

Original Paper

**The revival of pagan traditions and their influence on
the content of mental disorders in contemporary
Russia**

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Abstract. *There has been a recent growth in Russia of the popularity of superstitions, mythological beliefs and rituals. These have their roots in pre-Christian pagan Slavic mythologies. Many of these predictions, warnings and instructions concern the fate of newborn babies. They inform parents about the signs which predict the child's future, and describe the rituals that must be performed for the (magical) protection of the helpless child. Some of these pagan rituals have been restored in arranged scenarios of pagan feasts and ceremonials. The influence of pagan beliefs was found in the contents of obsessive ideas, hallucinations, and in the belief in a magic spell which can be placed by an 'evil eye'. The latter concept has been virtually synonymous with evil in Russian tradition through the ages. It was elicited in psychopathological experiences - in the structure of paranoid syndromes, and of sleep paralysis. An effective treatment of such mental disturbances presupposes the application of pharmacological approaches combined with psychotherapy, and the knowledge of old traditions and mythologies.*

Key words: pagan mythology, sleep paralysis, delusions, hallucinations, depression, obsessive ideas, house-spirit.

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INTRODUCTION The revival of old Slavic pagan traditions and rituals in contemporary Russia (Siberia) has been described. This phenomenon has been expressed in the growing popularity of various ceremonies that utilize the motifs of ancient pagan feasts. Many beliefs, superstitions and activities are seen in every day events, daily activities and verbal expressions. Some of these are a mixture of pagan and Christian beliefs.

Historically it can be explained by the changes in religious adherence in Russia within a relatively short period of time. Man is born with an inherent religious feeling that in its origins is comparable to other drives and instincts. In accordance with Jung's conception of Psyche, religious feeling (numinous) is connected with a deep unconsciousness, and reflects an archetypal level of functioning. Archetypes of collective unconsciousness possess a hidden energy. Different cultures have their own collection of images on which the projections of numinous are made. They have a strong influence on thinking, behavior and the development of mental disorders. The unique character of Russian history in the realm of national religious feeling is expressed by transformations that occurred twice in less than 80 years - at first after the October 1917 upheaval, and in the 20th century after the demise of the Soviet Union. The projections of numinous in Russia before 1917 were linked with: (1) the images typical of Orthodox Christianity, (2) the faith in the Tsar as an anointed sovereign, coming first after God, (3) patriotism, and (4) the remnants of Slavic paganism. During the Soviet period the projections of numinous were fundamentally transformed. Faith in God and in the Tsar was replaced by atheism, Communist ideology and the worship of Communist leaders. In recent times, new projections of numinous have appeared. They include polytheism, nationalism, the images typical of ancient Slavic pagan

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traditions, and an idea of the community of Slavic nations - which have their own unique set of values (“Sobornost”).

An image of “Sobornost” utilized by some leaders of extremist Russian movements wishfully manipulates the term “Slavic”, to exclude from the Slavic nations those that are predominantly Catholic or Protestant. Polytheistic projections of numinous have appeared in the place of the vacuum formed after the failure of atheism, reflecting the revival of the archetypal roots of pagan mythologies preserved during the Soviet period. The polytheistic projections of numinous explain the increasing popularity of esoteric religious sects, and of sorcery and witchcraft. Many patients with psychological and psychiatric problems visit local healers who utilize in their practice, magical formulas and some shamanic healing rituals. In general, there has been a revival of traditional healing with elements of shamanic rituals, which had been condemned and prohibited during the Soviet period. This is in agreement with the data of W. Jilek & L. Jilek-Aall (1978), W. Jilek (2005), of the change of Western views of shamanism and of altered states of consciousness.

Extremist groups have attempted to reinforce Slavic pagan traditions by making arrangements for the celebrations of ancient feasts associated with the worship of pagan gods. Some of them have tried to promote the view that the red swastika is a genuine Slavic symbol, with its origins in Aryanism.

METHODS A total of 35 patients (28 female and 7 male) aged between 18 and 48 years, who attended an out-patient clinic at Novosibirsk Medical University, and a Novosibirsk psychiatric clinic, were assessed. An enquiry was made as to whether, during the three years leading to the assessment, these patients had experienced psychic and/or somatic disturbances, which they associated with magic spells, the influence of an evil eye; or whether they had experienced sleep paralysis with the presence of hallucinations, which they believed were due to the presence of a ‘house-spirit’. Psychiatric interviews and sleep paralysis questionnaire were used. Data about magical beliefs concerning newborns and children were obtained from patients with neurotic disorders, and from their family members. DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000) was used for the diagnosis of mental disorders.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE In recent times, psychiatrists in Siberia have observed patients, who under the influence of pagan superstitions have radically changed their perception of reality, and begun to express unusual ideas and beliefs. The impact of an ‘evil eye’ is commonly used to explain psychiatric and psychosomatic symptoms. The belief exists that the wrath of a person with a “powerful look”, who enviously or admiringly looks at another person, may cause the latter to develop an illness or misfortune. Of all the superstitions, this belief is one of the most widespread. According to this belief, some individuals have the ability to cause harm to other people and animals, with an intentional stare, or even an unwitting glance.

The belief in the magical disease-and-misfortune-producing effects of the “evil eye” has been documented in many traditional societies around the globe (Hauschild, 1982). It is similar to beliefs in traditional Mexican-American culture where the category exists of “mal ojo” (the evil eye) - one of three main causes of illness (Torrey, 1972). “Mal ojo” may be caused by the projection of an unconscious desire, provoking transient neurotic and personality disorders (Rubel, 1960; Madsen, 1964). In Russian psychiatric practice, ideas about an evil eye are often mistakenly interpreted as delusions or delusion-like disorders, and these patients are often diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia or schizotypal personality disorder. These mistakes are due, first of all, to the lack of awareness among psychiatrists and medical psychologists, about the contents of pagan beliefs and superstitions which are becoming increasingly popular among the people.

Most of the proverbs in use (both old proverbs and newly revived ones), directions, warnings and rituals have to do with newborn children (Kuzmenko, 1986). In patients with anxiety and phobic disorders these themes often dominate their thoughts. They believe, for example, that the physical complaints of their children, or the development in their children of various diseases, are directly linked to disobedience of archaic pagan injunctions.

We observed three women in their post-natal period with transient delusions. These patients were diagnosed with postpartum brief psychotic disorder (DSM-IV TR). They accused themselves of having “evil intentions” against their newborns during their pregnancy and after delivery. For instance one of these women had said to her baby, “You are so sweet, I could eat you up”. In this context it is interesting to note that in the Philippines, the closest reference to the ‘evil eye’ is “bati” or “hot mouth” (Flores-Meiser, 1976).

Russian folklore contains many warnings and instructions to protect newborns and children from hidden threats from envious people, including mothers in certain cases. In the latter instance these threats can arise from partially unconscious thoughts, of missed opportunities in their own idealized past; that have been stolen, and are now being realized in the life of their child. This sense of having been robbed of something to which one feels entitled, unconsciously justifies the mother’s coveting her child’s future (Shabad, 1998).

A few examples of signs and instructions pertaining to newborns, and older children:

1. ‘Happy is the child who was born in “the shirt” (the remnants of the amniotic sac)’.
2. It is a sign of good luck when a girl takes after her father, or a boy resembles his mother.
3. It is a good sign, if a household comes into new possessions on the day of a child’s birth.
4. A child is in danger of dying if it was born during a full-moon, or if a birth occurs at the time of bereavement. However, if the child survives, it will be very smart.
5. Immediately after a child is born, everybody who participated in the birth must be “cleansed”:

With candles burning, and while prayers are being said (usually to St. Nicholas), a mixture is made using one egg, a few hops, and some oats in quite a large amount of water. The baby is then bathed in this concoction. Other individuals, who participated in the birth like the midwife, need also to be washed. The ‘*povituha*’ (an old lady in villages who helps women in confinement) says to the mother:

*As the hops are light and strong,
So will you be,
As the egg is round,
You too will get round;
As the oats are white,
You too will be white.*

Once the child has been washed, she says to the baby:

*Grow as big as a log,
And as thick as an oven.*

This ritual when literally translated means “hand-washing away”.

6. The cradle should not be rocked when there is no baby in it.
7. The baby’s hair and nails should not be cut until the age of one year, to ensure the child’s rapid development.
8. The baby should not be exposed to a mirror, so that the child is not retarded in his/her speaking abilities.
9. One should not sweep the floor when the baby is sitting on it, since the baby can become “a sitter”, i.e. a baby who is late, if ever, able to walk.
10. The baby should not be shown to people who have never seen him/her before since this may cause the baby to die suddenly.

11. Children get silly, and their physical development is arrested, when they are scolded with bad words, since this causes their “angel’s soul” to begin dying.
12. The sign of the cross should be made on the baby before he/she sleeps in order to be protected from unhappiness.
13. When the baby is sneezing, it may widely open its mouth inhaling the air, thereby providing evil forces with an opportunity to enter. The words “Greetings to you, the angel’s soul” are to be pronounced.
14. When the baby attempts to take its first steps, one should cut with an axe or knife, imagined hobbles binding its legs.
15. If the baby cries often, it must be taken outside with its face turned to the east at dawn, and to the west at sunset. The following words are to be said:

*The sunset, sunset,
Beautiful lady,
Take the cry from little... (The baby’s name)
And give him (or her) the ‘not-cry’.*

16. Seizures in children are to be treated by tearing the baby’s shirt from the neck down to the hem, or by covering the baby with a white veil which the bride had on her head during her wedding ceremony in the church, or by covering the baby with the wedding table-cloth.
17. When somebody says to the mother that her baby is beautiful and healthy, she should immediately lick the baby’s face three times, spitting on the floor each time.
18. After washing the baby, the bath water is not to be poured out until the next morning.

Some events associated with birds are seen as the precursors of the death: for example when a wild forest bird is perched on the balcony, or on the roof of the house. So-called ‘kind’ birds (pigeons, nightingales, as well as domestic birds in some situations) are connected with the souls of the dead. They can be the forerunners of approaching death.

It is believed that spending the first night in a newly built house may be fraught with danger. The new arrivals can protect themselves by allowing a cat into the new house on its own for the first night. The blossom of a flower in the house which has never bloomed before is considered as a possible precursor of death. The howling wind symbolizes the call of a dead person to the living.

For every newborn baby, a little doll from a piece of cloth should be made and placed in so called ‘red corner’ of the room (on the corner of the icon). The doll should not have eyes or a nose, and its mouth has to remain closed so that evil spirits would not be allowed to intrude through these orifices into the body of the defenseless baby. The doll symbolizes the baby’s soul, allows for the child to develop normally.

Russian traditional fables contain pre-Christian beliefs in various evil creatures which are potent at doing harm and killing (Zinovyev, 1987). Among them the most remarkable are vampires and house-spirits. Characteristic traits of vampires that distinguishes them from the images of vampires in mediaeval mythologies is their predominant “specialty”, namely their ability to pump the energy out of people, without striving to suck their victim’s blood or cause any direct physical harm. In general, evil forces in Russian legends and fairy-tales were always associated more with causing energy or psychic loss rather than actual physical harm. Vampires are classified as ‘sun-vampires’ and ‘moon-vampires’. The sun-vampires are more aggressive and active. Moon vampires are relatively quiet and peaceful.

Some examples of ‘vampire activities’, according to current beliefs, are demonstrated by the following examples:

1. A woman vampire drops into a house in the evening, asks some questions, and tries to strike up a conversation in order to divert the host’s attention while at the same time pumping vital energy out from her victim.

2. A woman vampire steps, as if by accident, on the foot of a person standing nearby, for instance on a bus or in a train, and in this way provokes an argument. The energy of the person that enters into the quarrel is consumed by the vampire.
3. 'Energy' vampires tend also to attend funerals, even of persons with whom they were never acquainted, to help out and to take part in all the rituals. In such cases their goal is to receive "energy support" from other people, especially, the relatives of the dead. People who come into contact with the vampires report feeling totally exhausted and weak. They complain of headache, experience anxiety and a low mood.

There are special rituals and activities to protect against energy vampires. It is recommended to spill pepper and garlic onto the door-post at the entrance of a house, and to make cuts with a knife on the inner side of the door.

The house-spirit (*domovoy*) has in recent times become the most popular figure in the pantheon of Russian mythological personages. Initially, the house-spirit was believed to be the soul of some ancestor of the family with the function of protecting, and providing "good energy, and a good psychological climate" in the house. The house-spirit is often invisible. Its activities are experienced indirectly. Nevertheless, in some cases the spirit may be seen for a very short time, like a flashback. The house-spirit in his external appearance is similar to the figure of a small animal covered with a large amount of fur, or it may look furless. If covered with fur it bodes well, in contrast, if it appears furless, it indicates that something bad is due to happen shortly.

The experiences of some of our patients on their encounter with the house-spirit were indistinguishable from sleep paralysis. Actually, the presence of the house-spirit formed part of the presentation. These experiences were repetitive in some patients. The patient would wake up with a sense that something strange and dreadful was in the room. They would have seen something that looked like a ball or rectangle gliding into the room from the window, or from the corner of the bedroom. The patient would feel very scared, and would be unable to move or to speak. The thing would come closer and closer, and then moved on them so that its entire weight was upon their chest, so that they could not breathe. Suddenly the patient felt alright again, the thing moved away and the weight dropped from their chest. The patients' ability to move and to speak was fully restored. At the end of the episode, the patient would continue to experience fear and the feeling of extreme exhaustion.

During 2004-2005 we examined 22 female patients, aged 18-46 years, inhabitants of Siberian towns and villages; six of them were university graduates. They had sought help complaining of fear of going to sleep, because they were anxious that they would experience the repetition of this type of frightening sleep paralysis. The patients believed that their unusual experiences were connected with the activity of house-spirit(s) because this was the explanation they received from their closest relatives or friends in whom they had confided. They decided to consult psychiatrists only after unsuccessful attempts to protect themselves by recommended archaic folk rituals, and in two cases, by consecrating the flat by a priest of the Orthodox Church.

The prevalence of sleep paralysis in the population is as yet underestimated. This is probably due to the omission of specific questions about these experiences in psychiatric and psychological interviews. On their own initiative, patients usually do not tell professionals about these experiences, or their beliefs in the existence of house-spirits. Recently collected data from adult patients seems to indicate a significant number of cases of sleep paralysis among patients with various psychiatric and psychological problems. This data collected using the sleep paralysis questionnaire revealed information which was missed in routine interviews.

The authorities of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the common people, especially from rural areas, have a different attitude to the phenomenon of house-spirit. The majority of priests do not approve of the very idea of its existence. The official religious view considers this spiritual

experience as heretical. Some priests may accept the reality of the home-ghost but negate any possibility of it having a positive role, claiming the house-spirit was one of the devil's representatives. Rural people and more recently many city-dwellers display ambivalent attitudes toward the house-spirit. On the one hand, they are frightened by the concept on the other hand they have a certain respect for it and hope that it would help them by warning them of approaching danger. However, the house-spirit has its periods of irritability and naughtiness. This happens usually in the form of a so called 'house-spirit crisis' which is believed to happen on the 28th of January. During this critical period special rituals are performed. One of these includes the "food sacrifice": the hostess places a pot of kasha into the lower part of the oven and then all family members wait until midnight. The house-spirit eats it, and after his "supper" he remains calm for the following year. The home-ghost can move into a new house with his hosts, if he likes them. To motivate him to do that the hostess gathers all the tenterhooks from the oven into the pot and brings them into the new house, where she has to say the following words:

*Welcome you are,
Old man
Into the new house.*

The hostess usually addresses the house-spirit by its name. It is interesting that he is always called by Christian names in spite of his pagan origin. It probably reveals an ambivalent perception of the house-spirit which is considered both as benevolent and, at the same time, as a vicious creature. According to our observation, the women who believe in the existence of home-ghosts, and have had personal experiences of the presence of a house-spirit, actively take part in religious rituals of the Orthodox Church. This is one example that reflects the survival of pagan beliefs in recent times.

The Old Russian pagan belief in the home-ghost and its presence during sleep paralysis has some similarity to the tradition of the Old Hag in Newfoundland, Canada (Hufford, 1982). The phenomenon of the Old Hag is described as an experience with the following symptoms: sudden awakening; seeing or hearing things; of something coming into the room; and being pressed on the chest, or being strangled.

The seventh of July or Midsummer Day according to the Julian calendar, has in recent years been celebrated in most regions of Russia, as this ancient Slavic pagan feast has become very popular. Its original name was "Ivan Kupala" (Ivan of the Bather's Day). On this day many people, predominantly the young, go out on the streets with buckets filled with water, and pour it unexpectedly without warning on passers-by. The water can be poured out from the windows, balconies, at public transport stops, even in the subway. The more unexpected the attack, the more successful it is considered, when a bucket full of water finds its victim. On this day many people prefer to stay at home. In the worst cases the ritual of dousing water on people contributes to traffic incidents.

This kind of celebration has its roots in the ritual of symbolic purification, which symbolizes ritual washing away of sins. In pre-Christian times the celebration of the Midsummer Day included the search for the fabulous fern flower. The fern flower marked a treasure that was hidden under it. People participated in ritual games around the bonfire. Soon after all the men and women undressed themselves, danced naked in the moon-light, and took part in communal bathing in a river or lake.

The Orthodox Church prohibited the celebration of this feast many centuries ago and the people participating in its performance were persecuted. Nevertheless, the remnants of the rituals survived in some regions of the country. During the Soviet period these activities were kept secret. In recent times there are attempts to revive some elements of the night feast for e.g., lighting bonfires in the forest at night, and dancing around them; singing the old national songs, decorating their heads with wreaths of wild flowers. The revival of the feast of Midsummer Day

has involved some changes – in the time of its celebration, from night to day; the water is thrown at passersby as unexpected showers replace voluntary communal bathing.

The pagan feast of ‘Farewell to Winter’ (*Maslenitsa*) has now been revived in most regions of Russia. It is celebrated before Easter and is actually the only pagan feast which the Orthodox Church treats as more or less acceptable. Pagan rituals of the celebration include “burning the Winter” symbolically represented as the effigy of an ugly witch, and raising up the images of the Sun depicted as a human face. The image of the Sun in pre-Christian Slavic mythology represented the deity “Jarilo”. During this ceremony some people wear the masks, and play the roles of the forest-spirits - wild animals, usually bears or wolves.

The contents of pagan Slavic mythology appear in the psychopathology of mentally disturbed patients in the form of delusions and hallucinations. For example, we observed a patient, aged 35, who produced megalomaniac paranoid ideas of his transformation into a “semi-god being”. He believed that he had a direct link with the Perun (Slavic Pagan god of thunder) and that he was sent to this world to save the people from their “vices”, and to return them to chastity. The patient experienced vivid scenic hallucinations in the form of a big battle that took place between the knights in red and black hauberks. Red color symbolized “Heaven’s Forces” and black color “Evil Forces”. The patient himself observed passively this event from the hill as the incarnation of an old Slavic psaltery player, who according to mythology had the special gift of forecasting the future.

Elements of pagan traditions are expressed in wake-rituals for which the relatives, friends, neighbors and co-workers of the deceased are gathered at his/her home or in villages usually outside the home. The people remember the deceased, his/her good deeds, and consume special traditional food and drink, beverages with high alcohol content, usually, vodka. Sparkling wines are totally disallowed at such times. Although proposing toasts is permitted, clinking of the glasses, typical for all other occasions, is absolutely prohibited. The essential element of the wake ceremony is keeping one’s place at the table unoccupied. This place is reserved for the deceased who invisibly assists the ceremony. His/her chair is often covered with a towel, and one glass of vodka and a piece of bread is placed near the table. During the meal, using knives is not recommended. The wake ritual was preserved during the Communist regime, and most of the (Communist) party members took part in it, without any fear of reprisals.

Pagan traditions remain an obligatory part of funeral rituals. The widely used “food sacrifice”, for example includes leaving some food and alcohol on the grave. A small table is constructed near the grave for the relatives to share the meal with the deceased. A violation of these pagan traditions is socially condemned.

We observed culture-specific depression with guilt feelings associated with the non-observance of the old customs relating to wakes and funerals. The patients experienced feelings of moral inferiority and believed that they were basically bad. They worried that they were inherently destructive. They felt rejected and were convinced that they deserved rejection because they had violated their tradition. In patients with psychotic depression, there is sometimes a conviction that their sinful behavior would cause inevitable misfortune to their family. Some of these patients experienced nightmares in which the deceased person reproached and accused them of violating traditions.

There has been a recent emergence of groups which exploit pagan beliefs. Members of such groups emphasize the need to turn back to “the culture of the ancestors” and to the “old roots” (Tupikin, 2004). They participate in special events which portray the early history of Russia; they dress according to the fashion of the period. Sometimes they wear attires typical of Russian knights (*druzhinniki*) and use them even in every day life. The organization of knights’ fights in the context of the ‘initiation ritual’ is now a rather popular constituent of many feasts and celebrations.

Pagan motifs emerge also in the works of contemporary popular Russian painters, for example, in Ilya Glazunov's "The Thousand Years of Russia", "The Horseman" or in Konstantin Vasilyev's "The Old Man".

The revival of interest in the old pre-Christian traditions is expressed in the content of psychopathological symptoms of patients with mental disorders. We observed an increase in the number of clinical cases in whom paranoid ideas were linked to popular pagan mythological beliefs. As an example, a married female aged 46 years who had for a long time been treated by *znacharka* (an old woman who treats her patients using magic) was admitted to the psychiatric hospital with complaints of pains in different places, a feeling of estrangement from reality, and a voice that she heard periodically inside her head. The patient believed that she was under the psychic influence of the *znacharka*. She reported that the *znacharka* had given her the black cat as a present, and said that the cat possessed the ability to emit positive energy. The patient revealed that from the very beginning she was suspicious about this cat. She felt that the animal was vicious and dangerous. Gradually her suspicions were expanded to include the *znacharka*, who was then regarded by the patient as "a black magician", receiving through this cat information about her, and exerting a "bad influence" causing pains and hallucinations. As a result the patient strangled the cat, and then put a little icon into its mouth. The story of these experiences is clearly connected with the archetypal figure of the evil witch (*Baba Yaga*). In Russian traditional fairy-tales *Baba Yaga* is believed to enchant, kill and eat children. She uses all sorts of black magic and usually has a black cat as her companion and the mediator of her evil deeds. The action with the icon reflects a syncretistic mixture of pagan and Christian beliefs.

The knowledge of local mythology by psychiatrists and psychologists, is in our experience; important to develop an empathic, therapeutic environment for the treatment of this type of patient.

DISCUSSION The understanding of the above phenomena is connected to some significant events in the history of Russia. Christianity spread in Russia after it did in Central Europe, and during the entire period of tsarist Russia, remnants of paganism were widely prevalent among the people. The Russian population in the beginning and in the middle of 20th century was predominantly rural. Pagan traditions and mythologies did not disappear totally after Christianity spread, and continued to have a remarkable influence on the way of thinking, the style of life, on the cultural traditions and superstitions of people. After the October upheaval in 1917 the Soviet regime needed for its relative stability the support of some parts of its population. Overwhelming fear linked with mass terror was very effective in the sense of its paralyzing effect. Antireligious activities were directed against Orthodox Christianity and other religious confessions, but only to the least possible degree against pagan beliefs and mythologies.

Nevertheless, it was not enough for the creation of a safe basis for the survival and the development of the (Communist) System. This task demanded the creation of new myths. It is known that Soviet communist propaganda tried periodically to create such myths utilizing an activation of some archetypal images which could be found in the ancient cultural heritage of Russia. Russian legends and fairy-tales reflect an archetypal idea of a Hero who would save the people through some great Miracle, and who would create some Magic that could solve every problem. The Hero would have the magic Power to change instantaneously the life of "simple people" to make them happy.

An idea of total equality ("all people are equal") was firmly connected with envy and hatred towards more successful people. The idea of equality, in its origin, was based on an archaic belief in the inevitable and cruel punishment by pagan gods of everybody who desired to become better than others. The expression of extremely negative feelings not only towards rich and successful

people, but also towards ones who were better educated and more talented, was always widely spread, and accepted especially by the rural population. This may have been the result of the influence of the archetype of the “Alien”. Soviet propaganda spared no effort to strengthen the activity of this archetype provoking the hostility of so called “working people”, and projecting hatred upon others who were stigmatized as “class enemies”.

The fall of the Soviet regime with the simultaneous collapse of its official atheistic Communist ideology led to the formation of a spiritual vacuum which the contemporary Orthodox Christian Church has yet been unable to fill. Some archetypal images have appeared in the content of the dreams of non-psychotic persons, brief psychotic disorders, paranoid and mood disorders. These motifs are also seen in the patients who are seized by fanatical ideas of their messianic vocation and their nation’s exclusivity.

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