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ON THE SYMBOLISM OF NUMBERS THREE, SEVEN AND FORTY IN AZERBAJANI FOLK STORIES

SOBRE EL SIMBOLISMO DE LOS NÚMEROS TRES, SIETE Y CUARENTA EN LAS HISTORIAS POPULARES AZERBAIYANAS

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ABSTRACT

Since ancient times, numbers have played an important role in representing the customs, traditions and beliefs of peoples, some reaching the status of sacred. For different factors there are common sacred numbers for different peoples, such as the numbers three, five, seven, eight, nine, twelve, forty, three hundred among others. However, in Azerbaijan, special relevance has been acquired by the numbers three, seven and forty, so the objective of this research is to analyze its importance in folklore and cultural expression. For this, various popular tales are analyzed, highlighting the relevance of these numbers, their functions and possible interpretations. It was identified that the number three is associated with success, number seven with time and forty with the concept of many. The study of their possible meanings serves for a better interpretation of ancient texts because, as shown, their interpretation cannot always be literal.

Keywords:

Sacred numbers, natural numbers, mythological presentation.

RESUMEN

Desde tiempos antiguos los números han jugado un importante rol en la representación las costumbres, tradiciones y creencias de los pueblos, llegando algunos a alcanzar el estatus de sagrados. Por distintos factores existen números sagrados comunes para distintos pueblos, como son los números tres, cinco, siete, ocho, nueve, doce, cuarenta, trescientos entre otros. Sin embargo, en Azerbaiyán especial relevancia ha sido adquirida por los números tres, siete y cuarenta por lo que el objetivo de esta investigación es analizar su importancia en el folclore y expresión cultural. Para esto se analizan diversos cuentos populares destacando la relevancia de estos números, sus funciones y posibles interpretaciones. Se identificó que el número tres está asociado al éxito, el número siete al tiempo y el cuarenta al concepto de muchos. El estudio de sus posibles significados sirve para una mejor interpretación de textos antiguos pues como se muestra su interpretación no siempre puede ser literal.

Palabras clave:

Números sagrados, números naturales, presentación mitológica.

INTRODUCTION

Numbers come in many varieties: natural numbers, rational numbers, real numbers, complex numbers, and others. Just as Platonists and their opponents cannot settle the question of mathematical reality, philosophers of mathematics also can't agree on what numbers actually are. A number may be conceived as "multitudes of units", "nothing but names" or numerals, a mental entity or projection, and as several other ideas. However, all of these interpretations have their respective advantages and problems (Nieder, 2019).

Symbolism of numbers has been one of the basic interests since philosopher and mathematician Pitagora's school in Antique Greece. According to Pythagoreans conceptual system, numbers were the key to the laws of the cosmic harmony, this being the reason why they consider numbers to be symbols of a divine cosmic order. In their beliefs numbers weren't randomly thrown into the world, but they are organized in a balanced and ordered system (Andreici, 2017).

On the other hand, according to Kulishenko & Chechel (2017), in the paremiological picture of the world, numbers play an important role in the sign system role. They are used not only to measure, but also act as one of the means of describing a person and the world of his knowledge. Everett (2017), states that we filter our experience through the learned and shared beliefs, values, and tools that we inherit from those around us. That is, we filter our experience through our native culture and nearly every element of our lives is affected, in one way or another, by this filtering. Following this point of view numbers symbolism play an important role in our lives conditioned by our beliefs, traditions and culture.

In the poetic texts of Azerbaijani folk tales, it has been found that some numbers are widespread and associated with primary ideas in traditions, customs, faith, religion, and everyday issues. Such numbers are rooted not only in tales, but also in folklore in general and this is no coincidence. It is known from many ancient sources that different ancient clans and tribes had their own numbers and such numbers were considered sacred (Chamanzaminli, 2005). The numbers used in oral folk art can be divided into two groups by their poetic nature: sacred and traditional numbers. In general, among the peoples of the world, the numbers three, five, seven, eight, nine, twelve, forty, sixty, three hundred, among others were considered sacred. It is known that some sacred numbers in different countries are identical, although in many cases they differ depending on the worldview, faith, customs and traditions of peoples.

For example, in the Turkic language numbers one, three, five, seven and nine are considered sacred numbers. Among the ancient Turkic peoples, the number of gifts and blessings was usually nine. Therefore, nine is perceived as a successful number since people believed that the "levels of heaven", sacred according to ancient astronomy, were nine. On the other hand, in ancient Yakut beliefs and rituals, many representations and events were associated with certain numbers that carried symbolic meaning, particularly the numbers three, nine and eight. The first two numbers were associated with a good start.

Sacred numbers arose from myths and rituals, which are the product of the early stages of the formation of human consciousness. In the Azerbaijani language, mainly three, seven and forty are considered sacred numbers and are often used in the language (particularly in folk literature and speech) and cover a wide area. This also manifests itself in various forms at the present time in the beliefs of the people. For example, consider some texts of beliefs: *"Khidir Zinda, Khidir Ilyas and Khidir Nabi are three brothers. They say that in difficult times call for Khidir Zinda, in the water for Khidir Ilyas, and on land for Khidir Nabi"*. (Aliyev, 1988, p. 11)

Other examples of this connection are (Aliyev, 1988):

- When a child starts to walk late, in order to overcome the situation, putting him in a sieve and collect gifts from seven houses (p.11)
- When a woman can't get pregnant take flour from a bag three times and later return it saying: "the path will remain fertile in it". After that, begin to use the flour from this bag (p.12)
- If two women give birth on the same day, then in forty days they should not speak to each other because their children would fall under the influence of evil forces. If this would happen, watering three time and wash them (p.12)
- Sacrificial meat is distributed to seven houses and the sacrifice, in the name of Khazret Bab, is distributed only on the way" (p.12)
- Until the fortieth day has passed, the person who has returned from the commemoration does not meet the newborn. That person must first enter a courtyard, and then meet it" (p.13)
- If someone sneezes sharply when it comes to a dear person, he should pull the hem of his clothes three times and says: you are ours, you are ours, you are ours (p.15)

As can be seen from the above examples, according to popular believes, certain sacred numbers have magical power or influence. Therefore, they bring good, joy, or,

conversely, misfortune and loss. From this point of view, it can be stated that numbers play an important role in folklore since they may save people from “evil spirits” or help them with “magic power”. Considering this, the objective of this research is to analyze the relevance of numbers three, seven and forty in Azerbaijani folklore. In order to do that traditional tales were examined in order to understand how previous generations created this numbers.

DEVELOPMENT

Fairy tales, which occupy an important place among the epic genres of Azerbaijani folklore, provide a very rich material for the study of archaic ideas, beliefs, customs and traditions. At the beginning and at the end of the tale numbers play an important role in the narrative process. Yu.V. Chemenzeminli, M.G. Takhmasib, B. Abdullaev and other folklorists, while studying certain issues of folklore, are referred upon the relevance of three seven and forty.

The most beloved and most used number in Azerbaijani fairy tales is three. In the fabulous plot, the trinity - three brothers, three sisters, three roads, three conditions, three tests, three questions, three battles, three assignments, three commands, three assistants, three magic items, three times of the day, three divas, three-headed diva, a dragon and so on - perform the necessary compositional function. The number three is also common in traditional expressions and depictions of folk tales. For example:

- *“Having passed the rod three times on the ground, he made the entire population of the city people.”* (Akhundov, 1959, p. 125)
- *“Once a bird has sat down on his head three times, it means that he is our padishah.”* (Akhundov, 1959, p. 128)
- *“I gave Bahram three hairs and said: when you have difficulties, set fire to this hair, then I will come to your aid.”* (Akhundov, 1959, p. 239)
- *“Once upon a time there were many people created by Allah. Once upon a time there was a certain padishah. This padishah had three sons.”* (Farzaliev & Gasymlı, 1994, p. 323)
- *“Three apples fell from the sky. One of them is intended for me, the other for you, and the third for the one who stands at a distance and turns away from the apple.”* (Farzaliev & Gasymlı, 1994, p. 211)
- *“You must hit this dragon with three arrows in the eye, if you hit it, you will achieve your goal, but if you don't, you will turn to stone.”* (Akhundov, 1959, p. 284)
- *“These three divas, having gone into the world of darkness, began to prepare wealth.”* (Akhundov, 1959, p. 155)

- *“As soon as morning came, all three heroes, having set off, followed the trail of blood to the well.”* (Akhundov, 1959, p. 157)
- *“After 3 days and 3 nights I reached the very center of the world of darkness.”* (Akhundov, 1959, p. 159)
- *“As soon as the daughter of the padishah fell asleep for three days, Melikmamed stole the girl!”* (Akhundov, 1959, p. 221)

In Azerbaijani folk tales, the three images of evil differ from the images of the three helpers. The assistants are depicted as three characters, perform three functions, so each of them has a certain magical property inherent only in him. However, in Azerbaijani folk tales, the three forces of evil are perceived as a single symbol of evil.

The number three, being associated with faith, rituals, customs and traditions, is used mainly in the meaning of success. Karabagly (1961), writes about the number three: *“It is very interesting that in our fairy tales and popular beliefs the third one always differs from the two previous ones; the third son is more agile, the issue is resolved on the third day, the third way is more profitable, the third hit gives a more successful result, the third sister turns out to be more beautiful and more faithful, etc”*. (p. 27)

In general, the trinity method in fairy tales is the most characteristic property. Telling about the semantic features of this method in folk art, Takhmasib (2010), writes: *“It is well known that, in general, retardation is associated with the sacredness of the number three. And in our customs and traditions, and in faith and religion, and in purely everyday matters, the “third day” of any business, as well as the repetition of a business three times is associated with very ancient views of our people and has spread very widely. And the “trinity”, that is, a threefold repetition of an event, adventure, episode in our fairy tales occurs especially often”*. (p. 109)

For example: “The prince goes to that place; the eldest aunt gathers all the old people in the region. Finally, the oldest of them says that there are two padishahs of snakes. They fight nearby every year. If you can help the white snake, it will show you the way. The prince reaches the place indicated by the old man. The snakes begin to fight. Prince Mutalib, having said ‘God help you’ shoots from a bow. The arrow hits the back of the white snake’s head. The prince turned to stone up to the knee. He aimed again, fired again from the bow. And this arrow, flying obliquely, hit the tail of the white snake. Mutalib was petrified to the waist. Watching that on one side of the wounds from arrows and on the other side the bites of a black snake completely weakened the white snake, which is about to be defeated, he says *“come what may” and fired a third*

time. An arrow, escaping from the bow, flew towards the kites. It flew ... and what do you think- and hit right into the right eye of the black snake. At the same moment, the black snake surrendered. Prince Mutalib freed himself from being stone”. (Akhundov, 1959, pp. 143-144)

In many cases, the same action is performed three times by the same person. In this case this method serves to prolong the history in a predominantly formal nature. If the same action is performed by different heroes, then the opposition is enhanced: what the two older brothers (sisters) could not do, the younger brother (sister) does, and this reveals the advantage of the third in comparison with the first two. For example, in the fairy tale *“The Three-Whisked Scythe”* (Akhundov, 1959) the father makes two wills to his three sons: one about the need of guarding his grave three-day after his death, and the issue of his daughter which would be responsibility to the first one who sits on the matchmaker’s stone. At first, two brothers cannot fulfill the first order, the younger brother guards his turn and the brothers’ turn to the end, and gets three magic horses. And the second will of the father, unlike the brothers, is fulfilled only by the younger brother, and therefore he gets three magic assistants.

In *“The Tale of the Shah’s Son Bahram”* (Akhundov, 1959) three sons set out on a journey to find a cure for their father’s blinded eyes. The older brothers’ attempt to find a stone that could become a medicine for their father’s eyes ended in failure. The younger brother meets a handsome old man on the way and listens to his advice. Then he meets three unusual skillful companions and at their request he takes them with himself. The younger brother, after long difficulties, fulfills all the conditions of the owner of the white spring and brings a stone, which will become a medicine for his father’s eyes.

As it can be seen, unusual actions, events, the hero’s battle with unusual evil creatures, difficult assignments, trials, questions, etc. are repeated three times. This method is often used in the storytelling process. While the same actions of each hero are depicted one-to-one, in other tales the actions of the first two heroes are given or mentioned briefly, and the actions of the third hero are described in detail, and in both cases, unlike the previous ones, it ends with success. In Azerbaijani folklore, as well as in fairy tales, the historical basis of the trinity is associated with the views of an ancient man about the three worlds. Then, the emergence of the ternary number system played an important role in the development of primitive consciousness.

That’s why at the beginning of the twentieth century, attempts were made to explain the essence of the number

three. According to Ivanov & Toporov (1999), the reason for attention to the number three in folklore and in customs is the three-stage structure of the cosmos.

In Azerbaijani fairy tales, the number seven is also widespread. For example:

- *“But in order to reach that source, it is necessary to pass through seven fiery gorges”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 167)
- *“Once a dervish came to the house and having learned about the padishah’s grief, he said: You must divorce all these wives. The weight of women weighs on you, so you don’t have a child. You must take the only young wife. Also, take bath in cold water three times every day to wash away the heaviness and evil of those wives. After seven years, your child will be born”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 129)
- *“The last diva confessed that he had stolen Melik Mamed, and, moreover, he had bewitched in seven fortresses”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 73)
- *“They chose a club weighing seven millstones”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 38)
- *“At that time the div with seven heads flew across the sky, and saw that Nushaperi-khanum was in the garden”*. (Akhundov, 1959)
- *“As a result, the son of the padishah, commanding seven climates, seven waters, came to woo this girl”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 126)
- *“Padishah immediately summoned the hunter Pirim and ordered him to build an ivory palace within seven days, otherwise he threatened to chop off his head”*. (Akhundov, 1959)
- *“After seven days, seven nights, the paths reached the very intersection of seven roads”*. (Akhundov, 1959)

It should be emphasized that the “magic (sacral) seven”, which was an important element of ancient Turkic mythology, in the course of a complex historical process entered into various folk rituals and rituals. There is also such an assumption about the sacredness of the number seven. According to the well-known version, the primary basis of the Universe was made up of four elements (air, fire, water, earth). And therefore, being the number of known elements, the number four is considered sacred. In this regard, by adding the moon, stars, and the sun, the number seven was obtained, which is also considered a sacred number.

Observance of the sevenfold tradition in the fairy tale determines the number of characters: seven assistants, seven robbers, seven thieves, seven days, seven nights in the depiction of epic time, as well as space, seven climatic

zones, a seven-story underworld and a seven-layer fence are important artistic elements for folk tales. Partly, this was motivated because

ancient people associated mythological images with celestial bodies. The legend about the constellation Ursa Major, which played a particularly important role in ancient times, became the basis for the traditionalism of the number seven in fairy tales. It can be assumed that the reason for the longevity and wide spread of the septenary is associated with the emergence and development of the motive of seven patrons. This motif reflects the seven-day countdown of the mythological nature of the seven stars of the periodic constellation of the lunar cycles.

The worship of the number seven as a sacred number dates back to ancient times. At that time, the calendar was based on the lunar cycle. During the lunar month (28 days), the Moon disappears and appears, and during this time there were four phases (quarter moon, half, full moon and new moon). These phases changed every seven days and they formed the basis of our seven-day week. Observing the alternation of the phases of the moon with each other, the ancients gave the number seven a particularly sacred meaning.

On the other hand, the number forty performs not only a mathematical function but a phraseological units used in Azerbaijani fairy tales. In general, in Azerbaijani fairy tales, the number forty is often found at various moments, for instance:

- *“At the doors of this fortress there are stones with an inscription in forty languages, whoever wants to break them must read all the stones”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 73)
- *“To awaken such people from the spell, it is necessary to read the Koran continuously for forty days”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 74)
- *“Son, in order to collect winter supplies, we have to go on a forty-day trip. You cannot come with us; forty days must wait for us here. Take these forty keys. There are forty gardens here. Walk around one of them every day so you don’t get bored but do not look in forties”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 136)
- *“He laid the palace at the intersection of seven roads; there were forty doors in the palace”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 23)
- *“Thus, they walked for a whole forty days, forty nights, until they reached the border of Eden”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 34)
- *“Brave, I am sick, the doctors prescribed me a medicine for the milk of a seahorse with forty stallions. Whatever it may be, you must bring it”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 100)

- *“I saw that it was a small fortress with a fence forty arshins high”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 108)
- *“You will see that Girkh Gencha khanum is sitting with forty servants in the yard”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 116)
- *“They saw that one big Kechepapag was sitting, and around forty of his servants”*. (Akhundov, 1959, p. 116)

The number forty is very often used in Azerbaijani fairy tales as an equivalent to the concept of “many”. As it is known, only a person who learned to count could accurately determine the many uncertain things. So, the ancient man accepts natural phenomena not subject to the human mind as an expression of supernatural forces.

The number forty was actually used as a symbol for the plurality. In the fabulous formulas “road forty days long, forty nights”, “wedding in forty days, forty nights”, “battle in forty days, forty nights”, “mourning in forty days, forty nights” actually reflects not only the measure of time and space, but also indicated the infinity of space and time. This trait is especially clearly reflected in such expressions as “a girl with forty braids” and “a pot with forty handles”. The number forty also is widespread among the people and is associated with various events, beliefs, customs and traditions, rituals. For example, the duration of abstinence of forty days, the forty-day strength of the child, the fortieth day after the death of the deceased, etc.

Tahmasib (1964), talking about the wide use of the number forty in folklore, came to the following conclusion: *“We believe that forty is a complex number of the more recent past. Forty means many. This can be confirmed by the centipede and centipede wells. Since it is known that, as the worm called centipede does not have forty legs at all, the step wells called centipede do not at all consist of forty steps. In our opinion, these are only names given to express the concept of a set”*. (p. 8)

CONCLUSIONS

Numbers have played an important role in the development of societies, as well as in the evolution of beliefs and customs of all the peoples of the world, some reaching the status of sacred. In the emergence of sacred numbers there is a certain role and the mythological concept of the world arrangement and this found its expression in a number of folklore samples, including tales. The functions of success, sacredness and magic in Azerbaijani tales of numbers three, seven and forty are closely related to this. The number three is used mainly in the meaning of success; the number seven is linked to time partly due to the phenomena of lunar cycle while forty represents the concept of “many”. As was shown they appeared repeatedly

as an expression of faith, rituals, customs and traditions being an important element of Azerbaijani culture.

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