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Students' Perceptions Towards the American Culture as They Learn English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Languages do not function isolated since these need their historical and cultural background. For this reason, the importance of this study relies on the analysis that the influence of a second culture has on the students' language learning process. The problem that this investigation attempts to solve is based on the importance of the teachers' experience in areas such as interculturality. The followed methodology consists on qualitative interviews applied to four young Mexican students from two different Universities of the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. An analysis of the results of these interviews shows that two main perspectives, positive and negative, were influenced by three main factors: (1) the preparation of the teachers; (2) the opportunity to travel to the USA; and (3) the social media algorithm. For future research implications this study will contribute to the investigation of adequate material that supports the language teaching practice that aims to consider the culture.

Keywords: culture, language teaching, language learning, educational settings, cultural awareness.

1. Introduction

Languages come from cultures that involve human beings that have distinct ideas, beliefs, traditions, political and social factors. For this reason, it is essential to consider that foreign language teaching permits students to have wide perspectives and learn about other cultures through the appreciation of the human and social aspects by leaving behind the limits of their first culture (C1) context (Mazari & Derraz, 2015). Bearing this in mind, contemplating the second culture (C2) in the teaching practice will bring opportunities to the students to learn how to use the second language (L2) and how to stablish communication with the individuals that belong to the target culture (Mazari & Derraz, 2015).

Considering this, teachers who dedicate their practice to teach a language should be informed about the distinct and possible procedures that will bring opportunities to assist the students to develop their personal experience with the cultural conditions of the target language (Wichadee, 2011). For this reason, teaching a language is a practice that requires the combination of the language itself and the culture since these two do not work isolated.

In this study, I intended to show the importance that a culture, specifically American, has on the teaching practice and the impact that it has on the students' language learning process

by examining their perceptions towards this culture as they continue learning English. This study contributes to the language educational field by adding importance to the role of the teacher and the experience that it is necessary to have in other areas, such as dominating topics of interculturality or social problematics that are related to discrimination. As well as showing the importance of developing techniques that can be applied in the classrooms in order to transmit the knowledge related to cultures from a perspective of respect.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Culture*

Considering that the study is mainly focused on the importance and the impact that the culture 2 (C2) has on the language lessons it is essential to first understand the significance of this concept.

According to Matsumoto (1996, as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012) culture is a group of attitudes, moral values, perspectives, and conducts shared by groups of people. Nevertheless, these will differ for each person and as well as being transmitted from one generation to other. In addition, Hofstede (1991 as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012) states that culture will acquire the meaning that outsiders provide to this concept due to their interpretation since, particularly, the meaning of this word is invisible. Although it has specific factors that are considered to be physically visible, such as traditions.

2.2 *Culture in language learning and its importance*

As previously mentioned, culture can be defined as a practice that is given and shared by two or more people (Ferraro, 1998 as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012). However, in language teaching and learning settings this concept receives a particular connotation. According to Mazari and Derraz (2015) culture in educational environments is a form of communication where the learners try to integrate the patterns of the target language and culture compared to their L1 and C1 (Mazari & Derraz, 2015).

In a lesson, teaching the target language is one of the most important tasks that are presented and considered to be a priority. Nevertheless, it is essential to provide an examination of the target language including an analysis of the culture behind this in order to stablish a reciprocal understanding with other societies (Mazari & Derraz, 2015). In addition, there is a connection between language and culture that is linked by three aspects. First is the fact of seeing language as an instrument for communication. The second aspect is the understanding and recognition of the essence of language. Third, there is the educational importance of learning about cultures (Mazari & Derraz, 2015).

Kovács (2017) mentions that normally the performance of language teaching involves the practice of the four skills and considers culture as a plus. In addition, the "culture" in a language lesson takes the role of the information transferred by the language and not as a proper feature of the this last. For this reason, it is important to start considering the cultural awareness as one of the educational aims (Kovács, 2017). According to Byram and Fleming (2002) the concept of cultural awareness is the comprehension of other speakers' culture and society as well as own, and the relationship between these two. Students and teachers should bear in mind that learning and teaching a language should guide to positive perceptions towards other speakers of different languages.

Being aware of the culture in the language lessons is an essential task that teachers and schools must consider due to the following reason. According to Krasner (1999) the fact of do

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not considering the cultural awareness in class can lead to learners to not make a connection in their cultural schemata which includes the target language rhyme, and historical background.

2.3 *Stereotypes and ethnic stereotypes*

The concept of stereotypes forms an essential part of the socialization of crucial organizational groups (Perkins, 2018). These stereotypes can be considered as reasonable, and people stablish the definition of themselves based on the terms that stereotypes have assigned. Brigham (1971) defines this concept as generalizations that are contemplated as unreasonable by the person that assigns the label. In addition, it is stated that no all of the stereotypes are considered to be precise (Jussim, 2005 as cited in Buchtel, 2014).

As previously mentioned, due to the nature of the responses of the participants this concept will be defined as the result and predictor of the behavior (Cauthen, Robinson, & Krauss, 1971). According to Cauthen et al. (1971) the stereotypes are considered to be mainly linguistic behaviors that change with the social class as well as the nationality. Through the results of this study some topics are contemplated, and the ethnic stereotypes form part of these. As Brigham (1971) states, the ethnic stereotypes are linked with negative points of view as well as discriminatory actions.

The stereotypes towards other cultures can lead to the probability of judging and having prejudices about other cultural practices and people. However, Buchtel (2014) mentions that if people become less cognitively critical about these practices as well as adopting a non-judgmental perspective can lead to the thought of being careless about the emotional care towards other cultures.

Considering this information, it is important that a balance exists between the implementation of culture and the perspective that the learners have towards the C2 and L2 in order to avoid negative prejudices that guide them to negative actions, such as discrimination. In a language lesson, this aim can be achieved through the consideration of the learners C1 and L1 analysis in order to avoid developing stereotypes towards the cultural differences as well as promoting the learners' cultural sensitivity through material that helps to establish the relationship between language and culture (Mazari & Derraz, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1 *Research design*

The present study intends to show the impact the impact that approaching the C2 has on the lessons and the possible effects that this action has on the students' language learning process. The study intends to show the impact of the approachability of the target culture in the lessons and its effects on the language learning process of the students. Therefore, the research questions that conducted this study are the following: What are the Ss perceptions on the target culture of the second language that they are learning? and What are the factors that influence their perceptions?

For the purpose of this study and the research questions that guided this investigation a qualitative paradigm was necessary to be applied. According to Creswell (2014, as cited in Kamal, 2019) the qualitative paradigm is defined as the approach that allows to be conscious and permits to explore the definition of human and social problems based on people's opinion. As previously mentioned, this paradigm was relevant to be applied because it permitted the researcher to understand the students' perceptions and interpretation on a specific issue through their experiences and opinions based on real settings in order to show the data and its analysis

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realistically (Woods, 2006). In addition, this gave an opportunity for the researcher to generate the description of the collected data through main concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 as cited in Kamal, 2019).

On the other hand, the case study method was used. Merriam (1938, as cited in Heigham & Croker, 2009) defines the case study method as a specific entity or role that the researcher intends to explore, such as an institution, T and Ss. This method was convenient to be applied because the results obtained from this method might assist other similar studies that have close cases (Heigham & Croker, 2009). In addition, as Ellet (2007) mentions it is used to show a specific reality and to bring a situation that may have not much information.

3.2 *Inquiry tools*

According to Heigham and Croker (2009) semi-structured interviews can take as an advantage the knowledge that is being produced in the dialogues by allowing the liberty to express by following the aspects that are considered important for the researcher (Brinkmann, 2014) while going to distinct directions that were not initially planned (Heigham & Croker, 2009). This was convenient to be applied because the researcher prepares the interview based on topics in which is not naïve (Ziebland, 2013) while also promoting the interviewees' engagement (Galletta, 2013). Additionally, it provides an understanding of the mental words that students and teachers hold, and the essence of the language teaching and language learning as a social and educational occupation (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). This consisted on the application of twelve to fifteen questions depending on the possible topics that emerged from these. The questions can be seen in the Appendix section named as interviews.

3.3 *Context and participants*

The four students, two women and two men, belong to the B2 to C1 level according to the European guidelines. These learners' range is from 20 to 25 years old. They are currently studying in distinct academic programs of the University of Guanajuato and the University of Leon in Mexico, such as Hispanic literature, international business, law and accounting. The participants speak Spanish as L1, and their first culture (C1) is Mexican. In addition, it is essential to mention that they were sent a consent letter that stated the confidentiality of their identities and their participation was voluntary since they provided their signature. The template can be found in the appendix section named as Consent letter.

3.4 *Data processing and analysis*

In order to analyze the data, four of the stages adopted by Richard (2003, as cited in Heigham & Croker, 2009) were applied. First, there was the application of few questions depending on the possible topics that emerged. Second, the transcription of the interviews was obtained with the application of technological devices. Third, the information was registered in tables that allowed to categorize through the use of codes. Fourth, the data was organized to find patterns within the abstracts and these were linked with themes.

The categories were labelled as instruments, fragments that were extracted and identificators that differentiated the participants. Firs, the abstracts were given a code named as perceptions towards the American culture and these were separated into two main groups: positive and negative perceptions. The second code has the name of factors that influenced the perceptions. The third code was named as actions that impacted on the development of the skills since these supported the principal aim of the study.

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The process that carried out the data analysis focused on the thematic analysis. This kind of analysis follow the processes of coding the information based on themes as well as looking for the patterns and the connections that these share (Barkhuizen, 2013 as cited in Mora, Rivas, Lengeling & Crawford, 2015). As Heigham and Croker (2009) mentions, the macro level analysis of data consists on the codification of interviews.

4. Results and discussion

In this section, the following results will respond to the research questions that conducted this study. These will be explained and numbered regarding their importance to the questions and this study.

4.1 *Perceptions on the American culture*

Based on the participants answers' two main perceptions emerged. These were divided on two main categories: positive and negative. According to Meagher and Castaños (1996) a positive perception is based on admiration, approval and tolerance towards the target culture. On the other hand, they consider that a negative perception includes a defensive attitude towards the culture. These definitions are relevant for the study because they were somehow reflected in the students' positive and negative perceptions on the American culture.

The students were asked about their perceptions regarding the American culture. In their answers it could be noticed some positive aspects regarding the comparison of the socioeconomical contexts between both cultures, the C1 and the C2. The main difference was well received by the students and their responses to this question included admiration as follows:

> "Americans take very serious the economy aspect in order to work and improve so they can live better. It can be observed in their attitudes since in Mexico people are very conformist and our economy sustains this since it is not good as in the USA. This country belongs to the 1st world so they are better than us in that aspect as well as being English an easy language to learn not as others such as Spanish." (Participant 1)[1]

> "I would say that in the aspect of culture Americans and Mexico differ, because Mexicans are warmer people. However, on socioeconomical aspects USA is a country that is better than us since they are a worldwide power." (Participant 3)

In this abstract, the Participant 1 not just compares the socioeconomical factors, but also the L1 and L2 by suggesting that the grammatical structure of the target language and its usages do not require a demanding amount of effort such as their native language. As Lantolf (1999) mentions the adults in particular are able to acquire new cultural models and adjusting their conceptual organization. Bearing this in mind, students recognize these models and try to adapt and incorporate their own perceptions to the previous ideas that come from their C1. As well as including new concepts and structures in a metalevel since these are linked or relative to their native culture (Lantolf, 1999)

However, other responses regarding their opinions on the American culture were dedicated to the recognition of discrimination and segregation from Americans towards immigrants. Considering this past information in mind, when learners were asked about the perception, they had towards the C2 all the informants expressed significantly the same negative opinion:

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[1] The interviews were originally done in Spanish. However, these were translated by the author of this study.

> "I think that there is a lot of discrimination towards Mexican people, and it is complicated to integrate to the society when you are an immigrant. I could observe that Americans do not let others to integrate to the society unless people were originally from there." (Participant 2)

As can be observed in Extract 2, Participant 2 shows a defensive attitude towards the American culture by saying that "there is a lot of discrimination given by the Americans" and she suggests that this treatment is received particularly by her compatriots which makes her perception stronger by providing empathy since this student belong to the same minority group due to the same sociocultural context. In addition, all of the participants stated the next negative comments, which were dedicated to the American cultural practices:

> "I do not think that American people and their culture have much to share, culturally speaking. They do not contribute in this aspect as other countries do, such as Mexico. We are rich in traditions, food and even values since we are kinder, warm as well as having and showing hospitality." (Participant 3)

> "I do not feel that American people have anything that they can give us. I mean, nothing culturally valuable, like right now at the Cervantino festival. I mean, if you went to the United States section, you could not find much. They do not contribute much, not even in terms of food, and it was not a very fruitful; it was all about business." (Participant 4)

As can be noticed in Extract 3, Participant 3 and 4 shares their perceptions based on the comparison between their native culture and the C2. This evidence leads to the concept of otherness which allows people to understand to how extent we are similar and different from others (Mazari & Derraz, 2015). These participants are aware that both cultures and countries differ from each other in some aspects. Nevertheless, they do not demonstrate a positive attitude towards this fact since they also commented that they would have preferred that another country would have assisted to a famous event given in their city in which countries are welcome each year.

4.2 Factors that influenced the perceptions

Three broad factors influenced on the informants' previous perceptions. The first factor is dedicated to teachers. The majority of participants agreed that having teachers that are native, that lived in the USA, and has knowledge about the C2 plays an important role:

> "The teacher that I have right now is native and she has taught us more about where she used to live. Actually, we had a whole class dedicated to patriotism and she explained aspects of her culture." (Participant 2)

This first factor shows that since the teacher who belong to these characteristics had direct contact with the C2 and know more about the cultural and social practices as well as the language itself can influence on how the students perceive the culture of the language that they are learning. This is because they provide exact, natural and closer information about the L2 and C2.

The second factor consists of the opportunity that these students had to constantly travel to the USA and having direct contact with the native speakers and citizens as well as their context and English in natural settings. A few interviewees emphasized that visiting the country made them realized that a certain problematic exists but is not a particular issue of one specific country. This can be seen on the following lines:

> "When I traveled to the USA, I did not experience any bad experience or treatment, but I do recognize that racism exists as well as in other countries." (Participant 1)

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This factor demonstrates that students are aware of social problematics that different countries have and many minorities face. However, these few students do not categorize this to one particular culture. The last and third factor is the usage of social media, internet and apps since these promoted the increasement of cultural stereotypes and prejudices. The majority of informants stated that their perceptions were influenced due to the social media algorithm.

> "The general perception that I have about the American culture is based on the news that I read and the social media, such as TikTok." (Participant 3)

> "The YouTube and TikTok algorithm continue blinding us, so if you consume a certain type of video, it will keep feeding your page with this kind of videos. All of this affected me when I saw what happened to George Floyd." (Participant 4)

As can be observed in the Extract 8, Participant 3 and 4 shares that social media influence on their negative perception towards the country and the C2 since these participants started to notice specific social problematics that affected their personal opinion regarding the country and the culture. The companies that are in charge of social media are motivated to elevate the user engagement by adding content related to the user preferences as well as promoting dispersion and filter bubbles (Springsteen, Yeoh & Christenson, 2024). In addition, they mention that people are very likely to be exhibited to the opinions of other individuals in social media. Bearing this in mind, the interviewees based their perception on other social network opinions that might affect the development of their own and real critical opinions and thinking.

4.3 *Actions that impacted on the development of the skills*

The following actions showed the importance that introducing the culture behind the target language has since this is a practice that is not normally followed in English lessons that are given in Mexican educational settings. According to Stainer (1971, as cited in Genc and Bada, 2005) the fact of studying a culture can provide to the students a motivation to learn the target language. Considering this information in mind, it is essential to mention that an important theme emerged from the answers and was considered to be added as a third code. This was related to the actions that students applied in order to introduce themselves to the American culture since in their daily lessons there was a lack of information. These actions can be observed as follows:

> "I enjoy to watch YouTube videos about the people who lives there as well as the tv shows and American movies and this helped me with my listening skills as well as being able to read American news in English." (Participant 1)

In this answer it can be noticed that the personal interest of the students for knowing about the C2 guided them to develop and increase their level in the L2 through their hobbies and interests. This improvement was mainly achieved in the listening and reading skills. These actions permitted them to have contact with English and cultural daily situations that occur in the country. The fact that there was not enough information provided about the C2 in the classroom time shows the importance of teachers, and other educational roles to implement this on the curriculum since it will permit learners to be aware of other external realities that differ from their own (Kramsch, 2003).

5. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was assessing the importance of approaching the C2 in the classroom when teaching the L2. Bearing in mind the research questions, the results of this investigation show that two main perceptions came from the students' answers: positive and negative. These perceptions were focused on three main aspects; the cultural practices that American people have, their discrimination towards immigrants and the economic situation that

USA faces. On the other hand, the main factors that influenced these perceptions were the teachers, the opportunity to travel to the country, the use of social media and personal interests.

These findings will be of interest to language teaching field because adds more importance to the teachers' role regarding their teaching performance at the moment of approaching topics related to the C2. The insights gained from this study may be of assistance to be aware of the significance that the role of the C2 has on the lessons. The factors that I have identified therefore assists in our understanding of the role of the teacher to search and update on topics such as accents, cultures and materials. In addition, an aspect that can be learnt from these results is the recognition that the influence of the culture has on the L2 learning process outside of the class. The results of this study indicate that this has on the language teaching practice is the improvement of the language curriculums, the extra preparation of the teacher in other areas that complement their profession as well as the improvement of material and activities.

A limitation of this study is the lack of English teachers that taught the 700 English level in one campus. Although the current study is based on a small sample of teachers, the findings suggest that this issue can be approached in future studies by applying the investigation on campus that count with more language professionals that are prepared in higher levels as well. The present study lays the groundwork for future research into strategies that teachers can use and apply in order to address the C2 in the classroom as well as investigating materials that can be adapted or designed for approaching topics that helps learners to recognize the C2 from their contexts.

As final thoughts for this study, it is essential to bear in mind that some of the answers provided by the participants are related to the cultural stereotypes that are influenced by different elements, such as social media. In addition, there is a possibility that students already formed a former stereotype about the C2. Nevertheless, if there are techniques that T and curriculums apply there is a probability that cultural stereotypes change and leave space to create new and positive ideas of a culture.

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Appendix

Consent Letter

Universidad de Guanajuato

Carta de consentimiento sobre el proyecto de investigación

Yo, Citlalli Aguilera, alumna de séptimo grado de la licenciatura en la enseñanza del inglés por parte de la Universidad de Guanajuato, estoy realizando un proyecto de investigación con el tema que se describirá en las siguientes líneas.

El principal objetivo de este estudio es explorar las perspectivas que tienen los estudiantes, que están aprendiendo inglés como lengua extranjera, hacia la cultura americana. Por otro lado, otro de los objetivos es analizar los factores que hay detrás y que además afectan dichas percepciones hacia esta misma.

Si usted decide participar en este proyecto, es importante que conozca la dinámica. Se le hará una entrevista en español la cual será grabada a través de una sesión que se dará en la plataforma de zoom. Así mismo, su identidad no será mostrada y tampoco se hará referencia a su nombre real, ya que este se usará bajo un pseudónimo. Las grabaciones y notas que se hagan durante esta entrevista serán usadas y aplicadas exclusivamente para fines de este proyecto. Además de mencionarle que yo seré la única persona que va a acceder a esta información, la cuál se usará en el estudio para mostrar los objetivos anteriormente ya mencionados. Su participación es totalmente voluntaria. Se hará una posible publicación de este estudio, y en caso de ser así se le hará llegar una copia si así lo desea.

Consentimiento del participante

Yo acepto participar en este proyecto de investigación

Nombre y firma:

Fecha:

Nombre de la investigadora: Citlalli Aguilera

Fecha: 26/10/23

Interview

1. What motivated you to learn English? Were there cultural or personal influences that guided you to make this decision?

2. In general, how would you describe your experience learning this language?

3. What opinions do you have towards the American culture?

4. How do you perceive the American culture?

5. Within your English classes, how do you think that the American culture is handled?

6. How would you describe that your English teacher handles American culture?

7. Do you think it is important to incorporate the American culture into your English lessons, and why?

8. Outside of your English classes, how do you stay in touch with American culture?

9. Can you share a story/critical moment, positive or negative, that has influenced your perception towards this culture?

10. Do you think that your perception of the American culture influences or influenced in your process of English learning process? Why or why not?

11. Have you experienced any cultural differences that surprised you during your English learning process? In what ways have they affected your perception towards this culture and the target language?

12. How do you think that the American culture has influenced your motivation to learn English?

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Thracian Royalty: The Institution of the King-Priest and Later Accounts of the Importance of Gifts and Their Means of Acquisition

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Abstract

The first part of this study focuses on the institution of the Thracian king-priest – a leader who in addition to the political, also directs religious affairs, as attested since at least the middle of the 2nd millennium BC not just by written accounts, but by the tripartite vessel from the Valchitran Treasure and the numerous excavated double axes as well. The second part of the research is dedicated to the role of gifts in Thracian aristocratic society. It is so significant that according to Thucydides, it is "impossible to get anything done without a present." Special attention is therefore given to the personal account of Xenophon, who describes in full detail the method of Seuthes II for acquiring gifts.

Keywords: Thracians, king-priest, double axes, archaeology, eschara, Thracian treasures, royal gifts.

1. The Thracian Institution of the King-Priest

The 12.5 kg Thracian Valchitran Treasure (16th–12th centuries BC, more probably towards the later period) is so far the largest Bronze Age gold treasure found in Europe. It consists of 13 pieces, but one of them has a peculiar and mysterious look and is considered as one of the most certain testimonies for the presence of the institution of the king-priest in Thrace since at least the middle of the 2nd millennium BC – the tripartite vessel, consisting of three separated gold, tear shaped vessels attached to their tubular electrum (an alloy of gold and silver) handles.[1] This unique vessel may have been placed on a ritual cart, perhaps to mix the *kykeyon* (a sacred drink).[2]

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* This paper is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Dimitar Popov (1950-2015).

[1] Venedikov, 1987; Valeva, 2015. For Thracian treasures in general see Casson, 1977; *Gold der Thraker* 1979; *Gold of the Thracian Horseman* 1987; Marazov, 1998.

[2] Venedikov, 1987; Eisenberg 1998: 9. For *kykeyon* see Webster, 2000. Discovery of fragments of ergot (fungi containing LSD-like psychedelic alkaloids) in a temple dedicated to the two Eleusinian goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, excavated at the Mas Castellar site (Girona, Spain) provided some possible support for the theory of ergot being used in the *kykeyon*. Ergot fragments were found inside a vase and

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- Jordanes directly attests the Getic leader Comosicus being a king-priest.

- According to Thucydides, in Thrace it is "impossible to get anything done without a present."

- In Thrace more disgrace was being attached to not giving when asked than to asking and being refused.

Figure 1. The Valchitran Treasure, discovered in 1924. The kantharos has a weight of 4.5 kg. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria

Figure 2. The tripartite vessel

We find numerous written accounts for the presence of king-priests in Ancient Thrace as well. It is Homer (*Il.* 10.435) who tells the story of Rhesus' glorious arrival in order to help the besieged Trojans and describes him as king of the Thracians. Although the poetic account lacks the slightest hint of his priestly affiliation, the doubt is later dispelled by Euripides. In the tragedy *Rhesus* (900-972) he states through the words of the Muse, who laments the unfortunate fate of

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within the dental calculus of a 25-year-old man (Juan-Stresserras, 2005). Gorman (1979: 200) reminds, that "drugs were only a means of escaping from the body . . . they only allowed the psyche to become aware of its own potentialities."

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her son that "he [Rhesus] shall not descend into earth's darksome soil," but will be "restored to life, no longer man but God, even as the prophet of Bacchus did dwell in a grotto 'neath Pangaeus." Euripides does not separate priestly abilities from political functions, but unites them in the figure of the ruler.[3]

Strabo (7.8.35) writes about one of Thrace's singers – Phamyris: "it was on this shore [Mt. Athos] that Phamyris the Thracian reigned, who was a man of the same pursuits as Orpheus." Given the fact that Apollonius (1.34) and Conon (45) consider Orpheus a king-priest, Strabo's information about Phamyris leads to the conclusion of the latter being another ancient Thracian king-priest.[4]

Another example is Eumolpus, despite the complexity of the myth about him (*Homeric Hymn 2 to Demeter* 147, 474).[5] This Thracian king arrived with his troops to help the Athenians in their war with Eleusis, but he was also the founder of the Eleusinian Mysteries there and founded the Eumolpid family, whose representatives performed the functions of the hierophant – the high priest. A king-priest himself, the Thracian bequeathed the institution to his descendants.

Phineus is a Thracian king of Salmydessus, near the Bosporus, but at the same time he has mantic powers – he is a seer (Apollod. 1.9.21; Ammanius Marcelinus *History* 22.8.14; Sophocles *Antig*. 966-967).

The earliest accounts about Zalmoxis are from Herodotus (4.93-96), but he does not describe him as a ruler. Despite of that most probably he is the ruler of the Getae. He was the Thracian leader in the political struggles with the Hellenic colonists and synthesized all the political activity in response to the campaign of the Persian king Darius I (522-486 BC) against the Scythians in the late 6th century BC. Herodotus talks about a banqueting-hall, "where he received and feasted the chief men of the tribe and instructed them meanwhile that neither he himself nor his guests nor their descendants in succession after them would die" (4.95). This account of a Thracian king-priest initiating the aristocratic elite in a hall resembles the one of Conon (45) about the king-priest Orpheus, who initiates "Thracians and Macedonians . . . in a large building well built for ceremonies." Plato (*Charm*. 155-158) and Strabo (7.3.5) also talk about Zalmoxis' king-priest abilities, which further substantiates the institution of the king-priest.[6]

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[3] Popov, 2014: 216. A. Nock (1926: 184 ff.; Linforth, 1941: 66) does not exclude does not exclude the possibility that Euripides' verses about Rhesus could be interpreted as referring to Zalmoxis.

Dimitar Popov gives Maron, Euantheus' son, a priest of Apollo (Homer *Od*. 9.196-211) as another example for a Thracian king-priest with the main argument that the term ἀμφιπόλων (handmaid) is only being used in the cases when servants welcome guests in a royal palace. But Zlatozara Gocheva (2008, Gočeva, 2008) considers Maron to be a Greek and a priest of Apollo, at that time an unknow god to the Thracians. It is very well known that the Thracians of this early age worshipped the sun. This is proven by the many monuments and written records alike (Gočeva, 1978), but has nothing to do with the Asia Minor cult of Apollo, especially in this period. Herodotus (5.7) lists as main Thracian deities Ares, Dionysus and Artemis, as well as Hermes; there is no Apollo among them. If Herodotus knew of Apollo's veneration among the Thracian population, even if only in Aegean Thrace, he would have mentioned it. Nor does he even give an account of the well-known solar cult, since it has no name and is not known to him from monuments which were more scattered on high mountain places. Indeed, a little later, with the increased Greek colonization, primarily along the Black Sea coast, Greek colonists, especially those from the Asia Minor coast, brought the cult of Apollo, revered as the main patron of the colonists. But by the end of Hellenism, he was mainly worshipped by the Greek population on the Black Sea coast.

[4] Apollonius (1.34) points that Orpheus was ruler of the Bistones and Conon (*Narrations* 45) – ruler of Macedonians and Odrysians. See Bondzhev, 2024.

[5] Mihaylov, 1972: 192-193; Yanakieva, 1993; Popov, 2014: 219.

[6] Popov, 2014: 220-221.

In a much later account Jordanes (*Getica* 73) directly attests the Getic leader being a king-priest:

> After the death of Deceneus, they held Comosicus in almost equal honor, because he was not inferior in knowledge. By reason of his wisdom, he was accounted their priest and king, and he judged the people with the greatest uprightness.

2. Archaeological accounts for the institution of the King-Priest

The existence of the institution is also confirmed by the discovery of double axes throughout Bulgarian territory. They were widespread throughout the Mediterranean during the Cretan-Mycenaean era and were considered cult monuments symbolizing power. Their sacred significance can hardly be disputed, since they were passed down through inheritance and could be preserved for generations as relics. This is the emblem of the king, which embodies the political and religious division of power and the union of the two beginnings in syncretic unity.

Found in many different places, the double axes testify not to the isolated presence of the king-priests in some geographical areas, but to their presence throughout Thrace regardless of the names of the tribes and the extent of their territories. Their widespread adoption and popularity in society is documented not only in the last centuries of the Bronze Age, but also in the Early Iron Age: cult axes with an artistically crafted heel date back to the 10th–8th centuries BC; axe amulets date to the 8th–7th c. BC and as late as the 6th c. BC, when their development finally ceased.[7]

Another example from archaeology are the excavations of the best studied Thracian city – Seuthopolis.[8] In the palace of the Thracian king Seuthes III (ca. last quarter of the 4th century BC) were found two clay platforms, but they are not ordinary hearths, but cult altars – *escharoi*,[9] which have parallels and a probable origin in the Mediterranean of the late 3rd or early 2nd millennium BC: e.g. in the sanctuary of the palace at Phaistos on Crete, in the altars of Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos and mainland Greece from the second half of the 2nd millennium BC.[10] In these sites, the monumental and ornate *escharoi* played an important role in the cult ceremonies performed by the dynasts. The meaning and functional purpose of the sacred hearth in the throne room at Seuthopolis is equivalent to them, although it dates from the 3rd century BC. They thus prove to be a good testimony to the vitality of the king-priest institution from the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BC to the era of early Hellenism, when Seuthopolis existed.

The nature of the local leader who directs political and religious affairs is confirmed by the second *eschara* in the palace. It is located in the sanctuary of the great Samothracian deities. The multifunctionality of the home indicates that the king's palace was both a monumental building with many living quarters and a large reception hall that housed a temple. This is well attested by the inscription found in the same room.[11] Regardless of the presence of altars in every

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[7] The earliest axe is dated 12th–10th centuries BC, found in Karlukovo (Lovetch). After that follow: end of the 10th – beginning of the 8th c. BC – Stara Zagora; 8th c. BC – Teteven; second half of the 8th c. – beginning of 7th c. BC – Chomakovci (Vratsa); 7th c. BC – Kamenno pole (Vratsa); second half of 7th c. BC – Rila Monastery; 6th c. BC – Gorna Lyubota (Bosilegrad) (Kitov, 1979; Popov, 2014: 228; see also Venedikov, 1973: 26-33).

[8] Dimitrov, 1961; Danov, 1962; Dimitrov & Čičikova, 1978; Dimitrov et al., 1984; Velkov, 1991: 7-11; Manov, 1998; Archibald, 1999; Tacheva, 2000; Popov, 2002: 122-134; Rabadzhiev, 2002: 10-54; Lehmann, 2016; Chichikova & Dimitrov, 2016.

[9] For *eschara* (plural: *escharoi*) see Ekroth, 2002: 25-27.

[10] Nilsson, 1955: 267-270, fig. 4.1.

[11] Dimitrov, 1957: 185.

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home, the sacred hearths here are associated with the city's most important official cult, whose high priest in the mystical sacraments is the king.[12]

       3. The importance of royal gifts

       According to Thucydides (2.97), during the reign of Seuthes I (424-405 BC) the tribute from all Thracian districts and the Hellenic cities amounted to about 400 talents (one talent equals c. 26 kg) in gold and silver (equaling 2 400 000 drachmas). There were also presents in gold and silver to a no less amount. Probably that is why Diodorus (12.50.2) sums it up to "more than a thousand talents".[13]

       But even this evidence of the wealth of the Thracian kings at the height of their power pales in comparison with the findings of the archaeological excavations. They create the milieu that surrounded the elite, illustrate their everyday accessories, and add to the protocol-ceremonial list of objects that are missing from the written sources. The best example is the world-famous 6,2 kg golden Panagyrishte Treasure (310-290 BC), whose metal weight alone would have been enough to pay an army of 762 soldiers for a year.[14]

Figure 3. The Panagyurishte Treasure, discovered in 1949. The amphora has a weight of 1.6 kg. National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria. Photo: Nikolay Genov.

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[12] Popov, 2014: 232-233.

[13] Using the existing Athenian tribute lists from 454/453 to 404/403 BC (Meritt, 1939-1953) (or rather the absence of evidence in the registers on taxes paid by *poleis* located along the Thracian coasts), Kalin Porozhanov (2021: 179-279) calculated the eventual tribute paid (voluntarily or through coercion) by the Greek *poleis* and *emporia* (trading posts) of the Thracian Sea and the Sea of Marmara to the Thracian kings (on which their existence depended much more than Athens) as follows: Teres I (first half of 5th c. BC) – 9-13 talents and 2000 drachmas; Sparacodus (448-444 BC) – 17 talents and 1000 drachmas (eventually, but less likely, 10 more talents from Perinthus); Sitalces (444-424 BC) – 77-78 talents; Amadocus I (Medocus I) (405-386 BC) – no data, but presumably 400 talents from his whole kingdom (just as Seuthes I), half of which from the *poleis* and *emporia*, the other half from the subjugated Thracian ethnical groups; Hebryzelmis (386-383 BC) – the same; Cotys I (384/3-360 BC) – no data, but most probably over 1000 talents from his whole kingdom, including the Thracians (cf. Demosth. 23.110 – Cotys' son Cersobleptes (360-341 BC) received as tribute 30 talents from Chersonese and 200 talents from the ports, but his kingdom was only 1/3 to ½ of the size of Cotys' kingdom).

[14] Venedikov, 1970: 11. For the Panagyurishte Treasere see Tsontchev, 1955; Venedikov, 1961; von Bothmer, 1962; Kontoleon, 1962; Corbett, 1964; Strong, 1966: 97, 102; Griffith, 1974; Hoddinott, 1975: 85, 89; Moorey, 1976; Marazov, 1977; Venediko, 1977: 39; von Bothmer, 1977; Vickers, 1989: 33-37; Rotroff, 1998; Marazov, 1998: 145-148; Archibald, 1998: 271, 328; Chary, 2011: 1, 145; Ovadiah, 2014; Valeva, 2015; Holt, 2016: 47.

The fact that many of the Thracian treasures were not found in graves or tombs, but were buried directly in the ground, means that they were not intended to serve for the next life of the deceased, but were most likely hidden as a result of sudden attacks.

The Thracians were known for their lavish clothing, the luxury of their weaponry and the precious tableware. Such decoration and ostentation are typical of the Scythians, Persians, and Eastern people in general – according to Herodotus (4.104), "the Agathyrsians are the most luxurious of men and wear gold ornaments for the most part". These habits aroused the ridicule and derision of the Hellenes, who often mocked the adorned "barbarians". Precious objects abound especially during feasts and feasts. According to Diodorus (21.12), Dromichaetes' noble guests drink from gold and silver goblets and eat at a silver table. Just as the Paeonian kings make drinking-cups out of enormous horns and cover over the brims with silver or with gold (Athenaeus 11.51), so does the Dacian king Decebalus also drink from a gold-plated horn (*Greek Anthology* 6.332).[15]

The beauty and virtuosity of the workmanship, the rich decoration and the high price make the exquisite objects accessible only to the aristocracy. We find the Thracian word for these people in Hesychius (s.v. Zibutides) – *zibutides*, meaning "shining", "radiant" people, in order to emphasize their high place in the hierarchy, obtained not without the help of ostentation of clothes, armaments, jewels, or, more simply put, through the possession of wealth and treasures.[16]

The reality is that wealth and treasure are most often acquired not through economic means, but through war and plunder. Plunder became an important means of establishing the authority of the dynasts and their entourage. Hence, the sharp reluctance of the Thracian aristocracy to toil, attested not just by Herodotus (5.6) – "not to work is counted most honourable, and to be a worker of the soil is above all things dishonourable: to live on war and plunder is the most honourable thing", but by Plutarch (*Sayings* [*Apopth.*] 174d) as well: "Teres, the father of Sitalces, said, when he was out of the army and had nothing to do, he thought there was no difference between him and his grooms".

Xenophon personally witnessed and described in full detail another method for acquiring gifts – that of Seuthes II (401/400-387/386 BC), by inviting to dinner the generals and captains of the Hellenic mercenaries who came to him at the very end of the 5th century BC:

> When they had reached his doors and were about to go in to dinner, there stood a certain Heracleides, of Maroneia; this fellow came up to each single one of the guests who, as he imagined, were able to make a present to Seuthes . . . it was customary when Seuthes invited people to dinner, for those who were thus invited to give him presents...

> When the drinking was well under way, there came in a Thracian with a white horse, and taking a full horn he said: "I drink your health, Seuthes, and present to you this horse; on his back pursuing you shall catch whomever you choose, and retreating you shall not fear the enemy." Another brought in a boy and presented him in the same way, with a health to Seuthes, while another presented clothes for his wife. Timasion also drank his health and presented to him a silver bowl and a carpet worth ten minas . . . Then Xenophon . . . arose courageously after taking the horn and said: "And I, Seuthes, give you myself and these my comrades to be your faithful friends." (*Anabasis* 7.3.15-7.3.30)

This genuine description attests for the popularity of gift-giving among the Thracians and is confirmed by Thucydides (2.97), according to whom: it is "impossible to get anything done without a present". In addition to the yearly tribute of 400 talents "there were also presents in gold

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[15] See also Blumenstengel, 1964.

[16] Detschew, 1976: 187; Velkova, 1986; Popov, 2014: 283.

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and silver to a no less amount, besides stuff, plain and embroidered, and other articles, made not only for the king, but also for the Odrysian lords and nobles" and "more disgrace being attached to not giving when asked than to asking and being refused."[17] In fact, it is not only through the means of military power and religion that the Odrysian kings established and maintained political power, but also through gifts.[18] The royal gift exchange, a practice originally adopted from the Persian court,[19] was especially important for legitimation.[20]

Thucydides also states that among Thracians there was "a custom opposite to that prevailing in the Persian kingdom, namely, of taking rather than giving" (2.97.4). But that is quite opposite to Xenophon's account (*Anab.* 7.3.20): Heracleides convinces the latter to honor Seuthes II – "I am quite sure that the greater the gifts you bestow upon this man, the greater the favours that you will receive at his hands." According to Plutarch (*Sayings* 174d), the Odrysian king Cotys, "when one gave him a leopard, gave him a lion for it:" obviously the case represents a fairly equal dynastic exchange; yet the advantage is on the side of Cotys, because the lion is the king of the beasts. Apparently, in relations between equals, the most important thing is that if the receiver does not respond equally, he remains under the dependence of the giver.

4. Conclusion

The first written accounts of the Thracian king-priests refer mainly to the period of the 13th–12th centuries BC, when the interactions of Thracians and Achaeans were most active – at the time the Trojan War.[21] But the institution of the king-priest was present much later – during the contacts of the Greek colonists with the Thracian coastline in the 8th-6th centuries BC and as late as the 1st century BC among the Getae. It would be correct to state that since for most of human history the desire for the material has always been stronger than the pursuit of the spiritual, so the pursuit of political affairs has always been greater than that for religious ones, and hence the blatant aspiration for luxury, treasures and gifts, as a symbol of political and hierarchical power, especially among the Odrysians. But on the other hand, it is the preserved treasures that arouse our admiration and curiosity about some ancient cultures and challenge us to explore their spiritual beliefs as well.

Acknowledgements

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[17] See Zournatzi, 2000: 692.

[18] Greenwalt, 2015: 337.

[19] Brosius, 2011: 145.

[20] Sobotkova, 2013: 135.

[21] Popov, 1981.

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