

ON THE BORDERLINE OF THE WORLDS:

Swamps in the mythopoetic world picture of the peoples of Russia

[Received March 23rd 2021; accepted September 2nd 2021– DOI: 10.21463/shima.168]

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the ethnic and linguistic world vision of the peoples of Russia with the aim of revealing the most representative mythologemes connected with swamps and defining their meaning and place in the cultural landscape. Swamps are dangerous areas for humans and, at the same time, they are also a source of food and biological diversity. In the boreal and circumpolar areas, swamps are seen as a separate world that has been perceived as a chaos that exists beyond the control of human beings. The range of meanings of the swamp manifests itself in the archaic pagan world picture as a primordial space. Swamps can be seen as chthonic or liminal spaces on the threshold of the 'upper' and 'lower' worlds, providing connection between them. In the Christian – and partly in the Muslim – world pictures, the swamp is infernal space where the deities of the ancient world live disguised as devils. The city dwellers who travel to the countryside to pick berries and mushrooms or to go hunting reveal an archaic tendency to depersonalise swamp spirits and other natural forces by avoiding names and precise definitions.

KEY WORDS: swamp, mythopoetic world picture, cultural landscape

Introduction

The cultural landscape of Russia is formed by the environmental and cultural diversity represented by the peoples of the Slavic, Turkic, Finno-Ugric, Tungus-Manchu and other language groups that live in the national territory. As different as they are, their folklore and mythological plots share certain similarities that indicate the presence of ancient trans-Eurasian connections. That, in its turn, allows us to speak of some archetypal connection of this cultural landscape (Berezkin, 2012, pp. 144–155). Any cultural landscape embraces not only types of settlements and methods of cultivating the land but also the images that are created on the basis of utilitarian experience and the basic ethnic linguistic and mythopoetic world picture. There is a variety of works on imagery, mythology, and genius loci of the mountains, forests, and rivers in Russian literature. But the archaic mythology of swamps has unfairly little research dedicated to it in consideration of its function as cultural landscape paradigm. At the same time, the image of swamps in Western culture and literature from the ancient times to postmodernity has been amply represented, for instance, in the works of the Australian researcher Rod Giblett (2007, 2014, 2015) and the English scientist Barbara Hurd (2003).

From the point of view of physical geography, swamps are landscapes that are characterised by excessive damp, low fecundity, and increased acidity. They are formed as a result of accumulation of various types of water (ground and sediment) and the lack of runoff. Russian landscapology classifies swamps into lowland, higher and transitional, depending on their location on the relief, conditions of water and mineral nutrition, and the predominant vegetation. Groundwater and surface waters settle in swamps, and this is where rivers originate. The ecosystem of swamps occupies an interstitial place between water and land. The biological resources of swamps, such as berries, mushrooms, peat, etc., determine their economic use by the inhabitants of neighbouring territories. Swamps are where people come to hunt waterfowl and where animals come looking for food. About one third of the swamps of the world are located in Russia, and they occupy about 8% of Russian territory. Over its vast territory, swamps play an important place both in ecosystems and in the traditional cultures, as well as in economic activity and mythology. Most of Russia's complex swamp systems, covering tens of thousands of square kilometres, are located in Western Siberia.

The waters of swamps are stagnant and dark; they differ from the flowing light waters of rivers and lakes where the water is constantly renewed. Swamps are places of a specific biological time flow. Accordingly, time on the swamp passes slowly, as if not at full force, which does not allow living organisms to develop fully, and contributes to conservation and long-term storage of the biological material:

This time is very slow, almost motionless. The stunted swamp trees and shrubs never gain the full growth that their forest counterparts do when growing on solid ground. The extinction of life here is also slowed down since always cold and acidic water impedes decay. In the swamps of Europe, the bodies of people who lived 2000–2500 years ago underwent natural mummification. This is where peat is formed; it is a product of millennial processes of incomplete decomposition of organic matter. These are no longer plants, but also not coal, no longer living, but still not completely dead matter. The absence of a clear distinction between living and non-living is natural for this element. (Panfilova & Trofimova, 2020, p. 194; author's translation)

Peatbogs are not solid land but a swell saturated with water. Their ability to retain water creates a wet microclimate that contributes to reproduction and expansion of wetlands. The swampy soil feeds its sparse vegetation, which in turn serves as food for the animals that live here. A quag hiding under the moss or grass is dangerous for animals and people. The larger and more active the body, the stronger the death grip of the swamp will be, since the swamp sucks in moving objects faster.

In the south of Europe and in Asia, swamps have been widely regarded as the source of poisonous miasma, cholera, and malaria (Goodall, 2022, p. 26). Until the late 19th century, miasma (now an obsolete medical term) referred to contagious elements perceived to exist in the environment (Kannadan, 2018), the nature of which was unknown. Anaerobic decomposition of the plant matter at the bottom of a swamp produces a colourless gas with a faint yet unpleasant odour. These gas seeps are fire-prone since their main component is methane (CH₄), and they also contain trace amounts of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and nitrogen (N₂). In the swamps of the boreal zone, the processes of decay are not so active, there are no anopheles mosquitoes and, therefore, the motif of swamp miasma and diseases is not common in regional folklore. One can also add that in traditional cultures the smell of smoke as a marker of human space in the taiga (Willersley, 2007, p. 84) is opposed to the

damp smell of swamps and the smell of swamp gas, which is perceived as even more distant from human manifestations than the forest.

According to the type of climate in Russia, there are subarctic and temperate swamps. The northern areas of the European Plain and Siberia have the most waterlogged territories. The lake-swamp systems of the subarctic and forest zone are usually combined with other landscapes, which explains the high flexibility of this ecosystem, as well as the richness and diversity of its fauna. The swamps of the boreal zone possess a specific aesthetic. Stunted trees, dim moss and brown-rusty waters of marsh lakes are not as striking as mountain ranges, centuries-old forests or feather-grass steppes; they tend to set one's mind in a meditative mood, comprehending life on the verge of dying, and survival in conditions of scarcity of resources.

Archaic times: Mythology and archetypes

Swamps represent mysterious and polysemantic realia in the mythological cosmos. Archaic mythology reserves the swamp a special place in the universe that places it outside the boundaries of the mastered and domesticated world. The sacred space of the mythopoetic world picture is essentially anthropocentric and of zonal character; it is structured in the form of concentric circles varying in the degree of their development around the settlement where the periphery of the 'humanised' world will have wildlife. And in this wild nature, swamp landscapes stand out:

A swamp as an area of wild nature opposes the domesticated, inhabited world... in a tougher way than forests, meadows, rivers or steppes. It is more difficult to cultivate. Of course, swamps are different: there are impassable swamps where no human being has set foot, and there are also swamps where each and every year people go to pick cloudbberries, blueberries, cranberries, where they go fowling, take moss, and extract peat. However, a person will never feel like a master here. The swamp is the master of its own that reproduces itself through the endless cycle of dying and renaissance of the elements. (Panfilova & Trofimova, 2020, p. 196)

In the mythological world picture, the swamp stands on the borderline of the worlds, uniting water and land, and being neither one nor the other. Fluidity and liquid state are metaphors for describing the ever-changing events in human society. Zygmunt Bauman (2000, p. 8), a well-known sociologist, describes various sociocultural phenomena using the metaphor of fluidity and the properties of a liquid:

Liquids, so to speak, do not fix space and do not bind time. All descriptions of liquids are snapshots, and the date must be stamped at the bottom of the photo... Liquids move easily. They flow, spill, dry up, splash, overflow, seep, flood, spray, drip, seep, exude; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped - they flow around some obstacles, dissolve others, and seep through others. After encountering solids, they remain unharmed, while the solids they encounter, if they remain solid, change—become damp or wet. It is their amazing mobility that connects liquids with the idea of lightness.

However, the swamp is 'liquid earth', which has both the properties of fluidity and fragility. It is like a liquid yet it also has constancy and inflexibility like earth. The stagnant waters of

the swamp do not flow anywhere: they become as static as dry land. While peat, on the contrary, does not have the properties of strength and immobility. The boundary properties of this landscape bring out sacred meanings, some special properties of potentiality that connect swamps with myths about the creation of the world.

In connection with the symbolism of the elements, a swamp appears as an element of the landscape where one notices a lack of the two active (air and fire) and an excess of the two passive (water and earth) principles. (Fedoseeva, 2018, pp. 72–131; author's translation)

Cosmogonies of the peoples of continental Eurasia and, in particular, the archaic mythology of the majority of the peoples of Siberia, assign the swamp the role of the primordial space. The primordial swamp where the world island or the world tree is located replaces the primordial ocean, which is more characteristic in the linguistic and mythopoetic world picture for the peoples who inhabit the coast of Eurasia. In the languages of the peoples inhabiting Russia, though belonging to completely different language families, the word *boloto* ('swamp' in Russian) has a similar dual etymology that brings out its bipolar semantics. For example, "in the Tungus-Manchu languages, the word '*nyangnya*' has a dual meaning: on the one hand, it is 'sky, air', and on the other, it is 'dirt (swamp)'" (Sem, 2012, p. 459; author's translation). In the Slavic languages, the word *boloto* also contains the proto-memory of the swamp as a sacred space that has the definition 'white':

Having related words in various Slavic and, more broadly, Indo-European languages where they denote the concepts of 'mud', 'clay, earth', 'quagmire', 'swamp forest', this lexeme correlates not only with the word 'white', but also with the concepts of 'shine', 'light', 'radiance', 'appearance'. (Vasmer, 1986, p. 149, p. 190; author's translation)

"Shine" and "radiance" also serve as "a form of expression of holiness in the optically visual sphere" (Toporov, 1987, p. 215; author's translation).

For the Slavs, Turks, Tungus and other peoples of Eurasia, the archaic structure of the world is vertical and is determined by the binary opposition of 'up-down'. If the swamp is the sole or primary human habitat, it is associated with primordial chaos. The swamp is located at the foot of the world mountain or the world tree, or under the feet of a deer or an elk, or another animal with branched horns that symbolises the sun and divine light. The swamp is a symbol of the world chaos where life is being born. The Tungus peoples share the idea that:

the presence of the beliefs about the primordial swamp in the north of the universe and on the edge of the earth where heaven meets earth, the rhythmic rise and fall of which creates noise and a strong wind of the first creation that has an exit to another space and the upper world. (Sem, 2012, p. 128; author's translation).

Thus, the swamp turns out to be the original locus and the source of creative impulses.

One can also recall the trans-Eurasian myth about diving behind the earth as an act of the creation, which can also be interpreted as diving into a swamp, since one of its actants is a wild boar (Berezkin, 2012, pp. 144–155; author's translation). A boar cannot dive into the

ocean, but it is capable of getting soil from the bottom of the swamp. In the mythology of the Khanty and Mansi, the 'liquid earth' gave birth to the whole world. The cosmogonic myth of the Komi-Zyryans about the demiurge brothers Omel and Yen depicts the swamp as the source of creation. If "water symbolizes the primordial substance, or the primary substance from which all forms are born and to which they return as a result of a catastrophe or gradual regression" (Eliade, 2000, p. 394; author's translation), then the swamp is similar to cosmogonic waters. Water is "the womb of all potential existence, the highest embodiment of fluidity, the support and carrier of universal becoming" (Eliade, 2000, p. 348) and, semantically, it correlates with the Moon and lunar cycles. The swamp also has a potential but, unlike open water, it is not subject to cyclical nature of the rise and fall of the tide, and therefore it is more primary and archaic than water. It is able to regenerate itself, renew itself, and form a new essence (Trofimova & Panfilova, 2020, p. 195; author's translation).

The owners of the primordial swamp are the multi-faced creator-gods who can alter their incarnations (anthropomorphic and zoomorphic) and change the vector of their activity from creative to destructive. They have Proto-Indo-European origins, and they are able to go through death and be reborn again. If the first ancestors and first creators are not genetically related to the swamp, they can come to the swamp to perform various heroic deeds. There, in the swamp, they defeat various mythological creatures and establish human control over the elements (Sem, 2012, p. 122; author's translation). The swamp can also be a tool in the hands of a god (although mostly punitive in nature). In Turkic mythology, there is the god Yer-Su, who:

personifies the union of earth and water (translated from Turkic, yer - earth and su - water)... This god symbolized not only the native land and its protective forces, but also the ability to punish. This punishment could be carried out through the diverse facets of the water element, including with the help of the swamp. (Yakovleva, 2018, p. 451; author's translation)

From the point of view of Freudian theory, the swamp can also be seen as an archetype of creative female sexuality, since the bowl of dark water archetypally resembles a womb (Giblett, 2007, pp. 85–86). Another association with the female can be seen in a quagmire since it leads to the lower world but has the potential for rebirth. From this point of view, the heroic deeds of the primal forefathers acquire a different interpretation: "heroism is constituted in patriarchy by the ability to survive the descent into the underworld, or 'dark continent', or 'black water', of female sexuality" (Giblett, 2007, p. 90).

Chthonic space

In myths not about the creation of the world, but about its existence, swamps are assigned the role of chthonic space that is one of the incarnations of the lower world where souls go after death. A swamp in the lower world can coexist with fiery hell and act as its antipode in a series of posthumous ordeals, "[a]t the base of the mountain range of the lower world, a swamp and a heavenly fiery mouth are placed" (Arsenyev, 1998, p. 448–487; author's translation). It can also be a self-sufficient place of residence for the deceased. Mircea Eliade wrote that the idea of the afterlife path of the soul and its suffering originates in the experience of interaction with the enclosing landscape. In northern mythology, instead of

the Asian “inferno” and “thirst for the dead,” we find a description of “low temperatures” (cold, frost, ice swamps, etc.) (Eliade, 2000, p. 348; author’s translation).

A swamp as a chthonic locus can act as a space for the wandering soul:

In the linguistic world picture, it is determined by related words with the root dal -, which contains spatial temporal parameters: this root correlates with both dlit’sya (‘to last’ in Russian) (дълуму) and with dolog (‘long’ in Russian) (дългъ). (Shaposhnikov, 2010, p. 206; author’s translation)

It also has a tinge of something ‘alien’, preserved in the word *dalyokij* (‘distant’ in Russian) when used in a figurative sense. Deprived of any topographical coordinates, such ‘distance’ is firmly associated with ideas about the other world (Krinichnaya, 2010, p. 173; author’s translation).

The variability of the form of the creatures living in the swamp is also associated with their role as guides to another world and intermediaries in communicating with it. In the world picture of the Tungus, where one of the underground worlds has the characteristics of a swamp (earth and water are mixed in it), an important place is occupied by the swamp spider *Ataka mama*:

which can turn into a fiery tiger Amba Buin or Kara Bui, Gambau Buin, the souls of the dead pass through this monster, entering the world of the dead. According to the Udege, the virtuous are reborn in the east, while the evil go into darkness in the west. (Sem, 2012, p. 123; author’s translation)

Another character is a black beast *Kara Amba* who guards the path to the world of the dead (Sem, 2012, p. 123). There was a fork on the road to the world of the dead: to the left there was the path for the good, to the right for the evil, the latter being wet, swampy, tundra with midges (Pilsudskiy, 1989, p. 54). One of the characters of Tungus mythology is *Senge Mama* or *Kenge Mama*; she is:

the guardian of the world, the mistress of human souls, who has the ability to kill and revive, the mistress of life and death. She lives in the cliff, in the middle of a swamp, on a cliff in a cave, in a forest on a mountain inside a lake of fire, that is, on the border of the world of people and the world of the dead, she acts as a guard at the entrance to this world. (Sem, 2012, p. 501; author’s translation)

Her appearance is also constantly changing from human to zoomorphic.

The creatures that inhabit the swamp as a chthonic space, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, are also capable of shape-shifting, just like the creator-gods who lived in the primary space of the swamps. They are also as fluid and unstable as ‘liquid water’. To a certain extent, they represent a prototype that acts as a pantheon located closer to human existence and takes responsibility for the after-life journey of the soul. However, it is also capable of influencing the world of the living, in particular, it can influence the weather.

Liminal space

The dual nature determines the functions of the mediator and of the connection between the worlds. The journey of the deceased is one-way, while for shamanic practices and unintentional 'wanderings' the swamp is the mediative space. Wandering in a mediative locus is one of the most common mythological plots, and its essence consists in the fact that a lost person, without knowing it, suddenly finds a door to another world, which turns out to be the world of spirits, the world of ancestors, and so on. In mythologies and fairy tales, the motif of wandering through the swamp is equated to the experience of the liminal transitional state and to the experience of initiation: it often happens that the character leaves this space and the situation acquiring new qualities of the soul as a result. Unlike a chthonic swamp that is located in an otherworldly space, a swamp as a liminal and mediatic locus can be an actual landscape that, under certain conditions, acquires the properties of a natural existential space.

In pre-Christian Slavic mythology, swamps are "not water and not earth, but it is both water and earth, a kind of transitional substance between two natural elements, 'where you can neither walk nor ride,'" here "at the right time and at an untimely hour defined in universal categories" (sunrise – sunset, middle of the day – middle of the night), some "disconnection" of the worlds takes place, and at that moment they become mutually permeable (Krinichnaya, 2010, p. 172, p. 174; author's translation). This "disconnection" is based on the ideas about the junction of parts of the daily cycle such as night and morning, day and evening, as well as the correlation of both halves whether it is day or night. The mere existence of this junction enables the "disconnection," and, in this case, it happens between "two continuums that are opposed to each other and at the same time interconnected" (Krinichnaya, 2010, p. 172, p. 174; author's translation). This also explains the motives of wandering, when, having entered another space at a certain moment, a person is no longer able to leave it, since the moment has passed and the spaces have disconnected. As we can see, in order to use actual swamp landscapes as mediative loci, one has to pay special attention to the time factor, that is: the moment that changes the quality of space, thus taking it out of the real world into the mythological space.

The swamp is associated with the shamanic practices of transition to other worlds, and this is the abode of the spirits that ensure this transition and a safe return, provided that they feel benevolent. This is where we should remind ourselves that swamps are a place where biological time flows in a specific way, which also concerns mythological time. Different peoples of Russia have stories about wandering in the swamps, and they are associated with the transition in time since time effectively 'stops' there. Shamanic practices require both male and female guides. In the mythology of the Nanais, *Pudin Nyaronki* is a decrepit old woman that lives in the middle of a swamp. She turns into a beautiful woman and becomes the wife of the shaman *Pandademolia* who has two assistants, a forefather and a foremother, associated with land and water (Kile, 1996, pp. 243–253). The old woman or the old man of the swamp act as a guide. Due to their advanced age, they already find themselves on the borderline between this world and the other world.

The guide may also be a dwarf, perceived as a subhuman in some way. According to the archival materials of V. K. Arseniev, the Kururmian Nanais of Achshi have an evil shamanic spirit, a swamp goblin, a cannibal that drives you crazy and has the appearance of a hunchbacked half-person, or a little man who carries a human head in his hand and snatches women (Sem, 2012, p. 390). The archetypal image of the hunchback is ambivalent: though erect-walking, it looks down, hence it usually belongs to the good and the evil, this world and the other world at the same time. The presence of a hump is one of the most

common external signs of evil spirits, which, under certain conditions, can be of help to a person.

Snakes are the usual inhabitants of the swamps of the temperate climate zone. In the majority of traditional cultures, rare mutations that cause snakes to be born with two or more heads are interpreted as a manifestation of the sacred mysterious power, and, in its turn, many-headedness is considered as a sacred polyfunctionality for the mythological snake characters. The image of the 'transformer' serpent is also played out in mythologies: the serpent acts as the master of two worlds of water and earth, earth and underground. In Bashkir mythology, there is a character called *Azhdakha*:

a thick, like a log, snake-like creature that lives in bottomless lakes, swamps, abandoned wells, gorges, caves, underground mines. In epic literature Azhdakha appears as a werewolf dragon. There are three-, six-, nine- and twelve-headed Azhdakhas. It can turn into a bull, a dog or a man. According to popular beliefs, when Azhdakha changes its appearance, that is 'loses his temper', the higher powers lift him up and carry it beyond the Kaf-tau mountain. This causes a terrible hurricane, a tornado. The beliefs about how Azhdakha 'rises' are still vivid among the people nowadays. (Khisamitdinova, 2016, p. 195; author's translation)

When rising, the mythical serpent connects not only the water and earth elements but also the air and the sky. This image visually echoes the Vedic thousand-headed serpent Shesha or Ananta-Shesha, a symbol of primordial time. In terms of internal semantics, these two images are, naturally, of a different order. Yet, visual correlation contributes to such chthonic and liminal character as a werewolf serpent. The European version of the image of the snake as "a divinity who nurtures the world with moisture" (Giblett, 2007, p. 196), which is an aspect or development of the Great Goddess of life. Death and rebirth is not found in the swamp myths of the Slavs and the legends of the Siberian indigenous peoples. The image of the snake is also reflected in the Russian-language swamp toponymy. For example:

"the swamps of Visyugan" (Vasyuganye) are located in the south of Western Siberia, in the riverhead of the Ob and Irtysh. This name goes back to the "basis 'Ves' (a beast)". Vasyugan is the river of Ves, and Vasyuganye is Ves's swamp, that is, some kind of freshwater dragon unknown to science. (Vinogradov, 2017, pp.15–16; author's translation)

Accordingly, the swamp as liminal space appears as a door to other worlds, which is successfully used in shamanic and witchcraft practices, whose mythological inhabitants of the swamps are used as guides, since they possess the qualities of mediators who can either connect and disconnect the worlds and open this door, or at least know the way to it. These guides are ambivalent towards good and evil. Being generally hostile to people, they can sometimes help them or provide an opportunity for an initiatory experience to transition from one space to another.

Infernal space

The demonisation of the swamps, inhabited exclusively by malevolent creatures that do not act as guides but rather are a curse, has had a long history, including the myth of Hercules

defeating the birds of prey that lived on the Stymphalian Marsh (Giblett, 2014, p. 148). Birds fed on people and defecated poison, which can be interpreted as a sign of the lethality of the swamp that functions as hostile environment to humans. Grendel, yet another later-period mythical monster that comes from the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, is a demonic creature cursed and exiled to the swamps that became a curse itself. Of course, in the original cosmologies of Siberia and the Central Russian Upland, including the world perception of peoples who still adhere to shamanism, evil spirits have always existed. Many of them lived in swamps. For example, according to the mythology of the Sakhalin Oroks, the *Kara Amba*, which dwells in the swamps, is a 'black beast' or 'black spirit' (i.e., undoubtedly infernal power) (Pilsudskiy, 1989, p. 54). However, within the general system of cosmologies, evil spirits represented only one of the facets of a multifaceted world, where mythological characters were mostly polysemantic and polyfunctional.

In the Middle Ages, Orthodox Christianity and Islam came to the lands that are now contained within the borders of Russia, and, a little later, Buddhism came to the southern regions of Siberia along with immigrants from Central Asia. The semantics of the cultural landscape of the tribes that adopted new religions has changed dramatically since all natural spirits that inhabit forests, mountains, steppes, and tundra – from demiurges to evil dwarfs – were expelled to the fringes as infernal forces. Devils are reserved a special mention here because they are brought up in the sacred texts of the new religions. The indigenous peoples of Siberia fell under the influence of the Russian Orthodox mission much later, from the beginning of the 18th century (Willersley, 2007, p. 120), which also marked folk cosmologies, although not as prominent as in those of the Slavs. We should also point out that many important and quite benevolent spirits change their location: they move from their homes to some dangerous and scary places, swamps being one of them.

The master-spirits of ancestral territories are “transferred to the rank” of beings of lower demonology, living in wells, baths, abandoned houses, ravines, and swamps. The pattern, observed in such diachronic studies, consists in the reduction of the actual mythological functions of the master-spirit, the loss of archaic motifs as well as of character’s specific name. (Doronin, 2013, pp. 245–296; author’s translation)

Accordingly, the semantics of swamps descends from its cosmogonic meanings to a rather mundane level. The swamp becomes a “disastrous place,” opposed not to the world’s grief, but to the “temple on the mountain.” It becomes a kind of locus-token for the demonic characters, which are usually referred to as “baptised in a swamp, worshiping stumps” (Karataev, 1996, pp. 266–267; author’s translation).

Dual faith

The Slavic peoples who adopted Christianity in the 10th–11th centuries did not completely reject the archaic pagan world picture. There is a transfer of mythological characters into the category of demons, and their direct connection with natural objects is preserved. They, too, are worshiped or at least paid tribute to when one takes up a dangerous route. As a separate subculture, there are witchcraft rituals and incantations where degenerate pagan deities are evoked, and incantations, refer diseases and death to the swamp (as a place of permanent residence). The spirits of swamps in the dual-faith system of the world cease to change their appearance and become anthropomorphic. The most mysterious character is the nameless Grandfather, the owner of the swamp; he is also the pagan

creator-god *Veles*, 'white' as one of the etymological options for the formation of the word 'swamp' in a number of Slavic languages, and all these pieces are the remains of the myth of the creation of the world. The meaning and etymology of the mythological character "Volos, Volot, Volokh" is connected with the names and concepts of "swamp, fornication, wandering, hairy, wise men, sorcery, magic, volhi-wolves, people, Bolotny, Swamp-man, Fornication-man, Lyad, Kolyada, Lada and Volkhov" (Vinogradov, 2017, p. 15; author's translation). It is curious that these archaic roots are reflected in modern toponymy. For example, Dedovo Pole is the name of:

a swamp in the Babaevsky district of the Vologda region... located on the watershed of the Chagodoshcha and Kobozha rivers. Swamp ore has been mined here since ancient times, and primitive small blast furnaces surrounded the swamp; iron sponge was smelted there and sent for re forging. According to local legends, Grandfather was the name of the god Veles, who patronised blacksmiths. Probably, in the views of the ancient blacksmiths, the swamp area of Dedovo Pole was 'under the supervision' of Veles (Vinogradov, 2017, p. 18). Grandfather often bears the traits of an ancestor, a dead person, and acts as a guide. (Krinichnaya, 2010, p. 176; author's translation)

In the modern Russian linguistic world picture, inherited from archaic roots, the most common spirit of dangerous places is Kikimora's Swamp. *Kikimora* is initially a character of domestic space, a kind of genius loci but with a negative aspect in that she had a bad character. She scared, rattled, knocked, broke dishes, spoiled bread, tore and tangled yarn, plucked chickens, rode horses to death (Dal', 1994, p. 402; author's translation). "The presence of a kikimora in a dwelling, unlike a *domovoy* (a house spirit), has always been regarded by the Slavs as a sign that the house is unfavourable, unclean, and manifested itself in minor nasty tricks that damage the household" (Ukhova, 2014, p. 28; author's translation).

The genealogy of *Kikimora* also goes back to the pagan gods, namely the goddess *Morena* (who was also sometimes called *Mora* or *Mara*), a mythological character associated with the cyclical nature, dying and rebirth. One has to add that *mar* is one of the Russian names for a swampy area typical in Eastern Siberia and in the Far East of Russia that is covered with sparse oppressed hemlock forest, interspersed with areas of treeless swamps. As Eroshenko has identified:

Later, the root "kik-" was added to the name [Mora], which means 'hunchback'. According to various sources, a variety of mythical creatures were considered 'kikimoras', such as an evil invisible female spirit; or swamp kikimoras which are girls drowned in a swamp; or the ancient keeper of the household; or unbaptized children thrown by witches; a female dweller resident of the swamp who fooled people who got into the swamp; a female unkind spirit, the wife of a house spirit, swamp or goblin; or an invisible baby, who is prone to mischief and lives behind the stove; or a housewife who tangles wool, yarn and the affairs of a careless housewife, and helps a cheerful housewife; or forest kikimora, a wood spirit. (Eroshenko, 2017, pp. 23-27; author's translation)

But, then again, the most wide-spread image, supported, among other things, by images created in modern fairy-tale films and cartoons of the second half of the 20th century, is an image of "a small, crooked, hunchbacked, poky old woman dressed in rags" (Eroshenko,

2017, p. 27; author's translation). The migration of the *kikimora* from a house to the swamps was largely caused by the urban culture, cut off from the roots, away from the village life, where the loci were assigned to different spirits:

For the city people, kikimora is a swear word, a derogatory name for an untidy, ugly woman, harmful, with a bad character. The phrase 'kikimora bolotnaya' was frequently used. As a result, kikimora was perceived as a swamp (less often forest) character, but not a home character. Respondents from rural areas retained beliefs about the domestic kikimora, a spinning spirit, a harmful infernal creature that creates noise and causes disturbance in the house, and can also be a precursor or cause of misfortune. (Golubkova, 2019, pp. 687–692; author's translation)

Sometimes, in the language and toponyms, one can trace the presence of the wood spirit, the evil owner of the forest, as the one dwelling in the swamps, which is a character that is generally uncharacteristic for them. Moreover, it happens both in Slavic and in Turkic versions. In some areas of Russia, the wood spirit was called 'damn grandfather' (Vinogradov, 2017, p. 18) (i.e., grandfather to the devil). On the one hand, there is a recognition that the wood spirit is older than the devil, while, on the other hand, it can be seen as an attempt to link the pagan character into the family tree of Christian mythology. The swamps associated with the name of *Leshiy*, or the wood spirit, can also be found on the map of Russia, with the *Leshiy* swamp being "an old toponym in the city of Murom, Ryazan region of Russia" (Vinogradov, 2017, p. 21; author's translation). *Pitsen-sas* is a swamp in the Ingalskaya valley, in the Tyumen region of Russia, Western Siberia. Its Turkish name, *Picen (bichen)*, means 'Leshiy' among the West Siberian Tatars, but its more ancient meaning is 'monkey' (that is, ape-man [i.e., yeti, bigfoot]). *Sas* means a swamp. Together, the name *Pitsen-sas* means 'the swamp of Leshiy' (Vinogradov, 2017, p. 24). Both *Kikimora* and *Leshiy* are degenerate guides through the liminal space whose main task in the Christianised world is not to show the way but to help get lost. Judging by some folklore fairy-tales, *kikimora* and the wood spirit often have a romantic relationship, they also have children, *lesavki*, who can also manage to lure a traveller into a quagmire (Fedoseeva, 2018, p. 72–131).

The *zybochnik* is yet another inhabitant of the swamps; the word comes from old Russian *zyb* which means 'unsteady place, quagmire' (Vasmer, 1964–1972, p. 109). A bog is a floating, shaking swamp, a fen place where the soil, overgrown with marsh grasses and moss, sways, and water comes out from underfoot. Thus, *zybochnik* is a spirit that floats and 'swings' (Dal', 1994, p.625), living in a quagmire and luring people there.

Bolotnik (swampman) and *bolotnitsa* (swampwoman) are "characters found in Slavic curses" that are more depersonalised and devoid of connections with archaic roots (Vinogradova, 2013, p. 163):

Bolotnik (swampman, swamp grandfather, swamp jester) used to be represented as a motionless and eyeless creature that would sit at the bottom of the swamp, covered with mud, algae, snails, fish scales. According to other legends, this is an old man overgrown with gray fur with a yellowish face, eyes the color of swamp water, long arms and a lizard tail. 'Bolotnik' frightens people walking through the swamp with sharp sounds: it gurgles, smacks his lips, gurgles and groans internally, and screams like a duck. He sets traps for the people, covering the bottomless swamps with grass, snags and logs, and those who stumble he pulls by their feet to the bottom. You can notice 'him' by

the bubbles that surface on the water, and by the pale wandering lights that appear at night. In the Russian North, more common beliefs were connected with 'Bolotnitsa', a beautiful girl with goose or frog legs. She sits in a large water lily in order to hide these paws and cries bitter tears, and if anyone comes to console her, the swamp will jump at this person and drown them in the swamp. However, these characters of lower mythology are often indistinguishable from mermen, wood spirits or mermaids. Swamp spirits are unequivocally malicious and dangerous creatures for people. (Panfilova & Trofimova, 2020, pp. 194–195; author's translation)

In Tatar mythology that has revised aspects of Islam, there are several types of *bolotniks*, and all of them are assigned to the role of evil: there is *antsybal*, “a swamp devil, a fat *bagnik* that lives in a sticky peat swamp; a long-armed *virovnik* that is a dweller of the most deadly swampy place; and an *orzhavnik* that appears in the swamps rich in iron ore deposits” (Yakovleva, 2018, p.450; author's translation).

Mermaids and water spirits that are usually associated with rivers or lakes also make an appearance in the swamps. Their images are used to intimidate children, and, according to its functionality, the mermaid becomes terrifying, especially in Slavic folklore stories meant for frightening a child, where she is more like a *kikimora* and *baba yaga*, the most terrible female character in Russian fairy tales: a hunchbacked old woman with a bony leg, sometimes with an iron tooth, or iron breasts, who – in many plots – acts as a mediator and a guide. The mermaid:

according to the texts of intimidation, lies waiting for children in all spaces dangerous for them, both characteristic of her from the point of view of mythological representations (in a field, in a river, in a forest), and where her appearance is unlikely (in a well, in a swamp or in a vegetable garden). In children's formulas of intimidation, the image of a terrible mermaid is usually presented: shaggy, with iron breasts, an iron mortar and a pestle, with the help of which she mutilates and kills children. (Vinogradova & Lakiyevskaya, 2016, p.452; author's translation)

A water spirit also lives in the swamps although it is more characteristic of rivers and lakes. Its image is associated with an interesting creature called a *gadyuka* (a viper), which has the original Proto-Slavic root **gadъ-* meaning ‘reptile, reptile, snake’ (Trubačev, 1974-2014):

It is obvious that such a mythological character has the appearance of a snake relatable to the name 'gadyuka'. This type of a snake is known to live in swamps and rivers, and it is poisonous, too. One may assume that the water spirit takes the form of this reptile and has its own 'poisonous properties' as a representative of the evil spirit. (Ivashinina, 2020, p. 149; author's translation)

‘Ghost lights’ (‘will-o'-the-wisp’ in some Western folklore) in swamps are a natural phenomenon, explained by self-igniting gas bubbles surfacing from the layer of peat. In Slavic demonology, they are recognised as one-eyed babies capable of indicating the location of the treasure (Afanasyev, 1865–1869/1995). Belarusians maintain that one-eyed old men (*lazaviks*) live in swamps, in small houses that no more than an inch tall, with a yard-long beard and a 49-foot-long *puga* (a whip with the name also meaning lightning)

and “when such a dwarf walks through the swamp, his eye sparkles like a light” (Afanasyev, 1865-1869/1995; author’s translation).

We should also recognise that in the 21st century, when commercial image-making has become widespread, folklore images are widely used to build a certain image of the cities as part of the formation of the cultural landscape in the present-day Russia at its administrative level. For example, the city of Veliky Ustyug, in the north of the Russian Plain, is recognised as the birthplace of Grandfather Frost (the pagan counterpart of Santa Claus), but the city of Kirov (also in the north of the Russian Plain) is officially recognised as the birthplace of *kikimora*. In both cases, this is connected with the image that the cities offer to the tourists and the attraction of recreational flows.

As we can see, dual faith, predominantly spread among Orthodox Russians, is characterised not only by ascribing the ancient swamp spirits to infernal creatures and also by preserving and even supplementing the expanded pantheon with the place reserved for the swamp spirits. All of them are hostile to human beings, and their goal is to destroy people by drowning them in a quagmire. Due to the shift of semantics towards the infernal, almost all of them lose the capacity to be a guide to other worlds, becoming the agents of the evil force that takes people’s lives.

The demonisation of the swamps

Yet another version of the mythology of swamps in Christian and Islamic cultures is their demonisation within the Christian or Muslim world picture. This is the product of a way of thinking about the world of wetland that corresponds to dominant Christian or Muslim cultural discourse. On the one hand, “the devils of folk culture inhabit the border loci on earth: side-land, ravines, forests, swamps, whirlpools” with such localisation correlating to “the traditional habitats of the characters of Slavic mythology” (Antonov, 2013, p. 24; author’s translation). On the other hand, however, it is the swamps that become the favourite abode of devils, thus turning into some sort of a branch of the abyss that is reflected in the Russian sayings:

When there’s a swamp, there’s a devil... In a quiet swamp devils are found (which is equivalent to ‘still waters run deep’); Do not walk in the swamp: the devil will cut off your ears; swamp of the philistine; Well, get out to the swamp. (Fedoseeva, 2018, pp. 72–131; author’s translation)

In Russian incantations, evil spirits are expelled into the swamps. The devil can be sometimes synonymous to the swamp. In Russian curses there are several examples: ‘Go to *lyad*!’ (in Tula region) and ‘May *lyad* take you!’ (Yaroslavl region) – where the *lyad* is “a swampy place unsuitable for plowing” and an “evil spirit’ at the same time” (Vinogradova, 2013, p. 166; author’s translation).

Along with the extended pantheon of Slavic mythology and common devils, there is:

some unidentified or non-personified mythical force that rules the swamps. One way or another, through a certain incarnation or being completely inconspicuous, it carries away the kidnapped person to the kingdom of death. (Krinichnaya, 2010, p. 176; author’s translation)

This unidentified and hostile force is especially noticeable in folk stories and legends about wandering through the swamps where names and exact definitions are avoided, as well as the use of indefinite-personal verb forms of the third-person singular and plural: “[b]ut what scared more is how you go and where” in the Novgorod region (Vlaslova & Zhekulina, 2001, p. 253; author’s translation). Sometimes, in such situations, the Russian tradition uses indefinite personal verbs of the third-person plural: “[t]hey took me everywhere, they took me, for two days they were steering me: through everything, through swamps, mosses, and alders” in the Novgorod region (Vlasova & Zhekulina, 2001, p. 414; author’s translation). Such forms are associated, on the one hand, with the personalisation of fear in an attempt to prove to oneself that there is some force that is unnamed, yet real, that possesses a will and that can cause harm. On the other hand, it is connected with an archaic fear of naming a hostile spirit in order to avoid ‘calling it out’. This form of statements about evil spirits is also characteristic of the present-day world picture, it is in this form that the *bylichki* of hunters, mushroom pickers, tourists who get lost in the forest or in the swamp, but find the right way back (otherwise there would be no one to tell this story) are most often formulated.

In the Christian world picture, and consequently in the cultural landscape, these ‘bad’ places (thickets, dips, whirlpools, etc.), inhabited by devils, can easily be neutralised by building a chapel, a memorial cross, even a church nearby or in the most topophobic (i.e., scary) place. A swamp is not exactly the place where building a chapel can be an option, and even a memorial cross will not stand there for a long time. Consequently, infernal forces of the swamp cannot be curbed or subdued and thus remain in this kind of reserve (or reservation) for devils in the cultural landscape.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of the mythopoetic world picture, swamps are loci and spaces with dual (topophilic and topophobic) semantics. Topophilic semantics refers mainly to the archaic images of the space of first creation, pregnant with possibilities. Moreover, some types of higher swamps are usually evaluated as topophilic places, from an entirely utilitarian point of view. They are easily passable (provided one knows the right paths), and rich in berries and game. The swamp-dwelling genius loci are also polysemantic and rooted in cosmogonic myths about the first creation, and can be both hostile and friendly to a human being. In terms of topophobic semantics, in the mythopoetic world picture, where there is no place for the demiurges, their function is to destroy, to lure a person, but also to lead them over the bridge between the upper and lower worlds, to give an opportunity to acquire some experience of initiation, the experience of falling out of real time, and sometimes - to get some unexpected help.

As the original space, the swamp is important for its potentiality: this is where demiurges emerge from, and it is the beginning of everything. In different language groups of the peoples of Russia, the word *boloto* is etymologically associated with the sky and radiance. As a chthonic space, the swamp expects the souls of sinners after death. It also functions as a sort of purgatory, filled with creatures through the mouths of which the souls of the dead pass into the lower world. As a liminal space, the swamp provides a connection between the upper and lower worlds; the spirits living here act as assistants in shamanic or witchcraft practices. As an infernal space in a predominantly Christian world picture, the swamp is the habitat of demonic forces, many of which originate in pagan mythology but become reduced to the level of demons. The duality of faith is still latent in Russia and,

respectively, the demonological pantheon of swamps is quite diverse and includes *kikimoras*, *bolotniks* and *bolotnitsas*, scary mermaids, as well as blurry characters such as the Grandfather. Common devils also reside in the swamps. All of these meanings are, to a certain extent, present in each particular swamp. Even the mind of a present-day urban mushroom picker or a hunter who goes to the swamp subconsciously retains archetypes and mythopoeic images, forcing these people to treat this type of landscape with respect and caution.

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