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Mysticism as a Cultural and Historical Phenomenon

Abstract

Mysticism is a complex cultural and historical phenomenon deeply rooted in human spiritual experience. It transcends specific religions and epochs, reflecting a universal quest for direct connection with the divine or ultimate reality. Historically, mysticism has influenced art, literature, philosophy, and social practices, shaping diverse cultural traditions worldwide. It often emphasizes personal experience, inner transformation, and the pursuit of transcendent knowledge beyond rational understanding. Throughout history, mystical movements have appeared in various forms, including Sufism, Christian mysticism, Hindu and Buddhist practices, highlighting common themes of unity, love, and spiritual awakening. Mysticism's enduring presence reveals its significant role in shaping humanity's cultural heritage and continuing spiritual search.

Keywords: Culture, Mysticism, Human Activity, Society, Nature

Kültürel ve Tarihsel Bir Olgu Olarak Mistisizm

Öz

Mistiklik, insan ruhani deneyiminin derinliklerinde kök salmış karmaşık bir kültürel ve tarihsel olgudur. Belirli dinlerin ve dönemlerin ötesine geçerek, ilahi ya da nihai gerçeklikle doğrudan bağlantı kurma yönündeki evrensel arayışı yansıtır. Tarihsel olarak mistiklik, sanat, edebiyat, felsefe ve sosyal uygulamaları etkilemiş, dünya çapında çeşitli kültürel gelenekleri şekillendirmiştir. Genellikle kişisel



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deneyimi, içsel dönüşümü ve rasyonel anlayışın ötesinde aşkın bilgiyi arama çabasını vurgular. Tarih boyunca, Sufizm, Hristiyan mistisizmi, Hindu ve Budist uygulamaları dahil olmak üzere çeşitli biçimlerde mistik hareketler ortaya çıkmış ve birlik, sevgi ve ruhsal uyanış gibi ortak temaları vurgulamıştır. Mistikliğin kalıcı varlığı, insanlığın kültürel mirasını şekillendirmede ve ruhsal arayışını sürdürmede önemli rolünü ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kültür, Mistiklik, İnsan Faaliyetleri, Toplum, Doğa*

Introduction

In order to examine the category of mysticism from a socio-cultural perspective, it is essential to first explain the essence of the concept of culture itself. The phenomenon of culture is dynamic and diverse in its content and development. Although the idea of culture has existed in the minds of people since ancient times, understanding this phenomenon and revealing its characteristic features has taken a long time. On the one hand, culture exists through human beings and carries a subjective character. It is intertwined with the majority of its carriers and manifests itself in each of them as a unique, unrepeatable, and individual element. On the other hand, the culture of society can stand in opposition to the individual as a system of norms, values, scientific theories, works of art, as well as prohibitions, behavioral patterns, and frameworks of activity. There is a certain level of culture that exists in the world in relation to every generation and every individual as a part of their lived experience. Thus, every person is considered both an object and a subject of culture—both a creator and a bearer of it. From this perspective, the concept of culture must be studied as a global phenomenon of human lifestyle. Culture is a second, artificial nature—it encompasses all the positive creations brought about by human intellect, emotions, and physical labor. At the same time, it is a historical and creative process, a journey from chaos and ignorance to knowledge, order, and prosperity. The main driving force behind cultural development is the concern for preserving and improving human life. In a scientific sense, culture is a triad: it is the process of comprehending and transforming nature, the individual, and society. This process results in the creation of spiritual (intellectual and moral) and material values and norms, as well as the technologies for their production, preservation, use, and transmission.

1. The main part

In a contextual sense, culture is the qualitative characteristic of the level of development of any phenomenon, field of activity, personal or social relationship, or the individual themselves.

This concept can be applied to various aspects of human, national, societal, and universal life. In a limited and everyday sense, culture mainly refers to language, literature, art, folklore, traditions, cultural heritage, and ethical norms. Culture has a representative character, producing ideas and values that influence social behavior. The processes of social life—such as social structure, social institutions, and systems of status—are manifestations of representative culture. The social and cultural are two sides of the same phenomenon. Every society is a reflection of the culture it belongs to. The founder of culturology, American anthropologist Leslie Alvin White, believed that culture is a class of objects and events endowed with symbolic meaning. It is primarily a symbolic system consisting of three subsystems: technological, social, and ideological. The main function of culture is to ensure the safety and survival of the human species, although it can also give rise to catastrophes such as war, epidemics, and ecological crises. As a defining factor of human existence, culture leaves its mark on the human species. Under the influence of Wilhelm Ostwald, Leslie White advanced the energetic theory of cultural evolution, asserting that the dynamics of cultural change are based on the energy supply of humanity. He associated the criterion of progress in cultural evolution with the increase in energy used by society. From the standpoint of technological determinism, he emphasized the decisive role of the energy balance and equated levels of technological and cultural development. Considering culture as a system, he divided it into three levels: at the base is the technological level, above it is the philosophical level, and in between lies the sociological level. Leslie White writes that culture, in all its ideological, social, and technological aspects, develops in correlation with the increase in the amount of energy available per capita per year and the improvement of the means by which this energy is transmitted. Therefore, culture is a dynamic system capable of development. Cultural tradition is the flow of interrelated elements of culture—tools, beliefs, customs, and so on. In this process of mutual influence, each element affects others and, in turn, is affected by them. This process is full of contradictions: tools, customs, and ideas become outdated and are eliminated from the flow. For example, stone axes are replaced by iron ones; science replaces myth and magic; at a certain stage of social evolution, tribes and clans become obsolete and are replaced by the state.

It is well known that there is an abundance of definitions of culture. For instance, culture is considered the part of nature that is comprehended both theoretically and practically by humans. (Məmmədov, 2016). The most commonly used definition states that culture is everything created by humans—a system of all material and spiritual values. This definition is often referred to as the

“supra-natural” definition. This rather broad definition preserves the ancient perspective on culture, where not only nature and culture are contrasted, but also the natural and the artificial. In this view, culture includes only what is artificial—what is created by human hands. However, this definition also contains certain contradictions. Are all things created by human hands of the same essence? Do they all exist for the well-being of humanity, society, and the individual? Since ancient times, people have tried to understand how they differ from nature and wild life, and the path to the elevated status they believed they deserved in the world. In contrast to a wild, natural life, humanity saw its own greatness, which came to be understood as culture. Humanity entered into a confrontation between “nature and society” long ago. In this confrontation, it appears that humanity struggles with itself: building grand temples and pyramids, composing lyrical poetry and creating beautiful paintings, constructing mythology, religions, and sciences to comprehend the world, and searching for self-perfection and immortality. Yet, at the same time, it also kills, steals, humiliates, persecutes those who think or believe differently, depletes the Earth's underground resources, destroys nature, wages relentless wars, and invents new means of destruction and self-destruction. Thus, it seems both to itself and to others that humanity stands in opposition to nature.

In our time, it has become clear that intervention in the sphere of nature and its transformation do not always lead to improvement (Uayt, 2021). Every such intervention often results in various destructive, and sometimes deadly, consequences. When we encounter ecological disasters—many of which are direct results of human activity—it becomes difficult to perceive them as expressions of culture. To better understand the ratio of creative and destructive tendencies in the “supra-natural” framework, culture is often divided into additional levels. Various levels of culture are distinguished, such as high, primitive, archaic, ordinary, folk, mass, and marginal cultures. It is particularly important to highlight the essence of archaic culture. Archaic culture is the foundation on which every culture stands; it is the source in which most of the cultural phenomena of modernity manifest themselves. Primitive consciousness views the world in a complex and multi-layered way, not through logic, but through intuition and a special system of knowledge dominated by mythology and magic. Therefore, primitive culture is classified as the archaic level of culture. Herder believed that the culture of a people is the color of its existence—a delicate yet temporary and fragile expression of its essence. He regarded culture as the result of human activity throughout the history of humanity's existence. On the other hand, he also viewed culture as a product of

Enlightenment. Culture, according to Herder, is not revealed through divine revelation. It emerges through human practice, through the transformation of the natural and social worlds. Naturally, the human being who creates culture also creates themselves. In this sense, the genesis of the human is the genesis of culture, and the genesis of culture is the genesis of the human. According to Kant, culture is the ultimate goal that gives meaning to human life and represents a special dimension of meaning in human activity. In his monograph *Immanuel Kant*, V. F. Asmus analyzes Kant's attitude toward art and writes that, for Kant, art is the creation of something through freedom—meaning it is created based on a decision founded on an act of reason.

Schelling, who bases his thesis on the idea that the world of culture is the world of humans, puts forward the idea that although the natural world is the result of a creative spirit, it differs quantitatively from the world of culture, in which the spirit acquires the ability to comprehend and reflect upon itself. Hegel considers culture to be the gradual revelation of the creative power of the World Spirit. According to Hegel, culture is a constantly evolving and developing process. The movement of culture is not chaotic; it is subordinated to a purpose determined by Reason. In his work *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel writes: The interest of the Idea, which is not consciously present in the members of civil society, is the process by which their particularity and naturalness—natural necessity and the arbitrariness of needs—are elevated to formal freedom and the formal universality of knowledge and will. This is the process by which subjective particularity, taken in its specificity, is transformed into cultural subjectivity (Bystrova, 2002). On the one hand, there is the notion of the innocence of the natural state and the simplicity of the customs and traditions of culturally underdeveloped peoples; on the other hand, there is an attitude that regards needs, their satisfaction, pleasures, and specific living conditions as absolute goals. This dual perspective is directly linked to the view that considers culture (*Bildung*) either as merely external and destructive or as a means to achieve the aforementioned goals. Both of these views demonstrate a lack of understanding of the nature of the spirit and the purpose of reason. The spirit attains its reality only through development within itself; it imposes boundaries and finitude upon itself through natural needs and their external necessity, and in doing so, it actualizes itself within them (*sich hineinbildet*), overcomes them, and thereby acquires its objective existence within them. Therefore, the purpose of reason is neither the natural simplicity of traditions nor the pleasures derived from the development of particularity. The aim of reason is the elimination—through labor—of natural simplicity, that is, the passive absence of egoism, the primitiveness of knowledge and will, or in

other words, the immediacy and singularity with which the spirit is burdened. The goal is for this externality to become the capacity for reason—that is, the form of universality.

Hence, culture (*Bildung*—used here in the senses of education and culture, referring to Enlightenment culture) in its absolute determination is the attainment of freedom and the work of achieving a higher level of freedom. It represents a necessary transitional phase on the path of spiritual elevation—not a direct or natural one—toward the level of universal, infinite, subjective substantial morality. This attainment of freedom is a difficult task directed against the empty subjectivity of behavior, the immediacy of desires, and also against feelings and arbitrary whims. The difficulty of this task is what leads to a general reluctance toward it. However, it is precisely through this process that the subjective will attains the objectivity it deserves, and in this objectivity, the Idea becomes reality. Simultaneously, the meaning of the form of universality to which particularity rises through its own labor and transformation within the cultural process (*die Verständigkeit*) is that particularity becomes its own true-for-itself being and, by granting it universality filled with content, becomes true infinite subjectivity for itself in the moral sphere. This is the perspective that shows culture to be an immanent moment of the Absolute and of infinite value. From this, we may conclude that the dominant idea in these views is that culture is the product of human activity and is primarily considered the result of moral practice. Marxism, on the other hand, presents the position that culture is activity directed at changing the material conditions of human existence—most importantly, at transforming the conditions of material life itself. That is, culture arises in the process of conscious adaptation of society to nature, of humans to the external world. Spiritual production is the result of people’s material activity, i.e., of social production. Its forms are determined by the material base and depend on the form of ownership. The mode of production determines the development of social, political, and moral life. Marxism presents culture as the social aspect of the production process.

Z. Freud believes that culture initially encompasses the knowledge and skills that enable people to dominate the forces of nature and satisfy their needs, as well as the institutions that regulate human relationships and the distribution of acquired goods. On the other hand, culture is presented as a special mechanism of social repression, expressed in individuals’ conscious renunciation of their free inner worlds and natural passions (Asmus, 1973). In Freud’s view of culture, the fundamental idea is that culture opened the way for reason to dominate instincts and

consciousness to dominate the unconscious, thereby creating real opportunities for the repression and suppression of individual freedom. A person must repress their freedom independently of themselves, limit their sphere of pleasure—sacrificing Eros to culture. This creates real possibilities for the fragmentation of the psyche and the emergence of neuroses. Reviewing Freud's philosophy of culture, it becomes clear that first religion and then culture function as Hegel's Absolute Spirit: all elements of social structure—including society, the individual, morality, ethics, the education system, and so on—act as its creations (Hegel, 2007). E. B. Taylor views culture as the higher organization of both the individual and the entire society, leading to the further development of the human race. Culture is a phenomenon specific to human society. It determines people's relationships with one another, nature, and society through a collection of norms, values, and behavioral standards. Culture forms the basis of society's life and activity. The substantial foundation of culture is human activity. Culture acts as a principle of connection between a person and the object of their activity, determining the character, mechanism, and direction of this activity. By its nature, subjectively directed activity forms objective social phenomena. The basis of the social origin of culture lies precisely in understanding the essence of activity.

In his book *Religion and Culture*, K. Dawson presents a counterargument to Marxism's view of culture's dependence on the production process, writing that the essential characteristics of human culture existed even before humans were economic producers. In the pre-production period, culture had already reached a high level of specialization and, especially under the harsh conditions of the Ice Age, had achieved mastery over its environment. Evidence of this mastery can be seen in the art of the Aurignacian and Magdalenian periods. This shows that before humans became economic producers, they were spiritually creative and that there is no necessary connection between economic development and the spiritual quality of culture. If this is the case with primitive art, it is even more evident with religion. Religion is not a refined by-product of the economic process or, as Engels said about the idea of God, "the result of a long process of abstraction." Rather, it is one of the original psychological forces behind the entire cultural process from the very beginning. Primitive culture is not merely a simple economic way of life; it also implies a conscious attempt to connect human life with divine reality and to subject the former to divine forces. In a society experiencing an abundance of information and especially economic and social changes, studying the processes occurring in social consciousness is impossible without understanding the essence of socio-cultural phenomena. At this time, it is also important to take

into account the phenomenon of mysticism, which becomes a conspicuous factor in social life. The emergence of numerous mystical groups has led to an increase in mythological and archaic components in social consciousness, affecting the spiritual and social life of society.

When analyzing the phenomenon of mysticism, it is important to consider its socio-cultural aspects and the corresponding mentality. Mysticism is not just a practice consisting of rituals but also a socio-cultural phenomenon and an effective transformative force in society. Mysticism is an integral part of any religion since mystical consciousness includes religious concepts. In fact, mysticism and religion are different but related phenomena (İsmayılov, 2003). Because mysticism is an extremely complex concept, its study benefits from the combined research efforts of philosophy, cultural studies, religious studies, anthropology, social philosophy, ontology, and epistemology, which can help uncover the essence of this problem. It can be concluded that mysticism is the oldest form of spiritual culture. In fact, ancient forms of art such as rock paintings and ritual dances performed before hunting carried a mystical character and laid the foundation for the emergence of primitive art forms. The weaker a person was and the lower the level of culture, the stronger their dependence on the "magical forces" believed to govern the world.

From very ancient times, for humans to adapt to and act within their environment, it was necessary to accept the influences of the surrounding world and the connections within it and to respond accordingly (Douson, 2000). As humans and society developed, the rational form of understanding the world became vital. However, from those early periods, or perhaps even earlier, alongside rational cognition based on the principles of logic, there also existed a mystical "perception" method connected to the intuitive and unconscious sphere. This was because logical methods alone were insufficient for comprehending the surrounding world. The content of the concept of mysticism has constantly evolved in accordance with socio-cultural transformations. When examining the cultural aspects of mysticism, hermeneutic, historical-logical, and phenomenological approaches help to take the right direction. The structural method reveals the genetic logic of mysticism, providing an understanding of its self-development process. Existing cultural traditions, along with the associated theoretical models and practical rules of activity, form the basis for this development. According to structuralism, the subject of the fundamental theory of mysticism is not the phenomenon of mystical experience itself but the relationships between the elements of its representation. Studying these relationships allows conclusions to be drawn about

the parameters of ecstatic excitement. Mysticism is primarily studied as a branch of social philosophy. Its subject is the study of the mysticism phenomenon within the context of specific historical conditions, social environment, and the spiritual atmosphere of society. Although the content of the concept of mysticism has historically undergone changes, its soteriological essence, as well as the structure and form of mystical experience, remains unchanged. Mysticism encompasses the historical periods of culture belonging to humanity, and the content and social significance of its manifestations are determined by specific historical conditions. Mysticism is not a phenomenon artificially introduced into society from outside; rather, it is a natural product of humanity's spiritual development.

Conculsion

The existence of mysticism and the transformation of its forms in the history of culture compel researchers to approach this issue from various perspectives. Especially during periods of crisis in societ-when transformations occur in all spheres, different cultural traditions conflict, and the subjective world of the individual undergoes renewal-the experiential aspect of mysticism becomes more pronounced. In times when the ideals people believe in collapse, stable social ties break, and socio-cultural identity is shaken, individuals are unable to find solutions to their problems within the framework of traditional culture and begin to seek them elsewhere. When people feel that even traditional religious dogmas cannot provide help, they start to rely on mystical experience to overcome the fear arising from these processes and to achieve stability. Mysticism is a phenomenon dependent on specific historical and socio-cultural conditions. As a result of mystical excitement, a person forms a specific conception of reality and their own essence. Mysticism is ineffable; such states of excitement cannot be verbally expressed. They belong to the emotional-sensory sphere and are directly experienced feelings. Mystical excitements do not last long. They give rise to feelings such as reaching a distant reality and experiencing pleasure. These feelings may also include understanding the paradoxical nature of what is perceived and attaining perfection or the transcendent. Feelings of freedom from space-time constraints are also part of this category. In most mystical teachings, these excitements are accompanied by a return to the real world. After mystical excitements, the mystic, returning to the real world, strives to share their transcendent experiences and emotions with others. The study of mysticism as a cultural phenomenon helps to track the dynamics of processes within the cultural life of society. The mystical aspects of spiritual culture are important for understanding related forms of social

consciousness such as ethics, religion, and art. Mysticism has accompanied human society throughout all stages of its development. However, the social essence of all forms of mysticism's manifestations has always been linked to specific historical conditions.

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