

Concept of Soul among North American Indians

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*Eternity is neither the past nor the future. It is the
dimension of human spirit which is eternal.*

Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss*

Questions concerning soul have troubled mankind since time immemorial – even before the beginnings of any religious teachings and beliefs. They remain topical to present day. With the development of sciences and technologies scientists pose more and more questions (it is enough to remember their experiments about the determination of the weight of this non-material substance and of the time when it leaves the body after its death).

But what is the soul? Where does it dwell? What is its predestination? Is it immortal? What way does it follow on the Earth and in the Universe? Every society has tried to find answers to and give a logical explanation for these and many other questions in accordance with its life experience and ideas about the world. Thus an entire conception was gradually built which seamlessly integrates into the cultural heritage of a particular people and which helps to better understand not only its worldview and culture, but also its soul.

As a rule, the closest attention is paid to the processes happening to the soul after death. Though we will hardly be able to avoid this subject completely, we will attempt to track the peculiarities of its lifetime existence on the example of the concepts of soul among North American Indians, as this aspect, to our mind, causes no less interest.

The first and legitimate questions that arise when addressing such an issue are, at the same time, the most difficult ones: What is the soul? and What is its essence? In most religions it is an “immaterial, immortal element, the source of life of the physical body” (Культурология. XX век, «Душа»). But E. B. Tylor’s definition, it seems, brings us the closest to the understanding of the perception of this phenomenon by American Indians: “soul is a fine, immaterial human image, something like steam, air or shadow by its nature. It is the cause of life and thought in the creature it animates” (Тэйлор 16). Here we have the indication of some materiality of soul, which is fully justified: it was difficult for primitive man to deal with abstract notions; to imagine them better, it was necessary to clothe them in some kind of recognizable form, to associate them with the outer world. Such specification is observed for all peoples. It should be noted that American Indians have developed different ideas about the soul. For example, among the Tlingit, Ojibwe,

and Cheyenne, soul is the shadow of a man (the Cheyenne believed that seeing one's shadow presaged death); the Tarahumara and some Californian tribes think that it is the breath, and the Hopi believe that it is liquid essence. And indeed, the dead do not move, so their shadow, too, freezes, i.e. practically disappears. Man is alive while his soul is in his body, when he stops breathing, he dies. These two views seem to be logical and are well explained by primitive notions: "For the majority of lower societies death comes at the moment when the 'tenant' residing in the body and having some similar features with what we call soul leaves the body completely, even if physiological life has not faded away. This is one of the reasons for such hasty burial common among primitive people" (Левин-Брюль 310). But the version with the liquid essence is also explicable: water for the Hopi who live in an arid region (Arizona) is the source of life in which everything depends on the rain. Their religion is riddled with reverent attitude toward the water. Probably that is why while the souls of the dead turn into Kachinas (and the word *kachi* means "life" or "spirit"), their souls return to the earth pouring in blessed rain (*navala*) (*Handbook*, Vol. 9, 577).

Strange though it may seem, the question of *the origin of soul* in American Indian mythology is almost never touched upon. Perhaps one of the few references is found in the Omaha Creation myth, though it does not reveal the prime cause either: "In the beginning all things existed in the mind of Wakonda. All creatures including people were spirits. They were flying in interstellar space (in heaven). They were looking for a place where they could be embodied in matter" (Eliade, 84–85, qtd. in М. Кремо). However, the idea of the souls (or spirits) of the dead is well developed throughout the whole continent, so by the mythological moment of establishing death people already had to be spiritualized, but even those myths do not develop this subject. Perhaps such avoidance of mention of soul is connected with certain taboos, as well as with the difficulty in understanding this phenomenon.

Both among all other peoples and American Indians we meet another notion, "spirit" (which is mostly used when talking about the dead or about the helping spirits). Despite the fact that it is close to the notion "soul" and is often inseparably connected with it, there are certain differences, although the Kiowa Apache, for example, used the same word to denote "owl" (as the personification of the soul of the dead), "spirit" and "soul" (Стукалин 41). According to some researchers, "spirit may be of independent origin, as well as appear as a mythological creature", i.e. "the notion 'spirit' is broader than the notion 'soul'" (Богословский). However, E. B. Tylor supposed that the difference between these terms was not too important for primitive man, because they are based on the essential unity (Тэйлор 22). As we shall see, these notions are often really similar except when they are separated on purpose.

To try to understand this controversial issue, we need also refer to the question of *the number of souls* in man. As the researcher of American Indian religions A. Hultrantz notes,

in all of North America except the southwest the belief recurs in one form or another that man is equipped with two kinds of soul, one or more bodily souls that

grant life, movement, and consciousness to the body, and one dream or free soul identical to man himself as he is manifested outside of his body in various psychic twilight zones. When the body lies passive and immobile in sleep or unconsciousness this latter soul sets out to visit faraway places, even the land of the dead. The free soul of the ordinary individual finds its way at random. The medicine man may intentionally direct his free soul there and, contrary to the layman, he generally may then return to the world of the living. Death comes when man's free soul is definitely caught in the world of the dead; then also the body soul, often conceived as breath, slips its moorings. (Hulkrantz 131)

This implies that the second, free soul is most likely what we might call "spirit." For comparison, let us turn to the beliefs of the Pueblo Indians described in more detail by L. White:

Everyone has tsats-vinok (literally – "the breath-heart"), or "soul" and tsayotieni (guardian spirit); he receives both at birth in Shiapay from Iariko, "the mother of all." Tsayotieni looks after its ward during his life protecting him from harm and keeping from evil ... When a person dies, both his tsats-vinok and tsayoteini leave his body and eventually return to his mother in Shipap. (Уайт 671)

The Pueblo Indians believe that Foremother gives soul to man, which corresponds to the most popular opinion among all peoples about the supernatural origin of soul (it is not accidental that the name of the supreme deity is translated as the Great Spirit, who is invisibly present in all). Despite the uniformity of the views among the majority of North American Indians on the presence of two souls in man (the Pueblo, Algonquin, Shoshone, Northern Paiute, Tlingit and others), there are tribes who believe that there are four souls (the Sioux, Yuchi, Condo).

The concept of soul cannot be studied in isolation from *animism* and *totemism*. American Indians believe that not only animals, birds, fish and other fauna had a soul, but also plants. E.B. Tylor mentions object souls, the belief in which was especially strong among the Algonquin. In other words, the whole world around is animated. Thus, "among the Sioux the privilege to have four souls was not confined to just man, but also extended to the bear, the most humane of the animals" (Тэйлор 48). No wonder that in myths every animal and even insect represents a separate nation, because if all have soul, both humans and all living beings should be related in a certain way, and one "quite seriously speaks about the dead and living animals as of dead and living people" (Тэйлор 46). Reasoning from this concept, it is easy to understand why animals became totems and protectors for American Indians: "Even J.G. Fraser drew attention to the widespread belief in 'external soul' capable of not just temporarily leave the human body, but hide in an outside object or in the body of an animal for security purposes, and derived totemism from this" (Мифы народов мира, «Душа»). It accounts for the presence of hunting rites when the hunter asks the killed animal for forgiveness and gives gifts to it, as "the souls of animals respond to human actions punishing people for pointless destruction of animals and thanking them for showing kindness to them" (Кремо).

The idea of “external soul” is reflected in such a widespread phenomenon as the belief in *guardian and helping spirits* who protect and guide the person. It can be the spirit of some animal or the soul of a deceased relative. If an average person, as a rule, has only one guardian spirit, medicine men can have several, and more powerful ones. Obviously in this case, the connection between the soul (spirit) and its physical shell is absent, i.e., we are confronted with the recognition of the capability of soul for independent existence and even various actions. Moreover, soul is endowed with a number of abilities and a certain power that is consonant with the idea present in many religions about fine material body “through which the soul acts in such a way that the physical body itself cannot” (Кремо). Such are, probably, the views with which the ideas about the wandering souls of the dead are connected, but we will return to this issue later.

In myths various *journeys of the soul* are described in most detail. They can be of two kinds: unconscious, i.e., when the person is in one of the border states which include sleep and serious illness; and conscious, when the medicine man deliberately directs his soul somewhere or falls into a trance. Let’s consider each of these kinds of journeys more closely.

K.Ch. Klemen gives a very good explanation of the relation of the ideas about soul among primitive people and dreams: in dreams the person

moved to another place or saw how other people from his dreams came to the place of his rest; after awakening the people around him assured him that neither he himself nor his visitors had actually changed their location. He also saw the deceased alive, and out of all this he allegedly concluded that man has a soul which can still in life leave the body and continues to exist after the death of man. (Клемен)

There is a well-known popular belief that it is better not to wake up a sleeping person, for his soul which has set off on wanderings may not have time to return into his body, which is very dangerous. However, here we are again confronted with dualism: so, the Algonquin suppose that “one soul goes out and has dreams, while the other one remains” (Тэйлор 21). A dream itself, according to the opinion of many American Indian tribes, “is the visit of the sleeper’s soul by the soul of the person or object which appears in a dream” (Тэйлор 27). Things seen in dreams were treated rather seriously, for these were messages from soul; especially significant dreams, just like visions received during illness, were interpreted and often became a guide to action perceived as a warning (among the Tlingit), instruction or prophecy (suffice it to remember the famous Black Elk’s revelations). The Iroquois believed that “ignoring the secret desires of soul can displease and anger it making it take away its energy, which leads to the loss of soul and thus depression or illness”, moreover, “the loss of soul may kill” (Мосс 43, 187). Sometimes, of course, the person’s own wishes could be attributed to the demands of his soul. For example, there is an interesting belief in several tribes that “the soul of the sleeping person leaves his body and searches for the objects which are attractive to it. These objects must be acquired by the person when he wakes up so that his soul will not grieve or worry and will not leave the body for good” (Тэйлор 26). In any case, dreams

were regarded as a certain experience, full of information which the soul was trying to convey to the person, and which would better not be ignored.

In the case of a serious illness, when the person was unconscious or delirious, the situation is similar to dreams; however, here another motive appears, that of the journey of soul between the worlds of the living and the dead. That is why people usually turned to medicine men for healing, the latter being the mediators between these worlds capable of influencing the souls and interacting with them. In general, the role of the medicine man is very versatile, and no wonder that the most complex, subtle, supernatural, spiritual, and many other questions are solved by him, because, as we have already mentioned, medicine men have the most powerful helping spirits. M. Eliade pointed out that “shamanic ideology ... has deeply penetrated into specific areas of North American mythology and folklore, especially where it deals with afterlife and journeys to the nether world” (Элиаде 228), i.e., with all the most sacred, but at the same time the most dangerous.

Still, “the shaman was not a healer in any physical sense. He gave neither medicine nor bodily treatment, but through the power of the spirits he controlled, he exorcised and contended with those who caused sickness” (Emmons 370). It was considered that diseases (except, probably, different types of external damage such as fractures, wounds, etc.) were caused by evil spirits. Thus, “the Dakota think that spirits punish people for bad behavior, especially for failing to observe the rites for the deceased. These spirits have the ability to send into the person’s body the spirit of any creature or object, for example, the spirit of a bear, deer, turtle, fish, tree, stone, dead person; these spirits cause illness when entering the person” (Тэйлор 161-162). Healing usually goes one of the two ways: either the medicine man “extracts” or conjures away the foreign spirit or (in extreme cases) he has to set off for the soul of the sick person which has already almost left the body and to return it back. Breath is often used in treatment: the disease can be “blown away” or “sucked out.” We have mentioned above that one of the essences of soul is breath; hence, we may conclude that it is not even the medicine man himself, but his soul that interacts with the soul of the patient and the spirits residing in his body. The Tlingit, as well as many other tribes, believe that if the medicine man has to start on a journey in search of the soul of a seriously ill person, it can be caught and returned back to the body, resulting in the person’s recovery or, at least, avoiding the threat of death. The Ojibwe even believe that “a good medicine man can return the soul from the land of the dead right after the moment of death” (Кремо).

Unlike the two previously described border states, sleep and illness, the journeys of soul during trance can be both unconscious and conscious. Let us explain what we mean. When the sick person himself resorts to the medicine man wanting to be healed, the latter can bring him into a trance during which the patient’s soul unconsciously travels, while medicine men can fall into this state intentionally. This helps him to “liberate” his own soul and direct it to where he deems it necessary.

As we can see, medicine men communicate the most closely with the spirit world in all its manifestations. They also interact the most closely with the world of the dead. It

is interesting that a number of tribes (the Navajo, the Apache) dread everything related to death and the deceased, and the reason for it is the belief in the existence of soul after death, in good and evil spirits. First of all it was the fear of vengeance – from the spirits of killed enemies, tortured captives or even relatives who were dissatisfied in some way with their descendants. As mentioned above, such spirits can send diseases, and sometimes take the souls of the living into the other world. However, in some cases such fears worked as taboos. For example, among the Sioux “the fear of the vengeance of spirits was the means that kept them from killing” (Тэйлор 148). Besides, hardly anybody wished to meet ghost spirits, which “appeared in dreams, but also in daily life, and took the forms of human beings, animals, and whirlwinds, the last an idea spread all over the Basin” (*Handbook*, Vol. 11, 636). The outcome of such a meeting could never be foreseen: “The main reason why the Navajo are still horrified when meeting a ghost lies in the fact that the latter are a sign of a near disaster, for instance, death of a close relative” (Стукалин 47). The Navajo and Cheyenne believed that the approach of such a ghost is indicated by a whistle.

But even with the observance of all the rites by the tribesmen and the absence of any offence at them, the dead do not leave the world of the living and constantly interact with it. The souls of dead relatives may appear in dreams and warn from trouble, suggest what to do, or report important information. The Algonquin supposed that the souls of the dead are able to eat and drink, that is why they left food at the grave, and the Iroquois left a hole in the grave or in the coffin so that the yearning soul could visit the body (Тэйлор 36). However, the term “soul” is not quite appropriate here as we again deal with a minimum of two entities. A. Hulkrantz underlines that wandering spirits are not the souls, as the latter leave this world and go to the land of the dead (the motive of journey to this country is well developed in myths), which again makes us distinguish between these two notions, “soul” and “spirit” (*Handbook*, Vol. 11, 636).

Soul, according to the ideas of American Indians, is capable of *transformations*. This concerns not only the popular mythological hero of the trickster who can change his appearance (in this case we deal with bodily transformations), but the souls of medicine men and even animals. The Ojibwe believe that the appearance that the soul takes during its journey depends on its power. Moreover, it can even hide in various objects by itself or with the help of medicine men. For example, the Inuit medicine man by means of spell drove the soul of a sick baby into an amulet and hid it in his medicine bundle where it was kept in maximum security (Богословский).

Some American Indians also believe in *reincarnation* of souls. Partially connected with this idea are the above-mentioned hunting rites, as well as the belief that the souls of ancestors may return to their tribe in the body of some of their descendants which the tribesmen guess either by visions or by birthmarks. As Emmons notes, “The Tlingit believe that the human soul can come into the world only in a human body, usually in the same clan or family” (288). With regard to animals and plants, their souls, as a rule, are reincarnated at the same place (on the same area). Maybe that is why in the majority of American Indian myths the dead more often appear not as immaterial ghosts, but in quite a tangible form which is practically identical to the one they had when they were alive.

The ideas about the Land of the Dead, or, as it is called the Happy Hunting Grounds, also speaks for the fact that the soul does not die with the body. A very poetic description of the afterlife is given by E.B. Tylor: “The shadow of the Algonquin hunter hunts the souls of the beaver and elk sliding on the soul of the snow on the soul of skis” (Тэйлор 121-122). However, the problem of the existence of soul after death is the subject for a separate study.

It is worthwhile mentioning that in the present research we have not made an attempt to reveal all aspects that constitute the integral concept of soul among separate North American Indian tribes, but only the ones which seem to be the most significant for our understanding of the inner world of these peoples and their cultures. Despite the fact that we can see some differences in the American Indian ideas about soul, however, there are much more similarities in them than it may seem at first glance: for a number of above-mentioned reasons the origin of soul cannot be traced and remains rather vague; this substance is inherent not only in people but also animals, insects, plants and even objects, which suggests that man is not the master of the Universe, but only a part of it; everybody has at least two or up to four souls which can move (travel) and reincarnate after the death of the physical body; soul, or spirit, can exist independently and may take different appearances. All these beliefs reflected in the mythology, rituals, superstitions, and traditions of American Indians are still passed from generation to generation being an integral part of their culture.

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