

<sup>5</sup>In addition to the above mentioned ritual we made use of an audio recording of Demnime Kosterkin's performance, which also belongs to the archive of the Folklore Department of the Tartu Literary Museum. I would like to mention that the well known Nganasan shaman Demnime Kosterkin was Dyulsomyaku Kosterkin's father. The latter has never practised as an independent shaman, but only as his father's assistant.

## THE SEMANTICS OF THRESHOLD IN LATVIAN TRADITIONS

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There are several important moments to be stressed when discussing the functions of threshold in Latvian folk traditions. It shows the high level of semiotisation of the notion *sliexnis* ('threshold'). And threshold has the following functions:

1. Threshold as a border both in a literal and a figurative sense.
2. Threshold as a dwelling place of spirits and divinities.
3. Threshold as a place of providing welfare of a family.
4. Threshold as an object of different magic acts.
5. Threshold as a part of a way.
6. Threshold as an oracle.

A threshold is a space-organising element which, taken functionally, helps to preserve the warmth of the house and to keep the status of a limited space.

A threshold is the border between the inner and the outer, between one's own and alien space. It regulates the links with the outer world. The opposition *inner - outer* is actualised exactly on the threshold, which is a part of the traditional system of boundaries, formed radially around the centre by the threshold itself, a yard with a fence and gates, limit to the family's properties, etc. The threshold has the lowest penetrability. The threshold is the border impossible to transit for the evil.

Although a threshold is not the topographic centre of the room as the oven, its functional significance allows to possess this status. This double manifestation of a threshold - a centre and an edge, marginalia - has no internal conflict, it only stresses the semantic and functional load of the notion. Thus, on the one hand, a threshold is a spatial marginalia of a room inhabited by some family, on the other hand - the resemblance of the centre and the point of forming the

eventual welfare of a certain family. According to the Latvian traditional beliefs Laima (the goddess of luck) dwells under the threshold. It is believed that the welfare of a family depends on the attitude of the goddess, being it hostile or benevolent. This way the border becomes mythologised.

Innumerable taboos and unwritten laws serves the same purpose - one must not sweep litter across the threshold in order not to throw it in Laima's eyes; one must not greet or shake hands with somebody across the threshold in order not to strangle or to turn Laima out of the house, also not to arise quarrels, hostility on lose friendship; wood must not be chopped on the threshold otherwise one can behead his luck; nothing must be given across the threshold avoiding to give away the blessing of the house; young maids have to keep threshold clean otherwise they would not get married. Obeying these rules ensures both one's social and physical welfare, ignoring the results in some ailment for the guilty one or his relatives.

The demand not to shake hands and not to give anything across the threshold is still actual, the same as one of the motivations, which being the only known until now, has become absolutised: that should be done so to avoid quarrels, hostility. The ancient motivation not to make Laima furious by impiety has disappeared.

Thus a threshold is connected, with such notions as fate, good luck, bad luck, health, etc.

The concept of a threshold includes much magic. Magic is often used for some practical purpose.

On the other hand, the demand not to step on the threshold cannot be found anywhere, one can grasp it only from such idioms as *kāpt pār sliexni* ('to step over the threshold'), *pārsliexni nelaist* ('not to let over the threshold'), the habit to carry the bride on bridegroom's hands when entering the house, the demand not to sit on the threshold to avoid diseases and rumours. In the course of time this demand vanished completely and in modern times a host's standing on the threshold has become a special way of his manifestation.

The view that the spirits of the dead and also other spirits are dwelling under the threshold brought about the belief that also the demons of diseases could be found there. Because of that there are many ways of protecting people and the cattle connected with the threshold. There are enduring apotropaic means of protection which are placed under the threshold, e.g., scythe, knife, scissors, needle, also mercury, rowan-tree branch, salt, a cross, a horse-shoe, garlic, tar etc. There is a custom of animal sacrificing (the most characteristic sacrifices are a black cock and a black hen) on the threshold of a byre. The soil taken from under the threshold is used to heal different diseases of people and

the cattle. Diseases are also annihilated on the threshold with the means of the ritual dialogues, carried out according to some certain scheme.

As the threshold is a border freely accessible for the outer forces, it is often used by the evil for malefaction and spell. There is an arsenal of means and ways used by witches for malefaction. There are also means of protection and resistance.

Wedding tradition as the main means of resistance has the 'cutting' of a cross on the threshold with a sword or a whip; there are also other means, e.g., gift of a hand-woven ribbon from the dowry to the threshold, collecting the so-called 'threshold money'. This ritual is preserved also in modern wedding, but not as a vital necessity, rather as a nice tradition which functional motivation is lost.

The *entrance - way out* function of the threshold is the model of relations between periphery and the centre, the model of space orientation. The way to centre crosses the threshold. Going this way is some ritual of acquiring a space, such ritual being actualised in wedding traditions.

Traditional meaning of bride's stepping over the threshold during Latvian wedding is one of the best preserved nowadays. The action is some kind of acquiring an alien space, coming in a new social structure, both physical and social transition, with bride changing her status referring to the bridegrooms family, becoming a member of it from a stranger, so she undergoes a ritual. There is a demand to enter all the rooms of the new house, to cross all the thresholds to multiply the new status, strengthen it. The same purpose has the gift giving to the threshold.

Thus in active magic the threshold serves as an object of modelling better luck, better conditions. One more typical way is stepping over the threshold with right or left foot.

One or another part of binary opposition *good - evil* is accentuated following the situative context: to ensure the good luck, one steps over the threshold with the right foot first, the left one being used to fight the evil. The left usually is woman's side, also the side of bad luck. This view was strengthened by the Christian tradition and it is the base of many means of initial magic.

This is the explanation of the great attention paid to stepping over the threshold both during everyday life and festivities, healing and mantises, with threshold as an oracle. This function of threshold is to be seen in explanations of some objects (alive or not) found on the threshold: cock singing on the threshold - guests coming, magpie chattering - rumours expected; mole digging under the threshold - somebody's death; an ear found on the threshold - suitors coming. Also the weeping of the spirits of dead can be heard near the threshold.

The role of the threshold is actualised during festivities, with man being born, christened, during wedding, funeral, moving to another dwelling place. Of course, the semiotic status of the threshold was higher in the ancient times. In the course of time its significance in man's mind and practical life is rather lost.

Yet the mythological notion *sliexnis* ('the threshold') is alive and developing also nowadays, e.g., the idiom *pārkāpt gāda sliexnim* ('to step over the threshold of a year') with meaning of a new calendar year.

## ATTITUDES AND FOLK BELIEF ABOUT WOLVES IN SWEDISH TRADITION

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On the 29th of July 1985 one of the few wolves, which at that time lived in the forests of Värmland in the middle of Sweden, was shot. On that occasion there was a rumour circulating, which said that it could be proved that this wolf had not been a wild animal, but let out in the forest by order of the Swedish Society of Nature Protection. The so-called proof consisted of a tooth, which was said came from a human being, and which was found in the wolf's leg. The explanation was that the wolf should have been born in captivity and was bitten by a kid, which lost one of its teeth.

When the wolf was examined post-mortem, it became obvious that the tooth originated from a puppy. It also became clear that the wolf had had whelps two or three times in earlier years, which contradicted all statements of a tame wolf. In spite of this, rumours and stories were circulating for a considerable time.

Similar motifs that have been attracted to rumours and legends deal with finds of empty wolf-cages in the forests or earmarks from zoological gardens on dead wolves or the presence of placed out meat in the forests. The latter should proceed from authorities, which provide wolves with flesh, as they lack hunting training.

This kind of rumours and legends are based upon two main factors: 1) A tradition from old times, in which wolves have been attributed with extreme cruelty and danger, 2) The debate and discussions mainly in the 1970's, which focused on the question how wolves could be brought back in a wild state in the pine-forest region of Sweden.

To unfold this, I have to return to the 18th and 19th century conditions.