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Review of *Mify narodov mira* (“Myths of the peoples of the world”), chief editor S. A. Tokarev. Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1987. Two volumes, 1350 pp.

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**1. Introductory remarks.** The encyclopedia under review (henceforth abbreviated MNM) is an alphabetically-arranged two-volume reference work on mythology, compiled by a team of Soviet scholars. Among the eighty or so contributors, two individuals, the celebrated Russian philologists Viacheslav V. Ivanov and Vladimir N. Toporov, wrote most of the longer entries, as well as the shorter articles on Ket, Hittite, Baltic, Slavic and Vedic Hindu mythologies. Other major contributors include Veronika K. Afanas’eva (Sumerian and Akkadian), L. Kh. Akaba and Sh. Kh. Salakaia (Abkhazian), S. B. Arutiunian (Armenian), Sergei S. Averintsev (Judaism and Christianity), Vladimir N. Basilov (Turkic), Mark N. Botvinnik, V. Iarkho and A. A. Takho-Godi (Greek), Mikheil Chikovani and G. A. Ochiauri (Georgian), V. A. Kaloev (Ossetic), Elena S. Kotliar (African), Leonid A. Lelekov (Iranian), A. G. Lundin and Il’ia Sh. Shifman (Semitic), Eleazar M. Meletinskii (Scandinavian, Paleo-Siberian), L. E. Miall (Buddhism), M. I. Mizhaev (Circassian), Mikhail B. Piotrovskii (Islam), Revekka I. Rubinshtein (Egyptian), Elena M. Shtaerman (Roman).

Most of the thousands of entries are sketches of deities and other mythological characters, including some relatively obscure ones, from a number of classical and modern traditions. Coverage is especially extensive for the classical Old World and the indigenous populations of the former USSR, but Africa, Asia and the Americas are well represented. These entries are generally a paragraph or two in length, and comprise the basic facts about the title personages and their doings. The entries are alphabetized according to their accepted Russian spelling, if there is one, or according to a more or less precise rendering in Cyrillic characters. Proper names from the Hamito-Semitic and Indo-European languages are also given in Latin or Greek characters, but no transliterations are given for names coming from other language groups, even where important phonemic information is not conveyed by the Cyrillic spelling (e.g. tone indications in Chinese, or glottalization in the Caucasian languages). Initial /h/ is represented by Cyrillic /g/ only where well established by Russian usage (“Gerkules” and “Giperborei” for Hercules and the Hyperboreans); elsewhere /kh/ is used (the Egyptian goddess Hathor is found under “KHator”). Many articles, including even some of the shorter ones, are followed by lists of references. By way of illustration, here is one short entry from the beginning of MNM, in a literal translation by the reviewer:

ABDAL (Volume I, p 22, by Kh. M. Khalilov)

Abdal: God of the hunt, patron of ibexes, mountain goats and deer, in the mythologies of the Tsakhurs, Dargins, Laks (Avdal). Several researchers link A. with the Georgian goddess of

the hunt *Dali*, [names in italics have their own entries in the encyclopedia — KT] whose cult, evidently, was widespread among the Daghestanian mountaineers; her function was transferred to a male deity (the name of A. may derive from this source).

According to the belief of the Tsakhurs, A. watches over the wild animals, herds and even milks them; he limits the killing of animals, severely punishing the hunter who violates the limit. Should A. appear to a hunter in the form of a white game animal or person, this portends lack of success at the hunt. According to Lak belief, A. can prevent the killing of an animal, blocking a hunter's arrow or bullet, if the latter has not prayed to him beforehand. In the event of success, hunters sacrificed the heart and liver of the dead animal to A., but did not burn or discard the bones — from these A. will resuscitate the animal. A. would extract an unborn child from a woman's womb, in order to make of him a herdsman of ibexes. [The entry is followed by two references: a 1915 article by A. M. Dirr and a 1976 monograph by E. B. Virsaladze — KT].

My impression of the other short entries is that they contain, like the one cited here, basic facts, colourful detail, and etiological speculation in varying proportions. The works cited in the short bibliographies are on the whole well-chosen, if not always readily obtainable outside the former USSR. And in many cases the information in the entries, especially where Caucasian and Siberian populations are concerned, appears to come from the authors' own fieldwork.

The backbone of MNM comprises several dozen longer articles, some up to ten three-columned pages in length, devoted to cultural areas ("Ashanti mythology", "Mythology of the Turkic-speaking peoples", etc.) and widely-attested mythemes and motifs ("Twins", "Good and evil", "Cat", "Sun", "World tree" and the like). Many of these longer pieces were written by Ivanov and Toporov, either separately or jointly. Among the authors of cultural-area entries treating subjects familiar to this reviewer, one finds both leading fieldworkers (e.g. B. A. Litvinskij, who composed a fine sketch on Nuristani mythology) and erudite scholars in the old humanist tradition, still to be seen roaming wild in the hallways of Russian universities even as their Western counterparts face extinction. The chief editor, S. A. Tokarev, is to be applauded for the quality of the team he has assembled for this project.

To keep this review to manageable length, I have chosen to limit my remarks to the treatment of the mythologies of the Caucasus region, an area I have studied (Section 2), and a pair of entries authored by the principal contributors, Ivanov and Toporov (Section 3). I believe this is a reasonable strategy, since non-native readers of Russian would be likely to make use of MNM to read (1) articles about the mythologies of peoples living on the territory of the former USSR, and (2) articles on other topics written by world-class scholars of mythology.

**2. Caucasian mythologies.** Looking through the MNM entries on Caucasian mythological personages (over a hundred of them), one cannot help but notice that with rare exceptions all are written by ethnologists from the region: Abkhazians writing on Abkhazian mythology, Daghestanians writing on Daghestanian mythology, Georgians writing on Georgian mythology. This bias, if that is what you would call it, is reflected in several general traits of the entries. While

Soviet literature is amply represented in the articles and the accompanying bibliographies, works by the handful of European and North American ethnologists who have made original contributions to the field have largely been ignored — one thinks of Georges Dumézil, who did important work in Caucasian studies while holding down his day job as an Indo-European comparative mythologist, his successor Georges Charachidzé, and John Colarusso in Canada. Based on what Caucasian ethnologists have told me, this is due to a lack of timely access to Western publications, and to lack of familiarity with the relevant languages. On the other hand, there is much in these entries which has not, as far as I can tell, appeared in print before. The authors have made extensive use of unpublished archival materials and their own field notes in preparing their sketches. One significant contribution of MNM is the ample representation given to what remains of the pre-Islamic beliefs of the Daghestanian peoples, which have tended to be overshadowed by the better-studied Abkhaz-Adyghean and Kartvelian traditions in the ethnological literature. It should also be pointed out that many of the publications drawn upon by Armenian, Georgian and Abkhazian authors are written in those languages; the encyclopedia entries represent the only opportunity for most readers to have access to this information.

The MNM summary article on “Caucasian-Iberian mythology” was prepared by the Georgian researchers G. A. Ochiauri and I. K. Surguladze, with the collaboration of four colleagues from the North Caucasus. (The term “Iberian”, it should be noted, refers to Georgia — known as *Iveria* in ancient times — and has nothing to do with Spain or the Basques, despite wishful thinking on the part of some linguists). As is the case with many of the other summary articles, it begins with a brief discussion of Caucasian cosmological beliefs, for example, the division of the universe into upper, middle and lower worlds. Most of the rest of the entry is given over to brief descriptions of deities and demons; in fact, one of its primary functions is to serve as a point of entry into the articles of individual personages (indicated by italics in the text). What is lacking — and this is where reference to the works of Charachidzé would have been welcome — is any attempt to discern a system behind the various mythemes, or rather the bundles of features and functions they could be said to represent. Charachidzé, in his 1968 monograph on Georgian paganism and more recent work, argued that the social ideology of the Georgian mountaineer communities was characterized by a thorough-going binarism: “L’univers se divise en deux séries antagonistes, l’une démoniaque et sauvage, l’autre divine et sociale, auxquelles respectivement se rattache tout être de la création ...” [1981, p 452]. Women, in particular, were associated with the “demonic” half of creation. In a society that is exogamic and misogynist, the very institution of marriage creates a fundamental contradiction: wives are doubly despised as demonic creatures coming from outside the clan, yet they are an obvious necessity for the continuation of the clan. As seen by Charachidzé, many aspects of Georgian mythology and ritual center around the resolution of this contradiction, usually through the representation of an incestuous sister-brother pairing (sisters

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being, until they leave their family of origin to marry, “pas encore démoniaque” [*op. cit.*, p. 454]). One would have liked to have had the perspective of Georgian ethnologists on this thesis, either arguments against Charachidzé’s global binarism or typological comparisons with the ideological systems of other Caucasian peoples, especially the Daghestanians, whose preference for endogamic alliances contrasts sharply with the exogamy practiced in the south and west Caucasus. Typological comparisons with the beliefs of non-Caucasian peoples would have also been welcome. The Ochiauri and Surguladze piece describes the expedition of the Georgian deity Giorgi to the underworld to do battle with a race of redoubtable creatures known as the Kajes, whence he returns with herds of livestock, metal-working tools and women. This bears a curious resemblance to the cattle-raiding myth reconstructed for early Indo-European society [Ivanov & Toporov 1974; Lincoln 1981], and to beliefs associated with Central Asian and Inuit shamanism [Burkert 1979]. In view of the evidence for extensive contacts between the Indo-European and Caucasian communities in prehistoric times [Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1984], and also for a shaman-like institution among the Georgian mountaineers, a comparison of the Kartvelian and Indo-European variants would have been illuminating.

The shorter entries cover a wide range of mythical beings, in each of the major Caucasian traditions: Abkhaz-Abazan, Adyghe-Circassian, Chechen-Ingush, Daghestanian, and Georgian [Kartvelian]; as well as Ossetian, Armenian and Karachay-Balkarian mythologies. Variants of what would appear to be the same type of character are often accorded separate entries, with cross-referencing among them (e.g. the articles *Albasty* [Turkic], *Almazy* [Chechen-Ingush], *Ali* [Georgian], *Al Pab* [Daghestanian], describing a mischievous female forest spirit). This will make the task of finding a definition easier for a reader who only knows the name from one tradition, and the extensive cross-referencing makes comparative work (and simple browsing!) easier.

**3. Ivanov and Toporov on the Kets and Indo-Europeans.** To represent the contribution of the principal authors, I have selected two summary sketches, one on the mythology of the tiny Ket ethnic group living along the Yenisei River in central Siberia, the other on what is probably the most widely-discussed culture of prehistory.

Represented by scarcely a thousand people in recent censuses, the Kets have nonetheless received considerable attention from Soviet researchers. Their language, now an isolate, sticks out like a sore thumb on the Siberian linguistic map, and their culture shows certain affinities with the Central Asian and Sino-Tibetan cultural areas. Ivanov and Toporov have, among their many other interests, studied Ket mythology and symbolism since at least the early 60’s, and one finds echoes of earlier publications, many of them nearly unobtainable, in their MNM sketch. After a detailed presentation of Ket cosmology and beliefs associated with shamanism, the authors present evidence for historical links between the Kets and other cultures. The Ket pantheon is structured along similar principles to those in evidence among cultures further north (Selkup, Nenets, Nganasan),

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while other data point to contacts, direct or mediated, with the Turkic and Iranian-speaking worlds (including a deity name that may be derived from Ahura-Mazda). The final proposal, and the most intriguing, is that the Kets have preserved elements of an old Eurasian myth — concerning a culture hero who finds an eagle’s nest atop the world-tree, and who eventually brings fire-making technology to his fellow humans — which is also widely attested among the native populations of the Americas (Ivanov 1982). Could this myth date from a time when the ancestors of today’s Native Americans still dwelt in Siberia? This is the sort of wide-ranging comparative approach, ambitious but well-argued, that this reviewer would have liked to have seen more of elsewhere in the encyclopedia.

Ivanov and Toporov are best known in the West for their work in the field of Indo-European studies (especially Balto-Slavic and Indic), and their jointly-authored entry on Indo-European mythology does not disappoint: both the level of scholarship, and the novel, often daring proposals, bear the authors’ personal stamp. The article begins on an almost cautious tone, and the Transcaucasian Urheimat and glottalized consonants argued so passionately for in Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1984 are conspicuously absent. The late Marija Gimbutas and her colleagues would find little to object to in the localization of the early Indo-Europeans (“southern Russia, southeast Europe and northeast Anatolia in the 4th-3rd millennia BCE”), or in the attribution to them of a predominantly pastoral-based economy, kurgan burials, and a prominent role played by the horse in religious symbolism and practice. Most of the article is devoted to the reconstruction of a Proto-Indo-European pantheon, headed by a sky-god (\*Deiwos-pater), and featuring an earth-mother, storm god, divine twins, and several figures of shifting (or ambiguous?) gender associated with the subterranean waters. Of particular interest is the attempt to reconstruct not only the outline of a Proto-Indo-European myth, but even actual fragments of the Urtext. Evidence from Vedic, Baltic, Slavic and other Indo-European traditions points to an ancient myth concerning a battle between the storm god \*Perun and a serpent-like monster from the underworld named \*Wel, possessor of vast flocks of livestock, rich pasturelands and the subterranean waters. By defeating this creature, Perun brings livestock wealth and fructifying waters to humankind. A thorough study of early Indo-European poetry, and especially of the alliterative and anagrammatic compositional practices that once obsessed Saussure (details in Toporov 1981), has led the authors to reconstruct what they claim individual lines of Indo-European verse would sound like, for example *\*perperti ngwhim Perunts* “Perun strikes down the serpent”. Ivanov and Toporov propose as well that their proto-myth was used as a model for religious practice: the slaughter and dissection of sacrificial animals (and humans?) maintained the cosmic order originating from the carved-up body parts of the defeated monster Wel, a theme later examined from a different perspective by Lincoln 1987.

There is much else in the MNM article which is equally fascinating, and controversial. The only addition I could possibly propose would be a more thorough presentation of Dumézil’s

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reconstruction of Indo-European social ideology. The three functions are mentioned, of course, but not the divisions within the functions: Mithra vs. Varuna, “le Borgne et le Manchot”, etc. Since it is precisely the attestation of details of this sort in widely-separated traditions that has demonstrated the efficacy of comparative mythology, I find this an unfortunate omission.

**4. Conclusion.** This reviewer’s global impression of Mify narodov mira is very positive, and a sampling of entries from parts of the world I know less well confirms this evaluation. Readers interested in having material for typological comparison will find MNM a useful source, one that should occupy a space on the library shelves next to reference works such as Aarne-Thompson, Bolte-Polívka, and the *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*. Mythological material from the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia is sparsely represented, if at all, in the standard references — Charachidzé’s contributions to Bonnefoy 1981, and the sketches in Friedrich 1994 are exceptions — and so one cannot but applaud the publication of a handy-to-use, well-structured work like MNM.

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