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### SYMBOLS OF NATURE IN UKRAINIAN BELIEFS

#### Mythical Context of a Natural Phenomenon

Nature has always had a unique, sacred meaning in the beliefs of ancient Ukrainians. Rivers, forests, the sky – everything that surrounded our ancestors had its own spirit and was endowed with human features. In the imagination of our ancestors, the stormy river sang loud songs, the storm shouted, full of human-like anger, and ancient forests often appeared in people's imagination thoughtful and full of strange sadness. Ancient Ukrainians lived in this subconscious, emotional world, and that is why concepts or symbols like *Water, Earth, and Sun* played a big role for our ancestors. They always accompanied the life of our ancestors, they were the main thing that people had once believed in.

**Water** is one of the oldest and most profound symbols in the imagination of Ukrainians, which combines plenty of counterintuitive principles. Water often meant infinity, as a steady unstoppable whirlpool. It also had the meaning of the beginning of human life, and sometimes the end of it – as a stream that carries human souls to the afterlife (this is also reflected in traditions like the bathing of a baby or the canonical washing after death). According to the old belief, Water was sacred and cleaned a person, washed away sins and misfortunes. Water was a symbol of chastity and mystery at the same time, because no one knew what dangers could be hidden deep in the waters.

The next important symbol for the Ukrainian people is **the Sun**, which often embodied the image of God. Even today, the sun appears in human imagination as something special, bigger and deeper than human beings. The sun embodied joy, happiness and calmness that were brought to human life along with sunshine. It is closely connected to another symbol, which became the second incarnation of the sun: **Fire**.

For a long time, **Fire** has been considered a vessel of light and calmness of human life. The fire embodied home and coziness, and at the same time it was its talisman. You can often hear the phrases “*living fire*” or “*holy fire*” in Ukrainian, since fire was a symbol of the life-force that burnt in a person, it also embodied a shrine that illuminated a person's life and was the greatest danger for the evil forces. Fire also embodied a landmark that prevents a person from getting lost in the world. In Ukrainian culture, the embodiment of Fire as a human talisman is *Vatra* – a large bonfire that protected shepherds in the fields from evil and misfortune, a shrine that brought happiness to those who cared for it. *Vatra* was prayed to, people took care that the flame would never go out, because only its eternal flame could protect them.

#### Symbolism of Flowers in the Beliefs of Ukrainians

Flowers are so closely connected with human life that we can say flowers are part of human history. It is not surprising that many plants have become symbolic. They often symbolize a nation, culture, language, aesthetic ideals.

## TRADITIONS AND CHANGES

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In Ukraine, flowers have been honored for centuries. Many legends, songs, traditions have kept the memory of the people about them. They were widely used in rituals, everyday life or just as decoration.

The first flower which is often mentioned in Ukrainian culture is **sunflower**. Sunflower symbolizes devotion and loyalty. This flower has long been considered a symbol of love for the Motherland. When the sun sets behind the horizon, the sunflower sadly lowers its head – it symbolizes a person in a foreign land who misses their native land. But when the sunflower turns to the sun, it means that a person turns to their Motherland in thought, word and deed.

**Cornflower** is a symbol of simplicity and tenderness. Ukrainians believe that cornflowers have significant magical powers against evil spirits, bad luck and misfortunes. The cornflower has been sung about since ancient times, the eyes of loved ones are compared to it (“*Oh you, cornflower eyes...*”), wreaths are woven and decorated. Cornflowers have a special meaning for young people: brides were often sprinkled with a bunch of cornflowers at the wedding, and girls often washed their faces with cornflower infusion to make their beauty inaccessible to evil spells.

**Poppy** is a symbol of preservation and procreation of the family. The fragile poppy flower means the immortal memory of the people. In ancient times, they believed that the field after the battle was covered with poppies in the spring. And girls whose families were killed, embroidered poppies and wore a wreath of seven poppies, thus giving a promise to protect their family. Since ancient times, Ukrainian people have believed in the magical power of poppies and their ability to protect from all evil.

**Mallows** are an ancient talisman of the family and home which can shield from all evil. According to popular belief, the good souls of our ancestors settle on the mallow and protect us. Previously, people used to address the mallow with the following words: “*Bless, guardian-mallow, to meet a new day, to wait for joy, to love everyone and everything and never to sin.*”

**Marigolds** are considered the main talisman of our land. They grow everywhere: on porches, in parks, squares and in the streets. This is especially noticeable in autumn, when marigolds warm us with their bright colors. It has long been customary to plant marigolds in the yard where a boy was born. So marigolds blaze everywhere with bright colors. They not only decorate our lives, but also unite our hearts and souls, for luck and for fate. Today, the marigold is a symbol of the deep national and democratic basis of society, its ability to survive even in adverse conditions, a symbol of youth and beauty of our country.

Every nation has its own symbols. By the name of the symbol, you can find out which nation we are talking about. Ukrainians considered plant folk symbols to be the shrines of their people. The plant symbols of Ukrainians include *sunflowers, mallow, marigolds, cornflowers, poppies* and other flowers. They have long embodied the beauty of our Ukraine, the spiritual power of the people, and their love for the native land.

### Ancient Ukrainian Beliefs about Animals and Birds

For our ancestors, nature was their native home. That is why they viewed animals as endowed with human features. Ancient Ukrainians used to have an inseparable connection with flora and fauna. Moreover, animals were considered to be not only equal to humans, but even higher and smarter. That’s why ancient Ukrainian beliefs are characterized by adoration of nature and reverence towards it, but not “*fear.*” The idea of totem animals among the ancient *Slavs* formed a rich and diverse folk heritage.

## TRADITIONS AND CHANGES

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**Horse.** The horse was one of the central images in ancient Ukrainian mythology and was associated with the Sun. People believed that the Sun travels across the sky in a horse-drawn chariot during the day, and swims across underground rivers at night using ducks. The horse, a mediator between the worlds, is able to predict the future. A horse can predict death, wedding or spring twelve days before it comes. According to the beliefs of ancient Ukrainians, a horse could cause both success and death. In ancient times, it was common to bury a horse with the dead. The horse was supposed to transport the dead to another world, and to serve the master there as well. This is confirmed by the research of numerous ancient burials, including *Kozak* burials.

**Cat.** Cats are pets, protectors of the home and family, keepers of the hearth and children. They were the main characters of numerous fables, songs, fairy tales and sayings. The attitude towards them was always special – they were loved, protected and respected by the people. A cat is a symbolic being which can travel between Day and Night, Good and Evil. It travels through the world of the living and the dead, can be a guardian spirit, a predictor of good and a patron. On the other side, it is a small demon, a thief who causes damage, a messenger of dark forces. The cat was often associated with the protective spirit of the house – *domovyk* (house-elf). Therefore, when a family moves into a new house, a cat is often the first to be brought in.

**Rooster.** The rooster has long been respected by the Ukrainian people. He is considered to be a symbol of the sun and fire, a harbinger of the early dawn, a guardian of the economy. With his crowing, he seems to wake up the Sun from a night's sleep. People believe that the crowing of a rooster drives away all evil and bad. The rooster is a time guard. He sees, hears and knows everything. The rooster crows in time with Nature and the Universe at certain times of the day and night: *at midnight – the first roosters, then the second roosters, and finally, in the morning – the third roosters*. This bird appears in many ancient rituals of the calendar, which belong to the agrarian and family-domestic cycles. The rooster is believed to bring good luck, strength, and harvest. The rooster also symbolizes warriors, victory, nobility, and bravery. A few months ago the figure of a rooster was found in *Borodyanka (Kyiv region)*. It was still standing on the shelf after the shelling and later became a symbol of national stamina. This shows that bird worship exists even nowadays.

**Swallow.** The swallow symbolizes a happy family life, kindness, love and tenderness. The love and respect of our people for the swallow is revealed in proverbs and proverbs. For example: “*Like a swallow with little swallows,*” they say about a mother who loves and respects her children. “*Chirps like a swallow.*” Good hosts live where a swallow has built a nest. It also protects the home from thunder, lightning, and fire. Therefore, it's a great sin to destroy its nest. People did not dare to kill it, because they could bring trouble to their home. In general, the swallow symbolizes a girl. Girls' beauty is often compared to swallows in folklore: “*Oh, beautiful girls are like swallows on our side. But here – like crows.*”

## TRADITIONS AND CHANGES

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Thus, over the centuries, a peculiar system of rituals and customs related to animals and birds has developed in Ukraine. All this was supposed to be a contribution to the prosperity of the family. Ukrainians followed these customs quite strictly, because they believed in the magical power of animals. Some of these customs have survived to this day.

### “Shadows of the Forgotten Ancestors”

The theme of nature, mysterious and spirited, is reflected in Ukrainian literature. The brilliant example of it is novel “*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*” by Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky., who was a famous Ukrainian writer.

The novel was based on a famous travelling plot, similar to the drama *Romeo and Juliet* by *Shakespeare*. The romantic relationship between *Ivan Paliychuk* and *Marichka Gutenyuk* was born in background of old family hostility, revenge and faced challenge all time. After all, their love was destroyed by envy people and supernatural forces. Firstly, Marichka died during a flood, while Ivan was far away and earned some money. Trying to relief his pain, Ivan married other woman, named Palagna. But he couldn't just live after the loss of sweet one. Then he went insane, and finally fell into a deep abyss. That's how a story of Gutsul Romeo and Juliet was ended unhappily.

However, the reproduction of traditions of the Ukrainian pagan worldview is also unique in the work. Heroes, unlike others, are able to see the evil force hidden in the forests of the *Carpathians*, they see nature alive, spirited, feel the emotions of mountains and forests – they see nature exactly as it was described by our ancestors, Marichka and Ivan are those shadows of the forgotten past, the reproduction of forgotten traditions. They are connected to each other, connected to nature subconsciously, which makes Nature a kind of third main character, some kind of background. Symbolic images of nature complement the story of the heroes, they color the story. For example, the symbol of Water is the most frequent in the work, and appears in various forms: as the song of the mountains, their whisper, as the blood of nature and its life. Water is always in change – sometimes it breaks into a lively dance, then falls into melancholy, then suddenly goes mad. It is interesting that its “emotions” are in line with the emotions of the heroes, their condition, as for example during the fight between the Gutenyuks and the Paliychuks, when the river raged like an echo of the characters' actions.

There are also other images in the work, such as the Sun or Fire in their classic images of luminaries and talismans. In addition, the traditions associated with them are reproduced, for example, the tradition of *Vatra*, the eternal fire, which in answer to the care of shepherds protects their household.

50 years ago the world saw a masterpiece of cinematography – the film “*Wild Horses of Fire*” by *Serhiy Paradzhanov*. It is a screen version of M. Kotsiubynsky's novel (1965), dedicated to his centennial anniversary. The film reveals the whole essence of the deep heritage of Ukraine, it allows the viewers to immerse themselves in Ukrainian ethnos and the traditions of the worldview of the Ukrainian people, and also to feel the mysterious spirit of nature, the horrifying mystique of its soul.

## TRADITIONS AND CHANGES

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