A millennium-plus supremacy of Islam and of Muslim culture among the Tabasaranians ousted the pagan rituals – the system of pre-Islamic religious ideas which has been retained in a rather fragmentary form. The construction of this system, of primarily the pantheon and the pandemonium, is hampered beside other things by the lack of whatever classification. Therefore we tried in this paper to provide a certain systematic presentation of the available material, which could be subsequently developed.

In this regard it seems rightful to divide all mythological figures by their hierarchical standing. The hierarchical depiction of gods and demons must probably be the spatial-temporal parameters: their occupied place within the three-term vertical structure of the Cosmos (the upper world – Heaven, the middle world – Earth, the lower world – the Underworld, Erebus’), archaic character, their effect upon man and society. In this paper we shall consider the system of the demonology only.

The demons are supernatural characters who, being not gods, occupy a comparatively lower place in the hierarchy. In a narrower and more precise sense the demons are evil spirits. The contradistinction itself of gods and demons inhabiting the differing cosmic worlds (Heaven for gods and Hell for demons) suggests the idea of using the basic interconnected binary oppositions when classifying the demons (there are other systems of classifications as well). The major boundary line here seems to be the ethic categories expressed in the opposition of good and evil, with the demons mostly divided into the unambiguously hostile, heinous (“Devilry proper or evil spirits are the names used for the demonic images mainly characterized by their propensity to inflict harm upon people in many different ways”), and very occasionally favourable to humans, in some cases combining those and other features (syncretism, ambivalence and multifunctional character of some demons). However, beside the spatial characteristics expressed in the binary opposition: near – far, and allocation (“each place is linked with a certain host, a goblin in the forest, a water-spirit in the river, a boggard in a home, etc.”), “a bathhouse is a dwelling of the bath spirit, an oven and a threshold – of the home spirit”), demons can be classified by the degree of proximity to man, i.e., the ones inhabiting: a) the man-reclaimed space (living premises, a yard, a village with environs); and b) unreclaimed space (beyond the village, beyond the river, in the forest, in the mountains, etc.), and even a hostile space (a cemetery).

Quite naturally the mythological characters are divided by sex: male and female. As noted by A. I. Egorova, “the symbols of the male and female origins are most vividly represented in the cosmogonic, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic myths, in the cults of divinities and spirits, in the numerical symbols of genders, as well as in the binary oppositions”. The latter, as a rule, link the “female” opposition with the negative, the other world (compare the series: female – left – internal – closed – alien – “unclean”, female – left – bad – dead – western – “the inside”).

It is interesting to note in this connection that most Tabasaranian gods and deities surviving to date (excepting the agrarian ones) are male, while the demons are female, which is associated with the natural-historic transition of mankind from the maternal to the paternal ancestry. Meanwhile, transition to androcracy in religion “results in the femininity being replaced by masculinity, the female spirits are converted into male spirits”, moreover, “with the consolidation of patriarchal relations, the female divinities are either subverted to impersonate the forces of evil, or are subjected to the male divinities, or else, are simply forgotten”.

Thus, the “general trend of developing the mythological systems is (when decaying) transformation of gods into demons with the latter retained rather as the evil demons”. Demons, like gods, have their scale of influence (realm) embracing the boundaries of individual (or groups of) villages, associations of rural communities, the entire ethnus, or even going back to quite earlier ethnic commonalities (Protolezgin, Protodagestanian and similar linguistic and ethnic commonalities).

With regard to the aforementioned, it it to be stated that the basic foundations of typological classification of the Tabasaranian demons are featured by the multifaceted characteristics: ethnic categories, spatiality and allocation, proximity to man, gender, scale of influence.

Thus, the demonology of the Tabasaranians can be presented as follows:

a) domestic serpents; b) boggards; c) demons antagonizing women in labour; d) demons impersonating diseases; e) demons of the cemetery. Proceeding on a specific feature of the Tabasaranian demons, it should be noted that on many occasions we have adhered to the description schemes for mythological characters suggested by L. N. Vinogradova and S. M. Tolstaya.

### Domestic Serpents

Featuring the souls of deceased ancestors in the popular mind are domestic serpents. The Tabasaranians know them as the “basement snakes” (Šibrițarin bitlar) or “snake Šavgbiar” (Šavgbar-bitI). The domestic serpent lives in a place long-inhabited by man: a basement, or more often than not in a headway under the ceiling thus making use of the Tabasaran dwellings. A structural element of the Tabasaran home like the central pole, having originated from the former forest resources, was not widely spread any more. The support function of the floor was done by the support beam up to 12-16 m long. The Rutuls also have the mykmagar (“ceiling snake”) live in the central beam of the ceiling. It is interesting to note that one of the names for the boggard used by the Aguls is gbvadikken which can be translated as “living under the ceiling”. In the Dargin and Avar homes the domestic serpent (Kini, Kune, Kaz) resides mainly in the central pole of the building.

Its exterior, as told by the persons who had allegedly seen the serpent, is black with yellow glints and red eyelets. A ritually “pure” creature. It has no posterity. It will never bite a member of the household. Associated with it is welfare and abundance. To kill it is a great sin, it means to incur trouble and misfortunes. The domestic snake will signal its presence with a special chirping sound. In those cases they say: “The Šavgbiar-serpent is chirping, it wants tribute”. On Thursday night the housewives put a treating under the ceiling for the serpent – bread dabbed withavarsha, a sweet paste with no salt or sugar. The Lak wives also prepared sugarless halvah to treat the domestic serpent KIini. According to the Avars, the serpent Kaz likes to rest on bowls with booze. The booze has to be always fetched by the same person wearing the same clothes and carrying the same jar. The Kaz, recognizing this person, remains calm, and the booze will never finish. If however, the booze is drawn by different persons, the Kazh will vanish carrying away the welfare of the house.

Analyzing the origins of revering the domestic serpents, N. Kharuzin wrote: “A harmless snake boldly creeping into a dwelling, must attract attention of an uncivilized person because he is used to seeing snakes as his enemies. He will willingly identify a harmless snake as a totem, and after the totemic notions sink into oblivion he will be able to explain the benevolence of this breed by assuming that it harbours the transmigrated souls of his tribesmen. The cult of kindly serpents (grass-snakes) guarding the contents of a vessel and a dwelling has been known since early Neolithic.”

Thus, the mythological image of domestic serpents have embodied anamorphic concepts of the elder of the house – a wise keeper of the principles of family hearth and traditions.