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**ANTINOMIAN CONCEPTS OF REPRODUCTION AND DEATH IN  
ARCHAIC CONSCIOUSNESS OF CAUCASIAN PEOPLES**

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*Abstract*

In the modern world, when globalization processes lead to the erosion of cultural boundaries, blurring unique elements of ethnic cultures, there is a need to appeal to the basic spiritual values of the people of the Caucasus, trapped in the mythological picture of the world.

In our opinion the fixation of the archaic layer of ethnic consciousness will help to preserve the diversity of world cultural heritage. Traditional cultural stereotypes are lost in an increasingly globalizing world. Against the background of multicultural interaction, the oppositional fields of cultural rejection, negative attitude and confrontation are created. Modern challenges require an answer about the origin of the unity and diversity of ethno-cultural approaches to the most important questions about the meaning of birth and departure from life. The search of this meaning are lost and simplified in everyday routine. They create a pattern of a myth full of hidden and explicit symbols that require decoding. This article touches upon the issue of the North Caucasian mythological texts that connect the ideas of birth and dying. Folklore texts are analyzed in conjunction with documentary historical and ethnographic sources. In the process of the investigation of myth, the persistent interrelation of the acts of death and birth, the reproduction of a new life, is traced. At the same time, there is a paradoxical dependence of birth on the death preceding it. The philosophical semantics of myth is literally transferred to ritual cultural practice, which confirms the dual nature of death and life.

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**Keywords:** Myth, North Caucasian, procreational traditions, death, funeral ritualism, archaic consciousness.



## **1. Introduction**

The people of the North Caucasus created a unique culture. Belonging to various linguistic families (Caucasian, Indo-European and Altai) and having significant differences in the economy and lifestyle, they, nevertheless, became the authors of the “Narty” all-Caucasian myth-epic complex, which presents an integral trans-ethnic phenomenon. On the other hand, the epic appears in a complex, variable form: Adyghe, Abkhazian, Ossetic, Chechen, Abazin, Balkar-Karachayev and a number of other editions, which reflect the mental characteristics of every nation. Representing unity variety, the epos “Narty” has a very ancient origin (going back to the substrate originating in the era of at least the new Stone Age) and retains archaic layers of consciousness, which allows historical reconstruction. As well as other mythical epic complexes, the epic “Narty” is an expression of the archaic worldview, which is based on the basic, substantial categories of human consciousness. The most important of these are the categories of life, death, and birth.

The opposition of the most important categories of human existence: life and death in traditional culture of the people of the Caucasus is perceived not as a fatal conflict, but in a dialectical unity, denoting a temporary spiral. The traditional perception of time as a kind of circle, rather than a linear segment, leads to the understanding of relict ethnographic phenomena in the traditions of the people of the Caucasus, combining the concepts of birth and death.

Death is the End and the Beginning. Therefore, with all the philosophical dimensions of the categories of life and death, their biologism is not completely lost. On the contrary, peoples and cultures aspire to biological compensation of members of the clan / ethnic collective. The analysis and interpretation of folklore texts and correlated narrative written sources that uniquely link the end and the beginning of life cycle is important in the context of studying everyday reproductive practices, traditional cultural attitudes towards the fact of death. The topic of the correlation of life and death, birth and dying should be studied with the help of integrated approach. The tasks set by the authors of the article consist in the intention to supplement this complex with the study of myth and ethnographic plots, which were previously on the sidelines of research attention.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Traditional cultural stereotypes are lost in an increasingly globalizing world. Against the background of multicultural interaction, the oppositional fields of cultural rejection, negative attitude and confrontation are created. Modern challenges require an answer about the origin of the unity and diversity of ethno-cultural approaches to the most important questions about the meaning of birth and departure from life, the reproduction of human race. The search for this meaning is lost, simplified in everyday routine or they create an altiloquent pattern of a myth full of hidden and explicit symbols that require decoding.

## **3. Research Questions**

The subject of the research is the existence of the categories of “birth” and “death” in the mythological picture of the world of traditional Caucasian society.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Death is the End and the Beginning at the same time. Therefore, with all the philosophical dimensions of the categories of life and death, their biologism is not completely lost. On the contrary, peoples and cultures aspire to biological compensation of members of the clan / ethnic collective. In the context of the investigation of everyday reproductive practices, traditional cultural attitudes towards the fact of death, it is important to analyze and interpret folklore texts and correlated narrative written sources that uniquely connect the end and the beginning of life cycle.

The topic of the interconnection of life and death, birth and dying should be studied with the help of integrated approach. The goal set by the authors of the article is to supplement this complex with research on myth and ethnographic plots which previously were unstudied.

#### **5. Research Methods**

In the modern era, when globalization processes lead to the blurring of cultural boundaries and unique elements of ethnic cultures, there is a need to appeal to the basic spiritual values of the peoples of the Caucasus, concluded in the mythological picture of the world. In our opinion the fixation of the archaic layer of ethnic consciousness will help to preserve the diversity of world cultural heritage. Traditional cultural stereotypes are lost in an increasingly globalizing world. Against the background of multicultural interaction, the oppositional fields of cultural rejection, negative attitude and confrontation are created.

Modern challenges require an answer about the origin of the unity and diversity of ethnocultural approaches to the most important questions about the meaning of birth and departure of life, the reproduction of human race. The search for this meaning is lost, simplified in everyday routine or they create an altiloquent pattern of a myth full of hidden and explicit symbols that require decoding. This article touches upon the issue of the North Caucasian mythological texts that connect the ideas of birth and dying, of the continuity of life and death. Research focuses on plots that were previously skeptically and euphemistically ignored in Caucasian studies due to moral mental limitations.

Folklore texts are analyzed in conjunction with documentary historical and ethnographic sources. The most productive was the use of the phenomenological approach, the use of structural and functional analysis, with emphasis on the principle of a rich description of ritual behavior. In the process of the investigation of myth, the persistent interrelation of the acts of death and birth, along with the reproduction of a new life is noticed. At the same time, there is a paradoxical dependence of birth on the death preceding it. The philosophical semantics of myth is literally transferred to ritual cultural practice, which confirms the dual nature of death and life.

The article considers several mythological plots related to the reproductive practices (acts) of cultural heroes of the Caucasian Nart epic, some of which are confirmed in the ethnographic descriptions of foreigners about the "strange and funny rituals of the natives". The first and most detailed of the sources of a narrative nature are notes of an Italian traveler of the XV century Giorgio Interiano about sikhs - the ancestors of a number of North Caucasian peoples (Adygei, Kabardians, Circassians). The evidence of these notes is consistent with the inner life of the "kingdom of the Huns" in the Caucasus at the end of the 7th century, from the life of Bishop Israel, preserved in the work of Movzes Kagankatvatsi (Klyashtorny &

Savinov, 2005). “The notes on the journey to the Volga” by A. Ibn-Fadlan were drawn from a number of sources confirming our theses.

The description of the connection between reproduction and death through myth and ritual requires the transfer of attention from the external characteristics of the object of study to the study and description of a Caucasian woman as an active and creative subject of sense-generation (Kumakhova, 2015). Here it seems productive to use the phenomenological approach, the beginning of which was laid by E. Husserl, involving the transfer of attention from external facts to phenomena, functions of consciousness and myths passed through it. The object of study should be seen as it is presented within the semantic limits of a particular culture. The use of this approach allows forming an idea of the horizon of everyday life, the picture of the world of a Caucasian woman and the place of such extreme categories as life, birth and death in her life.

In order to solve the problems set in this article, it seems productive to isolate the system of life circle from historical reality and identify its system-forming features: birth - initiation - marriage - death - birth. Structural analysis, the principles of which were developed by C. Lévi-Strauss, allows considering the myths associated with birth and death as a logical structure, developing according to our own laws, and identifying the most important binary opposition of the object of study (birth-death) and tracing the mechanism for resolving this fundamental contradiction in ritual practices.

Functional analysis allows revealing the relations between mythological ideas and ritual practices and showing the place of the categories of birth and death in a general cultural context. This direction of research involves the use of the principle of a rich description of ritual behavior developed by K. Geertz (Geertz, 1973), which presents the explanation not only of the behavior, but also of the context, meaning of a ritual, understandable to others.

In this article, in accordance with the theory of V. Turner (Turner, 1983), ritual practices are considered as a language whose elementary categories are presented by symbols constructed by myths. The research orientation to the ritual is presented by practical embodiment of the system of meanings created by a person that he attaches to his actions and to himself. It makes it possible to consider mythical ideas and everyday ritual practices associated with reproduction and death as a system significant and signified in terms proposed by R. Barthes, where the myth is interpreted as meaning and ritual is interpreted as a form of its expression. In order to understand the external manifestations of ritual practices in accordance with the hypothesis of the ritual form of T. Lawson and R. McCauley, (Lawson, & McCauley, 1990), the deep structures that give rise to the rules of ritual are revealed. A ritual is seen as the representation system of an action that realizes the expectations of people in relation to typical structural roles.

## **6. Findings**

In the majority of works devoted to the topic “Life - Death”, a clear demographic approach is traced to the factors affecting fertility, the choice of a marriage partner, and the norms of procreative behavior typical of different gender, age, and class strata. Another aspect of the considered plots is a philosophical view, which represents a world outlook on the problems set in the research (Shenkao, 2011). The breakthrough in the study of the circle of life was carried out by representatives of the school of Annals F. Aries, A.Ya. Gurevich, Yu.L. Bessmertny (Bessmertny, 1991) and others.

The issues of reproductive behavior, motherhood, fatherhood, the gender aspect of traditional and professional education were the subject of an interdisciplinary discussion with more than 300 participating researchers at the conference of «The Association for Women in Slavic Studies» in 2016 (Pushkareva, Mitsyuk, 2016; Pushkareva & Troshina, 2018).

However, the reproductive practices in connection with the mental attitude to death as a cultural phenomenon did not become the subject of special studies, especially in the context of the archaic consciousness of peoples. At the same time, in the works of ethnographers-specialists in Caucasian studies, the appeal to the problems of life / death was not always directly associated with incidents of mythological reproduction, almost always explicitly or covertly preceded by the event of death (Bgazhnokov, 1999; Nalchikova, 2013; Lugovoy, 2013; Chibirov, 2016; Besolova, 2017).

The exception is the scientific works of M.A. Tekueva, which initiated the discussion of previously silenced plots about the relationship between the sexes, female sexuality and reproductive acts, including in the mythological text and historical sources (Tekueva, 2006). Therefore, the current topic and the interpretation of a number of ethnographic evidences devoted to exotic reproductive rituals, paradoxically related to the act of death, is essentially new and controversial discussion, requiring further.

The example of the connection between mythological structures and ritual practices is the Ossetic myth about Dzerassae. Dying, Dzerassae asked her sons to guard her crypt for three nights, as she was afraid that the divine Uastyrdzhi would get the opportunity to engage in sexual intercourse with her insensible body. On the third night, Uastyrdzhi appeared in the crypt of Dzerassae and revived her with his vital force, striking her with his magic felt lash. Having satisfied his desire, Uastyrdzhi again struck her with his magic felt lash, and life again left the body of Dzerassae. A year later, the dead Dzerassae gave birth to Shatana, who bore the title of mother of all narts. The womb of death becomes the womb of life.

It is remarkable that on the third night Uastyrdzhi, appearing in the crypt of Dzerassae sent his horse and his first. A year later, dead Dzerassae gave birth to a foal, Harfan, the “the eldest of horses,” and a puppy Silam, the “the eldest of dogs”. The birth-death opposition is associated with a mythological rethinking and explanation of domestication. The category of “life” turns out to be associated not only with birth, but also with the need to provide primary vital needs, which is impossible in the mythological consciousness without domestic animals and, more broadly, without the creation of a life support system. The myth fixes the most important twist in the economic life of an archaic person.

The semantic deconstruction of mythical episode allows two important conclusions to be drawn: first, the twist of the plot in this narrative reconciles the binary opposition of the most important categories of human existence; secondly, it demonstrates the greater ontological status of life, its superiority / overcoming death.

One of the most vivid myths of the Adyghe version of the Nart epic is the myth about Adiyukh. With the help of shining hands, she lit up the way to home for her husband, who overtook the stolen herds of horses. The night, lighted up by the miraculous hands of Adijuh, personifies the mysterious power of the protective mother's womb. Night is secret knowledge, protection of the beloved from enemies, the promise of love pleasure. But the other side of this secret knowledge is death. The drama is that the husband did not recognize her value in his life and died, deprived of the help of his “light hand” wife.

The culmination comes after the burial of her husband and the meet of Adiyukh with the main hero of the epic - Sosruko. Sosruko meets Adiyukh, who mourns her husband on the burial mound, and in a chivalrous manner offers his help. She refuses, and Sosruko swims cross a river Psyzh, not bothering to search for a shallow. Surprised by his courage, and wanting to test the hero, the woman sends bad weather to Sosruko. Then he returns, not out of fear of the storm, but worrying about the safety of Adiyukh. This concern contrasts with the consumer egoism and the sadistic attitude towards her on the part of her deceased husband.

The attention of Sosruko found a response in the soul of Adiyukh and prepared the subsequent erotic turn of the plot. Hiding from the bad weather under the burqa on the mound, they succumbed to mutual attraction that ended with a sexual shock for both: Sosruko realized that Adiyukh saved her innocence in marriage; she also had experienced the unfamiliar joys of physical love. Sosruko regarded the attitude of her husband to Adiyukh as violence: “lei kyuihashch” (Adyghe language).

Here, the sexual intercourse in such conditions and form has a sacred meaning. Avoiding a direct collision of life and death, the myth replaces this opposition, reducing its severity, replacing the opposition with a less conflicting one. This is exactly what Lévi-Strauss called bricolage.

For the completeness and clarity of perception, the picture of Sosruko and Adiyukh’s meeting was supplemented by another important mythological element: after the rain that had poured during their sexual intercourse, everything turned green except for the burial mound, under which the man who was unworthy about his wife was buried. This metaphor enhances the meaning of the myth: the renewal of nature is demonstrated, the mortal space is limited to the burial place of the husband and the triumph of the vital force that fills the rest of the space. According to Georges Bataille, the sexuality implies death, “not only on the assumption that the newcomer presents a continuation and replaces the departed, but also because sexuality changes the very life of the breeding creature”.

The other meaning of mythological text in a frank compensatory function is seen in the following: the death of one character is overcome by the birth of a new life.

The confirmation of the mythological plot can be found in historical ethnography. Giorgio Interiano, the author of the first monograph on Circassia, published in Venice in 1502, has a description of one shocking funeral rite, which he observed among the Sykhs - Circassians during the burial of the most significant people. A girl of twelve or fourteen years was forced to sit on the hide of an ox that had just been killed near a freshly buried grave mound. And the strongest or bravest young man tried to deprive her of virginity under his burka. Then her clothes with blood stains were shown to the participants of funerals. The analogy of this kind of sacrifice with the myth is complete: the grave mound as a scene of action, a virgin and depriving her of innocence by the best of young people under the burqa. Ritual sex at the grave is filled here with the magical and visual meaning of the victory of life over death.

This is a deeply religious eroticism, reminiscent of the deep connection between death and Eros, which Georges Bataille called “the complicity of the tragic, based on death - with sensuality and laugh”.

The described epic plots, which received tremendous historical and ethnographic evidence, lead to the understanding that the logic of myth is expressed in ritual practices and gives rise to specific rules of ritual. The senses mentioned above found expression not only in the notes of Interiano, but also in earlier sources. Thus, for example, in the work of Movzes Kagankatvatsi, the evidence of the Christian missionary

Israel of the 7th century is preserved, recording the “demonic customs” of some nomads, whom he calls “Caucasian Huns”, who during the funeral indulged in demonstrative grief: weeping and ritual mutilation, accompanying the death of a kinsman with horse racing and ritual erotic games (“indulged in debauchery”) (Klyashtorny, & Savinov, 2005).

The evidence of the universality of the studied logical structures of myth is presented by descriptions scattered across various cultural and historical sources of such ethnographic facts. The researcher of ancient steppe civilizations S.G. Klyashtorny gives a similar Chinese source about the funeral of a noble Turk in the 6th century: “the relatives of the deceased person kill sacrificial animals, incise their cheeks as a sign of grief, and then arrange horse races and games for young men and women dressed in the best clothes. Games are erotic in nature, and after them the parents of young people arrange marriages” (Klyashtorny, & Savinov, 2005).

Arabian traveler of the 10th century Ibn-Fadlan left memories of his journey to the Volga lands as a part of the embassy. In the Volga Bulgaria, he observed the merchants-russes, described their lifestyle, appearance and beliefs. But most of all he was struck by the funeral rite, accompanied by ritual sexual abuse of a girl aimed to accompany the deceased into another world.

The archaic consciousness tries to overcome the hopelessness of death by transporting the fetus of life into a new body, with the sexual determinations losing their meaning. Thus, in the Narta myth of Khamytsa, his wife was forced to return to her parents in the underwater / underworld. The departure of his wife - should be symbolically interpreted as death. Khamyts's loss of his wife was compensated by accepting her pregnancy and bearing their fetus between shoulder blades.

The interconnection of the life-death opposition parts is also reflected in the Chechen archaic tradition with regard to the girls-firstborn (mehkari), who are charged with the performance of certain male functions. There is a gender transfer of the status of the eldest son on them. The semantic aspects of this transfer find the external expression in behavior: hair cut at the back of the head (кӀес), wearing men's underwear and headgear, and also a bandage on the chest, which allows carrying a weapon (силгӀа). In the context of this article, it is important that the preparation for the performance of traditional women's duties for her included the need to commit the killing of enemies. Only this act allowed the girl to marry and become a mother, and therefore fulfill her reproductive function.

## 7. Conclusion

The universal meaning of the concepts of “life” and “death” exists in mythological texts in the form of wandering plots. This is confirmed by the description of relic rituals that are rooted in the deep structures of consciousness. Specific mythological constructs offer certain rules of behavior, sanction rites, rationalize and justify social attitudes.

The concepts with opposite meanings of “birth - death” are equally characteristic of human existence. It is typical of mythological consciousness to reconcile fundamental contradictions, creating constructs in which opposites are synthesized, forming dialectically-logical structures. These structures are reflected in ritual practice, and they are not amenable to understanding without the investigation of logical-symbolic series of rituals.

Caucasian folklore emphasizes the direct relationship between death and reproduction, confirmed by diverse historical sources - the view of foreign cultural observers. Death is the womb of creation and bearing of a new life - it multiplies the population, ensuring the continuity of being and creating confidence in the life perspective. In the birth-death opposition system, the myth is a logical-semantic structure that helps a person cope with the insoluble death and manifests a model of ideal cosmic equilibrium, and ritual becomes a practice that realizes the continuous reproduction of the sacred order of things.

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