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### **MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS IN TRADITIONAL BELIEFS OF THE GUMBET AVARS (SECOND HALF OF THE XX – THE BEGINNING OF THE XXI CENTURY)**

*Abstract.* Based of field material, using general and specific methods of historical science, the article describes mythological characters of the former pantheon and pandemonium of the Gumbet Avars: personified heavenly bodies and atmospheric phenomena, mummers and dolls, patrons of wild animals and hunting, supreme deities; “house snakes”, demons intruding the dwelling and strangling a sleeping person, antagonists of pregnant women, shaitans. The sources for these characters are folklore (mythology, oaths, good wishes, sayings), vocabulary and phraseology, calendar, family and social rituals, customs and beliefs.

With the adoption of Islam, most of the mythological characters of Gumbets’ pagan pantheon and pandemonium were forgotten, and some of the surviving ones, due to the stability of traditional religious beliefs in the spiritual culture of the ethnos, were Islamized and took the form of syncretic, “everyday Islam”. Some of the Islamized mythological characters have become mediators between man and the God, which contradicts the doctrine of Islam.

A significant role in consolidation of pre-monotheistic beliefs in the spiritual culture of the Avars and other peoples of Dagestan in Soviet and modern times was played by the healthy conservatism inherent in all Dagestanis and the peculiarities of their mentality – adherence to traditional values. Such a circumstance inspires some confidence in the preservation of their religious, cultural and ethnic identity in the era of globalization.

*Keywords:* Mythological characters; traditional beliefs; Avars; Soviet and modern times.

## ЭТНОГРАФИЯ

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### **МИФОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ПЕРСОНАЖИ ТРАДИЦИОННЫХ ВЕРОВАНИЙ АВАРЦЕВ ГУМБЕТА (ВТОРАЯ ПОЛОВИНА XX – НАЧАЛО XXI В.)**

Аннотация. Написанная на основе полевого материала, с применением общих и специальных методов исторической науки, статья посвящена описанию сохранившихся до советского послевоенного и новейшего времени мифологических персонажей бывшего пантеона и пандемониума аварцев Гумбета – олицетворяемых небесных светил и атмосферных явлений, ряженных и кукол, патронов диких животных и охоты, верховных божеств; «домовых змей», проникающих в жилище и душащих человека во время сна злых демонов, антагонистов беременных, шайтанов. Источниками этих представлений служат фольклор (мифология, клятвы, благопожелания, поговорки), лексика и фразеология, календарные, семейные и общественные обряды, обычаи и верования. С принятием аварцами Гумбета мусульманской религии большинство мифологических персонажей их языческого пантеона и пандемониума было предано забвению, а некоторые из сохранившихся, в виду устойчивости традиционных религиозных верований в духовной культуре этноса, были исламизированы и приняли форму синкретического и «бытового ислама». Некоторые из исламизированных мифологических персонажей стали медиаторами между человеком и Всевышним, что противоречит доктрине ислама. Немалую роль в закреплении домонотеистических верований в духовной культуре аварцев и других народов Дагестана в советское и новейшее время сыграли присущий всем дагестанцам здоровый консерватизм и особенности их менталитета – приверженность к традиционному укладу жизни. Подобное обстоятельство вселяет определенную уверенность в сохранности их религиозной, культурной и этнической идентичности в эпоху глобализации.

Ключевые слова. Мифологические персонажи; традиционные верования; аварцы; советское и новейшее время.

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## ***Introduction***

One of the tasks of the Russian ethnology is to record traditional beliefs that have survived to our time with the identification of the reasons for their preservation in the spiritual culture of a particular ethnic group in the era of globalization. The present article considers the mythological characters of the traditional beliefs of the Gumbet Avars that preserved until today. The sources of these beliefs are folklore, vocabulary and phraseology, calendar, family and household rituals and customs, which brought to us the relics from the time of the cult of nature, the pantheon and pandemonium of the Avars.

When writing the article, both general methods of historical science (historical-typological, retrospective, functional, diachronic analysis, systemic) and special methods of ethnology (survey, observation) were used. The article is written on the basis of field material collected by the author in the Avar villages of Kilyatl, Verkhnee and Nizhnee Inkho and Chirkata of the Gumbetovsky region of the Republic of Dagestan in November of 2021.

The abovementioned villages were formerly part of the Baklulal society (Bak'ulal) [1, p. 28]. Until the beginning of the 14th century, the settlements of this microregion were part of the state of Sarir, whose population professed Christianity. Around 1302, they adopted Islam, and throughout the 14th century, the Islamization of the inhabitants of the left bank of the Andi Koisu River took place, which ended by the end of this century [2, p. 31; 3, p. 29]. The Islamization of the villages of the Bakulal society should probably be attributed to the same period. The invasion of this region by the army of Timur, whose name is associated with the final establishment of Islam in Dagestan, also fell on this period [2, p. 31; 4, p. 18].

Despite the fact that the Avars of Gumbet adopted Islam back in the 14th century, we have recorded numerous relics of former beliefs in their spiritual culture that have survived to this day.

## ***Mythological characters in the traditional beliefs of the Gumbet Avars***

The most ancient ideas of the Gumbet Avars belong to the times of the cult of nature and personifications of heavenly bodies, atmospheric phenomena and elements. In accordance with their cosmogonic ideas, the sun ("bak") is a girl, and the moon ("motsI") is a young man. They believed that if a pregnant woman sees the sun in a dream, then she is to expect a girl, and if the moon – then a boy. There were other similar superstitions: if a pregnant woman dreams of dishes and bedding, – it means the birth of a girl, and if a horse – a boy. Sometimes a ladybug was used in divination

of the sex of the unborn child. The expectant mother would place a ladybug on her left hand (“the left side represents the past” [5, p. 178]) and when the insect, about to fly away, moved from one finger to the other, the woman asked it the question: “Wasish–yasish?” (“Boy or girl?”). The finger from which the ladybug took off at the time of divination, then determined the sex of the unborn child (Verkhnee Inkho).

The Avars of Gumbet personified not only heavenly bodies, but also atmospheric phenomena. When thunder rolled (“gyug’ay”), adults said to children: “Gyugyu-dada gyugadulev vugo” (“The Father-Thunder thunders”) (Kilyatl), “Gyugyu-dada vatlina vugo” (“The Father-Thunder is coming”) (Chirkata). Lightning (“piri”) was represented in the form of a flying “fire axe” (“TsIadal gIashti”), which the Almighty threw at sinners, punishing them. There was a belief that lightning most often strikes a walnut tree (Nizhnee Inkho, Chirkata) and a pear tree (Chirkata). The Khvarshins also personified lightning (“gIarchIi”) in the form of a fiery axe, which the Almighty in anger threw at sinners [6, p. 68]. As we see, lightning among the Avars of Gumbet was represented as a “fire axe” – an attribute of the God (the Thunderer).

Other atmospheric phenomena, such as rainbow, were also personified. Rainbow in the village of Kilyatl was called “Nur” (“Radiance”), and in the villages of Verkhnee and Nizhnee Inkho – “Nuralul kIamuri” (“Shining Arch”). The latter comes from the belief of the rainbow as an image of the connection of different points of the sacred space [7, p. 116], connecting earth with heaven, top with bottom, humans with God [8, p. 117].

The Gumbet Avars believed that there were 7 colors in the rainbow, but red, blue and yellow predominated (Kilyatl). Upon seeing a rainbow, the children shouted: “Nur chIchIun [bugo]!” (“The radiance [the rainbow] is visible!”).

In the village of Kilyatl when a rainbow appeared, the children shouted the following phrase:

“BagIarab – gIurusaze!

GIurchinab – diye!”.

“Red (‘the color of fire, war, hell’ [9, pp. 31-32]) – for the Russians!

Green (‘the color of life, spring, vegetation, renewal, youth, rebirth, the sacred color of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam itself’ [9, pp. 30-31]) is for me!”.

At the unexpected appearance of the rainbow, the following phrase was uttered: “LykIalye bataiygi”! (“[Let it be] for good!”).

The rainbow was also associated with common and meteorological signs. For example, if one end of the rainbow rested on the house where a pregnant woman lived, then she was to expect a son. Apparently, the rainbow was perceived as a positive atmospheric phenomenon, bestowing with its touch the desired (especially for fathers of families) child – a son – a continuer of the family, a warrior and defender of the family and rural community. This superstition may possibly indirectly indicate the male sex of this natural phenomenon by analogy with the superstitions about the

heavenly bodies. This assumption is confirmed by the recent case in Gumbet in which a woman saw the moon split in two in her dream, after which her son died.

There was also a superstition that if you scare a pregnant woman by threatening her with an axe or knife (male attributes), then she would have a boy. The same superstition was if these objects were put unnoticed for her under the pillow (Nizhnee Inkho).

The appearance of a rainbow after the rain was a harbinger of clear weather. If the rainbow stretched along the river – it was to rain, and if across it – to clear weather. If the sky was illuminated by a red glow at night – to clear weather, and if in the morning – to rain (Kilyatl).

As we can see from the material above, the cult of the nature of the Gumbet Avars was represented by the sun (girl) and moon (boy) personified in anthropomorphic form, thunder (The Father-thunder as *Gyugyu-dada*) and the attribute of the thunder god – lightning (fire axe). The rainbow was represented by an image connecting different points of the sacred space. Similar beliefs existed among other Avars [10, p. 19-24] and the peoples of Dagestan [7, p. 42-117].

Among the Avars of Gumbet – ancient farmers and pastoralists of the mountain-valley zone of Dagestan [11, p. 17, 33; 12, p. 47] – precipitation was important. The arid climate of this zone gave rise to a number of rain-inducing rituals. The most popular of them was the ritual of “rainmaking” (“tsIad g’ari” – “rain”), in which the mummers “tsIadal hIama” (“rain donkey”) (Chirkata) or “khkharil hIama” (“grass donkey”) (Verkhnee and Nizhnee Inkho) participated. They were usually orphan-boys of 10-15 years old, who were dressed in burdock leaves and long stems of “rain grass” (“tsIadal khkher”). Accompanied by children and teenagers, the mummers were led through the courtyards of the village with a song in which they asked the God to send rain:

“Baiygi, *Allah*, chvahun tsIad!

Chabhila its bakkize,

Chwahhagi gongal,

GIadamal laladize!».

“May *Allah* grant that a downpour falls!

So that water comes out from under the stones,

So that water flows out of the drain,

So that people can water the fields!”.

After hearing the song, the hostess of the house came out to the participants of the ceremony and doused the mummers with a bucket of water, and presented the accompanying children and teenagers with treats (fruits, bread, halva, nuts). After going around all the courtyards of the village, the procession with the mummers gathered outside the village at a natural spring, where they arranged a feast from the collected treats. In Chirkata, this rite was held until the mid-60s of the 20th century, and in the village of Verkhnee Inkho – up until 1985.

It is worth mentioning that the mummers in the rituals of rainmaking were called “rain donkeys” by other Avars [10, p. 24-25; 7, p. 254-262]. The name of the mummer “grass donkey” demonstrates its connection with the “vegetation spirits” and “vegetation demons” [13, pp. 47-50]. The mummers participating in the rituals of meteorological magic can also be considered as mediators between people and deities who were in charge of weather [7, p. 296].

In addition to the ritual with the mummers, there were other rituals for rainmaking. For instance, in Verkhnee Inkho this rite was performed on the northern outskirts of the village, in the place known as “K’olon chIabi” (“The place where the flat stone is fixed”). It was a hilly area ending in a precipice. A sepulchral stele (cenotaph) with inscriptions in Arabic script and solar symbols was installed on the very edge of this site. Some believed that it was in this area that the first stones of the settlement’s dwellings were laid. Only women were allowed to participate in the rainmaking ritual, led by the eldest of them, who knew the Muslim ritual. The women headed to the place early in the morning, taking with them treats (unleavened flat bread and dried apricots) as alms (“sadaqa”). Having reached the “K’olon chIabi” site, the women used hoes to clear the road from small stones, along which the rural cattle went to pasture in the morning and returned from it in the evening. After clearing the road of the stones, the women sat down in a clearing by the road and performed the “zikr” ceremony [14, p. 77]. After this ceremony, the women distributed flat bread and apricots to the children and passers-by who were present there. Then everyone went home. The last time this rite was performed was in the spring of 2021.

There were other methods of summoning precipitation. Throughout Gumbet, during a drought, a horse’s skull was placed in the river to cause rain. Before dipping the skull into the water, the Muslim prayer “Yasin” was cited. In Chirkata, in the 90s of the 20th century, this ritual was usually entrusted to one of the God-fearing elderly men of the village, who conducted it until their death.

Aside from the rainmaking rituals, there were also opposite rituals – sun-inducing. People resorted to them when it was necessary to suspend prolonged rains, heavy rains and hail that could harm gardens, crops and cattle. Up until the 70s of the 20th century there was a following custom in Chirkata: during heavy rains, a woman without a headscarf and with her hair loose went out into the courtyard of the house to stop it. In everyday life, such conduct was unacceptable and condemned, but they resorted to it in extraordinary situations in order to encourage the God to suspend unwanted precipitation.

During the hail, to stop it, an axe (“gIashtIi”) was installed in the yard with the edge of the blade up, and a hearth tripod (“kanik mahh”) was thrown out with its legs up.

In conclusion, the mummers “tsIadal hIama” (“rain donkey”) and “khkharil hIama” (“grass donkey”) participated in the rainmaking rituals the Avars of Gumbet. In addition to the rituals with mummers, there were other methods of inducing rain and sun.

Mummers participated in the ritual culture of the Gumbet Avars not only for rain-making. Until recently, they have also been present at weddings and tightrope walkers' performances. The mummers put felt or rag masks on their heads with slits for the eyes and mouth and with felt ears sewn to the head (on a manner of a donkey). The mummers wore fur coats turned inside out. In Kilyatl, Verkhnee and Nizhnee Inkho mummers were called "gIindush" ("big-eared"), and in the village of Chirkakta – "gIartsi ber" ("silver eye"). The mummers were usually locals. At weddings they performed for free, and at tightrope walkers' performances they were hired for a certain fee. The mummers tried to stay unrecognized. Their main function at family celebrations and social events was to amuse the audience and avert the possible "evil eye" of evil-wishers from the bride and groom and tightrope walkers. The mummers danced, somersaulted, smeared themselves with soot and threw flour at the spectators who attended weddings and performances of tightrope walkers. People were usually not offended by their conduct. The mummers participated in the family and social rituals of the Gumbet Avars until the 70s of the 20th century.

Summing up the participation of mummers in calendar, family, household and social rituals of the Avars and other Dagestanis, we should note that some peoples of the North-Eastern Caucasus used a doll in the rituals of meteorological magic instead of ceremonial mummers, which indicates "a certain degradation of the rite towards its simplification and symbolization, which is probably connected with processes and changes in economic and social life and religious consciousness" [7, p. 298].

The use of the doll in the mentioned rituals among the Avars has not been recorded. However, it was used in some social rituals. According to the ancient custom of mutual assistance, when building a house for a new family, the Gumbets, like other Avars [15, pp. 388-392] and the peoples of Dagestan [16], arranged assistance ("gway"), in which the neighbors and relatives of the groom participated. At the final stage of construction, when plastering the floors and walls of the dwelling with clay, the women molded a "mud doll" ("HIarshul YasikIo") from it and silently sent it to the house of the bride. The parents accepted the doll, and in return sent a tray with food to those who participated in the "gway" custom – boiled meat, chudu-pies ("tsI-ural chadal"), flour halva ("bahuh").

The bride's side also arranged a "gwai" with the participation of women to prepare bedding for the newlyweds. Upon its completion, a "rag doll" ("ChIartIil Yasikio") was made from scraps and pieces of cloth and was also silently sent to the groom's house. The groom's parents, in turn, sent a tray of treats to the women.

In conclusion, at the stage of pre-wedding ceremonies, the Avars of Gumbet used the custom of mutual assistance in building a house and preparing bedding for the young. The custom of the wedding gift exchange is especially noteworthy, in which mud and rag dolls figure.

In everyday life, a weak-willed and soft-bodied boy is called a "rag boy" ("ChIartIil vasikIo") (Kilyatl).

We consider the dolls used in the ritual culture and social life of the Avars and other peoples of Dagestan as the “images of deities associated with agricultural production, patronage of the family and the cult of fertility” [7, p. 345].

Along with mummers and dolls – mediators between gods and man, personifications of patrons of household occupations, family and marriage associated with the cult of fertility, the mythology of the Gumbet Avars preserved beliefs about mythological characters living in the mountains – *Budulaal*, –patronizing wild animals and hunt. With the adoption of Islam, they began to be perceived as Muslim saints, intermediaries between man and the God. In appearance, they seem to resemble people dressed in white clothes. They dwell on the tops of inaccessible mountains, in rocks and caves. They feed on game meat. Among animals, they favor Caucasian Turs. They kill wild animals, eat their meat without breaking bones, which they then put back into the skin of the animal they killed and then revive it. Hunters kill the game that they have already eaten, and then revive the *Budulaal* (Kilyatl, Verkhnee and Nizhnee Inkho).

Mountain spirits allegedly help people who get lost in the mountains to find their way if they turn to them for help: “Ya, *Budulaal*, kumek gyabe!” (“Oh, *Budulaal*, help me!”).

It is noteworthy that *Budulaal* is still being asked for help even today. For example, during the invasion of Dagestan by international terrorists, in August–September of 1999, elderly women of the village of Verkhnee Inkho climbed the roof of a mosque and, raising their hands to the sky, prayed to the Almighty, calling him for help: “*Budulaal*, gyare *Allag* asda nizhede tIade gyel tushbabi richchageyan!” (“*Budulaal*, ask *Allah* to prevent enemies from reaching us!”). One of these women saw in a dream her late father, *ustaz*, who allegedly told her: “*Allag* as kabul g’abuna nuzher g’ari, wa tushbabi nuzhede rachIine g’echIo” (“*Allah* has accepted (heard) your prayer, and enemies will not come to you”). In this case, the *Budulaal* act as intermediaries between man and the Almighty, which contradicts the doctrine of Islam, which does not recognize any companions of *Allah*.

On the south-western outskirts of the village of Nizhnee Inkho there is the “*Budulaal* Spring” (“*Budulaa* zul its”). According to the legend, people saw *Budulaals* performing ablution at this spring before morning prayer. There, by the spring, the traces of their wet bare feet seemed to be visible on the rocks. Women who went to field work in the morning and returned in the evening washed their faces with water from this spring, as according to legend, it had the ability to relieve fatigue and give strength.

Thus, the Avars of Gumbet have preserved the belief of the Islamized anthropomorphic mountain spirits *Budulaal*, who patronized wild animals and hunting, assisted people lost in the mountains if they turned to them for help. It is noteworthy that the Gumbet Avars turn to the *Budulaal* (as intermediaries between man and the God) in extraordinary situations even today.



Beliefs about the mountain spirits of the *Budulaal* have also survived in the mythologies of other Avars [17, pp. 37-38, 41-42; 18, pp. 301-302].

Stadially, the peoples of Dagestan formed beliefs about the supreme gods of the pantheon most recently. This process falls on the era of a “qualitatively new stage in the development of agriculture and cattle breeding, producing farms, falling during the period of widespread iron, iron tools, which were the most important factor and driving force of the process of socio-economic development, which led to the transition from barbarism to civilization, to class society and state forms of social life” [7, p. 187].

Being a part of the Avar ethnos, the vocabulary and phraseology of the language of the Gumbet Avars preserved the theonyms of the former supreme deities of the pantheon. Thus, in the Avar language, the concepts of “Lord”, “God”, “Almighty” are denoted as *BetIergan* and *Beched* [19, p. 61]. At any request, supplication or wish, the Avars of Gumbet say the following: “Ya, *BetIergan-Allag!*” (“Oh, the Lord-Allah!”). A wife, speaking respectfully about her husband, says “dir *BetIergan-chi*”, in the sense of “my lord”.

According to M.A. Aglarov, now understood as “God’s mercy”, the Avar word “tsIob” is a transformation of the pre-Islamic Avar-Ando-Didoi deity *TsIob* [20, p. 67]. The name *TsIob* can be seen among the Avars of Gumbet in oaths and good wishes: “*TsIob gIatIidav!*” (“Infinitely merciful [about the deity]”), “*Allag asul TsIob legi!*” (“May Allah have mercy!”), “*Bichasul TsIob legi!*” (“May the *Beched* have mercy!”). The latter, in addition to *TsIob*, mentions another Avar supreme deity – *Beched*, whose name can often be heard in the saying “*Bichas bichani!*” (“If *Beched* pleases [then it will happen!]”). The concepts of “*Allag asul avarag*” (“Allah’s prophet”) and “*Bicha sul avarag*” (“*Beched*’s prophet”) are identical among the Gumbet people, although this contradicts the doctrine of Islam about strict monotheism, which considers *Allah* to be the only god who has no companions.

As we can see from the presented material, the vocabulary and phraseology of the Gumbet Avars preserved the names of the former supreme gods of the pantheon – *BetIergan*, *Beched*, *TsIob*. With the adoption of Islam, the first two theonyms became synonymous with *Allah*, and the third transformed into the concept of “God’s mercy”.

The names of the former supreme pagan gods, identified with the adoption of Islam with *Allah*, have also preserved among other Avars and peoples of Dagestan [21, p. 39; 7, pp. 155-156, 157-205].

Thus, the given material on folklore, vocabulary and phraseology, calendar, family and social rituals of the Gumbet Avars provides the images of the former deities of the Avar pantheon.

The demonology of the Gumbet Avars is represented by both virtuous and malicious towards man characters. The so-called “house-spirits” or “foundation snakes” can be attributed to the former. The Avars of Gumbet believed in the existence of a “foundation snake” (“*KyorchIyol boroh*”), allegedly living in the foundation of the

house. In Kilyatl this snake was called *Hono-boroh* (“Egg-snake”). According to the descriptions, it is gray in color, and has two orange spots on its head. It is harmless to humans, therefore not to be killed. The presence of this snake in the foundation of the dwelling seemed to depend on the well-being and prosperity (“barakat”) of the family inhabiting it.

On the other hand, the Avars of Gumbet treat ordinary snakes negatively: when they meet them, they try to kill them. However, it was forbidden to kill snakes in autumn. Otherwise, they would burden you with all their worries and troubles. It was also forbidden to injure a snake near a pond: “If it is wounded and manages to crawl to the water, then you will face major troubles up to death”. If a snake was killed during a drought, it had to be buried, and a small gravestone was placed at the head of the burial (Nizhnee Inkho).

Thus, the mythology of the Gumbet people had a belief in “foundation snakes”, with which the well-being and prosperity of the family were associated. Ordinary snakes were treated negatively. Seasonal, casual and calendar-ritual taboos were associated with them.

The belief in virtuous “foundation snakes” also existed among other peoples of Dagestan [22, p. 16-60; 18, p. 232].

In addition to virtuous demons, the mythology of the peoples of Dagestan is also represented by malicious spirits. These include demons that intrude the dwelling at night and strangle a person during sleep. The demonology of the Gumbet Avars preserved such a character – *HyegIelo*. It is an evil demon of vague appearance. It enters the dwelling at midnight (“night symbolizes chaos, death, madness, destruction” [5, p. 218]) and weighs heavily on a person, restraining their breathing and body movements. The residents of Verkhnee Inkho believed that “*HyegIelo*” lies only on those who sleep on their belly, and in Kilyatl – that it sits on the chest of men lying on their backs.

According to eyewitnesses, the demon weighed and strangled people not only at home, but also outside. According to a resident of the village of Nizhnee Inkho Isadibir Magomedov, in 1990s due to the breakdown of his Kamaz truck at the Kharib pass, he had to spend the night in the truck’s cabin. At night, while sleeping, he heard the car door he had locked open, and someone leaned on him with its weight and started strangling him. He realized it was *HyegIelo*. After a while, the demon slid off of him, opened the car door and slammed it, vanishing into the night. Another time, at the same Kharib pass, Isadibir stopped at a roadside house to perform a prayer. After the prayer, he wrapped himself in a sheepskin coat and fell asleep lying on his back. And this time *HyegIelo* came to him and crushed and strangled him for a long time. The demon frequently pesters the sleeping Isadibir at home, so he is forced to sleep with the lights and the TV on.

*HyegIelo* is said to possess magic items – gold (“mesed”) (Verkhnee Inkho), a golden crown (“mesedi tazh”) (Nizhnee Inkho), a pair of golden scissors (“mesedil kIvek-

makh”) (Kilyatl). It is also said that the rainbow “Nur” (“Radiance”) is a reflection from the radiance of *HyegIelo*’s golden scissors (Kilyatl). There is a belief that if any person manages to get hold of the magical objects of the demon *HyegIelo*, then he or she will become the owner of untold and inexhaustible wealth. Before leaning on a person, *HyegIelo* supposedly puts his magic objects in a niche above the doorway (“nutsil k’ono”). Through this niche, a locking latch was formerly installed. There was a belief that if a person managed to get up, carrying *HyegIelo* on themselves, and take possession of the magic items left by him in a niche above the threshold, then the person would become rich. Grabbing the golden items, it was necessary to pass through the threshold (“passage from the profane to the sacred”, “entry into the new world” [5, p. 256]) into the street. But, as they say, no one was able to perform this, because the demon overtook the kidnapper, took the gold from the them and beat the human’s back with his fists. The demon would leave an imprint of his hand in the place where he slapped, which could not be hidden by any, even iron, clothing: the fabric in this place would constantly torn. Even today, when they see torn clothes on a person, they say: “*HyegIelo* oyal khat bana?” (“Did *HyegIelo* slapped you with his paw?”).

There were special techniques and amulets with which people tried to scare away *HyegIelo*. For this purpose, they cited Muslim prayers aloud or to themselves (“du-gIa”). It was believed that it was possible to get rid of the demon that had leaned on a person if you managed to inhale and exhale, move your finger or foot, utter a sound. In order to insure yourself against demon’s visits, you had to eat something while in the toilet. A knife placed under the pillow also served as a talisman against the demon.

The belief in an evil spirit that intrudes a dwelling to strangle a person and possesses magic items also existed among other peoples of Dagestan [23, pp. 131-147; 24, pp. 26-27; 22, pp. 61-139; 25, pp. 111-113].

Another evil spirit was the demon antagonist of pregnant women. In the mythology of most of the Avars of Gumbet, he was called *Khuduch*. He also entered the dwelling at night and stole the fetus from the womb of God-fearing and pious pregnant women. They did not experience any pain in that moment. Having stolen the fetus, the demon left one (Verkhnee Inkho) or several (Kilyatl) drops of blood on the threshold of the dwelling. Where the demon then took the stolen fetus is unknown.

Locals of Nizhnee Inkho believed that the fetus of pregnant women was stolen not by the *Huduch*, but by the *Budulaal*, who carried it to the peaks of the mountains inhabited by them. The *Budulaal* would leave a few drops of blood on the threshold of a house. On their way, they allegedly halted for a rest. They would then put the stolen fetus on the trunk of a tree. It was believed that if the fetus was placed on a green tree, the woman from whom it was stolen would be able to have children in the future, and if on a dry one, then she would be infertile.

According to stories, in the 60s of the 20th century in Verkhnee Inkho *Khuduch* stole a fetus from one of the residents of the village, who had already lost two

infants before this incident. Residents of Kilyatl remember several cases related to the abduction of fetus from pregnant women. It is said that after the death of these women, they will be met at the gates of heaven by the children stolen from them, who will lead their mothers into this abode of the righteous by the hand. It is believed that any child who died before reaching adulthood (15 years old) is standing at the gates of hell in the afterlife and does not allow his/her parents to get there.

When a child dies, the Gumbets express condolences to the parents with the following phrase: “Alzhan kachIase, arav vatagi!” (“May he/she [the deceased child] comfort you in paradise!”).

As we see, residents of some villages of Gumbet believed in a demon antagonist of pregnant women – *Huduch*. In other villages, it was believed that the fetus of pregnant women was stolen not by the *Huduch*, but by the mountain spirits *Bud-ulaal*. Such uncertainty is also characteristic of other Avars, which is associated with the ambivalence of the functions of individual mythological characters and the splitting of their images into virtuous and unambiguously hostile to man.

Mythological beliefs about antagonistic demons of pregnant women and women in labor also existed among other peoples of Dagestan [26, p. 81; 10, p. 35-36; 27, p. 33-34, 44; 22, p. 140-190].

A great place in the demonology of the Gumbet Avars is occupied by the ideas of Muslim mythological characters – Shaitans (“Shaitan”) [28, p. 509]. With the adoption of Islam, these characters absorbed local mythological ideas with similar hypostases and functions. In appearance, shaitans have mainly human features, the only difference being the cut of their eyes and the pupils are vertical (Kilyatl). Sometimes there are shaitans in the guise of cross-eyed people (“heterotropia is a sign of an evil person” [29, p. 204]). According to common opinion, shaitans inhabit mountains, gorges, chasms, mills, garbage and waste pits. In addition to them, each village had areas that were rumoured to be places where evil spirits live. For example, on the northern outskirts of the village of Verkhnee Inkho, on the way to the village of Chitl, there is a cliff called “GanchIi kuru” (“Stone cliff”). Inside it, shaitans allegedly lived. If someone walked past this cliff late at night, the shaitans would throw stones at them. On the south-western outskirts of the village of Nizhnee Inkho is the “Fiery Gorge” (“BuhIila kIal”), in which shaitans supposedly lived. Shepherds saw shaitans in the guise of cross-eyed people in the rocks and grottoes of the Rukalib area, which is on the eastern outskirts of this village.

Shaitans allegedly dwelled on the southern outskirts of Kilyatl, where the garbage dump was located. Passing by it, it was necessary to recite the Muslim prayer “Kul-hu”. They were also rumoured to dwell in the area of “Isuva zhanib”, located on the southeastern outskirts of the village, in a gorge ending in a ravine and a walnut grove. Behind the village, in the gardens of “Makkazul busen” (“Pigeon nests”), there was supposedly a Shaitan village (Kilyatl).

Locals of Chirkata believed that shaitans can be found in mills. In the 60s of the 20th century, there was a functioning public mill “Shabal-gyobo”, which had a miller. It is said that he often complained about evil demons harassing him, when he had to stay at the mill for a night. To protect himself from their influence, he would cite the “Kulhu” prayer and curse “those who had an *evil eye* (“the bearer of the deadly gaze of various fantastic creatures” [9, pp. 244-245]) and the wicked *Ilbis* and shaitans” (“Ber hIaramazde, hIal hubazde, *Ilbis* azde, *ShaitIa* bazde”), after which he spat to his left and to his right.

There are many stories about human contacts with evil spirits. For instance, residents of Verkhnee Inkho remember an incident that happened to a shepherd, who was returning home at night from their village. The shepherd was girded with a dagger. In the place called “Bakvarab kulgIa” (“Dried up spring”), he was suddenly surrounded by some people who constantly repeated the following phrase: “Bakul bugeb kveshab zho gIodob rehe kIantsIero!” (“Throw away that bad thing that [is in your] middle, hopper!”), the “bad thing” being a dagger. Despite their insistent requests, the shepherd did not remove the dagger from his belt, and that saved his life. At parting, those people gave the shepherd a horse. When he reached the village on horseback, he dismounted and, entering the courtyard of his house, tied the horse to a hitching post. When the shepherd entered the house, he asked his wife to feed the horse. After a while, his wife returned and told him that there was no horse there. Approaching the hitching post, the shepherd saw a pine branch tied to it instead of a horse. Then he realized that the people he met in the mountains were shaitans.

According to old Sabigat from Kilyatl, a few kilometers to the northwest of the village, in the forest, near the path by the cliff, there is a place called “Burgal KialtIa” (“Gates of Burgala”), which is allegedly the place of a gathering of shaitans. As soon as Sabigat reaches that place, she has an epileptic seizure. After a seizure, she is sick for a long time and comes to her senses. A healer from Nizhnee Inkho Gazimagomed believes that Sabigat is possessed by evil spirits. One day he tried to come to her house to cure her of her illness with the help of Muslim prayers. However, as they say, Gazimagomed failed to reach Sabigat’s house, as he was allegedly captured by the shaitans at a rural spring and beaten to bruises – they in every way prevented the healing of this woman.

One story tells that in the village of Tloh, there was *alim* Salman, who had control over the shaitans: he forced them to work in his garden. The shaitans allegedly complained to Salman many times about their burdens and asked him to let them go, but he was relentless.

People tried to avoid contact with evil spirits, not to accidentally hurt them, since shaitans could punish the offender in revenge by cursing them. For instance, the adults of Nizhnee Inkho forbade children to throw pebbles at night into piles of garbage, sewage and manure pits, into gorges and precipices, telling them: “Do not

throw pebbles, otherwise you will break dishes and cripple the shaitans' children, and then they will harm us!" ("Nuzhetsa chIimhal rechIuge, gyez gyezul tsIaragI-matahI bekize begula, va shaitIabazul limalaze zaral gyabizegi begula, gylul hIasilalda gyez nilyeegi zaral gyabize res bugo").

If a child suddenly fell ill, it was believed that while playing in a certain place, he touched shaitans by accident. In order to heal the child, flour halva ("bahuh") was carried to this place and left there, asking the shaitans to accept this offering and forgive their child (Verkhnee Inkho).

If someone had facial paralysis, accompanied by a curvature of the mouth ("kIal tsIan bugo" – "the mouth is crooked"), it was assumed that this person, while relieving themselves, sprayed the shaitans and they slapped his face in retaliation. In order to heal the patient and appease the shaitans, they would sacrifice a black chicken, wrapped it in a shroud and buried it in the place where the patient urinated. In Nizhnee Inkho this ritual was carried out until the mid-90s of the 20th century.

According to stories, there was a mentally ill man nicknamed "Shaitan-GiakhI-mad" (Shaitan-Ahmed), who lived in Nizhnee Inkho. He allegedly accidentally hit a shaitan, for which he was punished by mental illness. There was a girl in Kilyatl who had incoherent speech and stuttered. She became like this after shaitans took her to a corner of a stable and beat her head against the stone wall.

Adults forbade children to play outside in the evening, scaring them that they would be taken away by shaitan. In addition to shaitan, disobedient children were also scared with BogIolo: "BogIolo will come and take you away" ("BogIolo bachIune bugo, vachun ina"). *BogIolo* was seen as a creature with big eyes and horns. The children were also frightened by the fact that they would be stolen by *Shagav*, a mythical man of tall stature wearing a burka.

Beliefs associated with shaitan and evil spirits exist among other peoples of Dagestan [30, pp. 134-151; 22, pp. 258-325].

As we see, the demonology of the Gumbet Avars is represented by various mythological characters – virtuous ("foundation snakes") and hostile (most demons) to man.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, the analysis of the vocabulary and phraseology, folklore and ritual culture of the Gumbet Avars reveals the diversity of mythological characters of the former pantheon and pandemonium of the Avars that survived to the Soviet and modern times. They are represented by a variety of different personified images: personified heavenly bodies and atmospheric phenomena, mummers and dolls, mountain spirits, supreme deities; "foundation snakes", an evil demon-strangler, a demon antagonist of pregnant women, shaitans. Most of these characters have analogies in the

mythologies of other peoples of Dagestan, which testifies to the common origin and the formation of the main features of their spiritual culture in ancient times. With the adoption of Islam, some of these characters were Islamized, and their names began to be identified with *Allah*. This circumstance testifies to the syncretism of the religious beliefs of the Avars of Gumbet, other Avars and the peoples of Dagestan, who have preserved relics of former religion in their spiritual culture.

The reasons for the preservation of pre-monotheistic mythological characters and early forms of religion among Gumbet Avars within the conditions of more than six hundred years of professing Islam, urbanization and globalization of Soviet and modern times can be explained by the healthy conservatism inherent in all Dagestanis, as well as the peculiarities of their mentality – “patriarchy, adherence to traditions, stable value systems and behavioral stereotypes” [31, p. 4].

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