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BIRD IMAGES IN OSSETIAN NARTIADA

Madina Darchieva (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) V.I. Abaev, North-Ossetian Institute for Humanitarian and Social Studies – Branch of Vladikavkaz Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vladikavkaz, Russia, kusaevaz@mail.ru

Abstract

In the Narts epic of the Ossetians one of the most interesting cultural codes for a researcher is the zoomorphic code, within which it is advisable to consider ornithomorphic symbols since the main artistic images are associated with the nature surrounding the creator and performer of the epic. The tradition of using zoomorphic images originates in the culture of the Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans is clearly represented in the so-called ‘animal style’ and has a logical continuation in the artistic culture including folklore of their descendants, i.e. the Ossetians. Folklore texts preserve the conceptual ideas of people about the external environment. Therefore, zoomorphic images are part of ethnic ideas about the surrounding world. The ornithomorphic symbolism within the framework of the Ossetian epic the Narts has its own specific features. Several birds stand out against general background, which are widely represented in the texts. Some others birds appear less often, but they all have typical features that correspond to folk ideas. The descriptions of the idealized picture of the world that are typical for epic texts along with the images of animals contain images of birds. The images of an eagle and a swallow are presented brighter than the others, an owl, a dove, a raven, a chicken, a turkey, a wagtail and others are less common. The characteristics of the underlying ornithomorphic images are bipolar.

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1. Introduction

The biomorphic culture code is one of the basic culture codes, which is divided into zoomorphic and phytomorphic. It is organically built into the national folklore text and preserves the mythological representations of one or another ethnic group forming an adjacent plane with the concept of an ethnic cultural code. As you know, mythological thinking corresponds to an associative and figurative logic that tends to syncreticism and a holistic perception of the world.

2. Problem Statement

Taking into account the properties of the folklore text, one should note the importance of the Nartiada for the Ossetian linguoculture as a text that concentrates cultural meanings (Besolova & Abaeva, 2020). Despite the increased interest of the humanities in the Narts epic, the images of animals remain out of sight of researchers. According to Toporov (2010), the role of animals in folklore and myths is exceptionally great and corresponds to that mythopoetic and early historical stage of human development, when animals were not yet distinctly separated from the ancient community. The zoomorphic code of culture presupposes the consideration of images of birds and ornithomorphic symbols among other things.

3. Research Questions

It was Abaev (1990) who drew attention to the connection of the Narts with nature (birds, animals and plants). According to his apt remark the three worlds (gods, people and nature), which eventually become estranged, breathe another life and understand each other's language in the time of the Narts. The scientist emphasized the closeness and mutual understanding between the Narts and nature highlighting the following motives: Atsamaz's play on the flute and its influence on the animals, birds and plants around him; Soslan's conversation with trees during his battle with the wheel of Balsag; his conversation with birds and beasts after the defeat; the importance of the image of the swallow in the Nartiada.

1. Sh.F. Jykkayty wrote about zoomorphic images of a horse, deer, fox, swallow, ant in Ossetian folklore in the context of the Indo-European cultural tradition and in a symbolic way.
2. The archetype of the eagle in Ossetian folklore is considered by Takazov (2017). The author connects the image of the eagle with the threefold system of the Ossetian religious and mythological worldview, designating it as a zoomorphic image of God or Uastyrdzhi. In addition, Takazov (2017) notes the semantic similarity of the image of an eagle in Ossetian folklore to the images of an eagle/griffin in the Scythian animal style (Chairkina, 2013; Cheremisin, 2009).

4. Purpose of the Study

The objective of the work is to determine the ornithomorphic symbolism and mythological representations underlying the image of a bird in Ossetian folklore based on the material of the epic the Narts.

5. Research Methods

When carrying out the research, both structural and semantic methods were used to study a folklore text with the elements of comparison and contrast. Thee attention was paid to identifying the archetypal and symbolic components.

6. Findings

The description of the ideal, harmonious picture of the world in the Nart epic is mostly associated with the image of Atsamaz and is based on the biomorphic culture code. Birds occupy a certain place here (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2007). *Marġ* (plural *mærġtæ*) is a bird, wilds: Generalizing lexeme for bird designation in the Ossetian language. The world order established by means of music is a traditional motive for folklore. Another series of plots, where the orderliness and harmony are present are the plots about the marriage of the Nart heroes (the wedding of Bora and the niece of God). General harmony is achieved during the performance of the *Simd* dance by the Narts (Legends about the Narts, 1989).

One of the characteristics of an epic space is security (Darchieva, 2017). In the case when the Nart heroes go on campaigns of conquest, entering the alien space, we are talking about inaccessibility and it is expressed in various phraseological combinations with the lexeme *tsiu* (a bird): ‘*tsiu dær næ bataekhdzæn*’ (and the bird will not fly up), ‘*Tsiuataehæg dær kynnæ ’rbakhiza*. So that even a flying bird does not cross (literally – does not enter) the gate’ (Legends about the Narts, 1989).

As you know, the **motive of transformation** of an epic hero into a bird or an animal is a characteristic of the epic. The Nart Syrdon has the ability to turn into a bird. By cunningly depriving *uaig* of his only eye, he turns into a bird and flies out of the cave when the blind *uaig* tries to deal with him (Legends about the Narts, 1989). In the South Ossetian Kadag he turns into a **wagtail** and flies out through the chimney to avoid the wrath of Batyradz who wants to take a revenge for Wryzmæg (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2005). Syrdon turns into a bird and flies to the Nart *nykhas* to inform Soslan that the Aldar and his son are going to carry off his flocks (Legends about the Narts, 1989). Sirdon turns into a small bird (it is not indicated which bird specifically) since it is important for him, in one case, to avoid reprisals, in the other, to move in space. But the inhabitants of heaven turn into a certain bird, i.e. an eagle.

The main bird in Ossetian folklore is the **white-headed black eagle**. Uatsilla turns to it helping Albeg’s son to get a bride (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2010). In another version of this Kadag, the celestial Uastyrdzhi turns into an eagle (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2010). He also turns Margus into a giant eagle (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2010). The eagle is a symbol of heavenly power, fire and immortality, ‘one of the most common animals – symbol of the gods and their messenger in the mythologies of various peoples of the world’ (Myths of the peoples of the world, 1992). In Slavic mythology – the bird of God, the lord of the sky and the king of birds, among the southern Slavs it performs the functions of a mediator freely ascending into the sky and descending into the underworld. This explains the ambivalence of the image: The eagle is worshiped, but at the same time it akin to an unclean bird of prey (Slav antiquity, 2004). The Nart Batyradz, proving his superiority goes in search of a bride. Having crossed the sea, the hero finds himself in darkness: A huge black eagle flies over him; the ground is shaken by the flapping of its wings.

Batyradz fired a steel arrow from his bow and prayed ‘Let this arrow go up and fall down a hundred’ (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2005). And so it happened: A hundred arrows pierced the eagle. The huge roc is found in medieval Arab folklore. It is able to hold an elephant in its claws. In most descriptions it has white plumage.

A special role is assigned to the eagle in the plot about the accidental murder of his son by Wryzmæg. Nart left the feast, an eagle rushed from the sky (at the behest of Huytsau) and thrust its claws into him. He picked up Wryzmæg and carried him to a stone in the middle of the sea. In another example the place where the eagle appeared – ‘*bærzon xox Qivaly ainægæj*’ (from a high mountain, from the Qival cliff) is specified, and the bird itself is called a cunning eagle, a white falcon. The bird disappears as suddenly as it appears (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2002). In another Kadag the bird is called the storyteller, a clawed falcon, a cunning eagle, and as a result, the single word *wari-tsergæs* (falcon-eagle). Petr Chervinsky considers the connection of the eagle with the sea and, in general, with water, a common Indo-European mythological motive reflected in the archaic types of hydronymic and toponymic names in various Indo-European traditions (Chervinsky, 2010). The cult of water, which has real ethnographic outlines in the Ossetian ethnographic tradition is described by Kusaeva (2016).

The eagle carrying the hero is also found in the Kadag How Sozryko Brought Aguna from the Kingdom of the Dead (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004). Regarding this plot, Takazov (2017) believes that the victory of Nart over the bird and the cutting off of the eagle’s wings brings the Ossetian text closer to the ancient Mesopotamian epic, where the gods must defeat the lion-headed sacred eagle Anzu, breaking off his wings (Berezkin, 2012). In various genres of Ossetian folklore (more often legends and oral stories) the motive of the abduction of a small child by an eagle is encountered, and this is not surprising, since such cases took place in the real life of mountain peoples. In the Nart epic, this motive is also associated with the image of Soslan and is characteristic of the plot about Soslan’s release of Shatana from the kingdom of the dead. Hurrying to help Shatana, Soslan saw an eagle carrying a child in its claws. The hero shot an eagle and returned the child to his mother (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004). Shatana (*khaertsyga*) asks the hawk to inform Soslan that Narts are going to destroy her, the bird refuses, recalling how Soslan chased it away (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2002).

Abaev (1990) noted that the favorite for the Nartiada are paired combinations: paired images, paired epithets and comparisons. One example was translated by him as ‘the cry of an eagle and the cry of a falcon’. This combination has different options. It is more often used in relation to the image of Soslan/Sozryko. As follows from the texts such a cry comes from a hero-rider driving herds, obviously for better organization, as it is terrifying for the animals. In the South Ossetian Kadag such a cry is emitted by Batyradz, saving Wryzmæg (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2005). In campaigns of conquest the Narts steal numerous herds from their enemies. Usually, herds are guarded by the mythological animals and birds, among which is an eagle with an iron beak or a stone eagle. Let us note that in Russian mythology there is a bird with an iron beak and copper claws that lives on Buyan Island – a gagana. It guards the wonderful Alaty stone, which contains sacred letters and has miraculous healing properties.

Another bird of cult significance in the Nartiada is a swallow. Jykkaity (2009) wrote about this mythological image. Let us note some of the storylines where the swallow appears. The bird plays the role of a messenger in the epic, a link between the Narts and the inhabitants of heaven, which speaks of

its mediator functions (Legends about the Narts, 1989). The swallow flies as a messenger from Soslan (they communicate in the Khatiag language), struck by the wheel of Malsag (Baltsag). To make a comparison, in the Karachai-Balkarian epos a dove is the messenger of the death of Sosuruk (Narts, 1994). The swallow in the epic also acts as an assistant. Bolatbarzai fought with gumirs. At that time his brother's widow called the swallow and handed it her hair. Bolatbarzai, having wrapped a hair around his little finger, became three times stronger and easily defeated the gumirs (Legends about the Narts, 1989). In the Digor Kadag, Shatana asks the swallow to fly to Soslan and inform him that the sleds/Narts want to kill her. Swallow agrees, remembering how Shatana saved her chicks from a cat. Doubting that Soslan would believe the words of the swallow, Shatana hung her ring around its neck (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004). It is believed that the white breast of the swallow is a mark from the Shatana ring. Britaeva considered Ossetian literary tales containing an etiological myth and explaining various external behavioral characteristics of animals and birds (Britaeva, 2019).

Sometimes the function of a messenger is performed by a dove in the epic. When the sleds/Narts decided to kill Wryzmæg he took his pet pigeon with him to kuvd and warned Shatana that in case of danger he would release it (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2002; Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004). In the version of the Kadag about the death of Sozyryko the hero sends a dove to the Narts with a fragment of his knife as evidence (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004).

Three doves, which personify strength, faith/hope and soul (*tykhy, nyfsy, udy bælættæ*) of the enemy of the Narts, the son of Tara Bibits, are in the box that his hawk brings to Soslan (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004). It is not possible to defeat the enemy by force, therefore the Nart beats the pigeons depriving the enemy of life. Donbettyr's daughters in the guise of doves fly to Bor's garden and feast on wonderful apples (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2002). *Huytsauy khæræfyrt* who is the niece of God turns into a dove (Legends about the Narts, 1989).

The bipolar characteristics of birds are not uncommon in the Nart epic. The **owl/eagle owl** is also endowed with positive and negative traits. An owl flies to the dying Sosryko. The hero offers to taste his flesh, but the owl refuses. Then the Nart pronounces a wish 'May you see the way I do!' (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004). This text was published in translation into Russian in 1871, the original has not survived so it is difficult to say which lexeme is used for the name of the owl. In the Ossetian language *uyg* is an owl a lexeme of onomatopoeic nature; the same is *ololi* – owl. In the dictionary at the end of the edition of the Legends about the Narts (1989) it is indicated that *ololi* is a forest bird, smaller than a hawk which makes a terrible cry at night. Other names are also given: *khuyrymsiu* and *mysyrykhug*. The first is from the addition of *huyrym* (naive; stupid, stupid) + *tsiu* (a bird) and the second is a compound of *Mysyr* (Egypt) + *khug* (a cow). In the Kadag about how the one-eyed *uaig* kidnapped Shatana, following the advice of his horse *Batyradz* crosses the impenetrable forest and cuts in two the head of the first owl that looked out of the thicket of the forest (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2012).

The only text contains *xabarxæssæg xalon*, i.e. the messenger raven, the bird of Barastyr, the lord of the kingdom of the dead. Barastyr forbids Soslan to return home, because he killed the raven at the gates of the kingdom of the dead; he was destined for a place in hell (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004). The raven informs the hunting Wryzmæg about the death of his son (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2005). Adiyeva et al. (2014) write about the role of the dialogue in national folklore. The poetic formula '*syntkh'ergængg æmæ*

khalonuasæg’, which is found mainly in Digor texts, means ‘to communicate bad news’ (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2004). In the mythological consciousness of Ossetians, the idea of a raven croaking as a harbinger of misfortune is really well-established. A person who heard the raven says the following ‘*Syzgærin khælæsæy fæuas, khorz habærttæ hæssæg u!* (“Sing in a golden voice, be a herald of good events!”), which makes the impact of bad news less strong heralded by the bird’s cry. For comparison, in the Karachay-Balkarian version of the epic the black raven foreshadows a happy road (Narts, 1994).

The poultry **chicken** and **turkey** also appear in the Nart epic. The chicken, first of all, in connection with the definition of the epic time: *kærkuasæn* is the time when the roosters crow. To say more, there are many such examples in the epic. It is of great interest that in the Kadags about Nards and uaigs, chickens and roosters are usually gigantic. Syrdon and Wryzmæg who ended up in the dwelling of a blind uaig could not finish the chicken wing (Legends about the Narts, 1989).

The Ossetian epic the Narts contains the Kadags about the appearance of sacred ritual drink *bægæny*, where the bird plays an important role. Due to fish fact Shatana understands the effect of hops: The sparrow that ate it, got drunk and fell from the branch (Narts kaddzhytæ, 2002; Legends about the Narts, 1989).

7. Conclusion

The ornithomorphic symbolism contributes to the disclosure of the zoomorphic code of the culture in the Ossetian Nartiada. The images of birds are associated with the mythological representations of the Ossetians. *Urssær sau tsærgys* (white-headed black eagle) and *zærvatykk* (a swallow) play a key role. Birds (falcon, hawk, raven, owl/eagle owl, wagtail, pigeon) have bipolar characteristics. Their images are revealed in the interaction with epic heroes. The mythology of the image of a bird is manifested in the motives of werewolf and in the presence of mythological birds in the epic (an eagle with an iron beak, a stone eagle), as well as in the plot development. Stable combinations with the components of *marg*, *tsiu* are used to convey the meanings of inaccessibility, security, desolation, as well as to indicate the accuracy of the hunter, etc. Meanwhile, there remain questions related to the image of a bird in the Nartiada (correlation with the human soul, sleep and a bird, the motive for playing Alshee) that require further clarification and study.

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