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EVIL SPIRITS IN THE DEMONOLOGICAL SYSTEM OF THE NORTH CAUCASUS

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Abstract

Issues of regional culture and cultural unity of the peoples of the North Caucasus have been the object of study of many Russian scientists. At the same time, the religious beliefs of each people have unique features, as they evolved under the influence of individual cultural and historical conditions. This article reflects the specific features of the demonology of the peoples of the North Caucasus in the cultural aspect. The author conducted a comparative analysis of the mythological characters of various ethnic cultures of the region, traced their transformation under the influence of religious beliefs, and considered modern modifications of religious and mythical images. The author comes to the conclusion about the correspondence between the demonological images of various ethnic groups, the influence of mythology and religious culture, the modern transformation of images and the objective conditions of their transition to folklore. Practical use of this publication is possible in studying folklore, the regional culture of the North Caucasus, mythology, and religious studies.

Keywords

Demonology – Folk mythology – National art – Regional culture of the North Caucasus

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Introduction

Issues of regional culture and cultural unity of the peoples of the North Caucasus have been the object of study of many Russian scientists. At the same time, the religious beliefs of each people have unique features, as they evolved under the influence of individual cultural and historical conditions. The need to study the national epos, mythology is associated with a partial loss of their meaning or oblivion as a result of urbanization and globalization. The objective of this research is to identify, describe, compare, and characterize demonological characters making part of the ethnic culture of the peoples of the North Caucasus.

The research methodology is based on the principles of historicism and objectivism that underlie the study of demonological characters in a certain sequence and continuous connection with the culture of the peoples of the North Caucasus, as well as their mutual influence. The work also uses methods of comparative analysis, typologization, comparative textual analysis, and the method of identification based on identity and difference.

The methodological and theoretical basis of the work is the research of modern scholars in the field of history and ethnography, folklore studies, regional studies, and religious studies, for example, the articles by F.M. Takazov, R.I. Seferbekov, L.K. Tekeeva, S.G. Tambovtseva, and others.

The scientific novelty of the work is expressed in the construction of analog series of demonological images of various ethnic groups, as well as the search for compliance with the description of the development and transformation of such images in the culture of various peoples of the North Caucasus.

The territory of the North Caucasus is one of the oldest agricultural regions. Like other historical territories, the North Caucasus has rich cultural traditions and beliefs. For example, the settlers of these lands have always believed they can influence the harvest, the weather, or other important conditions and events of life through magical rites. The rather harsh environmental conditions of the Caucasus contributed to the strong development of magical ideas¹.

The spreading of rituals and traditions contributed to a large number of mythological characters, including demonological, the peoples of the North Caucasus started to believe in.

Many of the images associated with the elements of mythology, representing the so-called evil forces, go back to early religious and mythological ideas. Later religions, such as Christianity and Islam, affected such mythological images and gradually transform them, turning into fairy-tale characters. At the same time, the genre trend called demonology turned out to be the most stable in the mythological creativity of the North Caucasian peoples².

¹ S. G Tambovtseva, "Koldovstvo u zakavkazskikh dukhobortsev i sotsial'no-psikhologicheskkiye funktsii" in Proceedings of the V International Scientific Conference "Demonology as a Semiotic System" (Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2018), 158.

² F. M Takazov, Ocherki po demonologii narodov Severnogo Kavkaza. Monografiya (Vladikavkaz: North Ossetian Institute for Humanitarian and Social Research named after V.I. Abaev, 2008), 3.

The structure of the demonological images in the culture of the North Caucasus

Demonology itself is the common name for dissimilar myths about evil spirits, demons, *etc.* In this aspect of studying mythological plots and images, materials related to historical traditions and rituals, descriptions of the behavior of demons, fighting them and controlling their forces, *etc.* are often considered³.

As for the peoples of the North Caucasus, we should mention that the mythological basis of their beliefs originated far in antiquity. Like other nations, during the formation of their identity, they experienced various external influences. For this reason, certain mythological tales of different nations are often intertwined or at least have mutual hints of similar tales⁴.

Often, every nation has tales (ideas) about certain patron spirits. For example, all peoples of the North Caucasus have mythological stories about the hunting deities, whose consent is a must for the hunter to get prey. For example, the Adyghes call their deity *Mezitkh*, the Ossetians - *Afsati*, the Ingush - *Elta*, *etc.*

It is important to point out that the so-called myth system is constantly changing. Thus, under the influence of the religious ideas of Christianity and Islam, there is a decline in myth-making. As a consequence of this fact, some of the mythological characters come into oblivion, others find their place in a kind of fairy-tale context, and the rest turn into lower mythology. The latter is precisely the layer of mythology with demonological characters⁵.

Lower mythology prevails in folk beliefs. In connection with the previously mentioned facts, both Christianity and Islam do not approve of myths (or even violently oppose mythology), so folk mythology remained only in demonology. To this day, the beliefs of the peoples of the North Caucasus include tales of a hunter (and other people) who met a demonic creature.

Evil spirits in the system of demonic images of the North Caucasus

The most common representatives of evil spirits had a common name - demons. Often, various religious systems, as well as religious and mythological beliefs of peoples in this category include various types of spirits. The word "demons" goes back to the Indo-European language and means "causing fear and horror". The most common demonic character among the peoples of the North Caucasus is the devil and his fellow genie. Some North Caucasian peoples have their own names, for example, such as *shaitan* (or *saytan*).

Genies can be either good or evil. At the same time, shaitans (saytans) are mainly negative characters. According to the beliefs of North Caucasians, each person has his/her own genie. Caucasians, who practice Islam, believe that each person has an angel on one shoulder, and a genie (or *shaitan*) on the other.

³ S. A. Tokarev, ed., *Mify narodov mira*, Entsiklopediya: v 2-kh tomakh, vol. 1 (Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia, 1992), 127.

⁴ E. M. Meletinsky, *Poetika mifa*, 3rd edition, reprint., *Studies on folklore and mythology of the East* (Moscow: Publishing company "Oriental literature" RAS, 2000), 22.

⁵ S. G. Tambovtseva, "Koldovstvo u zakavkazskikh..." 159.

In the various stories or legends of one of the North Caucasian ethnic groups, the Ossetian people, the evil spirit *Iblis* (or *Ibilis*) and the good spirit *Zed*, who plays the role of a human's guardian, confront each other⁶.

Modern ideas about shaitans and genies among representatives of the North Caucasus, although they differ in some details, are generally similar. In Dagestan peoples, Ossetians, Kabardians, Balkarians, Shaitans they are anthropomorphic creatures, overgrown with hair, with inverted legs, lower than an average man.

We shall list the names of some spirits, making a kind of demonological pantheon of various peoples of the North-Eastern Caucasus.

The deity Num-Negir, an ambivalent creature, most often seen as a white marten. If this creature run near the feet of a person, it presages misfortune, grief, family misfortunes and illnesses of the newborns.

Water *Ser-ovi* ("Master of Water"), who had anthropomorphic and sometimes amorphous images. It kept water from all sorts of impurities, but at the same time, it attracted young people and drowned them, but stayed clear of old people. Steel objects, and, in particular, damask rings worn on the thumb served as a guard against it.

Shekhadu - evil spirit, demon, the master of all evil spirits living in the other world⁷.

It is also important to note that many peoples of the Caucasus have the same traditions or rituals of protection against shaitans and genies. For example, according to the beliefs of Muslims, the most effective means against the wiles of demonic creatures in general, and shaitans and genies, in particular, are reading the Quran (or just saying prayers) and wearing amulets called *dua*. Other amulets against demonological creatures are various metal items such as knives, scissors, horseshoes, *etc.*

Other most famous demonic characters are *Almasty*. Sometimes this image is presented in the form of a naked woman with an ugly face and long flowing hair. According to legends of Kabardinians, *Almasty* live in ravines, thickets, bushes, in the highlands.

Other ethnic groups, Chechens and Ingushes, otherwise, believe some of *Almasty* to be extraordinarily beautiful. Forest dwellers appear as both women and men. Both of them differ in vivid beauty. At the same time, they are evil, insidious, and very dangerous.

The Abazin believe that *Almasty* is always hostile enough towards people, but if one manages to cut off a shred of their hair, and make them swear by the god of the sky *Uashkho*, they can then even obey. The negative characters in North Caucasian demonic mythology include giants. Ossetians, like other peoples of the Caucasus, have a number of tales and legends about the appearance of such creatures in this world. According to mythological views, the *Uaiugi* were created by God before the *Narts* and were incredibly tall and strong. The legends often describe *Uaiuga* as the personification of the elements.

⁶ S. G Tambovtseva, "Koldovstvo u zakavkazskikh... 10.

⁷ L. A Borokova, "Nomenklatura mifologicheskikh personazhey gorskikh yevreyev Dagestana" in Lavrovsky Collection: Proceedings of XXXIII Central Asian Caucasian Readings, 2008-2009: Ethnology, History, Archeology, Cultural Science, ed. Yu.Yu. Karpov (St. Petersburg: MAE RAS, 2009), 315.

For this reason, this character over time has been assigned to the category of demonological characters⁸. The demonological nature of the Uaiuga is confirmed by some Ossetian fairy tales, where the concepts of “*uaiug*” and “devil” appear as identical. Legends of the Adygei often tell about a character called “*Inyzh*”. It acts as the main negative character in all myths, fairy tales, legends, and epics. It looks different: in particular, it can be represented as a multi-headed giant.

One of the most popular giants, the most famous among the Chechens and Ingush, is a giant called Vampol. This demonic creature is always presented as a huge monster with supernatural power and several heads. These giants can be both male and female⁹. Looking at the historical layer of the mythological characters of the North Caucasian peoples, we should remember that some of the images of giants in earlier mythology were originally considered deities. Gradually, the images of giants, for example, uaiug and vampol, were transformed into demonic creatures.

Other demonological images: domovoy and dragons

Another one demonological image is the so-called house spirit or domovoy. Despite the ideas, caused by the influence of Christianity and Islam, about the domovoy as a creature of demonic spirits, some peoples do not place this image on par with the devil¹⁰. This demonological character is most popular among Ossetians. Such popularity is explained both by the superstitions of the Ossetians, and by their attitude to the family hearth, and housing in general.

The Ossetian domovoy is called *Bundor*, which means “foundation”, “main stone”. The Ironian Ossetians have a domovoy called “*Bynaty Khitsau*”, which means “master of the locality, or place”. According to legends, Bundor lives in the pantry and looks like an ugly old woman with fangs. Sometimes it can take more favorable shapes, for example, of some animals.

Bundor can be both evil and good spirit. According to beliefs, if the house is ruled by an evil Bundor, it must be placated. Ossetians also believe that the health of their families, as well as their material well-being, depend on Bundor¹¹.

Avars have their own character, close to the Ossetian Bundor and called *Bakarab Rukh*. It often takes the shape of a man with a white beard in snow-white clothes. This spirit can also appear as a woman. Both hypostases can act both as a good spirit (for example, a kind old man), and as evil.

Dagestanis, in addition to the kind house spirit, have an antipode – an evil house spirit. Laks call it *Sukhasulu*, Avars - *Khegelo*, Andians - *Chelkan*, Darghins - *Shyamga* and *Kibirkhan*, and Kumyks - *Basdaryk*.

⁸ F. M Takazov, *Ocherki po demonologii narodov...* 23.

⁹ L. A Borokova, “Demonologicheskkiye Personazhi Abazinskogo Fol’klora [Demonological Characters of Abaza Folklore],” in *Lavrovsky Collection: Proceedings of XXXIII Central Asian Caucasian Readings, 2008-2009: Ethnology, History, Archeology, Cultural Science*, ed. Yu.Yu. Karpov (St. Petersburg: MAE RAS, 2009), 317.

¹⁰ F. M Takazov, *Ocherki po demonologii narodov...* 29.

¹¹ V. Akaev, “Ethnocultural diversity and consolidation of Caucasus people unity: theoretic-methodologic analysis, *Scientific almanac of the Black Sea countries*” *Scientific Almanac of the Black Sea Countries Vol: 3 num 7 (2016): 23.*

In addition to the above demonological characters, it is worth adding a few more, which are less famous compared to the previous ones. For example, the most ancient creature among the Turkic-speaking peoples of the North Caucasus is a dragon (*sarubek*) - a serpent with three, seven, or nine heads of monstrous size and power. The dragon usually appears as a creature hostile to humans. According to legend, it blocked the flow of the river or drank water in it, which led to famine and drought. To "appease" the dragon, in ancient times people sacrificed girls.

The folklore of the Turkic-speaking peoples of the North Caucasus includes the image of the demonic creature *Elmauz* (*Dzhelmauz* - in the Karachay-Balkarians). In Nogai mythology, this can be both male and female demon, that is, it is anthropomorphic. Elmauz is a monster with a huge nose and mouth, devouring people. It can cause an eclipse of the moon. During eclipses, the Nogais thought that they helped to defeat the monster by making noise on the ground and thereby scaring Elmauz¹².

The category of evil spirits included *Obyr* (*Obur*) and *Sinaush*. *Sinaush*, for example, appears in popular belief as a tall and very thin man with long hair, without eyes. It moves by touch, climbs into dwellings that are close to the cemetery, and leaves nothing edible there. People identify white phosphoric light, which sometimes appears in the cemetery, with *Sinaush*. Nogais believe *Obyr* to be nothing more than the soul of a dead, evil person who took the shape of a cat¹³. People attribute the relevant fantastic properties to each object of nature. At the beginning of his independent existence in the harsh environmental conditions of the North Caucasus, a person tries to establish relationships between the living and non-living world. The inability of human consciousness to establish cause-and-effect relations at an early stage brings mythological beliefs and demonological images to life¹⁴.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed some of the most typical demonological images of the peoples of the North Caucasus. The most common are images of demons, as well as the devil (*shaitan*). Other demonological characters are *Almasty* and *domovoys*, which can sometimes act as kind spirits. Some peoples represent the spirits of mountains, waters, and the related dragons, serpents, *etc.* as evil characters. In this case, all the peoples of the North Caucasus often have the same methods of protection from evil spirits. The comparison and generalization of demonological characters show the interpenetration of the ethnic cultures of the peoples of the North Caucasus, as well as the originality of their formation and development. Ethnos has saved its significance under the social transformation of Russian society. In the Caucasus, peoples' interest in ethnic mythology, religion, ancient customs and rituals has intensified since the 1990s¹⁵. Demonological images continue to live in modern folklore and fairytale characters.

¹² L. K. Tekeeva, "Personazhi nizshey mifologii v traditsionnom mirovozzrenii tyurkoyazychnykh narodov Severnogo Kavkaza [Characters of lower mythology in the traditional worldview of the Turkic-speaking peoples of the North Caucasus]," *Bulletin of Perm University. Series: History* Vol: 1 num 24 (2014): 102.

¹³ L. N. Vinogradova, *Narodnaya demonologiya i mifo-ritual'naya traditsiya slavyan* [Folk demonology and the myth-ritual tradition of the Slavs] (Moscow: Indrik, 2000), 104.

¹⁴ E. M. Meletinsky, *Poetika mifa ...*, 90.

¹⁵ Y. P. Ten and V. V. Gudakov, "Simvolny regional'noy kul'tury Severnogo Kavkaza: annotatsiya [Symbols of the regional culture of the North Caucasus: Annotation]," *Scientific Almanac of the Black Sea Countries* Vol: 2 num 2 (2016): 39–47.

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