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TRADITIONAL KOMI CONCEPTS ABOUT DISEASE AETIOLOGY

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Traditional medical culture has a difficult character, because the accumulation of rational knowledge and experiences progressed simultaneously with the evolution of spiritual ideas, the main part of which was formed by the concepts about supernatural world. And in the traditional Komi medicine positive experience and peculiar achievements in a man's knowledge are indissolubly combined with irrational notions, religious and magical actions and rites. This syncretism clearly shows itself in folk concepts about the course of disease.

In this report the author tries to bring together facts that are able to reveal traditional Komi concepts about disease aetiology. This task is complicated by the process of their rapid disappearance. Even in the 2nd half of the 19th century scholars had noted that population of the Ust-Sysolsk area 'had some knowl-

edge's about the origin of diseases'. But nowadays only a few informants can characterise the traditional concepts about the course of diseases. They mention 'throwing an evil spell on', and 'evil eye' as the chief source of ailment.

At the same time an analysis of ethnographic, folklore and linguistic materials allow us to show different concepts, both elemental materialistic and idealistic about disease aetiology.

The whole set of pathological folk medicine is explained from the elemental materialistic position. Proverbs and sayings, customs and recommendations that ordered to observe cleanliness, rational diet, temperature regime, clearly testify about it. People realise that the infringement of these orders will cause different diseases.

The explanation of traumas caused by physical overstrain, cuts, burns was really rational. To prevent them, one could advise to be careful in everyday life, on domestic and agricultural affairs, etc. Children got acquainted with optimal methods of work from their early years. A proverb says: *Sintö kydz vidzan, as'tö sidz zhö vidz* ('Keep yourself, as you keep an eye').

Usually chills were caused by cold and dampness. It is not mere chance that people warned: *Kuchöm povodd'a, sechöm i pas'köm* ('Dress according the weather').

Many ailments were connected with different infringements in feeding: hunger, malnutrition; monotonous diet, inferior food, alcohol, etc. Good food, as people believed, is one of the main conditions of health: *Omölik s'oyan vylad regyd kystö n'uzhōdan* ('You may die if underfed'); *Chyg vis'ömōn vis'ny s'ökyd* ('Hunger is worse than disease'); *Olöm abu shan, kor omöl' nyan* ('Life is bad when bread is bad'). Traditional ration consisted of meat, fish, grain and flour products, milk and milk products. Besides, people used everywhere different wild herbs and fruits that were rich in vitamins, effective as prophylactics and remedies. There was an idea about the most rational system of feeding: one must eat 3-4 times in a day; hot dish, usually soup, was indispensable. At the same time, folk sayings underlined the significance of food moderation: *Vovti vyiön en s'oi; sinmyd berdaz* ('Do not use much butter – you may lose your eyesight'); *En termas', m'ed gorshö ves'kalas* ('Do not hurry – you may choke'). To counterbalance wide-spread stereotypes such as 'a fat man is a healthy man', there was a saying: *Kosydinik mortyd oz i pörys'my* ('A lean man does not get old'). The harm of alcohol was clearly realised: *Vinayd eböstö n'ylalö* ('Vodka eats the power'); *Vinatö on pomav, morttö vinayd pomalas* ('Wine does not come to end, but it can kill a man'). Special attention to food of a pregnant woman was connected with the concern for the future baby. She was forbidden to use alcohol, to eat products that were not fresh, to drink unboiled water. Any of her food caprice had to be satisfied.

In notions about a healthy style of life personal and public hygiene, as well as hygiene of dwelling were of great importance. It is no mere chance that such proverbs were widespread: *Vinatö on pomav, morttö vinayd pomalas* ('Any disease can call at a clean home'); *Med ne vis'ny, kolö söstöma ovny* ('One must live in cleanliness, if one does not want to be ill'). Sauna was considered one of the best prophylactic measures. As a rule, all skin diseases and some gastric-intestinal ones were explained with personal unscrupulousness.

Very important for health was rational interchange of work and rest, and sleeping was the main component of it. Long lasting sleep was always regarded as laziness, but many informants remembered that it was bad for health to wake a man, and especially a child or an adolescent, roughly or by force (except, of course, in extreme cases). It was not done by waking suddenly, by call; it was recommended first to call the name of a sleeper softly, then call loudly, and only after all these measures have failed, to wake actively. Non-fulfilment of these rules plus hard work without enough rest, according to folk concepts, could lead a man to exhaustion, feebleness; a child became sluggish, tearful and restless.

It was well realised that disease could be caused by insult, moral trauma, fright: *Bur s'orni-basniön vek bur, stav ly-s'ömydly, a l'ök s'örni-basniön vek l'ok, vek vis'an* ('Good speech always results in good, from bad speech illness may come'). Special measures for keeping complete rest of a pregnant woman allowed to suppose that relations between psychological state of the woman and the health of her future child were well realised.

Perhaps some diseases were connected with unhealthy heredity, because on match-making both sides were interested to know whether the families of the bride and the bridegroom had had any cases of mental deficiency or paroxysms. If they had such ancestors, marriage could be rejected.

Determination of the correct cause and effect connections did much to promote the formation of effective treatment and prophylactic system: all ailments explained with rational, natural reasons, had to be treated rationally, too. The Komi folk medicine used more than 140 species of plants, various mineral and animal products, remedies of water, heat, different forms of physical therapy.

However, knowledge about man and its surroundings did not allow to explain rationally the causes of a large number of diseases, first of all infectious, mental, chronic ones. Traditional world view connected their appearance with the influence of supernatural forces. Such concepts, formed in different historical epochs, are now losing their context and often are only fragments of archaic beliefs, which become clear from the complex of ethnographic materials belonging to neighbouring peoples.

One may suppose that once the Komi considered diseases as evil spirits, which sometimes were without any body, sometimes had a material, usually

zoomorphic form. In many stories diseases exist as animated beings that man must propitiate or drive away. Informants mentioned that even at the beginning of the 20th century, there was special attitude to such infectious diseases as typhus and smallpox. It was forbidden to make noises (speak loudly, sing, knock), to wash in a house with such a patient. It was not allowed to scold the disease and even to treat the patient. It was considered that in this case the disease 'did not take offence, would visit, and go away'. If the patient and his relatives would have scolded the ailment, begun to treat it, the disease may have 'got furious and taken the patient with it'. People believed that a man could directly speak with the evil spirit:

*...sometimes before its departure the evil spirit thanks the master
and tells where it will be replaced next time. Sometimes, but very
rarely, the evil spirit tells how a man can propitiate it.*

Medical practice also had measures which might not only propitiate, but kill the evil spirit-disease. Charms often said:

<i>Vis'öm kerala,</i>	I cut down the disease,
<i>Omöl' kerala,</i>	I cut down the evil spirit.
<i>Bura da shanya kerala</i>	
<i>Vazhs'ys burdzhika, shan'dzhika.</i>	I do it better than before.
<i>Vis'öm suchiödla</i>	I stab the disease,
<i>Omyl suchiödla,</i>	I stab the evil spirit.
<i>Bura da shanya suchiödla</i>	I do it quite well
<i>Vazhs'ys burdzhika, shan'dzhika.</i>	Better than before.

That is to say, an attitude to the disease as to a really existing being, which has no definite face or typical features. In some other cases the disease may have a more concrete image.

According to V. Nalimov's report, Zyrians imagined smallpox as a woman who came to a man in dreams and warned: 'Be ready, I shall come'. She could spoil one's face, if one was not able to please her. It is necessary to point out that such reports are single, and in contrast to, for instance, the neighbouring Russian people, since the anthropomorphisation of diseases is not typical for the Komi.

Concepts about *sheva* – an evil spirit in the image of mouse, lizard, worm, butterfly, grub, hair penetrating into a man's organism and causing different pathologies – are the most interesting. Since a great bulk of literature, both ethnographic and medical, deals with these notions, we shall give only general characteristics of the belief connected with *sheva*. It was considered that a wizard kept a *sheva* in a special birch-bark box (*sheva-chuman*) underground, fed it on his own body and then set it to people. A *sheva* got into a man with food or water or by air, lived there and caused various diseases. Modern informants

usually explain in such a way many chronic diseases, including alcoholism. But traditionally the main signs of a *sheva* were: hysterical attacks, actions and manner of speaking that were unusual for that person, sometimes dissociation of consciousness. According to folk concepts, a *sheva* lived within a man till he died, and only after his death it moved to settle in another person. Traditional medicine was considered non-effective and was used only for easing the pain during attacks.

In connection with folk ideas on the causes of the disease, information about the attitudes of the Komi to lizards is of great interest. Its name – *pezh gag* ('foul insect') – includes negative appreciation of the lizard as a foul being. In folklore it contrasts with sun, guards treasures, understands the language of birds and animals. Paying attention to these features, K. Tsakov assumed that once the lizard used to 'belong to dark divinities'. Materials on folk medicine support this supposition. Even at the beginning of the 20th century the lizard was considered to cause eye and skin diseases: 'A Zyrian is afraid of the lizard and not for the world takes it in his hands. There is the belief that if the lizard has passed over a leg, the leg begins to rot'. According to the beliefs current at the Upper Vychegda, if you had seen the lizard, your eyes became ill. These notions one may compare with the Estonian beliefs, according to which some skin and eye diseases are caused by 'underground' spirits. Such beliefs are recorded among other Balto-Finnic peoples as well and, as some scholars think, have very old origin. Probably, in the past the Komi had similar notions, and traditional attitudes to the lizard were connected with its image as a member of the next world, causing certain ailments.

Among the ideas about supernatural beings, damaging the health of a mother and her baby, beliefs in hobgoblins (*olysia*), sauna spirits (*pyvsian aika*, *pyvsiansa*, *guran'ka*), water-spirits (*vasa*) and goblins of the woods (*vörsa*) were widely spread. They could change a baby both during its uterine development and after its birth, leaving a wooden billet with human face in the place of a healthy human child. As usual, the birth of defective children was explained by such exchange. Descriptions of appearance, behaviour of 'changelings', the process of changing itself one might find in a great number of stories recorded in different areas of the Republic. (The following is an original story, told by Gabova G. in the village of Ust-Kulom).

There was a man in our village: his head was large, his body small, his face wrinkled. He ate much, but could neither walk nor speak. People said he was changed. Also they told: once a woman lived in the corner of the village. She went to the sauna to wash her new-born daughter – it was a custom to whisk a baby every day during the first week – but she forgot the wrap at home. She left the

baby on a bench and went to the house. In this time the sauna spirit (...) changed the child. Woman did not notice this exchange; she whisked the daughter, took her home and put her in the cradle. During 18 years the child was in this cradle; she ate, drank, but could neither walk nor speak.

Once some lads argued with each other, who was the bravest and who would come into the sauna at night and take a stone from the hearth. One of them went at midnight to the sauna, stretched the hand to the hearth, and suddenly someone caught him with a shaggy clawing hand. It was the sauna spirit. It said: 'I shall let you go, if you promise to come and marry my daughter tomorrow at midnight'. The young man had to promise. He came back and told his mother about it. The mother tied a belt on his waist and said: 'You may go, but draw a circle around yourself in the sauna. Don't come out from this circle, and don't take off the belt'. The boy came to the sauna and did all as his mother had told. At midnight the sauna spirit came into the sauna with all its family and with a beautiful girl. The lad was not bewildered, he pulled the girl into the circle. There they stood till cock-crow. Then the sauna spirit with its family disappeared, and the girl said: 'There is the house in the village. At this house a woman has rocked a cradle for 18 years. You must go to the house, take the child, put it on threshold and kill it with an axe'. The lad was surprised, but the girl repeated: 'Do it as I tell you'. They came to this house, the lad saw there the woman rocking the cradle. He took out the child, put on the threshold and hit it with the axe. Suddenly they saw a wooden billet instead of the child. So the girl said: 'I am your rightful daughter, you have rocked a wooden billet in the cradle, which was put there by the sauna spirit.' They all were very happy.

Therefore mother told us: 'never leave children, especially without teeth, without any attendance in the sauna. Or, what's even better, when you are in the sauna, touch them with a keen, because you may not notice when they are changed'.

Notions about close relations between the world of living and the world of ancestors were typical for the traditional Komi world view. The wrath of dead relatives, caused by lack of respect to them, violation of traditional norms and customs, may be the reason of a sudden disease. As N. Zavarin mentioned, 'A Zyrian consoles himself that the majority of diseases happen due to 'the dead man coming to a house', (...) and therefore the dead men in the Komi region are often commemorated.' However, the food, which had been brought to the grave, was a special sacrifice, intended for the ancestors and as a means to keep

away ailments.

Alongside with the concept about supernatural beings, which caused an illness, there was another view. In the traditional beliefs of many peoples, including the Komi, physical and mental states of a man were connected with the state of his soul, his personal name, shadow, heart, breath. Their theft by an evil spirit or a dead relative caused the disease and led to death. Special persons – shamans, sorcerers – were busy with the guarding of and search for stolen souls. Etymology of the term *nim vidzys* ('guarding a mane', 'guarding a soul'), signifying a good sorcerer who heals people, allows us to suppose that such notions of the Komi have existed in the past. The term *vudzhör* ('shadow'), meaning a whole group of protecting articles (including woollen, cotton, knitted belts, those are made of nets, beads of peony berries, headbands and kerchiefs, i.e. things, which girdled a man's body), may be explained according to these notions. A man's shadow (*mort vudzhör*) was considered by the Komi as 'a part of the man', closely connected with his health and his death. The loss of the shadow, as the Komi believed, brought about serious diseases and death. It is probably therefore that mainly protecting things were united with the term.

The concept about diseases being God's punishment for the man's sins are the latest. Their appearance is connected with Christianity.

According to traditional beliefs, the Komi saw the causes of ailments in the harmful actions of the really existing evil spirits, in the influence of the world of ancestors, in the loss of spiritual substance that embodied the life forces of the man. Mystic views corresponded with magic methods of treatment and prophylactic, which in composition of rational measures formed the whole system of folk medicine.

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ONCE AGAIN ABOUT THE UDMURT HEROIC EPIC:

Historical and Archaeological Aspects

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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