

THE CAUCASUS CULTURE – Mythology

OVERVIEW

Myths as part of every culture provide information about the civilizations, the origin of humans, their beliefs, their deities, supernatural beings and heroes. Myths also tell stories about customs and traditions, and explain natural events. Myths are connected to timeless beliefs and passed on from one generation to the next. The subjects of myths are also universal in the sense that different cultures that had no close interaction with each other believe similar myths, share themes and create their own heroes that are notably similar.

The peoples of the Northern and Southern Caucasus are either Muslims or Christians. Christianity spread in the Caucasus in the early 4th century, while Islam started to spread in the whole Caucasus in the 7th century through Arab invaders. Until then, the early Caucasus nations were pagan. Their religion was animistic, anthropomorphic and nature-inspired. Often people created cults around natural objects such as trees, stones, fires or springs in reverence to the spirit, or demon, within.



Fire has strong associations in the South Caucasus. There is evidence of petroleum-bearing rocks and flares, (eternal fires), arising from the surface seepage of oil and gas in Baku. Fire also indicated that the peoples of the Caucasus had been under the cultural influences of the fire-worshipping religion of Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism of Persia.

These ancient traditions and beliefs are transmitted by one generation to another for centuries. Although revolutionary thought rejected the traditional area of human cultures that concerned beliefs and customs, the Soviets used mythological elements, like the cult of Stalin being equated with the Sun, in art works to legitimize their existence and authority indicating that tradition of worship continued.

Even under oppressive regimes, traditional mythology, which is a product of human beings, will continue to exist as an instrument of the politics of the states and as a component of cultures that unites or differentiates people.

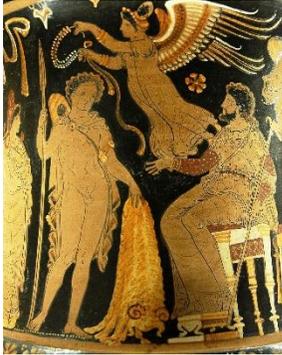
ANCIENT PERIOD

SOUTH CAUCASUS

Georgia: The Georgian pagans had polytheistic beliefs, where each tribe in Georgia had its own deities, who possessed supernatural power to protect and establish order in nature and society. The supreme deity was the male moon. He was depicted as a warrior, and often a bull was sacrificed to him. The second deity was the female sun. She was the deity of fertility and crops. The third one was Kviria who ruled over the world. The Supreme God *Morige Ghmerti* was the head of the pantheon of gods. He was the creator of the universe, and all other divine beings.

Angels, saints and icons were named *Khat'i*. The supreme deity Armazi was his son and represented the male moon, and established order. The second one was his daughter, Barbale, the deity of the sun and fertility, who provided good harvests. The third one was Kviria who served as the mediator between Ghmerti and humans.

Angelic beings lived in mountains (heroes such as Kopala, Lakhsari, Pirkushi) and fought against human enemies the mythical evil forces, Devs.



The Greek myth of *Jason and the Argonauts* took place in the Colchis kingdom where the *Golden Fleece* was kept. The Argonauts were heroes who accompanied the Greek hero Jason in his quest to find the Golden Fleece. Jason arrived in Colchis to find the Golden Fleece but the King of Colchis, Aeetes, asked him to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. However, Aeetes' daughter Medea helped him to overcome these obstacles and get the Golden Fleece. Medea then married him and Jason took her away from Colchis.

Armenia: The Armenians were initially pagan, and were nature worshipers. They worshiped eagles, lions, the sun and heaven.

The ancient Armenians were called *Arevortik* (Children of the Sun). The sun deity was called *Ar* (or *Ara*). The god *Tork Angegh* was the symbol of the strength etc. The pantheon of pagan Armenian deities inherited their main features from the Proto-Indo-European tribes that inhabited the Armenian Plateau and later the pantheon was modified under the influence of Hurro-Urartian, Semitic, Persian and Greek cultures.

Armenian mythology was strongly influenced by Zoroastrianism which dates back to the 1st millennium BCE after the establishment of Persian dominance in Armenia.

During the Yervanduni period, under Achaemenid rule, the Armenian pantheon was heavily influenced by Persian beliefs. The supreme god *Aramazd* was considered as the creator of heaven and earth in Armenia. The god *Ahuramazda* in the inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings was also regarded as the creator of heaven and earth.

During the Achaemenid and Parthian period, Armenians were under the influence of Mazdaism and they developed a mixed system of Persian-Armenian beliefs. For example, during the Parthian conquest the Armenian goddess of fertility became *Anahit* under the influence of the goddess the Persian *Anahita*.



Azerbaijan: Originally, the Caucasian Albanians were pagan, but starting from the 6th century BCE, especially during Achaemenid, Parthian and Sassanid rule, Zoroastrian monotheism which involved fire and outdoor altars, began to spread in Caucasian Albanian territory. Caucasian Albanian mythology was also rich with old beliefs, and antropomorphic and zoomorphic figures.

Bronze figurines Birds. 1st millennium BCE

In the pagan Azerbaijan, *Mother Earth* signified the goddess, the wife of the *Master of Heaven* (Tenqri) which was observed in period from the Neolithic era (8-6 millennium BCE).

NORTH CAUCASUS

Chechen

Before the adoption of Islam, the Nokhchii people practiced their own religious traditions and beliefs, and their ancient religion was based on cycles of nature and astronomy, with many gods and complex rituals.

Ancient petroglyphs in Khoy village, Chechnya



POST – CLASSICAL PERIOD

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA:

The oldest religious tales of the Caucasian people carry motifs from the Prometheus myth. The Georgian Amirani and the Abkhazian Abrskil were heroes stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity.

In pagan Georgian cosmology, the universe consisted of three worlds (*skneli*): *Zeskneli* is the highest world, and it is the home of the gods; *the earthly world* is the middle world, it is the home of humans, animals, plants; and *Qveskneli* is the lowest world, below the earth inhabited by demons, evil spirits and dragons. Black is the colour of lowest world. After the spread of Christianity, traditional cosmology was combined with Christian teachings. While *Zeskneli* became *heaven*, *Qveskneli* turned into hell.



When the Georgian tribes began to unite, their religious notions began to merge and a certain order and hierarchy was established. Along with Christianity, many of the notions have taken on Christian names. The moon deity Tetri Giorgi (White George) was depicted as a warrior. The sacred animal, the bull, was often sacrificed to him since the bull's horns have the shape of a crescent moon. The bull's head with crescent-shaped horns is also found in Christian Cathedrals during the Middle Ages as over the Gates of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta, Georgia (11th century).

ARMENIA: The pre-Christian Armenian pantheon had strong links to the Greek pantheon. For example, Aramazd was identified with Zeus, Vahagn with Heracles, Astghik with Aphrodite, and Anahit with Hera. There was a newly organized national pantheon at the beginning of the Christian era with seven chief deities Aramazd, Anahit, Tiur, Mihr, Barshamina, Nane, and Astghik.

After the adoption of Christianity in the 4th century, some of the ancient myths and beliefs amalgamated with Christian beliefs. Some elements of pre-Christian Armenian mythology were transferred to Christian figures. For example, characteristics of Vahagn appear in Armenian legends of John the Baptist.

The Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi mentioned a legendary hero, *Ara the Handsome*, in his *History of Armenia*. He was presented as the son of Aram and a descendant of the legendary patriarch Hayk, the forefather of the Armenians. It has been claimed that this figure has connections with the *Handsome to the Myth of Er*, mentioned in Plato's *Republic*. In pre-Christian Armenia, in the 3rd century, *Ara* was regarded as a male god, but after Christianity he was considered a male hero. In his book, Khorenatsi also describes the birth of the god *Vahagn*.

AZERBAIJAN: The mythology of Azerbaijan includes the elements of cosmogonic myths concerning the creation of the world, calendar myths concerning seasonal processes, and ethnologic myths concerning the origin of the ethnos.



Azerbaijani mythology contains antropomorphic figures like Aghach kishi, Qulyabani, Div and Peri etc. and zoomorphic figures like the Simurg, the Wealth bird, Huma, the Samandar bird, the horse, the wolf, the goat etc. There are also ethnologic myths, myths connected with ancestor cults, myths connected with God and spirits, seasonal myths, myths connected with cults and Ongon (a spirit of shamanistic belief), and myths connected with world catastrophes and the end of the world.

Certain trees, like the oak and the iron tree, were regarded as sacred and people carried pieces of bark from these trees on their necks as amulets to protect themselves from the evil eye and illness. Fire and black rock were also viewed as sacred and having curative powers.

Idolatrous beliefs relying on forces of nature like Fire has strong associations Zoroastrianism in Caucasian Albania. There are evidence of petroleum-bearing rocks and flares (eternal fires), arising from the surface seepage of oil and gas in Baku.

Under the influence of Persian culture, in Azerbaijani mythology zoomorphic figures (birds Huma, Simurq (Anka, Zumrud, Tovuz), Samandar bird, Wealth bird, White bird, Black bird, Wolf, horse etc) also existed.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: The pre-Islamic Vainakh developed a pantheon of deities that reflected their ethno-cultural features and were the products of nature and geographical relief. Traditional religion in Chechnya is animistic with a number of nature and patron deities. The head of the Chechen pantheon was *Malkha-Dela* (the god of sky). There were other gods like *Sela* (god of thunder and lightning), *Furki* (goddess of the wind), *Aza* (goddess of the sun), *Elta* (god of hunting), *Dika-Dela* (goddess of truth), *Kchokha-Dela* (goddess of peace), *Pkha-Dela* (god of place) and *Tusholi* (goddess of fertility).

The wolf (*borz*) is a strong national symbol, and is an example to be followed by men. The cult of the wolf was widespread in medieval times.

Many folktales of the Caucasian people include motifs from the Greek Myth of Prometheus. Vainakh Nart Sagas introduce Pkharmat, the most important hero of all the Narts. Pkharmat is a blacksmith figure who steals heavenly fire from the god Sela for mortals. Another heroic figure is Tulpar, a horse with supernatural abilities who came to help Pkharmat when the god Sela chained Pkharmat to the summit of Mount Kazbek where Ida, a falcon, comes every morning to tear Pkharmat's liver.

Questions

1- It appears that the myths of the many cultures in the Caucasus always under the influence of foreign cultures and they are mostly common. Despite the fact that the nations of the Caucasus have a history of resisting outside invaders, then why have foreign cultures been so influential there?

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EARLY MODERN PERIOD

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: After the adoption of Christianity, elements of pagan cosmology were incorporated into Christian doctrine. For example, the *zeskneli* was identified with heaven and the home of the Trinity; *qveskneli* was identified with hell and the home of devil, the principal figures in the pre-Christian pantheon of the Georgians *Giorgi* with St. George, *Mtavarangelozi* with the Archangel, the fertility deity *Barbal* with St. Barbara and the protector of women *Lamaria* with St. Mary.

Sayat Nova: Of Armenian and Georgian origin, the bard and troubadour Nova was the first folk singer of King Erekle II in Tbilisi. He narrated and performed his poems in the Georgian, Armenian, and Azeri languages in Persian melodies.

ARMENIA:

Old national festivals, legends and beliefs were carried over into the folk traditions with new meanings. The Armenian church also incorporated some of these legends and beliefs into its rituals.

Calendar: Zoroastrian and mythological influences can be observed in the Armenian calendar. The days of the month carried the names of deities, heroes or natural objects as did the names of the months and days such as third month of the year *trē* (Zoroastrian *Tir*), the ninth month of the year *ahekan* (Iranian *āhrakān-; Zoroastrian *Ātarō*), and the eighth day of the month *Mihr* (Armenian deity *Mihr*) etc.

Before the 18th century, *Nawarsard* was the ancient Armenian New Year (August 11). In the 18th century, the calendar was reformed and *Nawasard* (Avestan *nava sarəḏa*) January 1 was recognized as the New Year.



AZERBAIJAN:

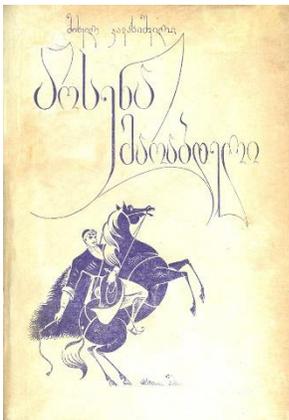
Baku's oil was considered a source of holy fire. In the 18th century, for the burning oil of the Absheron peninsula Zoroastrian merchants from India came to Azerbaijan to build a fire temple known as an *Ateshgah* (fire temple) in the Surakhani village near Baku.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: Chechens used to observe a wolf cult that would prevent wolf raids on sheep by observing Saturday as being a special day. In a story, it was believed that the Chechen hero Turpalo-Noxchuo was raised by a Wolf Mother. The wolf symbolized freedom and power and the symbol has been used since the 18th century by the Chechens.

In the 18th to the early 19th century, *some elements of pagan worship were preserved in Chechen mythology*. For example, a statue of Tusholi, the fertility goddess, was found in the vicinity of Lake Galanchozh in Chechnya and dated to the 15th -18th century. Tusholi was worshipped for many centuries, by women to have sons. There was a Tusholi festival which was held every year in April.

19TH CENTURY



SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: The Georgian folk hero *Arsena Marabdeli* who fought against the Russian occupiers in early 19th century is also considered a Georgian Robin Hood because of his struggle against serfdom and greedy nobles. His efforts were commemorated in the folk poem *Arsenas Leksi* (Odzelashvili) which was first recorded in the 1860s and published in 1872.

ARMENIA: The Armenian oral folk epic dating from the 8th - 10th century, *Sasuntzi Davith*, is about the adventures of the legendary hero *David of Sasun* and was written down in 1873 by the folklorist Garegin Srvandziantis.

AZERBAIJAN: Similar heroes were attested in Azerbaijani folk epics. The hero of the Azerbaijani epic *Koroglu* was a bandit, a Robin Hood, who fought the local

ruler and robbed caravans. It was first compiled in Azerbaijan in the mid-19th century by the Polish poet Alexander Chodzko.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: *Abrek* was a hero in Chechen mythology, a bandit fighting against the Russian occupation of the North Caucasus territory in the 19th century.

Question:

1- How many Caucasus nations were under the influence of Zoroastrianism?

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20TH CENTURY

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: Although the Georgians are Orthodox Christians, pagan folk customs such as the use of songs in rituals for healing purposes chanted over sick children, were still practiced in the 20th century. For example, the Georgians believed, that the spirit of disease, *Bat'onebi* visited the houses of the sick in the evening and lived in the bodies of the sick children.



Kopala was the deity of lightning worshipped by the mountain people in Georgia.

A temple to *Kopala* in Pshavi, in the village of Udzilaurta in an open place called Iremtkalo.

Iakhsar was deity of the Pshav-Khevsur pantheon, the cult of which was centred in the village of Shuapkho. He was also a deity of the wider Kistauri community.

The *Bat'onebi*, for example, are spirits who are believed to live beyond the Black Sea, and they are sent out by their superior in all directions in order to test the loyalty of mankind. During the daytime, the *bat'onebi* move about on mules. In the evening, however, they return to the houses of the sick and reside in the bodies of the stricken. *Bat'onebi* are to be obeyed without question, as resistance only enrages them.

The blisters from chickenpox (*qvavili*, literally: flowers) and the redness from measles (*ts'itela*, literally: redness) are said to be signs of the arrival of the *bat'onebi*. In preparation for the ritual, the patient's bed and room are decorated with colourful fabrics and flowers. Visitors wear red or white garments and walk around the sick person with presents for the *bat'onebi* in their hands.

A table full of sweets and a kind of Christmas tree are prepared for them too. If the illness becomes worse, the family of the patient turn to the ritual of asking-for-pardon (*sabodisho*) and a *mebodishe* (a woman who has access to the *bat'onebi* and acts as a mediator) is invited to contact them to find out what they want and to win them over. Once the patient recovers, the *bat'onebi* have to be escorted on their way, back to where they came from.

ARMENIA: Although the Armenians are Christian, elements of Zoroastrian and Mithraic beliefs are still preserved in Armenian culture. For example, February 14 is associated with the pagan symbols of sun and fire which is celebrated as a religious holiday *Diarentarach* (Presenting before the Lord) which is dedicated to newlywed and young couples for good fortune and fertility. Young couples dance, sing and jump over flames.



Another pagan tradition that still exists is the tying of pieces of cloth onto trees near a church, in the hope that God would see their wishes.

Another ancient tradition, *Matagh*, the sacrifice of an animal, to give a gift to God and show mercy by helping the poor, also still exists in Armenia. In addition, a church meal with bulgur and meat (or chicken) is served to people 40 days after of the death person who was a member of the congregation.

A pagan figure called the *Arevakhach* (Sun cross – Eternity sign) is still used on buildings, churches, khachkars, memorials, logos, medals etc.

Eternity sign carved on a khachkar for the victims of the 1988 Armenian earthquake

AZERBAIJAN: The mythological elements related to the cosmogonic myths referring the creation of the world, calendar myths referring seasonal processes, and ethnologic myths referring the origin of the ethnic race still exist in Azerbaijani folklore and literature. The mythological elements are found in the ceremony of Sayachy (Blessing Ceremony, counting) and Novruz (celebration of spring).

Mythological elements are also found in ceremonial songs and dances such as Kosa-Kosa, a blessing, fertility and abundance ceremony. Kosa is a mythological male character associated with youth and springtime. In the ceremony Godu-godu, godu associated with the ancient goddess of sun.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: There are still elements of mythology, elements of cosmogonic myths, some names of deities, Nart saga, totemic beliefs and the folk calendar have survived into the 20th century Chechen mythology. For example, Chechens still name a rain ritual to call the rain-god *Khin-Dela*. A group of children would go from door to door, one of the boys wearing a waterproof bag over his head. The residents of the houses would throw water on the boy and distribute sweets to the children.

Chechen cosmogonic myths are maintained in the genesis of Earth, Sun, Moon and stars. The name of the *Milky Way* corresponds to *Cha Takhina Tacha* (the route of scattered straw) and Great Bear to *Vorkh Veshin Vorkh Seda* (the seven brothers' seven stars).

The names of deities appears in animistic ideas. For example, *Latta-nana* corresponds to *Mother of Earth*; *Mekha-nana* corresponds to *Mother of Winds*, *Khi-nana* corresponds to *Mother of Water* and *Un-nana* corresponds to *Mother of Diseases*.

Questions:

1- Which deities and customs from early Caucasian culture have survived into the 20th century and where can we see these traces?

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