

INTRODUCTION

In the Volga region, Russian Orthodoxy and Islam have coexisted for centuries, along with their respective folk religions and mythologies, as well as a number of unique “pagan” concepts with a long history, which can partly be related to Finno-Ugric and partly to Turkic-language peoples.

This book introduces the mythical beings of three Turkic-language peoples, who are slightly isolated from the larger blocs of other Turkic peoples and live in a different religious and cultural environment: the Chuvash, the Kazan Tatars and the Bashkirs.

Although in the Volga region, Turkic-language peoples had created states as early as in the 9-10th centuries (Volga Bulgaria, Kazan-Tatar Khanate), what is typical of the development of most other Turkic peoples is also true here: the evolution of the peoples known to us today can only be dated to after the Mongol conquest.

The languages of the Kazan Tatars and the Bashkirs are closely related to each other; both belong to the Kipchak language branch, but the Chuvash language differs significantly from them, as it represents a separate branch within the Turkic languages. The two groups also differ in their religions: the Tatars and Bashkirs have been Muslims for centuries, and it is also worth mentioning that Islam has been present in the region since the 10th century. The Chuvash have officially been Orthodox Christians since the 16th century; but in reality, the multi-wave missions were rather unsuccessful among most of them until the 20th century. Thus, they had many beliefs even in the early 20th century that could be called pagan for want of a better term. It is also worth adding that some of the names of Chuvash mythical beings are of Arabic and Persian origin and can be linked to Islam, which can be partly explained by Tatar influence; yet it may have deeper roots, as Volga Bulgaria made Islam the state religion in the early 10th century.

The picture outlined in the present volume, of course, characterises a certain period: basically the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. This is a period from which a larger

number of sources are available to us, but at the same time myths, folk beliefs and folk religion are still alive in the majority of the society as a coherent system passed down from previous generations. Nevertheless, there are smaller differences in the cases of individual peoples – numerous records had already been taken among the Chuvash in earlier periods, whereas it was the opposite in the case of the Bashkirs: sources were scarce even in this period.

The beliefs of the three Turkic peoples and the level of their exploration are also very different. In the case of the Chuvash, we have information, even detailed descriptions, about the beliefs of the “pagan” Chuvash from as early as the 18th century and, from the second half of the 19th century to the first third of the 20th century, hundreds of articles and studies were published; first by Russian authors performing church-related or teaching work in Chuvashia, and then increasingly by the emerging Chuvash intelligentsia. Several substantial works have been published over the past half-century, written by Denisov, Salmin and, most recently, by the staff of the Chuvash Institute of Humanities.

As for the beliefs and folk religion of the Bashkirs, hardly any detailed study had been published until the end of the 20th century; the most significant of them being Rudenko’s ethnographic work published at the beginning of the 20th century, first in French journals and then in a Russian-language volume. Although the collection of folk beliefs gained more momentum in the second half of the 20th century, these descriptions often reflect beliefs that are no longer alive, but rather reminiscences of traditions that had once lived. A great summary work was published by F. G. Khisamitdinova, who sought to collect and analyse Bashkir beliefs in several “mythological dictionaries”.

Some local researchers endeavoured to collect and systematise the beliefs of the Tatars in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This process was halted for decades and followed by Galimjan Gyył’manov’s two-volume book, written with the intention of summarising the subject. As the work was published in Tatar, it unfortunately did not resonate even in the Russian-language literature.

I have a few more preliminary remarks to make about transcription and some terminology issues. My book is primarily intended for those interested in ethnography, ethnology and religious studies. However, due to the Turkologic aspects of the topic, I had to choose a transcription method that would neither deter non-linguist readers nor appal experts on Turkology. Taking into account the transcription rules applied by Turkologists, I have chosen a simple transliteration, which also has the advantage that a Latin-script Chuvash, Tatar or Bashkir word can easily be “written back” to the Cyrillic form that appears in the dictionary of the given language. The data can thus be retrieved without any knowledge of Turkology.

Another problem to be solved was setting up an alphabetical order – I could say with only slight exaggeration that I had to consider almost as many alphabetical orders as the various dictionaries, glossaries and studies that I used. English-language literature usually follows the order of the English alphabet, while Russian-language literature is based on the Russian alphabet, but some dictionaries and glossaries are based on linguistic considerations. In the case of special sounds that exist neither in English nor in Russian, there are several possible solutions used in different orders by different authors. In the end, I thought the best solution was, since my book is published in English, to provide my data in the order of the English alphabet. Speech sounds not found in English always follow those most similar in production. For example, there is a short, reduced (ă) sound in Chuvash, which I classified after *a*. I compiled the transcription tables to reflect the order I use.

The names of some mythical beings could be translated because they are common nouns or their derived forms, but some are not like this. In many cases, however, the translation would be misleading. For example, although the forms *šuyttan*, *šaytan*, are etymologically ultimately identical with the English word *Satan*, their mythical background and thus their meaning is very different. In view of all this, I did not translate the names of the beings.

I must also touch on the lower or upper case initials of the names of the mythical beings. The literature heretofore has not set a model for this either; the spellings are completely chaotic even within an

article. One reason for this is that there are several mythical beings for which it is impossible to decide whether their name can be considered a proper noun. There are some mythical beings whose names can undoubtedly be interpreted as proper nouns (e.g. the Chuvash *Esrel*), some names actually describe a quality (e.g. ‘barn spirit’), but in many cases, these are difficult to distinguish from one another (e.g. Chuvash *Pülëxšě*, literally meaning ‘distributor’). In the book, I have applied the following procedure: in the sections quoting the descriptions by other scholars, I kept the lower or upper case initials of the original writing. I always used capital initials for entries and references to entries (→ *Tură*). Most mythical creatures’ names cannot be regarded as proper nouns, so I basically used lowercase initials. I have only deviated from this in few cases, mostly in the case of Chuvash beings, where some god names can be considered to be the proper names of a particular supernatural being (for example: *Pülëxšě*, *Xărpan*, *Xěrlě-šir*, *Pixampar*). I capitalize the name of God (and its compounds such as Earth God, Sun God), Sun and Moon (when they appear as celestial bodies).

Although the available sources are very different for the three peoples, for the sake of the uniformity of my own work, I processed them in the same way. The book consists of three major units: the presentation and analysis of the mythical creatures in individual entries, the presentation of mythical texts, and the scientific apparatus.

The first chapter presents the Chuvash, Tatar and Bashkir mythical beings in three subchapters, respectively, in alphabetical order. I present the research on mythical beings to date at the beginning of these chapters in a brief summary of research history, followed by a transcription table. For a particular mythical being, I basically focused on ethnographic collections to date, the linguistic aspects of the word (e.g. etymology) and the available folklore texts. In the literature published in recent decades, the collected data and their interpretation are often inextricably mixed; so to avoid this, I chose the path of drawing a clear line between data and interpretation by dividing my entries into two parts.

The entries are headed by the name of the mythical being. After that, the given mythical being is presented in two different ways

with two different font sizes. The first, smaller print section contains the most important data about the mythical being. After the Roman numeral **I**, I supply the meaning or the most important, short interpretation of the mythical being published in the literature so far. Possible variants or dialect data are also included here. Since there are many instances where the name of a mythical being is also used as a common noun, I provide the common meaning of the given word or compound, if any, under the Roman numeral **II**. I put the meaning or, in some cases, a brief description of the nature of the being between apostrophes. Within the apostrophes, I used ordinal numbers in several places to give the order of the given meaning in the dictionary (or in each study). In this way, I can indicate if a given meaning only occurs as a secondary or tertiary one. Since the Roman numeral **I** describes the meaning or nature of a particular mythical being, it may be the case that there is an Arabic number 4 at the very beginning of the article, after the apostrophe, because the specific name has several other meanings in everyday use, which are primary to the name of the mythical being. In this case, the everyday meanings of the word follow the Roman **II** with Arabic ordinal numbers. Let me give an example from the Chuvash entry *Sinker*: “**I**. ‘4. name of a god’ (Ashm. XI, 149.) [...] **II**. ‘1. misfortune, unexpected event, trouble; 2. contagious disease; 3. terrible, frightening thing; 5. solidification’ (Ashm. XI, 149).” Here, in Ashmarin’s dictionary, one of the word’s meanings is a mythical being, but its main meanings are ‘misfortune, trouble, disease’.

It sometimes happens that in the literature, an author adopts some data from another, which I considered important to indicate in my own material. I added relationship symbols to such items, thus for example, “Zol. 21. > Ashm. I, 143” means that the given form can be found in the first volume of Ashmarin’s dictionary, but Ashmarin adopted this item from Zolotnitskiy.

After the Roman numeral **III**, the etymology of the word is given (if known), and where we have information on a similar belief held by other Turkic peoples, I refer to it here. Roman numeral **IV** indicates the texts in which the particular mythical being is mentioned, which can be found in the anthology in the second half of my book.

In the second, and usually longer part of the entry, printed in larger font size, I describe in more detail or analyse the data referring to the mythical being, the literature published so far and, if necessary, give a critique of it.

In the Chuvash section, I added an extra subchapter where I present in tabular form lists of names of gods and spirits that had either been compiled by previous authors or the occasionally dozens of names which were related to some ceremony or magic procedure.

The mythical texts are also presented in three major subchapters (Chuvash, Tatar, Bashkir), starting with the verse forms followed by smaller epic genres. Here, I did not try to choose texts of a similar nature, since, for example, perhaps the most interesting part of the Chuvash material is the pagan prayers, which cannot be found in the Tatar and Bashkir material, as opposed to a large number of incantations. Some of the mythical texts are mythical legends and memorats, but I also present descriptions of beliefs and healing.

The scientific apparatus includes the Index, which contains not only all the mythical beings that appear in the book (even if they do not feature in a separate entry), but also the form variants and dialectal data.

Here, I must acknowledge the great deal of help given by Hungarian and foreign colleagues during my travels and our consultations and by sending me literature that was hard to come by. I owe my thanks to Judit Szalontai Dmitrieva; among Chuvash scholars, to the late Professors V. D. Dmitriev and M. I. Skvortsov; to Professor N. I. Egorov, V. G. Kharitonova, A. P. Dolgova and V. A. Enderov; to my Turkish colleague Bülent Bayram and to Bashkir Professor F. G. Khisamitdinova. Besides, I must also thank István Zimonyi, Benedek Péri and Paolo Sartori for their help with the publication, András Róna-Tas for proofreading the manuscript and Ádám Molnár for many years of encouragement.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my grandmothers.