

Research Article

Images of Sleep and Insomnia Spirits in Karelian Mythology

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Abstract. The primary source of material for this research was the folklore-ethnographic evidence stored in the archives of Karelia and collected over a century-long time period by Karelian folklore researchers. Comparative-historical, synchronous-descriptive and comparative-typological methods were employed. The scientific novelty and relevance of this research arise from the fact that the topic has not been studied through 19-20th century mythological stories of Karelians. The focus of the study was on the images of two mythological characters that are antagonistic and struggle for power over the child: yönitkettäi ‘night placheya (evil night spirit of crying)’ and uniukko ‘old man of sleep’. They enter the house at night, the former by breaking the established taboo, the latter invited by a human. The worlds of the spirits are also antipodal both to each other and to the human world.

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1. Introduction

Karelian folklore contains stories about two mythical characters related to the world of childhood and personifying two antipodean states: sleep and insomnia, balance of life and chaos, good and evil. These two creatures are in constant struggle for the child, which intensifies after dark.

The night placheya ‘yönitkettäi’ image personifies a sick condition in which the child cries constantly and cannot sleep [1]. Sleep as a health indicator is frequently embodied in the images of the old man and the old woman of sleep, ‘uniukko’ and ‘uniakka’.

These mythological characters have similar features: firstly, both enter the human world from their own antipodal spirit worlds (in texts: “from foreign lands”); secondly, this happens at sunset. However, the sleep spirit comes as an invited guest, and stays next to the baby or temporarily takes the baby’s soul to its realm of tranquility. In contrast, the night placheya intrudes the house uninvited and penetrates the baby’s body causing the disease.


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The temporal concepts of sleep and wake have been counterposed to each other from the start. Karelians divided the twenty-four hour period into the day (solar) half 'päivypuoli', and the night half 'yöpuoli'. The day was filled with light, sounds, movement, warmth; it was good time for people. The night meant stillness, gloom, hush and cold; it was dangerous for people and associated with the realm of evil spirits. The sun was thought to be the main border dividing them. The night for humans was a strict taboo, and the house was considered to be the only relatively safe place. In the sleep, the soul could leave the body and travel to other worlds. On awakening, people usually remembered nothing [5]. Karelian lullabies contained the motive of lulling to drowsiness. Drowsiness 'maku' was considered as temporal dying, moving to the world of dreams, which was especially good for the baby. The condition called 'apnea' in medicine was believed to demonstrate that the soul had left the sleeping person.

2. Methods

The primary source of material is the folklore-ethnographic evidence stored in the archives of Karelia and collected over a century-long time period by Karelian folklore researchers. The comparative-historical, synchronous-descriptive and comparative-typological method methods were employed. The scientific novelty and relevance arise from the fact that the topic has not been studied through 19-20th century mythological stories of Karelians.

3. Results and Discussion

The image of sleep in Karelian beliefs is personified. People not only invite the spirit to the house where the baby is being lulled, but also show all the possible ways to get in. The means of transport are made from sacral tree species and intended only for the dearest and honored guests: alder carriage and birch sled drawn by a sheep or a mouse.

Sleep spirit is an amorphous or anthropomorphous creature. It appears mainly as an old man 'ukko'. He comes up to the threshold and asks for permission to enter the house to put the baby to sleep and temporarily take him/her to his own realm. The old man 'uniukko' has his place in the house: the stove or the cradle head.

As follows from lullabies, the old man of sleep may enter the house only when the baby is calm. If the baby is in power of the night placheya, i.e. crying and shouting, then

the old man of sleep cannot be in there. People first have to drive the evil spirit out of the house. There existed dozens of various rituals for this purpose [4].

Humming a lullaby, a Karelian woman believed in the triumph of good over evil: “the sleep will make the baby dreaming, dryoma (“the sandman”) will lure the baby. She assured that the baby in the cradle was safely hidden from the evil night *placheya*, so, the nanny asked the old man of sleep ‘uniukko’ or the old woman of sleep ‘uniakka’ to bring sleep “in a small copper box, in a copper cup”. She also reminded that they should bring “a silk band to blindfold the baby”, “golden rings to seal the baby’s ears”. The sleep spirit was to put the baby to sleep, take it away to its realm for “the baby to sleep as if in its mother’s belly, to doze like a snag in water”. The old man was thought to bring peace and quiet as well as good health.

During the bath ceremony of “steaming the baby until it falls asleep ‘lapsen uneen kylvetös’” the healer asked the God and forces of the nature for help, and the sleep spirit in the image of a young man would appear behind the bathhouse door. In the spells, the spirit is sometimes materialized as a “maiden, twilight girl ‘yön tytti, hämään neiti’” invited to the baby. One more rare mythological character to do with the realm of sleep, Untamo (from ‘uni’ sleep), is mentioned in some texts. This is an old deity of the night worshipped by Karelians, the Lord of the Land of NOD, who brings peace and calm to the baby.

Sometimes the sleep spirit is named angel or even Creator-organizer who comes to help the nanny. Thus, the syncretism of various beliefs and mythological views is clearly visible in folklore texts and ceremonies.

Lullabies give a detailed description of the other world of sleep and the way the old man and the old woman of sleep carry the baby away: “along golden alleyways, up the copper stairs”. The main epithets are: copper, gold, silver, silk. This is a special upper world of light, tranquility, and wealth. It is found either on a high (actually existing) mountain *Kompakko* “washed by white waters” with fish or on the mythical “Sleepy (Lulling) mountain *Tuovin mäiltä*”.

Karelians believed that the night *placheya* ‘yönitkettäi’ is both a mythological creature tormenting the baby thus making it cry, and the disease as such, sometimes with lethal outcome [3]. Unlike the baby suffering from insomnia, the night *placheya* avoids sleep, is full of energy and strives for everlasting wakefulness.

In Karelian beliefs, the night spirit could enter a place only after dark, as the house was protected by domestic spirits in the daytime, or if a human had violated some spatio-temporal or verbal-ethical taboo. After intruding the house at night and having a

sleepless night with a baby, placheya tried to spend the day by hiding in the washstand, room corners or at the basement door.

In spells, the night placheya is sometimes called 'piru' the devil, and portrayed as a creature shooting arrows of insomnia and cry at a baby thus causing a disease. It could be named the demon 'biessa' or the odd 'liika' i.e., alien to the human world, arriving not just from the other world but "from its bad part 'paha puoli'" inhabited by evil spirits.

The night placheya is often described as an amorphous creature with acoustic manifestations (people hear its voice in their dreams). Some texts describe it as an anthropomorphic character.

The night placheya is mostly portrayed as a female creature wearing a saraphan (a female peasant dress) and stockings; it has long nails which she uses to scratch and pinch a child. Male features are also found in many spells. We can guess from indirect descriptions that a female placheya comes to a girl while a male one to a boy. Various work skills of the night placheya show gender differences: it may plow and plane, or sew and knit. One can find both female and male proper names given to the night placheya 'yönitkettäi', e.g. mother Patrikeevna, Kharshi-Parshi, Matti.

Unlike the sleep image, the night placheya is not a single spirit: several evil creatures can penetrate the house and trouble the baby. They can be of different ages and sizes. The night placheya changed over time: in late 20th century folklore prose it could not only plough, spin, make fishing nets, weave lace, but also had fancy for reading newspapers and books.

The night placheya could appear in zoo- and ornithomorphic images (gray cat, magpie). The night placheya is connected with natural disasters. The water night placheya is thought to be especially dangerous. In case a taboo or the balance between the human world and nature is broken, people are supposed to beg forgiveness and healing at the exact location where the evil spirit enters [2, 6].

The native land of the night placheya is the realm of disease, rocky, barren, cold, and dark. It lies "across the cold sea", "in the thick spruce forest", in the "dark Pohjola". Epithets describing it have negative connotations: bad (left) half 'paha (hurai) puoli'; thicket 'korpi'; cold northern lands of the Lapps 'lapin mua', where "other murderers also live forever creating evil 'muutki murhamiehet, ikuiset pahantekijät'".

Thus, Karelian mythological images of sleep and insomnia spirits and their worlds are completely antipodal.

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