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Tatiana Deviatkina

Mordvin mythology is the result of the formation of the Erza and Moksha ethnic groups and their contacts with Persian, Turkic, Slavic and Baltic peoples. In later times, also Islam and Christianity have exerted their influence on the mythology of the Mordvins (Petrukhin & Helimski 1994: 563).

Although the Erza and the Moksha mythological plots and religious concepts are similar, no common Mordvin mythology emerged (Maskaev 1964: 131); therefore the term 'Mordvin mythology' here denotes 'Erza and Moksha mythologies'. The reasons for this lie in idiosyncrasies of the material and intellectual culture of these ethnic groups, and the existence of two independent languages. Other ethnic groups living in Mordvinia (the Shoksha, the Teriukhans, the Karatai) also share some Erza and Moksha characteristics in their legends, although they differ as to their mother tongue, traditions, native costumes, etc.

The current article touches upon some aspects of Mordvin mythology in the context of its neighbouring peoples' mythology. The subject treated here are legends concerning the creation and structure of the world as well as some andropogonic and theogonic myths.

THEOGONIC MYTHS

Extant Mordvin theogonic myths are fragmentary and by no means provide accounts of all deities.

Earthly as well as some superior deities were hatched from an egg. The Erza mother of gods *Ange Patiai*, for example, was born from an egg flattened by *Chipaz*. According to one myth, three sisters hatched from the eggs laid by the Great Bird in its nest on top of a birch tree: the Harvest Mother *Norovav* (mdE), the Wind Mother *Varmava* (mdE&M), the Forest Mother *Vir'ava* (mdE&M) (Harva 1952: 141).

Demiurges have the power to self-replicate and give birth to others, their actions are unlimited to time and space. *Nishkepaz* of the Erza is born from *Chipaz* (demiurge, the Sun God), *Mastoron' kirdi* (mdE&M – the earth god) created *Skai* (mdM – demiurge, the supreme god in the Moksha mythology); the wind god *Varmanpaz* (mdE) is the son of the Forest Mother *Vir'ava*; the god of the underworld *Mastorpaz* (mdE) was born from the union of *Chipaz* and the Harvest Mother of the Erza *Norovava*; the thunder god *Pur'ginepaz* was born from *Niskende Teitert'*, the daughter of *Ange Patiai*.

Deities are generally anthropomorphic, zoomorphic (in the form of an animal, but more often a bird), appearing in the form of plants, hybrids (half-animal, half-human); some of them reproduce similarly to humans (Smirnov 1895: 203–204), may even marry earthly women. In several mythical songs the thunder god *Pur'ginepaz*¹ marries an earthly girl *Litova* (*Lituva*, *Syrzha*, etc.) (Jakov 1848: 59–60).

As the Mordvin languages have no grammatical gender, neither do the words *Paz* and *Skai*. While today the word 'God' as adapted from Christianity refers to a male being, the Mordvins have not fully determined the gender of *Skai* and *Paz*. For example, a deity both male and female is the god of construction works *Keren'-Shochkon'paz* (mdE). Yet, dominance of female deities is characteristic. The guardian of the Earth was *Mastorava* (mdE&M), her assistant *Modava* (mdE&M). The guardian deities of agriculture, animals, industries, nature and natural elements (water, wood, fire, wind, etc.) lived on the Earth. They had husbands and children (Smirnov 1895: 209–210), who served no separate purpose: they helped the female deities and carried out their wishes. Maskaev argues that in the period of matriarchal rule there were no independent male deities but only those serving female deities. In time they gained independence as the husbands or sons of the female deities, or female deities began to transform into male deities (Maskaev 1964: 144).

THE DEITIES

Mordvin legends share some characters with their neighbouring cultures. For example, the demiurge in the traditional Erza myths

is *Thsipaz* (the Sun God), while in Moksha myths it is called *Skai*, *Shkabavaz* (the God of Time, the Sun God). Later on, *Nishkepez*,² the son of *Thsipaz* became the demiurge for the Erza. The Teriukhans called the mother of all gods *Ange Patiai*.³ However, Christianity has also exerted some influence on the Mordvin concept of the demiurge.

According to the Mordvins, the world is ruled by superior and inferior deities, who in primordial times embodied the Sun, warmth, fire and other objects of the universe. Each deity protected and governed a specific object, territory, or natural phenomenon. The Forest Mother *Vir'ava*, for instance, governed everything in the woods; the Water Mother *Ved'ava* everything in the water, etc. The deities constituted a specific hierarchy; trees, for example, were ranked on the same principle. In Erza mythology oaks were subordinate to the god of oak *Tumopaz* (called *Tumoskai* by the Moksha), who in his turn was subordinate to the Forest Mother *Vir'ava*, *Vir'ava-Skai* (mdM) or *Tsipaz* (mdE). The mediators between the humans and the gods were swans (*lokseit'* mdE). This belief may have survived in the custom of greeting birds imitating the song of swans with a special instrument at Easter time (Boiarkin 1986: 43–44).

According to the pre-Christian conceptions many deities were the first protectors of tribal interests, bringing thus the world of supernatural closer to humans. Most important were those that guarded the house *kud* (mdE&M) or the tribe *iurt* (mdE) (Smirnov 1895: 200): the Home Mother *Kudava* (mdE&M); the Tribe Mother *Yurtava* (mdE), *Yurkhtava* (mdM); the Oven Mother *Pianakudava* (mdM), *Kashtoma* (mdE); the Barn Mother *Kardazava* (mdM), *Karda S'arko* (mdE); the Sauna Mother *Baniava* (mdE&M), etc. Fairies and spirits of the surrounding nature (water, forest) were also revered.

Customs, habits and deities were created by *Nishkepez*, the supreme god of the Erza, the thunder god *Pur'ginpez* and *Nikulapaz* (mdE, the Christian saint St. Nicholas) (Paasonen 1977: 2).

Ine Narmun' (mdE 'great bird') is the culture hero; in mythical songs it sits (M.n.p. 1957: 60) in a nest on top of the world tree *Ine chuvto* (mdE), usually an oak or a birch, or in the field (UPTMN 1981: 104), brooding three birds from three eggs: the skylark, the nightingale and the cuckoo. Each bird is given a duty: the skylark is responsible

for cultivation (it also symbolises childhood and youth); the nightingale is responsible for home economics (the symbol of youth); the cuckoo represents forestry (the symbol of sorrow and misery).

CREATION OF THE WORLD

Mythologies of the majority of Indo-European and Siberian people reflect their beliefs concerning the creation of the world and universe. There are few cosmogonic myths of the creation of the world in Mordvin mythology, probably because they had no concept of the creation of the world (Harva 1952: 144); the Mordvins believed that the world came into being by itself. The idea of the formation of the world is generally associated with the formation of the Earth, or steady order.

The Mordvin worldview used to be apocryphal; the world was created by *Skai* (the Time God, the Sun God and the Superior God) ~ *Chipaz* and mdE *Idemevs'* ~ mdM *Shiaitan* (the Evil Spirit, the Devil). In the oldest world creation myth of the Volga-Finnish people it is the demiurge who transforms into a duck and dives for a piece of land which it spits out and from which a mainland forms (Napolskikh 1991: 141); the Evil One repeats the procedure, creating mountains (UPTMN 1983: 188).

In a similar Moksha myth, the Supreme God *Viarde Skai* boats on the ocean and tells *Shiatan* to turn into a goldeneye and dive for sand. The Evil One manages to bring up sand from the bottom at the third try. The creation of the world goes through several stages: first the Devil dives for the 'building material', moistens it in his mouth and spits it out. The spat piece grows into a plain, which the Devil makes uneven by creating holes, chasms, mountains.

In another Erza legend *Chipaz* boats in the ocean sitting on a stone. He ejects a clot of spittle and creates the Devil with a stroke of a crook, and then tells the Devil to dive for sand. *Chipaz* spreads the sand over the water, it swells and becomes the land (Melnikov 1981: 45–47). In a modified version of the myth God tells the evil spirit to turn into a scaup⁴ and dive for the land (Mitropolski 1876: 19). Similar creation myths, where the demiurge orders the Devil to turn

into a bird and fetch land from the bottom of the primeval ocean, are known among other Finno-Ugric peoples.

Less known is the motif of the universal bird *Ine Narmun'* (mdE 'great bird'), who lays the world egg (mdE&M *Ine al*, mdM *Oziu al*). The egg yolk turns into the round earth, the eggshell into heaven and the underworld.

There is also a Mordvin world creation legend that concerns with the tree of life. The Erza demiurge *Chipaz* rests under the tree of life (in later versions also in the tree top) twice for thirty years before the creation of the world. While he sleeps, the tree grows and its branches cover the sun. The tree's roots draw moisture from the soil: the water fills chasms created by *Idemevs'*. The place where he slept turned into a deep hollow, which became the bed of the Sura River (Mainof 1889: 109–110).

THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORLD

Similarly to the mythologies of other Finno-Ugric peoples, in Mordvin mythology the world has three levels: the upper world or the heaven (mdE&M *Menel'*), the middle world or the earth (mdE&M *Moda*), rimmed with the ocean, and the lower world or the underworld – the domain of coldness and darkness. In the Moksha tradition there was also a world pillar joining these three levels – a birch (mdM *Kelu*).

In the Erza tradition the world arrangement is patterned on a beehive and divided into four: the upper, the lower and two middle parts. Humans live in one of the middle hives; the other middle hive is inhabited by all kinds of living creatures. Each hive is under the rule and protection of a god who rules there as a 'queen bee'. The ruler of the hive heaven *Ineshkipaz* (*Nishkepaz*) creates stars, which the Erza believe to be the souls of happy people. They live in shiny houses illuminated by sunbeams. The god is depicted as a man who keeps bees, souls twirling around him like bees. The god's home is Ursa Major or the Balance (Mainof 1889: 109).

The Land

In some mythical songs of the Erza the world was carried on the primeval element of the world, the ocean *Ineved'* (mdM *Poks ved'* 'big waters') where three fish lived (Mitropolski 1887: 18). In other mythical songs of the Erza, the Earth rests on a white beluga, or on three sturgeons protected by *Ravava*, the deity of the River Volga. The fish stand between the ocean and *Ravi* (the River Volga), and protect people (Yevseev 1963: 209–210). The fish swim towards three beginnings, three chasms, to support the Earth on their backs. The eldest fish takes its course to the east, the middle fish to the south (towards the centre of the Earth, presumably), the youngest fish towards sunset (UPTMN 1963: 26).⁵

In incantations the Earth is depicted resting on three whales, who separate it from water and the underworld (Harva 1952: 130–140). Moving in different directions the whales create and preserve the harmony and balance of the world. The jerky movements of the Earth's 'supporters' cause floods and earthquakes.⁶

The Mordvins believe that all that lives on the land, in the water and in the air grows with the Earth. The conception that the world is small is rather archaic (Harva 1952: 140). In some legends the Earth is described as flat, scoop- or bowl-shaped, with brims curved inside, or as geometrically shaped; in others it is round and surrounded by the waters of the world sea (mdE&M *Ine Ved'*). The Earth was also conceived as quadrangular in shape – with a silver pillar in each corner; with closed barrels placed in the corners and the Wind Mother *Varmara* (mdE&M) sitting on them in turns, the course of the wind thus depending on which barrel is opened (Harva 1952: 141).

Even in wedding songs the Earth had four corners, with silvery chairs (a symbol of heavenly deities) and yellow tables (a symbol of fertility) in its centre. Quadrangle, a mythoepic symbol, figured also in traditional architecture: a house was built quadrangular, and a table with salt and bread was placed in the centre. Then, a young tree was planted (usually an oak, the symbol of the inception and development of life). The roof of the house symbolised heaven, a wooden building was the symbol of the Earth, the basement symbolised the underworld.

The concept of quadrangular Earth is vague and could probably be associated with the four cardinal points on the compass: east, west, north and south. Mordvins oriented by the Sun (mdM *sin' stiama sire*, mdE *tsi lisema en* 'east'; literally 'where the Sun rises'; mdM *sin' madoma sire*, mdE *tsin' madoma en* 'west', or literally 'where the Sun sets'). Mordvins were oriented mainly towards the east, where the Sun rises and a new day is born; they believed that this was where the god (*Skai* ~ *Nishkepaz*) lived. This is also reflected in their traditions: they prayed kneeling down facing eastward, and their front doors customarily opened to east.

The heaven

In Mordvin legends, having completed the creation of the Earth, *Skai* created the heaven. And he created the stars from stones gathered from the Earth. Mordvin mythology lacks solar and lunar myths; the firmament was believed to be the part of the world occupied by celestial bodies. The Sun was inhabited by the demiurge *Chipaz* (mdE) ~ *Skai* (mdM). Some belief accounts mention that *Skai* lived on the Moon.⁷ All other deities had to report to them.

According to the Moksha, the sky used to be so close to the earth that clouds touched chimneys, and Erza women had to scatter them with a poker, while Moksha women used a frying pan. In another legend, people could even touch the sky (Harva 1952: 140).

On the other hand, Mordvins believed that heaven forms an arch over the Earth. The North Star *Menel' petkol'* (mdM) was considered the centre of the universe.⁸ The eternal light reached the Earth through a crystal arch: in incantations, songs and funeral customs the heavenly arch is depicted either as golden, silvery or crystal-line, emitting light and heat.

According to dualistic beliefs, human souls ascend to heaven, to *Nishkepaz*, after death. God will then settle them in their place, while their bodies are left to *Idemevs'* ~ *Shaitan*. Belief accounts reporting that heaven is occupied by the souls of the prematurely deceased, children, and the blessed, date from the more recent times.

The Mordvin heaven has two levels: one of iron and the other of stone. Sparks fly from the cartwheels and the hooves of fiery-red

horses of *Pur'ginepaz*, the Erza thunder god, when he drives across the sky (Yurtov 1883: 129).⁹

There is no explicit explanation for the origin of the Sun and the Moon; they were believed to have come into being after the creation of heaven. Myths also mention the Milky Way *Kargon'ki* (mdE&M) 'the cranes' route', the constellation Libra *Kursiakst* (mdE), the Pleiades *Oziasket'* (mdE).

Since the upper world was the home of the supreme gods (*Skai*, *Nishkepaz* (mdE), *Pur'ginepaz* (mdE), *Chipaz*), people sacrificed to the Sun, the Moon and the stars, performed specific magic rituals and followed certain taboos. Several ritual traditions (nuptial and calendric), daily customs, ornamental jewellery refer to the cult of the Sun. In folklore the Sun and the Moon are personified. It was believed that *Shis' – stir'*, *kovs' – tsera* (mdM & mdE) that the Sun was a young maiden, and the Moon – a young man. The Sun was *mazy* (mdM 'red'), *liambe* (mdM 'warm'), etc.

The underworld

The concept of underworld was originally vague. People did not differentiate between Paradise and Hell, these notions were introduced by Christianity. They believed in the afterworld where their deceased ancestors lived, which was either in heaven, under the ground or on some faraway land. The underworld was ruled by *Mastorpaz* (mdE) or *Mastoratia* (mdM – 'God, the guardian of the underworld'). He was also the guardian of the dead, whom people prayed to for food for the deceased relatives. Since the deceased were believed to lead a life similar to that on Earth, people placed different household equipment, tools, etc. to the graves at funerals. They also believed that forests grew and rivers ran in the underworld, there were settlements and people could get married; and most importantly, there was the water of life *eri ved'* (mdM).

People also believed that some fairies were related to their ancestors (Smirnov 1895: 294), and could communicate or act together with them. The Wind Mother *Varmava*, for example, was believed to be also a mediator between the living and the dead.

ANDROPOGONIC MYTHS

The andropogonic myths of the Erza and the Moksha differ considerably. The Moksha *Skai* created man from a thirty-year-old tree stump with his will, a glance and a wish; the Erza *Chipaz* moulded man from clay (Melnikov 1981: 53), while in still another variant of unknown origin man is made from soil (Mitropolski 1877: 19). However, in Teriukhan myths from the Nizhny Novgorod and Simbirsk provinces *Shaitan* began to mould the man from clay, sand or soil gathered from seventy seven different locations, but man was finished and brought to life by *Chipaz* (Melnikov 1981: 54).

The first humans created by the Moksha *Skai* were giants of 99 archinnes¹⁰ tall who could live 700–800 years, and did not perish in the flood. The height of those who survived the flood decreased gradually.

In the mythical songs of the Erza, the creation of the Earth is followed by the creation of the Sun, then the Moon, the humankind and the Erza (*Erzjan' morot* 1928: 3), who settled in seventy-seven villages within seventy years and spread all over the Earth (Harva 1952: 137–138). The Erza *Chipaz* divided them into different nations, giving each nation its language and religion. According to one myth there were seventy-even religions and seventy-even languages on Earth (Melnikov 1981: 56). In order to bring order to the world *Chipaz* appointed governors, judges and other higher officials.

However, some legends say that the ancestors of three nations (the Erza, the Russians, the Chuvash) hatched from the three eggs of *Ine Narmun* (mdE 'great bird').

Mordvin mythology depicts the Devil as the creator of hostile demonic forces. He created hop and taught mankind to brew beer. People began to drink and steal. The Devil made them kill *Nishkepaz*, who was crucified like Jesus and ascended to heaven (Melnikov 1981: 55–56) – the motif of the Fall was clearly influenced by Christianity. For punishment the Sun shone seven times less, the winter was seven times harsher, land cultivation became strenuous and the crop was less.

SUMMARY

Material recorded on Mordvin mythology is scarce and of varying significance; some texts are fragmentary or with paradoxical plots, primarily due to their archaic origin and remoteness from living heritage.

Mordvin polytheism had begun to transform into a monotheist doctrine. In different Erza regions *Chipaz*, or his son *Nishkepez*, had assumed the position of a supreme god; in Moksha it was *Skai*. However, the transformation was not completed. Today, by Mordvin mythology we mean the mythologies of the Erza and Moksha peoples which, although with similarities and common traits, is still not a composite of parts, not a whole.

Translated by Kait Realo.

Comments

¹ *Pur'ginepaz* may have been a primordial Finno-Ugric deity (Kuusi 1993: 144).

² *Nishkepez* was a culture hero who taught mankind to work. In mythic songs *Nishkepez* sits on an oak tree, handing out human fate and fortune.

³ Smirnov has doubted in the authenticity of this name, calling it the plagiarism of classical epics and dubious (Smirnov 1896: 286). Nevertheless, quite recently an account concerning *Ange Patiai* was recorded from the Moksha of the Kovylnan district.

However, the Teriukhans believed that *Ange Patiai* poured life to the Earth in the form of dew, rain, snow and sheet-lightning (Melnikov 1981: 81).

⁴ Numerous Mordvin songs and legends contain the motif of a duck who dives for sand or soil. Various archaeological findings (duck-shaped or webfoot bronze pendants) and ornaments (bird-shaped utensils, etc.) testify to the significance of waterfowl in the Finno-Ugric worldview.

⁵ The reference to the fish who support the Earth and who are protected by Water Mother *Ved'ava* (mdE&M) suggests that the fish served as a totem, a tribal emblem, whose catch was prohibited at a certain period (Maskaev 1964: 273).

⁶ More recent mythology explains all such natural disasters with god's punishment for sins and for violating the order and rules established by the ancestors.

⁷ Such belief accounts must be of more recent origin, since *Skai* is there mentioned together with a mythical Orthodox figure *Ioann Predtech*.

⁸ The Moksha distinguished also *menel' tekshi* 'the centre of heaven' and *menel' ezha* 'the highest point' (Harva 1952: 140).

⁹ *Pur'ginepaz* could punish and kill those who broke the rules with stone arrows, or the so-called thunder stones (mdE *purigine kev*, mdM *atiam kev*).

¹⁰ 1 archinne = 28 inches, or 0.71 metres.

Abbreviations

mdE = Erzan language.

mdM = Mokshan language.

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