

## CONTEMPORARY STORIES ABOUT THE *PALESMURT*

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Even today there are people in the villages of Udmurtia who claim having seen the *Palesmurt* or at least, their friends or parents have. With a degree of caution, they speak about the Palesmurt and give advice how to behave when you happen to come across one, so as not to insult him. Anyway, the number of people who have seen the Palesmurt with their own eyes is no less than that of people who claim to have seen the Abominable Snowman in the Himalayas or the Pamir.

A Palesmurt is an anthropomorphic being who appears as a human being cut in halves down his spine: he has only one eye, one hand and one leg. He has been described by ethnographers (G. Vereshchagin, A. Yemelyanov, etc.) already at the beginning of this century. The present article has made use of a number of contemporary recordings, i.e. stories about the Palesmurt that have been collected between 1972 and 1990 by students and university teachers in different places in the areas of compact habitation of the Udmurts. These records are stored in the archives of the Department of Udmurt Language and Literature of the Faculty of Philology of the Udmurt State University in Izhevsk.

The word '*Palesmurt*' is composed of two parts: *pales* - 'half' and *murt* - 'man', human being. Contemporary informants have also stressed that this mythical creature has been split in two halves. Some informants think that a Palesmurt is a single entity, half of him just being transparent as if X-rayed, whereas others believe that he consists of a right and a left side who live separately and communicate with each other shouting. A Palesmurt is taller than a man. Some say that he is two metres tall, others, that he can touch the tree-tops. Like some other creatures of Udmurt mythology, he can change his height, depending on his location in the forest. He possesses immeasurable strength and when a storm is raging, people say, 'A Palesmurt is walking and bending down trees.' Shouting 'Eh-eh' in a terrifying voice, he can shake trees. Usually, Palesmurt is described as brainless. He never feels any pain. Sometimes people have seen him burning his finger in the fire. A Palesmurt lives in the forest. He appears only when you are alone.

Stories depict Palesmurt as insidious, malignant and revengeful. He is like a kind of anti-man. He can tickle a man to death. As he possesses enormous strength and is composed of two halves, he can tear a man in two halves. Often, one can be led astray in the wood because of the Palesmurt's tricks. One loses

orientation after treading on a Palesmurt's footprint. The consequences of meeting a Palesmurt are quite unfavourable. Even seeing one may cause misfortune: the eyewitness or one of his nearest relatives dies. Palesmurt plays various tricks on animals, for example he can smear a horse with tar (sulphur) and ride the animal, sticking to it.

However, the man can protect himself against Palesmurt if he knows the appropriate magic words or actions. For example, when meeting a Palesmurt, one must say: *Shur ullan!*, that is, 'down the river'. But if you say 'up the river', the words will have no effect. One can also say, *Osto!* ('Oh, Lord'). Some people leave their clothes on the wind-fallen twigs and branches, so that the *Palesmurt* would take the clothes for a man and tickle him to exhaustion. One can start arguing with the Palesmurt and suggest that he should thrust his hand into the crevice formed in the log with an axe or a wedge. Then the man removes the wedge and the Palesmurt's hand is stuck. There are other ways of protecting oneself against the Palesmurt: one should put his left boot on the right foot. One can strip oneself naked and run or challenge him to throw salt and see who can throw it farther. The salt thrown by the man falls on the open internal organs of Palesmurt and the latter runs screaming horribly. A rowan branch can also protect against a Palesmurt: one should put it into the Palesmurt's footprint, but it is not specified, which of the two feet must have left the print. An idea that a Palesmurt may be shot by a pine chip or a brass button has decayed by today.

As some informants have told us, there are lots of Palesmurts: large and small, fathers and sons. If a Palesmurt gets into trouble, other Palesmurts can come to his rescue. Contemporary stories lack ideas recorded by Uno Holmberg-Harva, that a Palesmurt has blood and if he is injured, a new Palesmurt will emerge from every drop of blood; that the Palesmurt has a large nipple and when the nipple is put into the mouth of a man, the latter suffocates.

N. Pervukhin wrote that by many signs, a Palesmurt resembles a *N'ulesmurt* - another mythological creature of the Udmurt people, the former belongs to the *N'ulesmurt's* retinue.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Palesmurt, a *N'ulesmurt* is a creature that resembles a man. He usually looks like an old man with a small basket, dressed in white. He may foretell a man's fortune or share a meal with a traveller in the wood. He may give a man a hand in collecting fire wood or building a house. It sometimes happens that a *N'ulesmurt* steals horses, but afterwards he brings them back: when a horse arrives home from the forest sweated and exhausted, they say it was ridden by a *N'ulesmurt*.

The luck of a hunter and the prosperity of a peasant's farm depend in the most on the *N'ulesmurt's* benevolence, that is why he should be coaxed with prayers and sacrifices. These prayers are short and there is a request to safe-

guard domestic animals against misfortunes in the forest and the farm against fire. The most complete prayer was written down by Kedra Mitrey - an Udmurt writer and folklorist - at the beginning of the 20th century. This prayer is included into his tragedy 'Esh-Terek',<sup>2</sup> and Peter Domokos considers it to be original. The prayer sounds as follows:

*Almighty Father, N'ulesmurt!  
You keep mighty words safe,  
Feed squirrels and hares  
Protect flocks of birds  
Sometimes you whistle or cry  
To call all of them together  
If your possessions are  
Blocked with fallen leaves  
You raise pillars of dust  
By your mighty breath.  
We sometimes make you angry  
And you rush like a whirlwind,  
You ruin villages, tear fields,  
Knock down poles on which corn is dried  
But you are both kind and gentle  
With everyone who with faith sacrifices  
A cow, a goose and a duck for you  
You have always been, generous with me  
You have never deprived me of game  
Father, thank you for all that.  
But why, bread-winner,  
You bear a grudge against me today?  
If my sacrifice was insufficient  
Be merciful and forgive me  
Don't disgrace me before my people  
They look upon me as the best shot,  
And if today I come home  
Tired and without prey  
Send me, send me at least a squirrel  
Present me with a finch.*

There are people who have been in contact with a N'ulesmurt. One of them was known to have jumped over the fire, stretching his arms to someone. This someone was invisible. He turned out to be a N'ulesmurt.

There is one more creature belonging to the N'ulesmurt's retinue. They call it *Iskalpydomurt*, 'a man with a cow's hooves'. This creature is more perfidi-

ous than a Palesmurt, it may even kill a man. However, this creature has disappeared from the modern folklore.

Translated by Kai Vassiljeva  
Commentaries by Aado Lintrop.

### Literature

<sup>1</sup>*n'ule s* - 'forest', *murt* - 'man, human being'. A forest spirit of the Udmurt mythology. He is considered to be the most important one of all the supernatural beings living in the forest. He is also called *N'ules N'un'a* - 'forest uncle', *Byddzym N'un'a* - 'great uncle', etc. His appearance is often accompanied by wild animals and a whirlwind. Some people have believed that all the other creatures associated with the forest belong to the *N'ulesmurt's* retinue.

<sup>2</sup>'Esh-Terek' (1915) - Kedra Mitrey's (also known as Pan Reymit and D. Korepanov (1892-1949)) historic tragedy about the struggle of the Udmurts against the Tatars.

## THE IDEA OF EARTHLY AND UNEARTHLY WORLDS IN THE UDMURT FAIRY-TALES

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A fairy-tale due to its mythology presents one of the sources for studying popular world view, i.e. the mytho-poetical images of the world. In this particular case we are interested in the relations between different worlds in the fairy-tales: a human world and the other world – underground or underwater. The opposition of these worlds is based on the Udmurt understanding of the three-layered system of cosmos: sky, earth, and the netherworld.

It is known that the main actions in fairy-tales take place in an unearthly world, where the hero goes through the principal trials. The unearthly (other) world created by the fairy-tale is a mytho-poetical image of the other world, the world of the dead.

Dualistic understanding of the world is vividly observed in fairy images of both earthly and unearthly worlds in the Udmurt mythology, i.e. ethical dualism is based on the antagonism of good and evil, while gnoseologic dualism means the division of the world into the earthly bodily sphere and spiritual beyond sphere, where is also a struggle between good and evil forces.

Let us turn to the plots of fairy-tales and first of all examine those motifs