissue and fortunes around a person, whereas death, on the contrary, was conceived as an unwinding. Thus, it is understandable that the semantics of the verb ‘to wind’ (*viti*) in Slavic languages includes both meanings: it has the connotation of fertility, growth and birth as well as of death. The meanings of this verb are associated with the positive, with growth, the embryo (beginning), proliferation, and development, and on the other hand with the negative, impure forces and destructive aspects (Plotnikova 1996), i.e. with life and death.

In Kilbourne Matossian’s interpretation, a Russian healing incantation is an expression of the notion that the process of passing away is equated with the unwinding of the thread of life from the spindle of the body. A stream of blood coming from a wound is, according to her, analogous to this thread:

*On the sea, on the ocean, on the island of Buyan on a little white stone sits a beautiful girl, re-spinning silk on a crooked spindle. Spindle, turn, thread, break, and you blood, go away!* (A. T. Popov, *Russkaia narodno-bytovaia meditsina*, St Petersburg 1903: 247<sup>29</sup>, from Kilbourne Matossian 1973: 333)

The notion that death means the beginning of the unwinding of the thread from the spindle of the human body might also explain the symbolism of the unwinding of balls of wool or thread in funeral rituals: at the beginning of the 20th century, people in northern Moldavia (in the vicinity of Dorohoi) carried coffins to the cemetery by walking behind a wrapped-up white woollen cloth, which they kept unwinding from the house to the graveyard (Stahl 1987: 218).

In the context of the interpretation presented here, i.e. that the winding of thread represents the continuity of a life cycle from birth onwards while unwinding of the thread means dying, i.e. entering into the world of dead, Theseus’ *unwinding* of the thread given to him by Ariadne when he enters the labyrinth, from a well known Greek myth, can be understood as his entering the otherworld. Craig Wright actually argues that the labyrinth on Crete was indeed understood as the otherworld (2001: 15). On the other hand, his rewinding of the string and returning from the labyrinth after slaying the Minotaur

can be understood as his subsequent re-birth to the world of the living. Similarly, Penelope's weaving of a shroud for Laertes where she un-weaves at night what she has woven during the day (*Odyssey* 2.93–100, 19.137–156, 24.129–148) can be understood as her attempt to undo time.<sup>30</sup>

As stated above, according to traditional European worldview, “all life comes from death, and every death foreshadows renewal” which can be understood as an eternal circulation of souls between this world and the other, i.e. what Francisco Vaz da Silva calls “rounds of souls” (2008: 82, 73–75; cf. also Barstow 1983: 12). If un-spun wool is related to that world and the spun thread to this one, we may perhaps speculate that people conceived the thread that unwinds upon death as ultimately decaying once again into raw, unprocessed material, un-spun wool – just as a body decays after death – from which a new thread, i.e. body, is once again spun upon each subsequent birth. We can hardly expect to find direct evidence for such a claim, although such a notion would seem reasonable in the context of traditional ideas about a continuous rotation of souls from this to that world and vice versa. With this in mind, the curious motif of a snake lying on wool on top of tree roots in Belorussian incantations would seem understandable:

*On a flat plain by an azure sea stands a broad leaf oak. Beneath it old sheep, sheep from last year, black wool. On this wool lies a snake.* (Romanov 1894: 108, no. 280, from Katičić 2008: 154)

*On a flat plain there is an apple tree, beneath this apple tree is a nest made from the fleece of a black ram; and in this nest is a snake.* (Romanov 1894: 181, no. 93, from Katičić 2008: 154)

In the opinion of contemporary researchers of Slavic mythology the snake is an emanation of the pagan Slavic god of the otherworld, Veles or Volos. The god of the otherworld thus lies in the otherworld on un-spun wool at the foot of a tree – *axis mundi*. A similar notion is found in the Hittite ritual text of the god Telepinus (Katičić 2008: 154; cf. also Toporov 2002: 40–41). There is also an etymological connection between the name of a god and the word for wool: the Russian word *volosen'*, closely associated with Veles/Volos, means a long strand of sheep's wool, woollen yarn but also a devil or an evil spirit – into which the pagan god of death was degraded upon the rise of Christianity (cf. Toporov 2002: 41).

Conceptions that link un-spun wool with the otherworld could further clarify the widespread custom of laying balls of un-spun wool<sup>31</sup> on graves in South-Eastern Europe – thus symbolically that to which the souls of the dead return and turn into. People say that the soul “hides” in them, that it is “resting” there, that it is “protected” there, that it is “sleeping” there, it “makes a nest”,

since the soul is “as light as flax”. All of these objects are intended solely for the dead and nobody touches them. Paul Henri Stahl underlines that the frequency with which people affirm that these objects are necessary is surprising. Balls of wool on crosses and spruce trees also decorate the graves in the southern tracts of the Hunedoara region of Romania, and Bulgarians throw balls of wool onto places where someone has died (Đaković 1983; Stahl 1987: 218; Đorđević 2002: 425).

## **CONCLUSION**

The material presented in this paper shows that according to the traditional European conceptions, spinning, the material for spinning (fibres – un-spun wool) and the results of this activity (thread, yarn) bear important symbolic meanings related to the basic aspects of human existence – birth, fate and death. Spinning is a means of entering and/or exiting this world. Moreover, it marks the connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead in various ways – indicating the transition, the link and the liminal space between the two worlds. However, while un-spun wool bears a symbolic reference to the otherworld, spinning and its result, a thread, seem to be trademarks of an existence in this world.

While I do not claim for such symbolism to be universal, it nevertheless seems obvious that – by comparing data from different sources – one comes to similar conclusions regarding the symbolic meanings of spinning. The fundamental ideas about spinning seem to have had an enduring existence in the European traditional worldview, even though they have been verbalised and presented in many different ways, and in many different places and times. Yet, as Francisco Vaz da Silva beautifully phrased it – and let me conclude with his words: “... one can perceive the structure of the universe in a grain of sand, even though no two grains are ever alike.” (Vaz da Silva 2003: 350)

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Barber suggests that the more primitive methods of turning bast into thread were known even before, i.e. already in the Upper Paleolithic era (1991: 39–50).
- <sup>2</sup> This goes also for weaving – spinning and weaving in their symbolical connotations sometimes overlap, as weaving is in a way a natural extension of spinning and generally follows on from spinning. Thread must first be spun so that it can afterwards be woven into a fabric (Barber 1991: 9; West 2007: 385–386; cf. also Kilbourne Matossian 1973: 331).
- <sup>3</sup> No special date or place where the poem was recorded is indicated. However, Karadić died in 1864 so the poem must have been recorded before that. The poem was sung on the *kraljice* holiday which is usually performed on St George's or St Nicholas' Day.
- <sup>4</sup> This was published in his collection of fairytales *Severnye skazki* (in translation: Northern tales) from Arkhangelsk and Olonetsk provinces.
- <sup>5</sup> The author does not give a German name of a supernatural being.
- <sup>6</sup> The author does not tell when this should be done, but one can assume whenever they stopped using it.
- <sup>7</sup> In the role of the “Spinnstube-frau” we can find Perchta (Pehtra/Perhta/Pehtra baba/ Pehtrna/Pirta/Pehta/ Percht/Berchta ...), in Germany also Frau Holle or Holda, Stampe/Stempe/Stempa, in Switzerland Frau Saelde, in Slovenia Kvatrnica, Torka or Torklja. The Italians know a similar being named Befana, the French have Tante Airie, Swiss Sträggele, Chrungele, etc. We furthermore find them under several different names in central Asia, from Iran through Tajikistan to the basin of the lower flow of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers (cf. Kuret 1997; 1989/II: 458).
- <sup>8</sup> The difference between the *vila* and *rojenica* is not always clear.
- <sup>9</sup> For the references of the variants of this type of Slovenian legends see Kelemina 1997: 314.
- <sup>10</sup> Men in the Slovenian countryside often helped women to wind the thread.
- <sup>11</sup> In medieval European folk beliefs, e.g., forests were associated with otherworldly creatures like those of the Wild Hunt, the procession of spirits or ghosts who roamed around. Wild men and women, part human, part animal and part spirit, were also believed to roam medieval forests (Russell 1999: 49–50).
- <sup>12</sup> In the Slovenian countryside it used to be customary for children to sleep on the stove at night (which the householder stopped heating in the evening, but it stayed warm until morning).
- <sup>13</sup> The report in Tolley is cited from Popov who published it in 1968; he cited the Russian original which has never been published (cf. Tolley 2009: 36).
- <sup>14</sup> Saintyves interprets the thread in this case as a symbol of fate (cf. below).
- <sup>15</sup> A certain building or room where spinning and weaving was done in ancient Scandinavia.

- <sup>16</sup> For a picture of the spinning Eve, see for instance Badalanova Geller 2004: 237–238.
- <sup>17</sup> In some places, the so-called wolf holidays begin around St. Sava’s day; these holidays constitute a period when wolves are supposed to be most dangerous to people (for more on wolf holidays in the Balkans see Mencej 2009).
- <sup>18</sup> There is no explanation for how to understand such a long pregnancy.
- <sup>19</sup> Besides cooking and baking.
- <sup>20</sup> However, as Daniela Cottica states, spinning symbolism was not originally included in the concept of the *Moirae*; they absorbed it or appropriated it from older goddesses of fate known in Minoan and Mycenaean mythology (Cottica 2004: 185–6).
- <sup>21</sup> In Homer it is otherwise most often Zeus who spins and allots fate (cf. Onians 1954: 410).
- <sup>22</sup> Karen Bek-Pedersen finds the evidence rather suspicious (2007a: 4–5).
- <sup>23</sup> Probably meaning a life-span.
- <sup>24</sup> The author gives no information on the type and the age of the monument.
- <sup>25</sup> I would like to thank Irina Sedakova for this information (personal communication May 16th 2011).
- <sup>26</sup> I would like to thank Irina Sedakova for the information (personal communication, May 16th 2011).
- <sup>27</sup> The same also holds for weaving: “First the warp threads are wound, their length symbolises the length of life. The wool threads symbolise the vicissitudes of a lifetime. When the weaving stops, death ensues. The resulting cloth is a shroud or winding sheet. This winding sheet, originally a prediction of man’s coming experience woven by the fate goddess, is now the history of the man’s life.” (Kilbourne Matossian 1973: 331–332)
- <sup>28</sup> A well know Indo-European as well as Semitic notion relates death to dryness, draught, drying (for a very good presentation of these beliefs, see for instance Dundes 1980: 93–133, Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye).
- <sup>29</sup> I could not get the original source of this particular incantation but the incantations of the same type – *A thread tears apart, blood stops* – are frequent in Russian tradition, and more seldom in Ukrainian and Belarus tradition (cf. Agapkina 2010: 350–351).
- <sup>30</sup> For a different interpretation see Lowenstam 2000. One of the possible interpretations, offered by Steven Lowenstam, also partially coincides with this interpretation, i.e. that “at the deeper level the shroud has always been destined for suitors. As Penelope wove, their death came closer, and as she undid her work their lives extended”. (Lowenstam 2000: 341)
- <sup>31</sup> However, people also lay cloth, handkerchiefs, tablecloths, napkins, clothing, or linens on the graves.

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