

The Shamanic Themes in Chechen Folktales

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By

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How to pin down the North Caucasus? You can't. You change worlds and centuries in an hour. In a single day you met patriarchs and brigands, swaggering mafiosi and shepherd boys; there are faces from ancient Greek pottery and strains of music from Turkey. None of it can or should be pinned down. The North Caucasus is a hall of a thousand distorting mirrors, each showing a different reflection, and people have long forgotten which are straight, which crooked.

—Sebastian Smith in *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*, published in London by Tauris Parke Paperbacks in 2006.

DEATH OR FREEDOM

(THE CHECHEN “NATIONAL ANTHEM”)

We were born at night, when the she-wolf whelped.
In the morning, as lions howl, we were given our names.
 In eagles nests, our Mothers nursed us,
 To tame a stallion, our Fathers taught us.
We were devoted to our Mothers, to people and the Native land,
And if they will need us—we'll respond courageously,
We grew up free, together with the mountain eagles,
Difficulties and obstacles we overcame with dignity.

Granite rocks will sooner fuse like lead,
Than we lose our Nobility in life and struggle.
The Earth will sooner be breached in boiling sun,
Than we appear before the world; losing our honour.

Never will we appear submissive before anyone,
Death or Freedom— we can choose only one way.
 Our sisters cure our wounds by their songs,
The eyes of the beloved arouse us to the feat of arms.

If hunger gets us down— we'll gnaw the roots.
If thirst harasses us - we'll drink the grass dew.
We were born at night, when the she-wolf whelped.
 God, Nation, and the Native land—
We devote ourselves only to their service.

(taken from Usmanov, L. (1999) 'The Chechen Nation: A Portrait of Ethical Features', http://amina.com/article/chech_nati.html [accessed 4/06/08]).

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

CHECHNYA & THE SHAMANIC STORY



First of all, some background information on Chechnya and its people so that the stories that will be presented and analysed can be placed in some kind of context. (The source for much of this information was http://www.amina.com/article/br_hist.html [accessed 5/5/08]).

The Chechens live in a small territory called Chechnya bordered by Dagestan to the East and Northeast; Ingushetia and North Ossetia to the West; Russia's Stravropol Province and Cossack region to the North; and Georgia to the South and Southwest. The Caucasus Mountains, which stretch along a line 1,100 kilometres long between the Black Sea and

Caspian Sea, protect the people not only from enemies but from outside influences in general. The Chechens therefore have retained many traditional customs and practices. Not only has the mountainous terrain long been strategically important for Chechnya, but it also supports sheep farming-the traditional Chechen occupation. As for the size of the population, according to the 2002 Russian census there were 1,088,816 people living in Chechnya, but that does not include the tens of thousands of refugees who, as a result of the recent conflicts, are now living in the neighbouring regions.

It is said that

when God created the world, he sprinkled nations over the globe, but clumsily dropped his shaker over what ancient travellers called the "mountain of languages". Pliny wrote that the ancient Greeks needed 300 interpreters to conduct business in the North Caucasus, while later, "we Romans conducted our affairs there with the aid of 130 interpreters." Today the mountains remain a living language laboratory. In Dagestan, one village may speak Avar, the next village Darghin, the next Lezghin. There are three main linguistic groups: Turkic, such as Karachai and Balkar; Indo-European, such as Ossetian, which is related to Persian; and the truly indigenous Caucasian tongues. The Caucasian languages, which are not found anywhere else in the world, are themselves divided into two branches: the eastern, such as Chechen, Ingush, and several Dagestani languages, and the western Adygei dialects, spoken by the Adygei, Cherkess, Kabards and Abkhaz (Smith, 2006, pp.7-8).

Contrary to popular misconception, the Chechens are not Slavs and they are not Turkic in origin either, despite the fact that Turkey unites all North Caucasus Muslims into a category which is related to them. In fact, they are not even "Chechen" as this was a term coined by the Russians after the name of a village (Chechen-aul) where the Russians first encountered the people in the early 16th century. The first written mention of the inhabitants of the region was in the 7th century, when they were known as the "Nokhchii" (pronounced "No-h-chee" with the "h" pronounced as when gargling from the back of the mouth: very similar to one of the ancient Aramaic letters). Ethnically, they are related to other groups throughout the Caucasus, most closely with the neighbouring Ingush. Together, the Nokhchii and Ingush people have been called the "Vainaikh" which means "Our People." They have lived where they are now since prehistoric times, and while the Mesopotamians, Persians, Turks, Mongols, Slavs and others have greatly influenced the region with their wars, conquests and trade, being fiercely proud and protective of their

roots and background, the inhabitants of Chechnya have remained ethnically the same for thousands of years.

As for the Nokhchii language, it is considered to be both one of the most difficult and oldest languages in the Caucasus. Its roots can be traced most closely to the ancient Mesopotamians. A cuneiform-style of writing is evident on some of the stone inscriptions, dating at least to 2,800 BC. The Nokhchii language, as we know it today, is most linked to some of the words used by the ancient Akkhadians, and can be traced at least to 1200 BC. It is not related to Russian, Slavic, Indo-European or Turkish languages. But linguistic influences from invaders and traders over the centuries, including Mongolian and Arabic, are evident in many words. Linguistically, the Nokhchii language belongs to the Nakh branch of Caucasian languages, which include Ingush (galgai) and Batsbi (found in present day Georgia). Until Islamic tradition came in and words were transcribed phonetically into Arabic it was purely an oral language. In the early 19th century the Russians changed it to Latin, and then the Soviets in the 20th century changed it to Cyrillic. However, it is now written in Latin again.

The history of the Nokhchii, and their land, is filled with rich and colourful stories, which have survived for thousands of years through oral traditions that have been passed down generation by generation through clan elders. However, legends have blended with actual events so that the true history is difficult to write. During the 19th century, several Chechen writers tried to preserve the history in massive volumes. Some still survive, despite Stalin's purges between 1939-1944, which ended with the exile of all Chechen and Ingush peoples as well as the removal of all references to the Chechen people from maps, history books and more. The 1994-1996 war destroyed most of Chechnya's treasured archaeological and historical sites, though fortunately ancient burial sites, architectural monuments and several prehistoric cave petroglyphs still remain in the mountains. These valuable relics, coupled with the histories and stories of the elders, provide the people with virtually the only remaining evidence of who their ancient ancestors were.

Despite the fact that the people are predominantly Sunni Muslim today, that was not always so. Before the adoption of Islam, the Nokhchii people practised their own blend of religious traditions and beliefs. Like so many ancient cultures and civilizations worldwide, archaeological evidence and modern day practices suggest that their ancient religion was based on

cycles of nature and astronomy, with many gods and complex rituals. Artefacts and monuments, as well as burial and sacrificial sites, tell archaeologists a lot about the religious beliefs before Islam and Christianity. Petroglyphs in underground caverns high in the mountains, dating from at least 4,000 BC, depict solar signs, anthropomorphic animals, and use of plants for rituals. Ancient underground burial vaults from approximately 2600 BC have carved niches and unusual stones with concentric circles in a variety of manners. Different underground dwellings dating from 1200 BC until the 9th or 10th centuries A.D. suggest a wide variety of gods associated with forces of nature and the stars. Islam was slowly introduced over a period of centuries, gaining converts by the 15th & 16th centuries, but not taking root until well into the 18th-mid 19th centuries, with the mountain regions last.

Then, after the tsarist era, instead of the freedom they had been led to believe would be theirs, the people got Communist atheism, Russian language, Russian officials and brutal land collectivisation. Mosques were either shut down or destroyed, and the mullahs arrested or shot. However, new mosques sprang up under Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* thaw in 1987, and by the 1990s could be seen everywhere. Along with the mosques came Islamic schools, or *medressehs*, a renewal of Arabic studies, and even pilgrimages to Mecca. However, "Many people across the region were so ignorant about Islam that this was often less a revival than a rediscovery. The middle-aged had grown up in an atheist state, while their children were just as likely to be inspired by the thought of making money and becoming post-Soviet consumers as they were by the mosque" (Smith, 2006, p.75). So what we find today in Chechnya are ancient traditions and superstitions blended with traditional Islamic beliefs and practices, and post-Soviet consumerism. It is a unique mixture and unlike any other.

What the majority of the people actually practise is a localised Sufi tradition and, as a result and contrary to popular misconception, the puritanical Islamicists in practice have almost no support from Chechen society in general. The fact that they follow the Sufi *tariqat*, or religious path, has stood them in good stead in that it has proved to be

the ideal form of religion for facing outside cultural and military pressure. Sufism has no need for formal buildings such as mosques, and its undocumented but fanatically loyal members can easily go underground or surface whenever they choose. ... The *zikr* ritual formed an unbreakable shield around these people's sense of identity and self-confidence. The

tightly knit groups which gathered everywhere, and still gather, to perform the *zikh* were perfectly equipped for battle. Many were unafraid to die, because they felt close to Allah, and their training in brotherhood had prepared them to act as a group, with the discipline vital to fighting (Smith, 2006, p.40).

As for the practice of shamanism in Chechnya, we know that at least one of the roles traditionally performed by a shaman—that of acting as intermediary between the people and the gods or spirits—was performed by the priests of the Vainakh:

Men of cloth were wrapped up in halos of sanctity and were clad in white. A priest (*ts'uu*) was the first to address the deity in prayer and he alone could enter the sanctuary at will. He was the one to go for counsel in lean years or in case of illness.

We know too that the Vainakh priests acted as diviners and interpreted dreams, again roles traditionally performed by shamans:

They also acted as medicine men and sorcerers, auguring, among other things, the harvest and weather. Like their Pharonic counterparts, Vainakh priests had recourse to oneirocriticism, or interpretation of dreams, to divine the wishes of the gods. For example, the spirits inspired dreamers as to the sites where shrines were to be built (Jaimoukha, 2005, p.115).

The shaman of a community was often called on to arbitrate to settle disputes, another role undertaken by the Vainakh priests:

Vainakh priests were responsible for maintaining social stability and settling civil law issues. They did not cultivate the land for sustenance, relying on villagers to till the fields assigned to them instead. The clergy were presented with offerings from their parishes, including jewellery, as can be attested by the discovery of gems in temples (Jaimoukha, 2005, p.115).

So it would seem that all the most important functions of the shaman were fulfilled by the Vainakh priests, though whether they actually entered trance states in the course of their work remains unclear. However, given the popularity of the mystic dance among followers of the Sufi *tariqat* or religious path, it would seem that people in the region have a natural propensity for doing so, which would suggest that even though we lack concrete evidence, it was very likely to have been the case.

Historically, the people's lives revolve around their village and clan structures, and this has been the case since ancient times. Taipis, or clans, consist of several villages with a common ancestor, and each village can have anywhere from 10-50 families. There are more than 125 clans among the Nokhchii people, and all are categorized by a specific "Tukum", which is like a tribe. There are 9 Tukums and legend has it that they all share a common family ancestry of 9 brothers, hence the nine stars on the Chechen flag. Members of the 9 tukums unite to help one another, just as the legendary 9 brothers did thousands of years ago.

According to another of the various legends concerning the origin of the Chechens, they all come from the locality of Nashkh;

hence the name "Nakhcho" the Chechens gave themselves. All "pure" Chechen kins (taipes) assert that they have come from Nashkh. It is also said that in the village of Nashkh there was a huge copper kettle riveted of separate copper plates, on which the names of all Chechen taipes and tukhums (allied tribes) were engraved. If anybody started an argument about the "purity" of any Chechen tribe, people could go to Nashkh and prove the correctness or incorrectness of the consideration (Anchabadze, 2001, p.38).

While the clans share a common history, language, religion and culture, each taip has their own elder council, court of justice, cemetery, customs, traditions and adats (which were customary laws). Leadership is by election and each clan, or taip, is self sufficient and self contained. The unity of clans, despite blood feuds, has traditionally been strong, and it remains strongest in the mountain regions. The clan structure has protected the people for thousands of years, and is one of the main reasons why foreign invaders, and later Russia, could not penetrate and conquer the people. As elders ruled in ancient days, today they are the backbone of village and clan life, and have the respect of all the people. Not only do the Chechen elders often act as intermediaries between feuding families but they also acted as intermediaries between villages and besieging Russian troops during the recent war, sometimes even deciding whether their village would fight or not (see Smith, 2006, p.23). Consequently, even though an elected government now exists, it is still the elders and the taipis that truly rule. And the 9 tukums unite them all.

No study of the Caucasus can be considered complete without reference to the importance afforded to hospitality in the region, for hospitality and

respect for guests was, and still is, a source of pride for all Caucasian peoples.

In classical Chechen society, a cult had developed around hospitality, bestowing reverence upon the guest (*haasha*; cf. Circassian *hesch'e*). Turpal Nokhcho (literally: "Hero-Chechen"), the legendary ancestor of the Chechens, was born with a piece of iron in one hand and a portion of cheese in the other. Many legends and sayings have come down to us depicting the high status and some details of this institution. The inhospitable terrain and inclement weather had a lot to do with the development of this institution. Hospitality was certainly an important and interesting aspect of the social life of the Vainakh.

Chechens received their guests with open arms, literally, as a token of sincerity and absence of malice. The etiquette of proper guest reception, lodging and subsequent delivery to the next destination or host (*heeshan daa*) was very involved. All Chechens were conversant with proper table manners and seating arrangements at home and as guests. A guest was not only put up for as long as he wished, but was also lodged in the best quarters and offered the choicest victuals, sometimes at the expense of the host's family. He was always seated in the place of honour (*barch*) in a room or at the table. It was improper to enquire of the guest about the purpose of his visit in the first three days. Hospitality was not conditional and no compensation was expected, any offer in this regard being considered a grave insult. A guest, however, could present the children of his host with gifts.

Refusing to receive a visitor, even if a fugitive or inveterate criminal, was a stigma that stuck for life. The guest in return was expected to follow specific rules of etiquette and not to overburden his host. He was also expected to lodge with the same host on his next visit to the village, failure to do so being considered an indictable breach of etiquette (Jaimoukha, 2005, p.135).

When Chechens meet, they greet each other with the words "Marsha woghiyla" (masculine form), and "Marsha yoghiyla" (feminine form). This can be translated as: "When you come to this house or meeting place, freedom, peace and kindness are extended to you, they are in fact guaranteed to you as a guest". The following story provides a good illustration of the importance attached to guests.

[A] driver ... accidentally knocked down a woman on the street, and she died immediately. The driver took her in his arms and rushed to the nearest house, praying to God for help and mercy, for he had neither relatives nor friends nearby. The man who opened the door saw his dead mother, and

said to the praying driver: "Keep calm. I've heard your prayer. This dead woman is my mother, and if you wish, I'll be your brother from this day on. But by God, if you had only left her at the road and tried to run away, I would spend all my life looking for you in revenge for my mother" (from Usmanov, L., 1999, 'The Chechen Nation: A Portrait of Ethical Features', http://amina.com/article/chech_nati.html [accessed 4/06/08]).

Let us now consider what is meant by the term "shamanic story" and why the tales chosen for analysis in this study can be said to exemplify the genre.

In her paper "South Siberian and Central Asian Hero Tales and Shamanistic Rituals", the Leipzig researcher Erika Taube suggests that

Folktales—being expressions of early stages of the development of human society—reflect reality: material culture, social relations, customs, [and] religious beliefs. When folktales were being formed and appeared as vivid forms of spiritual and artistic expression in correspondence with the general social development, those elements, which nowadays are usually regarded as fantastic creations of human mind, were strictly believed phenomena, i.e. they were accepted as facts. Therefore, it is not at all a new idea that such tales sometimes reflect shamanistic beliefs and conceptions (Taube, 1984, p. 344).

If they were forms of "artistic expression", however, then they could well have been regarded as such by those they were told to and we actually have no way of knowing whether they were "accepted as facts" or not. On the other hand, what we can show is that they do reflect shamanistic beliefs and conceptions, and this becomes apparent once we start to analyze them.

Sir James Frazer made a similar claim in his abridged version of *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1922: "folk-tales are a faithful reflection of the world as it appeared to the primitive mind; and that we may be sure that any idea which commonly occurs in them, however absurd it may seem to us, must once have been an ordinary article of belief" (Frazer, 1993, p.668). In reality, however, there is no way we can be certain that any idea that appears in such tales must once have been an ordinary article of belief as, not being able to get inside other people's minds, we cannot possibly know what was actually the case.

On the other hand, as Emily Lyle (2007) points out in the abstract to her paper “Narrative Form and the Structure of Myth”, what we can be reasonably sure of is that “At each stage in transmission of a tale from generation to generation, modifications take place but something remains. Thus there is a potential for material to be retained from a time in the distant past when the narrative was embedded in a total oral worldview or cosmology.” In view of the fact that in the past shamanism was widely practised in the region where the tale presented here originates from, it should therefore come as no surprise that a shamanic worldview and shamanic cosmology is to be found embedded in it.

Stories have traditionally been classified as epics, myths, sagas, legends, folk tales, fairy tales, parables or fables. However, the definitions of the terms have a tendency to overlap (see Berman, 2006, p.150-152) making it difficult to classify and categorize material. Another problem with the traditional terminology is that the genre system formed on the basis of European folklore cannot be fully applied universally.

Consider, for example, Eliade’s definition of myth. For Eliade the characteristics of myth, as experienced by archaic societies, are that it constitutes the absolutely true and sacred History of the acts of the Supernaturals, which is always related to a “creation”, which leads to a knowledge, experienced ritually, of the origin of things and thus the ability to control them, and which is “lived” in the sense that one is profoundly affected by the power of the events it recreates (see Eliade, 1964, pp.18-19). However, many stories are “lived” in the sense that one is profoundly affected by the events they recreate without them necessarily being myths. Moreover, many shamanic stories could be regarded as having the above characteristics but would still not necessarily be classified as myths.

Another problem encountered is that a number of the definitions of what a myth is are so general in nature that they tend to be of little value. For example, the suggestion that a myth is “a story about something significant [that] ... can take place in the past ... or in the present, or in the future” (Segal, 2004, p.5) really does not help us at all as this could be applied to more or less every type of tale.

Mary Beard, considering the significance of distinctions between such categories as “myth,” “legend,” and “folk-tale,” concludes that in fact no technical definition distinguishing these is wholly plausible, since matters of technical definition are not really the issue. “For these are value

judgments masquerading as professional jargon; they are justifications of neglect—the dustbin categories for all kinds of mythic thinking that we would rather not treat as ‘myth’” (see Winterbourne, 2007, p.15). Be this as it may, it is surely indisputable that we need some form of labelling for the categories in order to be able to refer to them, and the argument being presented in this study is that the time has come to revise these categories.

For this reason a case was argued in Berman (2006) for the introduction of a new genre, termed the shamanic story. This can be defined as a story that has either been based on or inspired by a shamanic journey, or one that contains a number of the elements typical of such a journey. Like other genres, it has “its own style, goals, entelechy, rhetoric, developmental pattern, and characteristic roles” (Turner, 1985, p.187), and like other genres it can be seen to differ to a certain extent from culture to culture. It should perhaps be noted at this point, however, that there are both etic and emic ways of regarding narrative (see Turner, 1982, p.65) and the term “shamanic story” clearly presents an outside view. It should also be pointed out that what is being offered here is a polytheistic definition of what the shamanic story is, in which a pool of characteristics can apply, but need not.

What these stories often show is that by carefully sifting through them for, in effect, red herrings such as material clearly added at a later date, and by carefully using external controlling factors such as archaeological, historical, and linguistic information, it is possible to a certain extent to reconstruct ancient beliefs from very remote periods, and that much more of the unwritten past may now be recoverable by such techniques than we ever realised before.

Characteristics typical of the genre include the way in which the stories all tend to contain embedded texts (often the account of the shamanic journey itself), how the number of actors is clearly limited as one would expect in subjective accounts of what can be regarded as inner journeys, and how the stories tend to be used for healing purposes.

In his Foreword to *Tales of the Sacred and the Supernatural*, Eliade admits to repeatedly taking up “the themes of *sortie du temps*, or temporal dislocation, and of the alteration or the transmutation of space” (Eliade,

1981, p.10)¹, and these are themes that appear over and over again in shamanic stories too.

Additionally, given that through the use of narrative shamans are able to provide their patients “with a language, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be expressed” (Lévi-Strauss, 1968, p.198), it follows that another feature of shamanic stories is they have the potential to provide a medium through which psychic states that might otherwise be difficult to put into words can be explored.

They are also frequently examples of what Jürgen Kremer, transpersonal psychologist and spiritual practitioner, called “tales of power” after one of Carlos Castaneda’s novels. He defines such texts as ‘conscious verbal constructions based on numinous experiences in non-ordinary reality, “which guide individuals and help them to integrate the spiritual, mythical, or archetypal aspects of their internal and external experience in unique, meaningful, and fulfilling ways” (Kremer, 1988, p.192). In other words, they can serve the purpose of helping us reconnect with our indigenous roots.

As for the style of storytelling most frequently employed in shamanic stories, it can perhaps best be described as a form of magic realism, in which although “the point of departure is ‘realistic’ (recognizable events in chronological succession, everyday atmosphere, verisimilitude, characters with more or less predictable psychological reactions), ... soon strange discontinuities or gaps appear in the ‘normal,’ true-to-life texture of the narrative” (Calinescu, 1978, p.386).

Before concluding this introduction, it is worth making two further observations on the nature of the tales included in this study. “Since

¹ Mircea Eliade has been much maligned by academics in the field of Religious Studies in recent years. However, as Åke Hultkrantz has pointed out, he can be credited with being largely responsible for opening “wider vistas when, ignoring the common restriction of shamanism to Siberia and the Arctic regions, he included the Americas, the Indo-Europeans, South-eastern Asia and Oceania in his discussions of the phenomena of shamanism”. Not only that, but Eliade’s opus has also been responsible for inspiring “an intensified study of shamanic ideology and a fresh dedication to further research in the field” (Hultkrantz, 1993, p.40). Indeed, without his trailblazing work, many of us would never have got interested in the subject in the first place. Consequently, I offer no excuses for quoting from his work in this volume.

shamanism is so widespread, it is self-evident that the tales about shamans [and shamanic stories as defined in this volume] will be coloured by the narrative traits and modes of cultural expression specific to the various regions” (Hultkrantz, 1993, p.41). Additionally, it should be noted that “In areas where shamanism has long been a thing of the past [as in Chechnya], many tales contain only vague, piecemeal or inaccurate recollections of shamans and their like” (Hultkrantz, 1993, p.51). On the other hand, however vague, piecemeal or inaccurate these recollections might be, this does not invalidate the classification of the tales they are embedded in as shamanic stories for the purposes of this study, or their value. In fact, just the reverse is the case, as in the absence of more concrete evidence, they may well help us to reconstruct how things used to be in a time when shamanism was undoubtedly prevalent in the region.

According to the finest traditions of storytelling, there are only a set number of archetypal story lines to draw upon and all of them relate to the human condition-to the struggle of becoming fully human. The heroes, or heroines, find themselves facing impossible conditions that can only be overcome by an initiation journey, during which the outer struggle is seen as symbolic of an inner struggle, and when this is won the outer dangers fall away (Hallam, 2002, p.47).

For the shaman, however, the outer struggle is perceived to be as real as the inner struggle, simply another form of reality, and the shamanic story is an account of just such a journey.

CHAPTER TWO

TIMOR

Very little is known about the early history of the Chechen people. Their background is unclear and surrounded by legends rather than historical documents. Moreover, attempting to uncover the ancient native culture is no easy matter for two further reasons, the first being the influence of the Avar imams. As leaders of the struggle of the Northeast Caucasians against Russian encroachment, they saw it their duty to suppress the native culture in favour of spreading the Sufi ethos. The other reason is due to the conduct towards the Chechens by the Russians over the last three centuries, and what has been described as their “incessant drive to impose an adventitious set of morals and modes of conduct” on the people through “expulsion, transfer, mass deportations, massacres and full-scale invasions,” all of which, not surprisingly, have “taken a very heavy toll on Chechen society” (see Jaimoukha, 2005, p.6).

It has been suggested that

The pre-Christian Vainakh had an amalgam of religions and cults, including animism, totemism, paganism, polytheism, familial-ancestral and agrarian and funereal cults. Stone sanctuaries and chapels were erected in honour of patrons in the mountain settlements. Objects of cultic rituals discovered at excavation sites include metallic amulets, hand-bells, deer-teeth, tips of arrows, ear-claws and human figurines. Subterranean petroglyphs, dating back to the fourth/fifth millennium BC, showed solar signs, figures of anthropomorphic animals, and plants (Jaimoukha, 2005, p.107).

However, was there in fact an amalgam of religions and cults or were different religions and cults practised at different times and / or in different places? And why is there no mention of shamanism in this list? Possibly as it would not be recognised as a religion by the author, or perhaps due to the fact that he intended for it to be included under the heading of animism. Either way, we should certainly not take its omission as evidence of the fact that it was not practised or that it did not exist. In view of the

themes to be found in the stories included in this volume, and what we know about what was being practised in neighbouring countries in pre-Christian times, this would surely be extremely unlikely. So let us assume then it was merely an oversight on the part of the author, and turn our attention instead to what the same author has to say about animism, probably the most ancient religion of the Vainakh (if one includes shamanism under this heading), and one that was prevalent among all peoples of the North Caucasus.

Its origin probably dates back to the Palaeolithic Age, or the Old Stone Age, more than 10,000 years ago. ... The basic tenet of animism was the belief that a soul resided in every object, animate or inanimate, functioning as the motive force and guardian. In animistic thought, nature was all alive. In a future state the spirit would exist as part of an immaterial soul. The spirit, therefore, was thought to be universal. Ghosts, demons and deities inhabited almost all objects, rendering them subject to worship. Ritual services were associated with some of the more important sites, like (Mount) Ts'e-Lam and Lake Galanch'ozh. Khin-Naana (River-Motherland) was the guardian naiad of mountain rivers and Huenan-Naana (Forest-Mother) was the wood-nymph, or dryad (Jaimoukha, 2005, p.108).

What we also know from signs visible on extant ancient ruins is that

the belief in magic and ghosts (*ghaalartash*) was widespread among the Vainakh. There were different forms of magic wielded by witches (*gheemash*), old sorceresses (*eeshapash* and *chabaabanash*) and warlocks. A special class of magicians, called "gham-sag" ("witch-human"), had the power to depart from their bodies and haunt those of animals [in other words, to shape-shift]. If during this spiritual transmigration the body was annihilated, the magician would have remained in limbo and eventually perished. Witches had special canes that could be turned into steeds when dyed with charm potions. In their defence against sorcery, mere mortals had recourse to amulets, the one made from quince (*haibanan dechig*) being also "effective" against injury and disease. Conjury (*bozbu-unchalla*) was practised by a special class of people called "bozbu-unchash" (Jaimoukha, 2005, p.151).

Additionally, we are informed that fortune-telling (*pal*) was a developed "craft", with there being

special classes of people with vatic powers and a number of oracular devices, including a book of divinations (*zeeda-zhaina*: literally "star book"), at their disposal. Diviners would spend the night in a sanctuary, lying face down and keeping their ears pressed to the floor to hear the

deity's revelations and convey them to an eager audience the next morning. Scapulimancers divined the future by scapulae, holding the ram shoulder-blades to the light and interpreting the marks, the spots predicting the harvest, weather and even familial events. In addition, women soothsayers sized pieces of cloth, wrapped spoons with cotton and used lithomancy, hyalomancy, akin to crystal-gazing, and catoptromancy to foretell the future. Auspices and augury had religious and practical applications, for example using the arrival of the hoopoe to predict the advent of spring (Jaimoukha, 2005, p.150).

It has to be said however that the picture we are presented with of this early period in Chechnya by Jaimoukha is really nothing more than a rough sketch and, as he admits himself,

The animist-pagan period in Chechnya warrants more research to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the ancient cults and to establish connections with Near Eastern civilizations in antiquity. The pictograms and magic signs on stone towers and tombs would provide crucial clues, as they often date back to earlier periods than the structures themselves (Jaimoukha, 2005, p.109).

And it is the mission of the Argun Preserve, which was established in 1988 around the headwaters of the Chanti-Argun and Sharo-Argun rivers, to study, preserve, and restore these historical and cultural monuments located in the Khoi-Makazhoi, Itum-Kalin-Khaskalin, Yalkharoye-Galanchozh and Maistin-Malkhistin valleys.

The Argun Preserve encompasses 150 tower villages, which include over 300 residential towers and hundreds more military towers, as well as fifteen ancient shrines and around 150 above-ground burial vaults. Researchers date these structures from the 11th through to the 17th centuries.

Although Chechnya's medieval architecture has not been sufficiently studied by architectural historians, the limited study that has been done already shows the existence of common elements between the material and artistic culture of Chechnya and the civilizations of Asia Minor and the Mediterranean. These connections will become better understood with more extensive research of ancient Chechen pagan religions and mythology, which demonstrate numerous parallels with the pagan gods and mythological heroes of the great civilizations of the ancient world. In that aspect, the pictograms and magical signs on the stone towers and tombs are very interesting to scholars, as they often date from an earlier

period than the structures themselves. These towers and tombs were often built using stones taken from more ancient buildings, some of which dated from the 7th to the 5th centuries B.C (see Dispatches from Chechnya No. 12: The Fate of Chechnya's Architectural and Natural Treasures, <http://www.idee.org/lreport12.html> [accessed 31/05/08]).

Hopefully, the research being carried out at the Argun Preserve will in time throw more light on the early period of the history of the region, but until then this brief overview will have to suffice, coupled with the clues about the ancient beliefs and practices of the Vainakh that can be gleaned from their stories. So without further ado, let us now turn to the first one.

Once there was a man that suffered from a sore old back and bad eyesight. It was more than he could bear, so he thought. Without further delay, he sent his oldest son in search for a cure to his sufferings. Dutifully, the eldest travelled far and wide, for both a long time and a short time, until he came to what seemed to him to be one of the famed ends of the world where the snow was red. 'What a wonder! Such a sight I certainly have not seen before,' he thought.

Excited, he ran back home as quickly as he could with the red snow in his hand, hoping that this would cure the old suffering man. As soon as he arrived, his father eagerly asked, 'Have you brought me a cure for my sufferings?' He felt like death was all around him. 'Yes father, yes father! I have brought you what eyes have never seen before, red snow.' The old man's son answered.

Needless to say the old man was quite upset with his eldest son. He then sent his second son in search of a cure for his ailments. Well the second son travelled far and wide for both a long time and a short time, travelling past the place where the red snow fell. He travelled quite a ways before he came to what he thought was most certainly one of the ends of the world. It was a wondrous place, where the grass grew white. With the white grass in his hand he ran home as fast as he could, thinking the whole time that this white grass that had never been seen by anyone would most certainly cure his old and ailing father.

As soon as he arrived his father asked him, 'What have you brought me for a cure for my sufferings?'

His son answered that he had brought white grass that had never been seen by anyone ever before. The old man was again upset and there was nothing left to be done but call for his youngest son. The youngest son prepared himself for three days and three nights. His father made him jump with his horse over a stone wall just to see if he was big enough to set out on his own. He jumped easily over the stone wall three times. Then his father wished him a safe journey but forbade him to stop and pick anything up on the way or he would fall into the hands of misfortune.

The day came and the day went and by night the youngest son came to the place with red snow and then went on. He came to the place where the white grass grew and went on. He was riding along on his white horse when he saw a golden feather. He stopped his horse and picked up the golden feather. The horse said to him, 'you have broken your promise to your father. He distinctly forbade you to pick up anything along the way.'

However the young lad took the golden feather, hid it and rode on farther. 'He couldn't have meant anything as beautiful as this!' The youth had travelled far and wide for a long time and for a short time when he came upon a golden ball of thread. He stopped the horse and picked up the golden ball of thread. The horse again said to him, 'you have again broken your promise to your father. He said, don't you remember, that you were to pick nothing up along the way. This golden ball of thread is only going to bring you misfortune.'

However the young lad took the ball of thread. 'What? Have you lost your mind? How could something as beautiful as this cause me misfortune?'

By sunset the youngest son had reached a strange and unknown land. Soon enough he saw a shepherd herding his cows. The young man asked, 'Who lives in this strange and unknown land with the reputation of being a virtuous man and kind to guests?'

The shepherd pointed to a very high tower off in the distance. He said that there, there is said to be a prince who lives with respectable people and loves guests. The youngest son went to this prince. After heavy questioning at the gates he was allowed to stay and he with the entire household went off to pray together.

When the youngest son was bending down to do his prostrations, the golden feather fell out of his bosom. The prince picked it up and begged

the young man to find the bird to which this feather belonged. If not the prince said he would die. The young man said that he would have to consult with his horse otherwise he would not be able to give an answer. The son went to his horse and told it of the prince's request.

'Well let's go and see what will come of all this,' the horse said. 'Have the king prepare a light and tasty meal for our trip. Let's say a kilo of cornmeal and a pitcher of Karaki.'

The prince had everything prepared and the next day the young son set off in search of the little bird.

He travelled far and wide, for a long time and a short time. Then he came to one of the ends of the world. The horse stopped high up in the mountains and said to the young son, 'If you throw your sight about a bit, you'll see a monster arising in the heavens. You see, doesn't that look like his tall fur cap?'

'Yes, I see.'

'That's the bird of which the prince was talking about. I will try to lead her this way and you better get in the mood to play a little game on her. She will ask you from which village you are from and you must answer that you are from the village where *Timor* lives. Then she will ask you how *Timor* is feeling these days. Then you must answer that *Timor* has hurt his back and his eyesight has gotten really bad. If the bird asks about *Timor's* horse answer that if her master is infirm, the horse can go to hell and not getting any older is put out to pasture, high and dry. It's better not to ask her anything about that though. The bird will then come down from the high mountain and start to bath in the river, to clean its plumage. That is when you must pour the sticky Karaki into the river and throw the cornmeal all about you.'

The young son did everything he was told. The bird started to bath in the river and then came closer to the youth to get a better look at him. The young son jumped on her and grabbed a hold of her. She wiggled in his hands but he didn't let her go. 'Is that you *Timor*?', she trembled.

The young son answered, 'I am *Timor's* third son.' 'Oh, I see. I must do my evening prayers and I must clean my plumage, please let me go,' the bird started to beg.

The young son let her go. The little golden bird bathed herself and then rested herself on the young son's shoulder. So with the bird on his shoulder and the sun sitting, the young man returned to the strange and unknown land where the prince lived. A small time later when the young son was doing his prayers, the golden ball of thread fell out of his bosom. The prince took hold of the golden ball of thread and said, 'I will die, if the girl who wound up this sweet golden ball of thread is not brought to me.' The young son consulted with his horse. The horse told him to have the prince prepare a light and tasty meal for the trip. The next day the young son set off with his horse in search of the girl. He travelled far and wide, for a long time and for a short time. Soon enough he was at another one of the ends of the world. His horse then said to him, 'you see those tall mountains, and do you see the tower among them which has no entrance and no exit? Well at the top of that tower sits the girl who wound up the golden ball of thread. We'll have the ball seemingly unravel all by itself, although you secretly are behind everything. She will ask you how *Timor* is feeling and you must answer that *Timor* has hurt his back and that his eyesight has gotten bad. If the girl asks about *Timor's* horse, answer that if its master is infirm, the horse can go to hell and not getting any older is put out to pasture, high and dry. For her though, it will be a great joy. The girl will say that she is scared to come out of the tower because of *Timor* and that is why she is staying there and getting old. She will also say that she plays on the harmonica and will do so on the lower balcony if you are a good rider and will circle around the tower a few times on your horse. You must answer that you are in a hurry but in order to calm her heart you will ride around. We will ride around three times and on the forth I will jump up and get my hooves onto the balcony and if I don't gallop then you can tear off my front legs! Then you grab her.

Timor's son rode to the girl. She asked him, 'Where are you from?'

He answered, 'I am from the same village as *Timor*.' He was though admittedly a little nervous to be talking to such a pretty girl.

The girl asked about *Timor* and the young man said, '*Timor* is having a hard time these days. He has hurt his back and his eyesight is failing him. He fears that the legions of death are all around him.'

'What about his horse?' the girl asked.

'When its master is infirm, the horse can go to hell and not getting any older is put out to pasture, high and dry.' The girl was glad to hear this.

The girl went down to the lowest balcony and started to play her harmonica. She asked him to circle around the tower with his horse a couple of times. The young man and his horse rode around the tower three times and on the fourth round the horse galloped up and jumped landing his front hooves on the balcony. The youngest son grabbed the girl. She started to beat him with her hands but the young man held onto her with a tight grip even though his nose stung and his eyes curled.

'Are you *Timor*?' the girl asked.

'I am not *Timor*. I am his third son,' the young man answered.

'I gave an oath that I would marry the one who took me away from that balcony,' the girl said.

The youth held onto the girl and rode back to the prince. The prince went up to the girl and she said coolly to him, 'Unless you cleanse yourself with the milk of a sea mare, then you have no right to touch me.' She was firm on this point and everyone at court knew it not least of all, the prince.

The prince ordered everyone under his power to go out and find this special milk. His people however couldn't find this milk and said to the prince that the one who brought the golden bird and the girl may be able to find and bring this milk from a sea mare. The prince pleaded with the youngest son of *Timor* to help him find this milk. The youth said that he would have to consult with his horse first.

'Well, this was what I was afraid of all along,' the horse sighed. 'Have the prince kill three of his horses. From their hides make pieces of bright clothing and also have him give us some glue.'

They travelled far and wide, for a long time and for a short time before coming to the coast of the sea. The horse told the youth to dig two holes big enough for them to hide in. The youngest son put glue on the bright clothing and wrapped them around the horse. After this was done the horse kicked his hooves in the water, neighed and hid in one of the holes.