

ASCEND AND DESCEND ON THE RITUAL LADDER. MODES OF INITIATION

Gerlinde Glaser
(1950 – 2022)

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Abstract: Communication between heaven and Earth as an experience on a spiritual plane can be brought about by some physical means, such as a rainbow, a bridge, stairs, a ladder, a vine, a cord, “a chain of arrows”, a mountain, etc. These symbolic images of the connection between heaven and Earth are merely variants of the Cosmic Tree and imply the idea of a “Centre of the World”, a point where Earth, sky, and underworld meet.

Keywords: ritual ladder, Cosmic Tree, connection between heaven and Earth, modes of initiation

According to a Siberian belief the world is constructed on a series of levels: the middle one is represented by the world itself, the upper one by heaven, and the lower one by an underworld. All three are connected by a central axis, which could take the form of a world pillar, tree or mountain, and the shamanic or the initiatory technique was the ability to travel in spirit-flight from one level to another (Eliade 2004: 259). Further means to accomplish spirit-flight for initiatory purposes are a bridge, a well, a journey into far-away lands, a rope, a staircase and the glass mountain.

The Tree

The mythological World Tree and its role in the life of an initiate undergoing a rite of passage into adulthood may undoubtedly be traced in the tale *Der Wunderbaum/The Miracle Tree* (Haiding 1953: 71ff.). Ascent into the upper world by climbing the World Tree offers the young male enlightenment (Von Spieß 1940: 80ff.): one day a miraculous tree springs up and grows so fast that its top soon pierces the clouds. Naturally, people are curious about what might be behind the clouds and so a number of males dare the ascent. But none of them is successful.

Jetzt meldete sich der dumme Hansl selbst und verlangte für seine Reise zwölf Paar hölzerner Schuhe, Speisen und eine bleierne Hacke. Er kümmerte sich nicht viel darum, daß ihn alle auslachten, und machte sich auf. Die Leute warteten einen Tag und glaubten, nun werde er wieder herunterkommen. Aber sie erstaunten nicht wenig, als bloß seine Schuhe herabfielen, die ganz durchlöchert waren. So ging es auch an den nächsten Tagen, und da die Schuhe immer gewaltiger herabplumpsten, wußten sie, daß der dumme Hansl noch immer höher steige.

(Now the fool ascertained himself and demanded twelve pairs of wooden galoshes, provisions and an iron axe. He did not mind the other males mocking him and set out on his climb. The villagers waited for one day and expected him to return. They were, however, quite puzzled when they saw his worn footwear dropping to the ground. During the following days they found more galoshes falling down and so they knew he was advancing higher and higher)¹

(Haiding 1953: 71).



The Miracle Tree
(Haiding 1953: 72)

After a few days' climb the fool is offered shelter in a tree hole by a friendly crone. Other, less friendly, encounters follow until he finally arrives at a door in a high stone wall. On entering he steps onto a green meadow.

Als er wieder zu sich kam, lag vor ihm eine goldene Stadt, über der schwebte ein so starkes Licht, daß es seine Augen schier nicht vertragen konnten, Neben ihm lag seine Hacke, die hatte einen goldenen Stiel bekommen. Der Wipfel des Baumes trug goldene Früchte, und auf der Wiese sprangen goldene Tiere umher

(When he came to his senses, he saw a golden city spreading in front of him with a strong light blinding his eyes. Next to him there was his axe that had

¹ This and all other translations are mine.

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turned golden. There was golden fruit hanging from the top of the tree, and golden beasts joyfully dancing about on the meadow)

(Haiding 1953: 73).

Among the myths related to the theme of ascent is the “chain of arrows”. The hero goes up by fixing a first arrow in the celestial vault, then a second, and so on until he has made a chain between heaven and Earth (Eliade 2004: 490ff.). The axe that helps the young male climb the tree and that turns golden when he reaches the top (“Neben ihm lag seine Hacke, die hatte einen goldenen Stiel bekommen”; Haiding 1953: 73) may be seen as conceptually related to this myth. The incisions produced by the young man’s instrument could likewise be seen as forming such a chain connecting heaven and Earth.

The traditional toy offered at the Viennese Easter fair (Kalvarienbergmarkt), the legendary Bamkraxler (tree-climber), is undoubtedly another reflection of the neophyte’s climb of the World Tree. According to popular belief, the figure of the small wooden tree-climber is identical with the man Zacchaeus, who, in order to get a better view of Jesus, climbs a tree. The biblical episode is described by Luke:

And he went into Jericho, and when he was going through it,
A man, named Zacchaeus, who was the chief tax-farmer, and a man of wealth,
Made an attempt to get a view of Jesus, and was not able to do so, because of the people, for he was a small man.
And he went in front of them and got up onto a tree to see him, for he was going that way

(Luke 19: 1–4).



Bamkraxler vom Wiener Kalvarienbergmarkt



Bamkraxler vom Wiener Kalvarienbergmarkt

The Bridge

When the mythical dressmakers in a Macedonian song fling their broken needles into the sea, bridges arise; along those pathways the *Lazarki*, maidens who are being subjected to an archaic pre-marriage ritual, move along into the Netherworld across the sea. The South Slavic dance of the lazar maidens reflects an archaic lunar fertility ritual: positioned in the shape of the moon crescent the dancing females mime the movement of the celestial bodies, and in particular that of the moon (Кулишић 1979: 95ff.). The stomping of their bare feet is to magically stimulate the Earth's productive energy („Босоноге оне додирују земљу и тако на њу приносе своју плодност”), and their long, unbraided hair is to further the growth of the vegetation. When acting out their magic ritual the females wear small protective mirrors in their headdresses, which signifies their borderline state (between two worlds) and therefore their vulnerability (Kujundžić-Ostojić 2015).

Шијат шијат терзии,
на високи димани,

игли им се кршеа,
во море и фрлјеа,
во море и фрлјеа,
мостои се прајеа,
да минат лазарките,
шчо сет морни, уморени:
везден дена шетале,
везден дена пееа,
везден оро играле.

(The dressmakers are sewing,
seated on their high sofa;
their needles break,
and they fling them into the sea,
fling them into the sea;
along the bridges that rise from the water
the lazar maidens move,
tired, very tired from all the walking,
singing and dancing)

(Тахов 1895: 200; cit. Наневски 1971: 58).

Transfer across a glass bridge is an equivalent of a pass-way into the Other World. *Die Prinzessin auf der gläsernen Brücke/The Princess on the Glass Bridge* (Haiding 1953: 29ff.) is about a young male's journey into adulthood, which as an initiatory ordeal is not devoid of dangers.

Am vierten Tage kam er schon frühmorgens zur gläsernen Brücke. Als er darauf die Gestalt mit dem großen Kopfe sitzen sah, getraute er sich nicht hin. Sie aber winkte ihn heran, nahm ihn auf den Rücken und trug ihn über die Brücke aus Glas. Am anderen Ufer stand ein großes, schönes Schloß, in das sie ihn führte.

(On the fourth day he came to the bridge early in the morning. There he saw a female with an enormous head seated, whom he dared not approach. She, however, beckoned him to come closer and then carried him on her back across the glass bridge. On the other side of the river she led him into a huge and beautiful palace)

(Haiding 1953: 10).



The Princess on the Glass Bridge
(Haiding 1953: 31)

When the hero has fulfilled a number of difficult tasks he is provided with a life in a paradisaical world.

The Well

In the tale *Goldtöchterchen und Pechmagd*/*Gold-Maiden and Pitch-Maiden* the young female reaches the Other World through a well, where she is successfully initiated into the female skills:

Nun rutschte das Mädchen in seinem Eifer vom Brunnenrand, brach durch die Spiegelhaut des Wassers und meinte zu ertrinken. Aber sie erstickte nicht, sondern schwebte ganz sanft auf den Grund, milde Frühlingsluft brach herein. Die Maid war auf einer üppigen Wiese gelandet. Da grünte und blühte ewiger Mai, und sie tanzte vor Lebenslust auf den blumigen Rasen.

(Now the zealous maiden slipped from the rim of the well, broke through the water surface and expected to drown. But instead of suffocating she softly glided to the bottom, where mild spring air embraced her. She had landed on a lush meadow. It was the eternally green and blooming season of May, and she joyfully danced on the flowery lawn)

(Paetow 1986: 38).

The Macedonian hero, on the other hand, in pursuit of the dragon-snake descends through a hole in the ground into the underworld and finds his good fortune there.

Братја мои, мене да ми вразете и да ми пусните: колко ки клатја хортомата, толко на дол да ме пуштите. Го врзаја и го пуснаха. Тој, кату отиде малко нетри на дупката, беши нашел една стара баба, ... отиде понанетре, најде четиријси удаја; и тој влезе в удаите, тамо најде три моми прехубави... Момите, как го видоха, трите на нога станаха...

(My dear brothers, fasten me and let me down the full length of the rope. They fastened him and let him down. When he advanced into the hole, he met a crone... At the bottom he entered a building with forty chambers, where three most beautiful maidens welcomed him...)

(Верковиќ 1977: II, 212).

In the tale *Die Drei Jungfrauen/The Three Virgins*, the herdsboy, when following his herd of pigs through a dark hole into the underground, is richly rewarded, at least as long as he keeps silent about his source of wealth:

...und als sie /the pigs/in das Loch hineinschossen, da überwand er alle Furcht und lief ihnen nach. Da war es aber so finster wie in einem Sack und er wußte bei keinem Schritt, wo er hintappte, sondern mußte nur aufs Geratewohl seiner Nase nachlaufen, so wie es die Schweine auch taten.

(...and as the pigs rushed into the hole, he overcame his fear and hastily followed them. It was, however, so dark there that he did not know where to direct his steps, but then he did as his pigs did, he just ran along)

(Haiding 1953: 197).

The new attire provided by the three virgins from the underground must be seen as an outward sign of his changed personality:



The Three Virgins
(Haiding 1953: 200)

Across Fifty Lands

The spiritual travel may also be undertaken on ground level as happens to the heroine in the Russian tale *Перышко Финиста ясного сокола/The Feather of Finist, the Sharp Eagle*, who sets out on a journey across fifty lands to retrieve her lover, Fynist, the sharp eagle. Her extensive preparations point to a long empires and difficult march into the Another World, where she will eventually find her lover and obtain maturity.

“Пойду, говорит, куда глаза глядят!” Приказала себе сковать три пары железных башмаков, три костыля железные, три колпака железные и три просвиры железные...

(“I will go where my step directs me!” She ordered three pairs of iron shoes, three iron crutches, three iron helmets and three iron loaves of bread...)

(Афанасьев 2010: 559).

Далеко ж тебе идти, малютка! Надо пройти еще тридевять земель. Финист ясен сокол, цветные перышки, живет в пятидесятом царстве, в осьмидесятом государстве...

(You still have to go a long way, across thirty-nine lands! Fynist, the sharp eagle with the bright feathers lives in the fiftieth tsardom, in the eightieth country...)

(Афанасьев 2010: 560).

The Rope

The symbolism of the rope, like that of the ladder, implies communication between sky and Earth, as it is by means of a rope or a ladder (as, too, by a vine) that the gods descend to Earth and men go up to the sky. Australian medicine men claim to possess a sort of magical rope with which they can climb to the tops of trees (Eliade 2004: 428–430).

The concept of the spirit flight along the celestial ladder finds further confirmation when elected dead souls are imagined to march into heaven along a fine thread: “...for certain tribes, who are reckoned among the most archaic, the dead go to the sky...” (Eliade 2004: 491). Those who are characterized as sinful are refused entrance. Holy Mary’s observation of the dead souls travelling is based on this belief:

Заспала света Мария
На свети Петър на ръка.
Свети я Петър будеше:
„Я стани, света Марийо,
Да видиш чудо големо,
Какво се души превода
През тънко влакно конопно:
Коя е душа греховна,
Она не може да мине“.
Сите са души минали,
А до три души остана.
Тия не можа да мина,
Тия су души греховни.

(Mary was asleep
Next to Holy Peter.
Holy Peter woke her:
Wake up, Mary,
You will see a great miracle,
How the souls move along
A thin thread of hemp:
The sinful soul,
Must not pass.
All the souls passed,
Only three souls stayed behind.
They could not pass,
As they were sinful.)

(СБНУ 1889: III 36; cit. Вранска 1940: 179).

The dead souls’ march into the other world is witnessed by the maiden Lalina in a variety of the above text:

Лалина е заспала в нова градина под бел червен трендафил. Престилката ѝ е постилка, ален вълненик – завивка, шарен рукав – възглаве. Майка ѝ я вика да стане да види чудо големо – как мрътвите души минават по тънко влакно ленено.

(Lalina fell asleep under the red rosebush in the new garden, on a red woollen cover with her head on her brightly sewn sleeve. The mother wakes her to see a great miracle, dead souls marching along a fine linen thread)

(АрхБАН: 19; cit. Вранска 1940: 180).

The boy in the story of *John Spriggins and the Enchanted Bean*, on the other hand, finds riches, i.e. enlightenment, when climbing a beanstalk. John is sent to the market to sell his mother's only cow, but instead of exchanging the cow for money he acquires magic beans. Those grow into a gigantic beanstalk, which the boy climbs the next morning to find an enormous castle high in the sky:

Using the leaves and twisty vines like the rungs of a ladder, Jack climbed and climbed until at last, he reached the sky. And when he got there he found a long, broad road winding its way through the clouds to a tall, square castle off in the distance

(*Jack and the Beanstalk*).

There the owner, a giant, threatens to destroy him:

Fee-fi-fo-fum!

I smell the blood of an Englishman: Be he alive, or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make my bread

(*Jack and the Beanstalk*).

John, though, grabs the giant's bag of gold coins and escapes down the beanstalk.

The Russian tale *Старик на небе/The Old Man in the Sky* deals with a similar subject matter: the beans the old man has sown grow high up into the sky, where a life of plenty expects the climber.

...а бобинка выросла под самый стол; приняли стол, она еще выше выросла, сняли накат, крышу – все растет, и выросла род самое небо. Дед полез на небо; лез, лез – стоит хатка, стены из блинов, лавки из калачей, печка из творогу, вымазана маслом. Он принялся есть, наелся и лег на печку отдохнуть.

(...and the beanstalk grew under the table; so they removed the table, but it still grew higher. So they had to remove the roof – but it was still growing and grew up into the sky. The old man climbed up the beanstalk, high and higher into the sky and arrived at a hut of plenty: its walls were made of pancakes, its benches were made of white bread and its oven of cheese and butter. He began to eat, and when he was full, he lay down on the oven to rest)

(Афанасьев 2010: 27).

The Staircase

In the myth *Maria Stiegen in Wien/Mary's Stairs in Vienna* the young nobleman Bernhardus is helped by Mary to witness the spirit of his late friend mounting the stairs to heaven/Scala coeli:

Der heilige Bernhardus hatte unweit von seinem Kloster eine absonderliche Andacht zu einer Kirche, in welcher ein uraltes Marienbild stand, das aber durch saumselige Verehrung ohne Titel und Namen war. Bei diesem alten Gnadenbild hat er einst eine Messe gelesen für einen verstorbenen, gar getreuen Freund. Nach vollendetem Meßopfer sieht er... eine Leiter oder Stiegen von einem Fegfeuer bis gegen Himmel, und nimmt beinebens wahr, wie auf dieser Stiegen die Seele seines besten Freundes hinaufsteigt in die allsättliche Glorie...

(Holy Bernhardus had a strange vision not far from his monastery in a church that housed a nameless and neglected picture of Mary. There he attended mass for his late and dear friend. At the end of the service he saw... a ladder or a staircase along which his dear friend was ascending from purgatory to heaven...)

(Kaltenbaeck 1845: 22).

The Glass Mountain

The Polish tale *Der Glasberg* with its archaic details offers an insight into the mortal dangers young males face when endeavouring to climb the glass mountain:

Schon viele Ritter hatten versucht, auf den Berg hinaufzukommen. Auf scharf beschlagenem Pferde kletterte mancher hinan, aber auf halbem Wege stürzte er von dem glatten und steilen Berge hinunter. Einer brach sich den Arm, der andere das Bein, mancher gar das Genick. ...Rund um den Berg lagen viele Leichen – Ritter und Pferde. Die ganze Gegend sah aus wie ein Kirchhof.

(Many knights had already endeavoured to climb the mountain. On heavily shod horses they climbed up, but halfway they fell from the slippery and steep surface. Some broke their arms or legs and others even their necks. ...)

Around the mountain there were heaps of corpses – knights and horses. The whole area resembled a cemetery)

(Woycicki 1920: 67).

The young man, who ascends with a lynx's claws attached to hands and feet, is involuntarily helped by a falcon to reach the top:

Der Falke schlug seine scharfen Krallen in das Fleisch des Jüngling. Da packte dieser plötzlich die Beine des Vogels und ließ sich von ihm emportragen. ...Jetzt war der goldene Apfelbaum in der Nähe. Der Bursche zog ein Messer aus dem Gürtel und schnitt dem Falken beide Füße ab. Der Vogel stieg vor Schmerz bis zu den Wolken hinauf, der Jüngling aber fiel in die breiten Äste des Apfelbaums.

(The falcon dug its sharp claws into the flesh of the youth. The latter then grabbed the bird's legs and was carried upwards... Now they were close to the apple-tree. The male took his knife from his belt and cut off both legs of the falcon. From pain the bird soared up into the clouds and the youth fell into the crown of the apple-tree)

(Woycicki 1920: 67).

There is a clear indication of an initiation practice (mutilation/death, healing/revival), when the wounds inflicted on the youth's flesh are healed with apple peel from the golden apple-tree on the top of the glass mountain, and even the dead males at the foot of the mountain are revived by the falcon's blood.

The classical structure of the glass mountain tale is given in the Norwegian tale *Die Jungfrau auf dem Glasberg/The Maiden on the Glass Mountain*. From among three brothers the youngest one, Aschenper, who proves to be the most fearless, obtains three magic horses and three sets of armour, copper, silver and gold. After three successive trials to climb the glassy surface of the mountain, he reaches the top where the maiden is seated: "Am dritten Tag schließlich reitet er in seiner goldenen Rüstung ganz bis nach oben und bekommt den Apfel.../und/die Prinzessin..." (Asbjørnsen & Moe 2013) (On the third day he arrives at the top in his golden armour and obtains the apple and the princess...).

In the German tale *Die Sieben Raben/The Seven Ravens*, though, it is the female who sets out to find her raven brothers enclosed in the glass mountain. From the Morning Star she obtains a chicken bone, which is the key to the glass mountain: "...wenn du das Beinchen nicht hast, kannst du den Glasberg nicht aufschließen, und in dem Glasberg da sind deine Brüder"

(Grimm 2010: 149) (...without the bone you will not be able to open the glass mountain, and in the glass mountain there are your brothers).

The Russian tale *Хрустальная гора/The Crystal Mountain* offers a different solution: when the young male slays the dragon, he obtains the magic seed that melts the glass mountain.

Иван-царевич победил змея о двенадцати головах, разрезал его туловище и на правой стороне нашел сундук; в сундуке – заяц, в зайце – утка, в утке – яйцо, в яйце – семечко. Взял он семечко, зажег и поднес к хрустальной горе – гора скоро растаяла. Иван-царевич вывел оттуда царевну и привез ее к отцу; отец возрадовался и говорит царевичу: “Будь ты моим зятем!”

(Ivan-tsarevič defeated the twelve-headed dragon, cut up its body and found a chest to his right; in the chest there was a hare, in the hare a duck, in the duck an egg, in the egg a grain of seed. He took the latter, lit it and held it against the crystal mountain, whereupon the latter quickly melted. So Ivan-tsarevič could free the princess and bring her back to her father. Now the grateful king offered the hero the hand of his daughter)

(Афанасьев 2010: 309).

This tale appears among the few that promotes the idea of the glacier as the archaic concept of the glass mountain.

Selbstverständlich ist die Ähnlichkeit zwischen Glas und Eis in die Augen fallend, und zwar überall dort, wo man Gelegenheit hat, ihre Durchsichtigkeit und harte, glatte Oberfläche zu vergleichen. Gletscher waren in den Alpenländern ebenso bekannt wie in Afghanistan und in Nordindien mit dem Hindukusch und dem Himalaya. Die Inder stellen sich vor, dass ihre Peris /fairies/ in einem “Glasschloss” auf dem Gipfel des Nanga Parbat im nordwestlichen Kaschmir, ... Der Nanga Parbat oder “der kahle Berg” erhebt sich 2000 Meter über das umgebende Gebirgsmassiv und ist von Gletschern umringt, also ein wahrhaftiger “Glasberg”, wenn man Glas und Eis gleichzustellen wagt.

(The similarity between glass and ice is obvious as far as their transparency and hard and slippery surface is concerned. Glaciers were known in the Alps as well as in Afghanistan, Northern India with its Hindukush and the Himalayas. According to Indian belief the Peris or fairies lived in a “glass palace” on the peak of Nanga Parbat in north western Kashmir, ... Nanga Parbat or “the bare mountain” rising 2000 meters above the surrounding mountain range and encircled by glaciers is a true “glass mountain”, if one wants to equate glass with ice)

(Der Glasberg 530. Maerchenlexikon.de).

Conclusion

By mounting a ladder, a tree or a mountain or by moving along a rope or a vine, neophytes in a transcendental mode undertake their spiritual flight. As a widespread mythical motif the cosmic ladder expresses various phases of spiritual ascent and relates to a symbolic centre of the world.

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ИСКАЧУВАЊЕ И СЛЕГУВАЊЕ ПО РИТУАЛНИТЕ СКАЛИ КАКО НАЧИН НА ИНИЦИЈАЦИЈА

Герлинде Глазер
(1950 – 2022)

Резиме

Комуникацијата меѓу небото и земјата како опит на спиритуалното ниво може да се случува на физички начин, којшто може да се претстави како: виножито, мост, скали, винова лоза, јаже, гора итн. Тие симболични искачувања, коишто ги поврзуваат небото и земјата, се третираат како варијанти на Космичкото Дрво и укажуваат на идејата на еден центар на светот, каде што се среќаваат земјата, небото и подземјето.