

The Myth of the Master Builder

Mircea Eliade

MIHAELA GLIGOR on the *Legend of Master Manole*

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not endowed with ‘life’ and
‘soul’ through the sacrifice
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HUMAN SACRIFICE was practiced in many ancient cultures. Victims were ritually killed in a manner that was supposed to please or appease the gods or spirits. On very rare occasions, human sacrifices still occur today. One universal reason for human sacrifice is to accompany the dedication of a new building, such as a temple or a bridge. A Scottish proverb says: “If you want the bridge to stand the flood, lay the foundation in water and blood.”¹

Mircea Eliade also indicates that there are “many legends related to human sacrifices,” especially when we speak about “bridges, fortresses, castles, cities.”² He also speaks about the Arta Bridge in Greece, or Rosporden Bridge in Finisterre, where a child was buried; about Pont-Callec Bridge, and many others. Similar practices can be found all over the world.³ Mircea Eliade also gives some examples from China, India, America, or Africa. Innocent lives are dedicated to the successful completion of an important building.

In Romania, mythical stories have always played an important role. In fact,

we can say that Romanians “survived primarily through the shared experience of storytelling.”⁴ *Miorița* and *Balada/Legenda Meșterului Manole* (The ballad/legend of Master Manole) are just two of the most important Romanian folk tales, considered to be “the two myths of the Romanian spirituality.” If *Miorița* represents a purely Romanian creation, without correspondence in other nations, *The Legend of Master Manole* is also found with the other Balkan nations, notable examples existing in the Hungarian, Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Serbo-Croatian, and Macedonian cultures; there is also evidence of such stories in India.

In interpreting *The Legend of Master Manole*, we have to begin by placing it within “the myths of the construction sacrifice,” based on authentic rituals which presuppose a human sacrifice as the foundation for a new construction. As Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga noticed, “between history and myth, set against a definite time and place and soaring towards timeless heights to express eternal truths of the spirit and its works, *The Ballad of the Argeş Monastery* or of *Master Manole* is endowed with that strange and fruitful ambiguity of the great creations handed down to us by the ancient world.”⁵ This story is a product of the popular spirit and it explains, “for the distant time of traditional wisdom, in artistic images, the truths of the creative process; it sets, as an impressive model, valid for the whole Balkan area, the archetypal impulses of those participating in the noble game of construction. What was a bridge with the Greeks or the Serbians, in the Romanian version of the ballad is a monastery, a masterpiece of architecture, erected for pure worship or in the eternal memory of the patron, himself the legendary founder of the country.”⁶

In what concerns the subject of this study, many important scholars consider that *The Legend of Master Manole* represents in fact *The Myth of the Master Builder*. Considered to be one of the fundamental myths of Romanian literature, *The Legend of Master Manole* is an aesthetic myth, indicating our understanding of creation as the fruit of suffering. *The Myth of the Master Builder*

*does not deny the lived reality of the people, whereby the world is dangerous and hurtful. It does not extend to listeners the hope of gaining control over their lives. But it says, in its essence, that if you endure the pain of living, see pain as sacrifice, and remain faithful to a higher calling, you will find meaning in life, and you will be able to connect to the positive forces, the divine presence, which will offer you protection or rewards after death. Moreover, through such sacrifice a person becomes capable of feeling self-esteem, acquires a satisfying sense of who one is, which helps offset physical discomfort and pain; as a result, the physical discomfort and pain nurture a positive sense of who one is.*⁷

Eric Tappe indicated that there are some similar elements of this ballad throughout Southeast Europe:

1. *Masons are engaged in an important building project.*
 2. *The building continually collapses.*
 3. *The suggestion is made that a woman be sacrificed, as this will give stability to the edifice.*
 4. *It is decided that whichever mason's wife arrives first on the following day with her husband's midday meal shall be immured.*
 5. *The hero of the poem sees his wife in the distance and prays for miracles to stop her.*
 6. *The miracles take place, but she struggles on against all obstacles.*
 7. *When she arrives, she is told that she will be immured, and thinks it is a game.*
 8. *As she is being immured, she realizes the truth and pleads in vain.*
- In addition, most Rumanian versions and some Bulgarian ones end with her husband falling from the top of the building.⁸*

The Myth of the Master Builder developed in the oral tradition. *The Legend of Master Manole* describes the events that happened during the construction of the Argeş Monastery during the reign of Voivode Radu Negru, on the river Argeş, near a ruined fortification, included in or near Trajan's wall. The ballad of Master Manole was first recorded in Romania in 1793, and Vasile Alecsandri published in 1852 what is considered to be its standard version. The earliest possible date would be the time when the monastery was actually built, the early sixteenth century. After the first version of the myth was composed, it probably suffered gradual adjustments as it was transmitted orally until it was finally written down.

Lucian Blaga discusses this subject in his 1927 drama entitled *Master Manole*. "At times, the creation of a culture demands quiet sacrifices. Creation has its own parched touch. Master Manole walled up his wife under stone blocks and mortar, so that the monastery could be built."⁹ Lucian Blaga, while taking up the well-known ballad, nevertheless creates an original work, by analyzing it profoundly and expanding the motifs of this ballad from an expressionist perspective. Thus, the ballad acquires a new dimension, related to the absolute and through a poignant participation in the images thus invented. Blaga's approach to the legend and to the Romanian mythical foundations is manifest from the very first page, in the explanation he gives to the place of the action: "Downstream on the Argeş River. Romanian mythical time." Being a philosophical drama, the author wants the beholder to contemplate a man in which one can find oneself, thus living up the intensity of a superior existential drama—full of ten-

sion, active, always presenting contrasting alternatives. Blaga's drama does not start as the ballad does, with the choice of the place for the future church, on an old and abandoned wall. For Blaga, choosing the place means making contact with the original spirituality, with symbolic elements: life, death, water, and the dead. Beyond the importance of the events that prefigured it, the scene of the game of death is dramatic and full of significance. The metaphors that Blaga uses for Mira's characterization amplify the lyrical tension: "black deer," "mountain spring"—symbols of beauty and purity—she is the only one capable of becoming the "altar."

The lines in which the building is described are rich in significance. In the walling "game," Mira enters barefooted, leaving outside all that could defile the halidom, whose spirit she is going to become:

"Manole, with inhuman calm: Discard your footwear so that you can enter barefoot in the wall.

Mira: How long will this game last?

Manole: The game is short. But long and everlasting is the miracle."¹⁰

The sacrifice completed, "the halidom frenziedly rises. It is a love song interlaced with a death song."¹¹ Manole's wish is that "our story would sink into the earth, because it was the hardest, the saddest, the most senseless and troublesome of all the stories ever carried by the wind."¹²

In the ballad, Manole's end is the result of an exterior element—the voivode's envy; in Blaga's drama, the death of the hero is a deliberate gesture. It does not represent a common suicide, symbolizing instead the fusion of the creator with his own work and his union, beyond the confines of ephemeral existence, with Mira, his beloved wife. The life of Manole, the man and the artist, is the church, his fate is complete and, without having anything to sacrifice, he passes not only into non-being, but also into collective memory, into the legend itself. The other bricklayers stay alive (not in the ballad), indicating the permanent propensity for "the creation of beauty"; each of them could become another Master Manole.

MIRCEA ELIADE also studied this legend and used it as material in his studies on folklore. As Mircea Handoca puts it, "both demiurges, starting from the myth of Master Manole, offered outstanding works to our literature: Lucian Blaga's drama in 1927 and Mircea Eliade's essay in 1943. In their youth, they were both synthetic 'theorists,' putting these ideas into practice in their later years. After researching autochthonous myths, both thinkers produced many studies of outstanding erudition; their works were different in form, but nevertheless featured some common themes."¹³

Eliade made several references to *Master Manole*, Blaga's drama of 1927, seeing it as a rare example of authentic artistic creativity in a Romanian style,

and not a modern imitation of folkloric themes.¹⁴ “A Romanian drama inspired by folklore did not exist until Lucian Blaga. *The Legend of Master Manole* was adapted many times. But all who processed it wanted to give an ‘original interpretation.’ Or, what constitutes the pure charm of this theme is the legend itself, without any symbols and quests for interpretations.”¹⁵

We intend to discuss here some ideas regarding the Romanian folklore and popular culture found in Eliade’s interpretations, practically the sources of inspiration for his scholarly construct of the history of religions. The formative years of Eliade as a future scholar specializing in the history of religions were inspired by Romanian folklore. In the interwar period, Eliade wrote many scholarly articles devoted to folklore. Actually, one of the most important works written by Eliade during his stay in Portugal is *Comentarii la Legenda Meșterului Manole* (Commentaries on the Legend of Master Manole). Announced in 1937, in the preface to *Cosmologie și alchimie babiloniană* (Babylonian cosmology and alchemy), *Comentarii la Legenda Meșterului Manole* was published in 1943, under the care of Constantin Noica,¹⁶ while Eliade was a cultural attaché in Lisbon.

Although Eliade claimed that Indian spirituality had helped him “understand the structures of Romanian culture,” it did not add anything substantial to the basic ideas about the history of religions that Eliade had already developed while in Romania. Eliade stated that “the common elements of Indian, Balkan, and Mediterranean folk culture proved to me that it is here that we find that organic universalism which it is the result of a common history (the history of peasant cultures) and not an abstract construct.”¹⁷

In the Preface to the *Commentaries*, Eliade wrote: “The present work is published with a delay of at least six years. In one of the courses on the history and philosophy of religions which I taught at the Faculty of Letters of Bucharest University (1936–1937) alongside the course on metaphysics of Professor Nae Ionescu, I had the chance to present, although briefly, the content and the conclusions of this book.”¹⁸ Also, Eliade pointed out that “the present commentaries would be more interesting if they were read together with our former studies, especially *Babylonian Cosmology and Alchemy*, *Metallurgy*, *Magic and Alchemy*, and *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.” This because they all “belong to the same *family* of studies, conceived, elaborated and partly completed in 1935–38.”¹⁹

Moreover, Eliade seemed interested in this subject much earlier. In an article published in 1932 Eliade wrote, in connection to the *Legend of Master Manole*:

For instance, consider the legend of Master Manole, which is not at all one of the best, in our folk literature or in Romanian literature (it can be found all over the Balkans, having ancient roots). Almost all who have taken up this legend wanted to give it an original interpretation, in one way or another.

But the charm of this theme is the legend itself, without any quest for symbols or interpretations. The legend alone creates a fantastic presence, irrational, purely by itself—and not in its symbolic connotations—and it introduces us to a folkloric universe in which the inorganic world has its own life and its laws; where houses and churches are living beings which cannot last unless the offering of a human life is made, so that its blood and soul would make it last forever.²⁰

The *Commentaries* are mostly important in the sense that they reflect the development of Mircea Eliade's thought, especially in what concerns religion, myths and symbols, as well as folklore. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the title, the work consists of *Commentaries on the Legend* and it is not a new and inedited approach. Indeed, the work could be seen as a synthesis of Eliade's theories and studies in the religious field, touching upon cosmogonic myths, the Orient, Yoga, *coincidentia oppositorum*, the ballad *Miorița*, or the place occupied by Christian myths, and featuring many other topics stemming from his previous studies and analyses.

A few days before the publication of the work, Eliade published in the Portuguese newspaper *Acção* an introductory article on Romanian folklore, in which he presented *The Ballad of Master Manole* and the story of the construction of the Argeș Monastery, and he also mentioned the *Miorița*, another remarkable product of Romanian folk wisdom.²¹ In fact, Eliade's book is structured around the legend of Master Manole, "a central myth in the spirituality of the Romanian people." As already mentioned, the subject had stirred the attention of Eliade long before he began writing the book. He had prepared an article on this subject, called "Manole and the Ritual of Construction," for the *Zamolxis* review. Manole is seen as the master builder; he is described as "the best of all." We may think of him as a great architect; in the mythical story, he has designed a church "more splendid than any other [church] in the whole world."

Besides, "the two myths of Romanian spirituality" (*Miorița* and *The Ballad of Master Manole*) hold a central place in another work of Eliade, dedicated to the Romanians and entitled *Os Romanos, latinos de Oriente*.²² "In any culture," Eliade contended, "there is always a central myth which reveals it and which is to be found in all of its great creations. The spiritual life of any Romanian is dominated by the two myths which express, in perfect spontaneity, his spiritual vision about the Universe and the value he ascribes to existence."²³ Strictly referring to *Master Manole*, Eliade stated that "what is of interest is that the Romanians chose this mythical theme and gave it an unparalleled artistic and moral expression. They chose it because the Romanian soul finds itself in the myth of the supreme sacrifice, which makes it possible for a human creation, be it a cathedral, a country or a hut, to last forever."²⁴ Eliade began by placing

it among what he called “the myths of the construction sacrifice,” based on authentic rituals which presuppose a human sacrifice as the foundation for a new construction. His argument is based on examples from all over the world, beginning with ancient Greece, Rome, and even China and Japan.

The Myth of the Master Builder “both assumes and reinforces the patriarchal structure of society. Ana’s chief role is to take care of the men and to bear and nurture children. In the story she functions as the object that Manole most values, and it is shown that he values her for her loyalty, her obedience, her beauty, her sexuality, and her childbearing. She is the possession that makes his loss so enormous. She has no part in any decisions. He is the one who must choose whether or not to murder her for the sake of the building.”²⁵ Manole chose the church, even if Ana was everything for him. By acting in this fashion, he transferred her soul to the church. Regarding his decision, as Eliade noted, there are many myths, as well as documented instances, of a person being walled into a structure to ensure its completion. These various stories have in common the fact that a “construction must be animated, that is, must receive both life and a soul. The ‘transference’ of the soul is possible only by means of a sacrifice; in other words, by a violent death.”²⁶

In commenting on the story of Master Manole, Eliade had the opportunity to draw on all of his knowledge related to the history of religions. Thus, he mentioned all construction-related rituals²⁷ based on sacrifice and explained the fact that the sacrifice is made just because a particular structure (house, bridge, and monastery) cannot endure, cannot be, if it is not given life. The reason for this is that behind the sacrifice there is the cosmogonic myth which speaks of the creation of the world as a “sacrificial act”: “We can find the sacrifice of a primordial giant in the cosmological myth of the creation of the world even in other places (although probably its origin should be looked for somewhere between the Euphrates and the Indus)...”²⁸

In his conclusion to the chapter “The Cosmic Myth, an Archetypal Model,” Eliade explained six main points. We shall cite the last two of them, as we consider that they encapsulate the main idea of the *Legend of Master Manole*:

*5. Nothing can last if it is not endowed with ‘life’ and ‘soul’ through the sacrifice of another life. 6. It is only the ritual death (violent death) that is creative, for the simple reason that it interrupts a life that did not accomplish all its possibilities, which did not fulfill its destiny; also the ritual death (and to generalize, any such ‘violent death’ justified by its meaning, and not just an accident) triggers a force which not only makes possible the ‘transmission’ of life itself, but assures the perenniality of the new creation which has been created through it.*²⁹

Although various versions of the legend can be found all over Europe, Eliade considered its Romanian version to be superior to all, in its artistic as well as “metaphysical” expression. Besides, the Romanian version of the legend preserved (or rediscovered) a detail rich in meanings: the Icarus fight of Master Manole, tragically ended on the threshold of the monastery, built at the price of his wife’s life. This was his only chance to reunite with his wife. Not just because he died, but because he met with “a violent death which allowed him to *exist* in the same cosmic level where she existed as well.”³⁰

Eliade believed that with the Romanians the value of the “ritual of death” is a Geto-Dacian legacy. The theme of death is commonly found in folk creations. Besides, “it is not at all by chance that both prominent spiritual folkloric creations of the Romanians—*Miorița* and *The Ballad of Master Manole*—find meaning in the value of death. The death in *Miorița* is a peaceful return ‘to his own people.’ The death in *Master Manole* is creative, like any ritual death. The Romanian does not search or wish for his/her death—but is not afraid of it either; a ‘ritual death’ is gladly welcomed. The same value given to death can be found with the forefathers of the Romanians, the Geto-Dacians.” For the Romanians, what bestows life to an object is this sacrifice, the ritual death. Besides, the idea of a “creative death” (and all that might be derived from it) was accepted *per se* and transformed within Christianity as well. Actually, Eliade believed that “it was expected that an ecumenical religion, centered on the value of suffering and on an optimistic interpretation of death, would accept the beliefs and customs structured around the idea of a creative death.”³¹

Many of Eliade’s ideas from the *Commentaries on the Legend of Master Manole* (1943) are also expressed in his earlier writings, especially in his *Babylonian Cosmology and Alchemy* (1937), and in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1942) and in many other studies related to symbolism and folklore, written beginning with 1932. But what he asserts in the *Commentaries* is more profound than in the previous works; this is, in fact, the only work on the philosophy of religions written by Eliade before the publication of the *Traité d’Histoire des Religions* (1949).

In 1955, Mircea Eliade wrote an article called “Master Manole and the Monastery of Argeș,” which was later included in the volume *From Zalmoxis to Genghis-Khan* (1970).³² In the first part of this article Eliade mentioned the work published in 1943, in which he had attempted “a first exegesis of the spiritual universe revealed by the well-known Romanian ballad.”³³

ELIADÉ WAS quite passionate about myths and legends, and thus his interest in the *Legend of Master Manole* was spontaneous and natural. Furthermore, this legend is one of “the two important myths of the Romanian spirit,” both very dear to him. Eliade depicts “the world revealed by the bal-

lad” and does not intend to provide his own interpretation of it. His work is a commentary rather than an analysis of the ballad’s text. He was interested in “the folk spirituality” which it depicts, in the archaic stratum underlying it. This is, in fact, the key to the whole work: his attempt to see what lies beyond the folk language, to find the driving force behind the sacrificial act.

The Legend of Master Manole symbolizes the condition of human creation, the incorporation of individual suffering into the work of art. This is a common pattern. The legends and rituals connected to the cosmogonic myth recall the primordial act of creation that gave birth to the world. In the end, we can say that Manole makes the ultimate sacrifice; he endures extraordinary suffering in order to remain true to his higher calling of building a house of worship; a tribute, in stone, to God. The extent of his suffering defines the power of his creation. Manole provides the listener with the model of an ideal self. It enables one to feel self-esteem and justifies the misery of one’s life.



Notes

1. In Germany, this subject is also well known: “When Christianity was introduced to Rügen, they wanted to build a church in Vilmnitz. However, the builders could not complete their task, because whatever they put up during the day was torn down again by the Devil that night. Then they purchased a child, put a bread-roll in one hand, a light in the other, and set it in a cavity in the foundation, which they quickly mortared shut. Now the Devil could no longer disrupt the building’s progress. It is also said that a child was entombed in the church at Bergen under similar circumstances.” For more information: *Human Sacrifice in Legends and Myths*, by D. L. Ashliman, University of Pittsburgh: <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/ashliman.html>.
2. Mircea Eliade, “Comentarii la Legenda Meșterului Manole,” in *Meșterul Manole: Studii de etnologie și mitologie*, eds. Magda Ursache and Petru Ursache (Iași: Junimea, 1992) (first edition, Bucharest: Publicom, 1943).
3. As Eric Tappe noticed, “the theme of builder who sacrifices his wife to ensure the stability of the building on which he works is widespread in the folklore of Southeast Europe.” He mentioned Romania and the legend of Master Manole, and then he continued: “in Greece the builder is Manole, but the building is the bridge of Arta. In Bulgaria the builder is Gojko and the building the castle of Skadar. In Hungary the builder is Kőműves Kelemen and the building is the castle of Deva, in Transylvania.” Cf. Tappe, “A Rumanian Ballad and its English Adaptation,” *Folklore* 95, 1 (1984): 113.
4. Cf. Ted Anton, *Eros, Magic, and the Murder of Professor Culianu* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 30.
5. Cf. a commentary on the Ballad made by Prof. Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga in *Meșterul Manole*, a volume designed by Emil Chendea, ed. Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga (Bucharest: Albatros, 1976).

6. Ibid.
7. See Ruxandra Ion and James William Anderson, "The Myth of the Master Builder: A Psychoanalytic Perspective," in *Psychoanalysis and Architecture*, eds. Jerome A. Winer, James William Anderson, and Elizabeth A. Danze (Catskill, NY: Mental Health Resources, 2006), 241–259.
8. Tappe, 113.
9. Lucian Blaga, *Geneza metaforei și sensul culturii* (1937), in *Trilogia culturii* (Bucharest: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1944), 472.
10. Lucian Blaga, *Meșterul Manole*, drama in 5 acts (Sibiu: Tiparul Institutului de Arte Grafice Dacia Traiană, 1927), 76.
11. Ibid., 88.
12. Ibid., 93.
13. Mircea Handoca, "Afinități electice," *Vatra* (Târgu-Mureș) 13, 147 (20 June 1983): 8, 12.
14. See the following articles of Eliade: "Teme folclorice și creație artistică," *Rampa* (Bucharest) 20, 5693 (4 January 1937); "Folclor și creație cultă," *Sânzana* (Bucharest) 10, 11 (19 December 1937); "Gabriel Negry și problemele dansului folkloric," *Vremea* (Bucharest) 7, 367 (3 December 1934).
15. Eliade, "Teme folclorice și creație artistică."
16. At the end of his Preface, Eliade writes: "I owe this book to Constantin Noica." See Eliade, *Comentarii la Legenda Meșterului Manole*, 55–144, especially p. 57.
17. Mircea Eliade, *Autobiography: Volume I, 1907–1937. Journey East, Journey West* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 203–204.
18. Eliade, *Comentarii la Legenda Meșterului Manole*, 55.
19. Ibid., 56.
20. Mircea Eliade, "Folclor și literatură," *Cuvântul* (Bucharest) 9, 2599 (18 July 1932).
21. Cf. Albert von Brunn, "Mircea Eliade em Portugal (1940–1944)," *ICALP* 20–21 (July–October 1990): 37–50. Eliade's article in the *Acção* is "A lenda de Mestre Manolé," 29 April 1943.
22. Mircea Eliade, *Os Romanos, latinos do Oriente*, volume published in April 1943 in Portugal; cf. Mircea Eliade, *Jurnalul portughez și alte scrieri*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 186.
23. Mircea Eliade, "România: Breviar istoric," in *Meșterul Manole: Studii de etnologie și mitologie*, 43.
24. Ibid., 44.
25. Ion and Anderson, 250.
26. Mircea Eliade, *Zalmoxis: The Vanishing God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 182–183.
27. "The basic elements of the Ballad of Master Manole can be also found in other folkloric areas." Eliade continues to refer to the Estonian, Ukrainian, Spanish, American legends... later turning to Antiquity, which was "aware of the sacrifices of construction" and to modern India, which "kept the tradition of the human sacrifice associated with building" (Eliade, *Comentarii la Legenda Meșterului Manole*, 75–78).
28. Ibid., 105.

29. Ibid., 109.
30. Ibid., 110.
31. Ibid., 132.
32. Mircea Eliade, *De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han: Studii comparative despre religiile și folclorul Daciei și Europei Orientale*, trans. Maria Ivănescu and Cezar Ivănescu (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1980), 166–192.
33. Ibid., 166.

Abstract

The Myth of the Master Builder: Mircea Eliade on the *Legend of Master Manole*

The Legend of Master Manole, considered “a central myth in the spirituality of the Romanian people” (Mircea Eliade), is an aesthetic myth, indicating our understanding of creation. If *Miorița* represents a purely Romanian creation, without any correspondence in other nations, *The Legend of Master Manole* is also present with the other Balkan nations. In interpreting this legend, we have to begin by placing it within “the myths of the construction sacrifice,” based on authentic rituals which presuppose a human sacrifice as the foundation for a new construction. The legends and rituals connected to the cosmogonic myth recall the primordial act of creation that gave birth to the world. Regarding these creation myths, Eliade indicated that there are many myths, as well as documented instances, of a person being walled up into a structure to ensure its completion. Although he found different versions of the legend all over Europe, Eliade considered the Romanian version superior to all, in its artistic and “metaphysical” expression. Besides, the Romanian version of the legend has kept (or rediscovered) a detail rich in meanings: the Icarus flight of Master Manole, tragically ended on the threshold of the monastery, built at the price of his wife’s life.

Keywords

mythical stories, Mircea Eliade, spirituality, sacrifice, death