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ONCE AGAIN ABOUT THE UDMURT HEROIC EPIC:

Historical and Archaeological Aspects

Aleksandr Ivanov. Izhevsk, Udmurtia

Every nation needs its heroic past, and strives to seek for it. Trying to find the ideals of the society, we often arrive at the heroic epics. It is no mere chance that many of the Finno-Ugrian intellectuals have landed on the epic genres of folklore.

The first written records of the Udmurt heroic and epic legends date back to the late 19th century (by B. Munkàcsi, J. Wichmann, B. Gavrilov, N. Pervukhin, G. Vereshchagin, G. Potanin and others). Very soon after that, the researchers were at the point of asking many questions: Have the Udmurts ever really had a heroic epic? Was it in verse form? What is the explanation for the regional distribution of the Udmurt heroic narratives? Does Udmurt heroic tradition reflect the heroic period in the history of the Udmurt people? Some researchers corroborate the existence of an Udmurt heroic epic, while others negate it and still others state that the epic has not matured to its final form.¹ The content and disposition of their works is largely determined by the fact that the researchers are folklorists. Specialists of other fields, such as historians and archaeologists, have made only occasional use of folklore, for example, to illustrate their ideas

on history. There are some promising prospects of using the heroic tradition in the studies of history, but one must take into account some objective difficulties that may come into one's way. The information contained in folklore is a complicated coded system of specific regularities in the development and use of the nation's oral creation.² M. Atamanov is one of those who, in his works concerning the origin, habitation areas and mutual relations of the Udmurt tribes, has fruitfully employed legends and folk traditions.³ So, always keeping in mind the historical point, we might come across new, unexpected aspects of the oral folklore. In the following treatment, the heroic tradition has been emphasised primarily as a historical source.

A historian at first tries to find out the place of origin of a work of folklore, i.e. its historical conditionality and its stage of development, and to characterise its concrete form of existence. To a certain extent the time of its creation can be established by the logic of the general processes of historical development, according to which the creation of such works of folklore is characteristic of a certain stage of development of mental creation. The other procedure involves the search for the historical information contained in the epic, which means its treatment as a direct historical source. In order to clear up the concrete historical basis of a heroic epic, we may successfully juxtapose it with other historical sources, and look for supplementary information there. As the history of the Udmurts up to the 17th century is only sporadically covered by written sources, the archaeological material is the more significant.

The Udmurt heroic epic gives us information about different aspects of their past. Let us mention only a few of the suitable plots for the research. They illustrate the livelihood of the ancient Udmurts, whereas here we can notice a certain division of tasks between people. In one of the legends known in the northern part of Udmurtia, each character has his own work to do: *Gurya is a land-tiller, Idna is a hunter, Donda tills the land, but mostly does handicraft and trading*. Here we have a complex and differentiated social structure, where the ancient tribal institutions with their elders (Udm. *töro*) exist side by side with the upper class and the lord (Udm. *ekser*⁴). We can see early feudal exploitation, collection of taxes. One of the legends tells us about the lord of the Uzyakar fortress who with his measureless taxes aroused dissatisfaction and was drowned in a bog.⁵ Traditions reflect the rise of filial families on the basis of great patriarchal tribes, and the following division of the common land. The consequent quarrels about territories were solved peacefully, as a rule (by a competition of throwing clusters of grass). There are numerous reports concerning their relations with the neighbouring peoples: with the Mari (Udm. *Por*) since the time when they settled in the region between the rivers of Volga and Vyatka, and with the Volga Bulgarians (Udm. *Biger*⁶), as well as their earlier contacts with the

Tartars and the Russians. Their struggle against the enemies and the foreign occupation is a popular theme in the folklore that has also been used by the Udmurts. Probably it reflects some real events of the past.

The heroic epic tradition reflects the historical transition period from the decomposing tribal relations to the early class society and the formation of pre-state ethnic units. These processes can be observed in the archaeological material of the Kama region of the second half of the I millennium and the early II millennium. The plot of many epic narratives is connected with ancient Udmurt historical objects. This connection is especially significant in the northern Udmurt habitation areas where many medieval strongholds and modern villages have preserved the names of the legendary characters: Idnakar, Dondykar, Guryakar, Vesyakar, etc., where Idna, Donda, Gurya, Vesya are personal names and *kar* corresponds to the Old Russian *grad* or the German *burg*. The archaeological material of these strongholds is dated mainly between the 9th and the 13th centuries. Similar common features of the oral tradition and the history of medieval strongholds can be observed in other areas of Udmurt habitation: a number of South Udmurtian fortresses have been considered residences of Udmurt heroes and noblemen. The old settlement at the present site of the town of Kirov (previously Vyatka, Khlynov) was called Vatkakar – ‘the fortress of the tribe of Votka’. The fortress of Kuznetsov and the areas on the right bank of the Vyatka are associated with the name of the Udmurt nobleman Yadygar. The Arsk Udmurts have many legends about their former territories with the centre in the Arsk fortress, which has also been mentioned in written records. Thus, in the light of all this information we can date the main part of the Udmurt heroic epic tradition in the 2nd half of the I millennium and the 1st half of the II millennium AD.

This cycle of narratives is characterised by local distribution.⁷ Each ethnic group had its heroic leaders and its legends about his descent: the heroes of the Cheptsya Udmurts were Donda, Idna, Gurya, Vesya, etc., the Kilmez Udmurts had their Bursin Chunypi, Selta, Kuzhmo Bigra; The Mozhga Udmurts had Mardan, Mozhga, Biya; etc. It is interesting to note that the names of the heroes’ wives are based on the *vorshud* (e.g. Ebga, Egra, Bigra), that is to say, their tribal lineage – even as late as at the beginning of the 20th century the Udmurts used to call their wives after their tribal lineage.⁸ The Udmurts have no common national heroes. Their heroic legends reflect their ethno-social structure before their consolidation and the formation of a single nationality.

A heroic epic is born at the period of decline of the tribal structures, and it is transmitted to the next period – that of military democracy, which is characterised by the glorification of military heroic exploits. The finished and classical form of heroic epics developed in the early stages of the class society, and often this development was aided by the work of some known or anonymous authors.

Let us mention here such epics as the *Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the Karelian-Finnish *Kalevala*, etc. The heroic epics have their significant role to play in the mythical story of creation of a nation.

The Udmurt epic in its classical form was never created. At the opportune time there was no person who would have been able to fulfil such a grandiose task (as V. Vladykin admits⁹). A more important reason is the history of the Udmurt people. The processes of development of class relations and ethno-political consolidation did not reach their climax in the formation of a state. The Mongol-Tatar occupation and the colonisation of the Kama territories by the Russians were the determinant factors. In the whole it braked many social processes and retarded the consolidation of the udmurts into a nation. Thus, the necessity to create a common national epic fell off.

It is evidently no mere chance that many Udmurt legends end with the death of the hero. There is no optimism in the statement ... *And since then there have been no heroes among the Udmurt people*. Perhaps the tragical fate of many traditional heroes expresses the pessimistic self-evaluation of an oppressed people. We can find a parallel in M. Khudyakov's *The Ballad of the Udmurt Batyrs*, a Russian authorised variant of the Udmurt epic. There the people's pessimistic view of their future is expressed on the basis of the folklore material.¹⁰

A similar stage of development of heroic epics (there is no completed classical heroic epic; the legends feature local heroes and are of regional distribution; there is no common national hero; some late attempts to create an authorised epic) is also characteristic of other Eastern Finno-Ugrian peoples.

Translated by Kai Vassiljeva

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AETIOLOGICAL REMARKS AND LEGENDS IN THE CONTEXT OF ABKHAZIAN NART EPIC

Zurab Jopua. Sukhumi, Abkhazia.

Abkhazian Nart legends represent one of the main versions of Nart epic – the remarkable folklore monument of Caucasian people. In the real texture of the plot of the epic besides the latent ritual-mythological components¹ one can find also aetiological ‘insertions’ in the epic stories and aetiological narrative legends.

In this case, we are interested neither in myth² (or proto-myth) as a ‘verbal’ part of the ritual³ nor in the artistic-aesthetic dynamics (creative potential) of the formation of folk epics. In other words, we analyse the myths and legends to the extent they have significance in the context of Abkhazian Nart epic. Examining the myths and legends in this respect we can find two principal forms: separate elements and independent stories.

We can distinguish a certain set of texts which include aetiological elements and episodes, explaining the reasons of different occurrences and signs (Appendices 1-9). All these textual details carry definite independent information originated from the fantasy of the story-teller. Therefore, at first sight they seem not to be connected with the textual events, they are introduced as outside elements, as a digression from the main plot. At the same time the inside