

Transformation of Giant Creatures in Caucasian Mythology

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Caucasian mythology is very peculiar and diversified. It can be said that the myths which have passed through the millennia have much in common. It should be noted that giant creatures, convinced of their power and having such advantage, were not always well disposed to other inhabitants. Moreover, they use this advantage not only to praise their names, but also to satisfy various temptations, such as the appropriation of the property of others, the destruction of others, and so on.

The present article deals with the representation of these mythological titans, which are represented in various ways. It is noteworthy that giants play a significant role in Caucasian mythology, consisting of the world of *devis*, giants and goliaths.

The main objective of the paper is to show that giant creatures in the mythology of the Caucasian people always contradict the representatives of the ordinary world, mainly to emphasize their advantage, and appropriate the property of others by the use of force leading to many fights and much bloodshed.

The importance of Giants in Caucasian mythology

The mythological stories were created in ancient times. It is very difficult, almost impossible, to say the exact time and place of writing of the mythological stories, even the creation of folk-tales. The world mythology knows a lot of giant creatures. Many of them are differently presented in the mythologies of different nations; they have both common and distinctive features. Giants, first of all, are attested in Greek mythology. The word *giant* is Greek and means huge creatures that were considered as sons of Gaia and Uranus. “According to some versions, they were sons of Gaia and Tartarus. These were clumsy beings like rocks which had huge snakes instead of legs. Gods hated them, and they destroyed this evil kind. These mighty giants were cast by Gods into bowels of the earth from where they got out” (Gelovani, 1983: 115–116).

Caucasian folklore is generally familiar with giants, *devis* and other huge creatures: “In Caucasian mythology a special group of huge giants is created by the *devis* who

came here as a result of cultural and historical contacts with the eastern world. In the eastern, namely in Iranian mythology, they are negative characters” (Sikharulidze, 2006: 211)

There are three main eposes dominating the Ossetian folklore: the Nart tales, legends about the Tsartsiats and the adventures of the Daredjans (Daredzans). All of these eposes represent the richest mythological world and have much in common. It is true that among the heroes of the stories of Tsartsiats, Narts and Amiranians benevolence reigns, but they are equally severe towards the devis and the evil spirits.

***Devi* as a mythological image**

Devi as a mythological image and concept is the most developed and realized in the Caucasian mythology. This word, according to some scholars, comes from ancient Persian and Turkish. “‘Dev’ – an evil demon, devil. In Avesta ‘Daeva’ is an evil spirit” (Gelovani, 1983: 182–183).

According to V. Abaev: “*Багъ (wæjyg)* is a very popular figure in Ossetian demonological belief as well as in fairy tales and eposes. This is a creature of huge height and force, usually hostile to humans. In the fairy tales and *Daredzan* legends borrowed from Georgia, the Ossetian *wæjyg* consistently responds to the Georgian *devi* – the ‘giant’ goes back to the Persian *dev*, the ancient Iranian *daiva* – ‘demon’” (Abaev 1990:105-106). Abaev also has a broad interpretation of devis in his etymological dictionary and attributes to them demonic, devilish features: “In some fairy tales with identical plots, in which evil beings act, in one version they are called evil *wæjyg*, in the other – *xæjræg*.” (Abaev, 1989: 68–71).

Devis also have a common image. In the majority of legends The *Devi* has a human face disfigured by fatness and large size. He is of huge build and his mouth stinks. Some of them have individual characteristics: some are one-eyed, some have colorful beards, some are lame, etc. But Devis, mainly, have several heads. There are three-headed, nine-headed, and in some fairy tales a hundred-headed *devi* appears.

In the Ossetian Nart stories the Devis are mighty giants who are enemies of people. Some of them possess swords from their mothers’ wombs (the battle with Soslan). Some of them are dancing circle dances (Batradz kills him). Some of them are so huge that heroes spend nights in their skulls, thinking that it is a cave.

However, according to Vasily Abaev, there are also “kind” devis. According to Z. Kiknadze there are “sworn brothers of the Devis”. It appears that Narts had such sworn brothers: “Narts and devis fraternized with God, they did not dare to fight against the Tsartsiats and asked God: God, exterminate the Tsartsiats” (Bepieva and Popiashvili, 2009: 122). Nevertheless, all this does not change the stereotype of the devis established in human consciousness: the devi is a very big, or rather huge, shaggy, many-headed, terrifying creature which is mainly perceived as a creature using violence in folklore. In the oral literature of many people there are legends about their huge build. In one of the Nart legends there is a myth about the power of devis:

Narts, who went for raids, were overtaken by night and they continued their way in the dark. Suddenly Soslan’s spear tripped something. They saw something like a cave. The Narts entered and were surprised – there was neither wood, nor rock around. They spent the night there. When the sun rose, they saw that it was a huge skull. The Narts asked God: “Revive this man as he used to be, only that he saw nothing”. A huge devi stood up in front of them. His lips left such stench that pushed Soslan far away. Having learned about the Narts, devi touched Soslan and was surprised of how weak build they were. He was interested – What do you eat? – Bread and meat of animals. – Then you will disappear. – And what did you eat? – asked the Narts. – We have been living by a fat of earth. And the devi grasped the earth, squeezed out fat and gave Soslan to try. “Fat of the earth is so nutritious that you won’t want to eat for a week”, – said the devi. Soslan was oversaturated. (Tskhovrebova, 1988: 309–310).

Such legends can be found in the folklore of other nations of the Caucasus as well. In the Chechen folklore something similar happened to the Nart Seska Solsa (the same Soslan as in the Ossetian Narts). A similar adventure is described in legends of Amiran-Daredzans.

Devis differed from people not only in the food they ate, but also in their way of life. They defeated their rivals thanks only to their might and the thought of people as devilish creatures. In the same legend we read:

How do you have fun, amuse yourself? – asked Soslan.
– Climb the hill, and I will show how we amuse ourselves.

Soslan ascended the hill, but as soon as he saw that devi pulled out a tree and threw it to the hill, he immediately changed the place. The tree completely destroyed the hill.

– And how did you survive? – the devi was surprised.

– I managed to get out, – answered the Nart.

– We know nothing about such tricks, you are from a sort of devil, leave me alone, – answered the devi.

The Narts asked God to turn devi back to what he used to be, then went back home, and continued their ordinary life (Tskhovrebova, 1988: 309–311).

It should be noted that the Georgian mountain people also called devis *Ajmeba* (Ajami – means ‘naïve’, ‘a bit muddle-headed’). The giant creatures that characterize different ethnic communities of the Caucasus are added to the world of devis, giants and goliaths. Avars call a one-eyed giant *Gadarober*. *Komble* is also a one-eyed giant who, on the one hand, is a character from the famous fairy tale and, on the other hand, an image of the god’s son – Kopala who is the god of mountaineers’ in the pantheon of East Georgia.

Giant creatures – *Garbashes* – appear in the folk-tales of Chechen and Ingush people who are both men and women. In the folk-tales of Balkars and Kabardians *Emegens* correspond to Garbashes – these are female giants with huge cuneiform teeth and big breasts thrown over their shoulders. They were carnivorous giants.

In the Nart sagas of the Adyghe people there is a woman warrior – *Dakhanago*. According to folk-tales, she defeated even the Narts.

The importance of *Evgvipars*

Besides the devis and other giant creatures, a peculiar kind of huge creature – *Evgvipar* appears in the Ossetian folk-tales. According to the legends of *Tsartsiats*, the gods created Evgvipars with a special purpose – in order that they should punish the Tsartsiats and bring them to their senses.

Evgvipars were only men because they had one purpose only: to make war, to fight the Tsartsiats and destroy them.

According to the legends of the Tsartsiats, the reason for creating humans was because they (the humans) should be the most intelligent creatures in the world.

Evgvipars are a peculiar kind of huge creatures and they are more identified with those giants who lived in time immemorial; they had their own specific, intended purpose, after which they became superfluous in life and for this reason they died out; they did not even have anyone to talk to them.

Transformation of the Giants

The transformation of the giant creatures is clearly demonstrated in the folk-tales of different nations. The main objective of giant creatures in the mythology of the Caucasian peoples, creatures who always contradict representatives of the ordinary world, is mainly to emphasize their advantage. And all of this will ultimately lead to many fights and much bloodshed.

It is very interesting that in the epos of the Tsartsats there appears a transformed image of giants, devis, and goliaths, but there also exists a being different from the rest of them, a more peculiar image of a creature using violence. He has strong physical ability and a huge build. He has much in common with giants using violence, but also differs from them. He is called *Tabu*, and he is a human. Some *Tabus* live alone, some with people. But they have a different physical ability, and they also differ in their way of life.

Tsartsats had no holy places; they did not know either God, or angels. Tsartsats had only *Tabus*. *Tabu* was a man. Of course, *Tabu* was not chosen among the people, but he was so strong that had strength of five-six people. Such a strong man still prayed before battles. All *Tabus* had their own people, and certainly, he was also their leader. Tsartsats had to pray and make a sacrifice to their *Tabus*.

There were also such *Tabus* who lived together with their people in one place. There were also those which could not live in one place. They were nomadic *Tabus*, and they took their people with them. Nomadic Tsartsats lived in groups underground, in caves. *Tabus* also lived in these caves; only the best places belonged to *Tabus* (Bepieva and Popiashvili, 2009: 111).

Certainly, *Tabus* enjoyed all advantages and did not work; they always lived off people, and made them work. People brought them all the best things and they took everything for granted. They also used people for their pleasure. Their power allowed

them everything. They made people hunt for animals; the Tabus ate meat and in winter they wore fur clothes made from animal skins.

But that is not all. The Tabus were cannibals. Tabus often attacked people dominated by other Tabus, stole their children, and ate women and men. Then Tabus went to fight against other Tabus.

“During the battle they had such rule: at first Tabus fought with each other. A victorious Tabu expelled the people of the defeated Tabu, and ate their children. If the people of the defeated Tabu did not obey the winner, then the victorious Tabu ate them too. The defeated Tabu was thrown into a pit and starved” (Bepieva and Popiashvili, 2009: 113).

The people of the defeated Tabu swore fidelity to the winner and fully obeyed him. As we have already noted, Tabus ate human flesh, they were cannibals. The Tabus required sacrifices from their people as well, and the people themselves were ready to sacrifice a man so that the Tabu would be grateful to them.

On holidays the Tsartiats sacrificed their children to their own Tabu. All Tsartiats surrounded Tabu with songs and dances, and so addressed him:

“Oh, our great Tabu, let your grief be ours,
The one who sits at the top, who leads us,
Who protects us against all troubles. May it be of benefit and bring blessings to him
(Bepieva and Popiashvili, 2009: 113)

People considered their Tabu a rescuer, guardian, defender against troubles, and first and foremost they called him a protector. Such a great sacrifice certainly caused a lot of discontent among the people. The evil in the Tabus began to prevail, and they had many addictions; they began to eat human flesh. This went on for a long time. Transformation of the personality, having a huge, giant build similar to a goliath does not appear suddenly in the epos of the Tsartsiats. The people living in such conditions got used to the fact that a person with huge power always tried to use it in his favor. He considered others as an opportunity which he used for his comfort, otherwise they were punished. In the epos of Tsartsiats there appears an absolutely new person with great power; everyone knelt before him and his behavior was different:

A son was born at Tsartsats who was strong as a lion, courageous as a devi. If two hundred and twenty people fought against him, they would not be able to defeat him. When people first saw him, they thought that he was a strong Tabu, and people would again suffer as with other Tabus. So they brought him a child as a sacrifice. He answered:

– I am not a Tabu, I don't eat human flesh, children must live, we must forget all bad habits, neither Tsartsats, nor others should eat human flesh.

After that this boy, Caucasus, saved people from Tabu, forbade people "harmful and nasty habits". He married and settled down to live on a glacier. They had a son who was named Nart. He was a strong, but absolutely different person with a different way of life and habits (Bepieva and Popiashvili, 2009: 118).

The most striking thing is that this becomes a way of life of not just one specific person but the whole group of people. Here the whole of society experiences catharsis, here everyone who has come to Caucasus begins to live in accordance with this new humane order: Kalatdjins, Valasins, Dalasins and Tsartsats. They liked to live according to this way of life. The chaos around them disappeared and everything got better. If earlier they ate human flesh, mother married her son, sister married her brother, Caucasus established order – "It is forbidden to eat human, children's flesh, nasty habits should not take place, and mother must know her son, sister must know her brother." (Bepieva and Popiashvili, 2009: 114).

Certainly, first of all, the behavior of one strong person starts to become apparent here – he, Caucasus, a devi-like creature with completely different principles and way of life, heals the society and creates relationships that are based not on violence and personal benefit, but on the protection of the weak, help and rescue of people in need and, in general, on humanitarianism: the people of Caucasus cut down trees, laid down branches on them, put on them children who were rejected, abandoned and cast off by the enemy; everyone brought cattle, sheep and goats to them, and so they raised these children.

Thus, the epos of Tsartsats emphasizes that in the very depths of the Tabus' wickedness, a transformed character is born, for whom the way of life that suppresses, humiliates, and destroys people is unacceptable. The breaking of this way of life is born in their own bases, which restore order and humanitarianism, and win over evil.

In the folk-tales of Narts and Tsartsiats there are a lot of evil spirits, both men and women: *Kulbadag-Us*, *devis*, *kadjis*. It is the *devis*, the giants, the *kadjis* who represent the most ancient layer of the Iberian-Caucasian mythology. They are also mentioned under the same name in Ossetian mythology. It is true that the heroes of the stories of the Narts, Tsartsiats and Amiranians are equally severe towards the *devis* and evil spirits. The heroes always win the battles against them.

Thus, heroes of mythology are transformed in the form of sons of Tsartsiats, Narts or Amirandaredzans and win everywhere as they obey that highest order in which they protect the helpless, expel evil and sow the good seed. The hero of the story fights against and wins over the evil spirit. It has a peculiar virtuous purpose: the battle against *devis* and evil spirits “has the ultimate purpose – to clear the territory from evil *devis* and to create a living environment for the human society” (Kiknadze 2007: 71). This purpose is so noble that in this battle all means are justified. That is why the triumph of those heroes fighting against giants, *devis*, evil spirits, cannibals and others is justified. But here the main thing is still different. An absolutely different connection unites these eposes to each other: “Amiran in the form of *devis* fought against a low beginning, and this fight was successful (‘Amiran defeated a *devi*.’). And then, in the form of a godfather, he fights against the divine principle and is defeated by himself (Kiknadze, 2007: 71). The same is the final fate of the heroes of the Nart and Tsartsiat eposes. They were successful until they fought against the low beginning, and fought for a very noble purpose: to do good for others. This resulted in their victories in battles. That is why they won over the *devis*, evil spirits and Tabus.

Conclusion

The heroes of all three eposes differ, but they still fight against the divine principle: Narts complain about god and why he is not showing himself to them, Tsartsiats have their own reasons, and Amiran fights against the godfather that cannot be called anything else, other than a rebellion against the god, a hubris that inevitably deserves punishment.

The transformation of the hero in Caucasian mythology mainly happens taking into account what he fights against, what he tries to uproot and what he establishes in society. Thus, the following thesis is formed: those who are based in humanity and

kindness are transformed and win, and they win only if they are directed against the low beginning. The fight directed against the highest virtue condemns even heroes to eternal punishment.

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