

## PHILOLOGY

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### THE NART EPOS OF THE BALKARS AND KARACHAYS

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#### Abstract

This paper considers the Nart epic of the Karachays and Balkars, that presents one of the basic national versions of the Caucasian-wide entire Nartiade.

As the result of the close economic, political and cultural relations built up over the centuries between the Caucasus peoples, there is much in common in the diverse versions of the Nartiad. But with all their closeness, among each of the peoples of the Caucasus the Nart legends, in respect of their content and current cultural background, form, poetic style, style, and manner of performance, carry the traits of their national folkloric traditions and national colouring. So, particularly in the Balkaro-Karachay version, the Caucasus and local individual epic traditions harmonise with the epic traditions of the Turko-Mongolian peoples.

**Keywords:** the Nart songs and tales, large and small cycles, Teyri, the motif of a divine and miraculous birth.

Among the Balkars and Karachays, as also among other peoples who are bearers of the Nartiad, the legends consist of a series of large and small cycles. Each cycle is a group of small (in bulk) legends and songs about the appearance on the earth of the Nart tribe; about the various stages and events of the epic life of the heroes (birth, heroic childhood, the first exploit, marriage, the struggle with mythical monsters, with a blood enemy, etc.).

One of the cycles is formed of a series of legends that are grouped around the name of Nart heroes according to a biographical principle (Yoryuzmek and Satanay and others), others are according to a genealogical

one (Debet – Alaugan – Karashauay; Achey – Achemez, the son of Achey, Byodene – Rachikau).

The small cycles are composed of legends and songs about Nart heroes with names linked to a small collection of tale subjects and whose epic 'biographies' are not developed in detail.

Each cycle represents a sufficiently independent and complete group of legends, however all of the cycles are mutually linked (and sometimes even mutually dependent on each other). As a whole, the Balkaro-Karachay version of the Nartiad is a compositionally developed and complete epos: in it is reconstructed the life of the Nart tribe from its appearance on earth until its destruction or resettlement in heaven and underground world. S.-A.Urusbiev in his foreword wrote: "The legends about the Narts appear at first sight not to have among them anything in common, but on a closer examination it is impossible not to notice the internal links between them, as if between the parts of a single epic poem" [ 14, VIII ].

According to the Balkaro-Karachay legends, the creation of the world and of the Narts is connected with the activity of the gods: Teyri of the Earth, Teyri of the Sun and Teyri of the Sky, who take a very active part in the fate of the Nart heroes.

In the legend "Teyri and the Narts" it is said: "Teyri of the Sun created the sun, Teyri of the Earth created the earth. The third thing to be created was the sea. When the sky and the earth were created, the people were created between them" [ 13, 117].

In the legend "About the first Nart Debet the Golden" [8, 304-305], in which there is a detailed description of the epoch of the 'first creation', the god creates from part of his body not only the universe but also the first man, the Nart blacksmith Debet. And in the epic text "Teyri", the Narts themselves speak about their divine origin:

Your blood flows in the Narts, Teyri,

The Narts are a part of your flesh. [ 8, 582 ].

Describing the Balkaro-Karachay Nart heroes, S.-A.Urusbiev wrote: "The Narts were a people of enormous height and immense strength, a people hardened in the endurance of difficulties and deprivations. They spent their life mainly in the search for dangers and adventures, in raids for the purpose of booty, and also in special journeys, called 'jortuuuls'... Everything that was obtained without special difficulty, not connected with dangers, was disagreeable to them... they searched for adventures such that they would be able to display their daring and strength to its full extent... At times that were free from jortuuuls, the Narts would organise amusement gatherings, in which they would give themselves over to bogatyr-type games and dances" [ 14, II].

The Narts were the embodiment of heroism and manliness. "They did not know what fear was, and they did not fear death", it is said in the legend "The birth of Sosuruk". "The one who died in battle with an enemy, they used

to consider as a relative of Teyri... The Narts would not forget the grave of a Nart who had died heroically... At these graves they used to swear by the names of Teyri of the Sky, Teyri of the Earth, Teyri of the Water and Teyri of the Fire, to be bold and not to retreat before the enemy" [ 8, 365].

The specific character of the portrayal of the Nart heroes depends on the heroic-epic aesthetics of the ancient epos. The idealisation of the majority of them starts already with the description of their birth and childhood. In this epos the motif of a divine and miraculous birth is linked to the images of all the basic Nart heroes.

Thus, in one of the variants of the legends about the birth of Debet, he was created by God, in another variant that was based on ancient mythological ideas, he was the son of Teyri of the Sky and Teyri of the Earth; Satanay was the daughter of the Sun and the Moon; Yoryuzmek appeared out of a star with a tail, which had fallen on to the earth; Sosuruk was the son of a stone; Karashauay was the grandson of Debet, and his mother was an emegen.

With the motifs of the miraculous birth of the Nart heroes there are linked also other constant archaic general folklore motifs: fantastically fast growth, the bogatyr childhood, the first exploit, and so on.

The motif of divine or miraculous birth predetermines also the extraordinary and exclusive nature of the heroes (Debet's heart and blood were of fire, he understood the language of fire, stones, beasts and birds and so on; the beautiful Satanay was a magician and a seer; the element of cold was subject to Karashauay, and he and his horse Gemuda could change their appearance, and so on.

The Nart heroes were not only endowed with various supernatural abilities, but they also possessed wonderful things: the keg (bowl) of Aguna, the cauldron with forty lugs, Yoryuzmek's sword, the talisman of Chyuerde and so on, and also they have magic helpers (most often of all this was the bogatyr horse of the Nart hero). All of these qualities of the heroes and of the things they possessed, were necessary for the Narts in the struggle with the various hostile creatures.

The specific character of the studied version is that its main epic theme is the struggle of the Narts with the mythological emegen-monsters. "Between the Narts and the emegens a continual struggle was carried on, in which thanks to their intellectual superiority the Narts always were left the winners". [ 14, III ].

The emegens were not only the permanent epic enemies of the Narts, but they were the source of evil and chaos on the earth. Quickly multiplying their numbers (Alaugan's wife, an emegen woman, used to give birth to babies every three months; an old Emegen grandmother gives birth to a hundred emegens), these insatiable monsters used to devour every living thing. And in order to clear them from the earth, God created the Narts, who waged a ceaseless struggle with them [ 8, 305].

The Nart Yoryuzmek comes forward as the main destroyer of the emegens. He has, as do also other epic heroes like him, one task: the destruction of the monsters who violate the peaceful life of his tribe.

The coexistence in the epos of the Balkars and Karachays of the two epic traditions – the general Caucasus one and the Turko-Mongolian one – is especially vividly revealed in the legends relating the fate of the Nart tribe after they have annihilated all of their enemies on the earth. Alongside the legends which, as also apply among other bearers of the Nartiad, are about the destruction of the Nart race, there exist legends in which it is said that the Narts, having exterminated all of the monsters on the earth, left the earth by the orders of Teyri: some of them flew off to the sky on “wind-winged horses”, and others went away into the underground kingdom of Teyri of the Earth. Of course, “legends about the distinctive immortality of the favourite folk heroes are widespread in world folklore” [ 3, 110 ], but here even in a range of other cases, when we were examining the Turko-Mongolian parallels in the Balkaro-Karachay epos at the level of the tale subject, we took into account that some of them are general international tales, and we tried to handle only those that are the most favourite ones in the Turko-Mongolian epos and have a distinctive specific treatment in their epic tradition.

Many scholars have pointed out the ‘non-tragic character’ of the majority of epic works of the Turko-Mongolian peoples ( [ 3, 109-110; 9, 86 ] and others ). Also in the Balkaro-Karachay epos, in distinction from other versions of the Nartiad, almost all of the heroes are immortal [5].

One’s attention is drawn also to the fact that, although it is speaking about the resettlement in the sky of half of the Narts, in this epos the only ones to be specifically named are: Debet (“Debet, the heavenly blacksmith”), Yoryuzmek (“How the Narts abandoned the earth”), and Satanay (“Cultural achievements on the epic level”).

Even that, of course, is not accidental, but results logically from the connection of the heroes with the sky: they came on to the earth from the upper world and, as is inherent in the mythical epic tradition of many peoples, at the completion of their short sojourn in the earthly world “they return to their own – the upper world” [ 7, vol 1, 233 ].

At the same time the justification for the resettlement of these heroes is not only plainly specified, but is also mutually linked to all of the subject-matter complex of the epos of the Balkars and Karachays: they leave the earth after the fulfilment of their mission – Debet and Satanay, with whose names are connected the time of ‘first-items’ and ‘first-actions’, after fulfilling their civilising functions, and Yoryuzmek, after destroying evil on the earth (“Cultural achievements on the epic level”).

In the legend “Karashauay is not dead, he lives”, in which it is related how Karashauay, after exterminating the Narts’ enemies, left the Nart land and settled on Elbrus, we read: “Just why did Karashauay return there, to Elbrus? –

he returned there because when he was little, the glaciers (icicles) of Elbrus were for him a mother's breast, he was nourished by them. They say that no matter where a person is and no matter where he has wandered, towards old age he is drawn to the place where he grew up. That is why he returned to Elbrus" [ 8, 485].

It seems to us that it is precisely according to this idea of the Balkars and Karachays that their Nart heroes (moreover only the heroes connected with the archaic layer of the epic) "return to the place from where they have come"; Debet, Satanay and Yoryuzmek to the sky, Sosuruk to the stone and Karashauay to Elbrus.

The song tradition of the epos of the Balkars and Karachays is one of the strong original peculiarities of their epic tradition. It is specifically thanks to the song-verse form in which their epos exists that many of the archaic elements have been saved, which fact researchers of the Nartiad have also noted. Thus, S.-A.Urusbiev wrote that the Nart legends of the mountain tribes of the Caucasus, "passing from the mouth of one generation to another... underwent some alterations in details, but not among any of these tribes were there preserved the traditions arising from more remote times than these Balkarian ones." [14. I].

M.V.Rklitsky himself, when referring to innovations in the Ossetian epos, wrote "that the parts corrupted... by the absurdities of the location of the legends (i.e. the Ossetians), are restored to some extent in the legends of the Balkars, which are the most preserved from these influences" [ 11, 28 ].

The preservation of the Balkaro-Karachay legends was also remarked by B.K.Dalgat in his time [1, 85].

Among the Balkars and Karachays the Nart songs are called "Nart zhyrla", and the performers of the Nart songs are called "Nart zhyrchy", or simply "zhyrchy" (singer).

The first information about Balkar singers in pre-revolutionary publications came from the pen of P.Ostryakov: "With the profession of singer", he writes, "is combined the idea of truthfulness, and only an irreproachably honest man could be a singer. I had the possibility of meeting such a singer. He was an old man with a dark-complexioned open face, dressed very poorly; but one had to see with what respect those round him treated him, they were almost idolising him. The Princes Urusbiev gave me the opportunity to meet him. One had to see them too, educated, having travelled over nearly all of Europe, with what honour and respect they treated the venerable old man" [10, 701].

In the pre-revolutionary publications of the Nart epos of the Balkars and Karachays we also find information about the manner of performance of the Nart songs and legends. After noting that among the Balkars "a poetic work about the Narts is divided into songs" and "each song is performed on a completely special motif", P.Ostryakov writes that the zhyrchy sang these songs

“to the accompaniment of the sounds of a pipe and a *zurna*, or else simply to the accompaniment of striking with a staff” [10, 701-702].

A more detailed description of the forms of the musical performance and an analysis of the sung-story narratives of the Balkars and Karachays are given in the work of S.I. Taneev [ 4; 12].

The observations of N.M.Dryagin also seem valuable to us, regarding the character of the performance of the Nart works: “Observed strictly and piously are the “metre of the original”: the elder of the narrators silently follows the separate expressions, even the words, with which the stories are conveyed by his younger colleague” [ 2, 20].

In the people’s consciousness the Narts are not only associated with the concept of martial valour. Also connected with their names are certain categories of spiritual culture. It is significant that such examples of folk wisdom as sayings, proverbs, and aphorisms among the Balkars and Karachays are called “nart syosle”, (Nart sayings).

In the contemporary Karachayevo-Balkar language the word “Nart” has not only the meaning of “Nart”, “hero” and “bogatyр”, but also “old” or “ancient”. Elderly Balkars and Karachays call the kingdom of the dead “nart duniya”, “the world of the Narts”. According to their ideas, the Narts, who during their life helped people and kept peace and tranquillity on earth, even from the “world of the Narts” try to help the human race: “they look at us from the world of the dead and, when some kind of misfortune is waiting for us”, their “sacred spirits... after changing into eagles, ravens or the forms of various beasts”, burst into the auls in the night with loud shouting and “inform the people about the forthcoming trouble”, it says in the legend “The resurrection of the Narts” [13, 552].

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