

SERPENT SYMBOLISM IN VEPSIAN INCANTATIONS

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Incantations are a little known and virtually unstudied genre of Vepsian folklore. About 35 incantations devoted to snakes were derived from published sources, as well as from archival and field materials. These texts formed the basis for the present study.

An inherent feature of most Vepsian incantations is the listing of the kinds of snakes differing in coloration. During the study, 23 texts where snake colours are mentioned were found. Their analysis indicates that all texts mention, usually in the first place, the black colour – 23 occurrences, the second and third positions occupied by the motley (22) or grey (17) coloration.

Keywords: colour, incantation, snake, Vepsian incantation

Even in cursory acquaintance with different spheres of Vepsian traditional culture one's attention is drawn to the ubiquity and abundance of various animal images. They are part of the ideas about space and time, views on nature and disease, of demonology, of various rites, and of the graphic and verbal systems; they represent the physical, emotional, intellectual and other qualities of people. This listing alone proves how important it is to identify and study Vepsian national perceptions of the animal world. Being an especial component of Vepsian traditional worldview, they can help us considerably in advancing its study.

In contrast to many other Finno-Ugrians, Vepsians became an object of scientific research only after a significant delay – in the second half of the 19th century, which was many years after their “discovery” by A. Sjögren in 1824, when their culture was already much “Russified” and impacted by urbanization, and many of its distinctive phenomena and even whole spheres had been lost for good. This is especially true for Vepsian mythology. For instance, no cosmogonic myths common among other Finno-Ugrian nations, such as myths about a waterfowl diving to the bottom of the ocean to get earth, or about the creation of the world from an egg laid by a bird, have been recorded from Vepsians (cf Vinokurova 2015). Neither do they have aetiological myths, relating to the behaviour and appearance of animals, so we can only assume they are present in an “implicit” form in some areas and genres of folk culture. At present, one has to take all potentially available sources into account in order to reconstruct

the faunal world in mythological and religious perceptions; and there are very few of such sources left for the Vepsians (Vinokurova 2006). Furthermore, while some documents would be more valuable and true, others will be less so. One of the sources for studying mythology is incantations – fixed texts with specific starting and final formulae, many of which have been strongly influenced by Christian prayers.

Incantations are a little known and virtually unstudied genre of Vepsian folklore. Texts of Vepsian incantations recorded in manuscript and in print contain images of the following animals: snake, toad, louse, as well as domestic animals, such as horse, bull, rooster, cat and dog. This paper deals with that group of incantations which feature the image of the snake – a key group in any mythological system – with the aim of discovering traditional Vepsian ideas relating to this reptile.

About 35 incantations devoted to snakes were assembled from published sources (including 10 texts from various Finnish editions not easily accessible to the Russian reader), as well as from archival and field materials. These texts form the basis for the present study.

Vepsian incantations against snakes are highly variable in structure. Two chief groups can be distinguished among them. The first one (presumably an earlier one, which is also characteristic of Estonian and Finnish incantations) is three-tiered, made up of 1) the definition of the kind of snake; 2) the definition of snake habitats; and 3) an order, threat or request to make the snake's bite harmless. For example:

Must gad	<i>The black vermin,</i>
Ġonoikaz gad	<i>the striped vermin,</i>
Kus sinun kodi?	<i>Where's your home?</i>
Kodi om penzhannau.	<i>Home is under shrub.</i>
Mina mänen i rikon	<i>I'll go and kill</i>
Sinun tatan i maman.	<i>Your mother and father.</i>
I rozorin kaiken kodin sinun.	<i>I'll ravage all of your home.</i>

(Setälä, E. N. & Kala J. H. No. 151, collected in the village of Shimozero)

The second group of incantations always feature an introductory formula with a description of the charmer's route to the world of magic powers, across a number of borders and regions. For example, an incantation recorded from the village of Korbinichi, in the Tikhvin District of the Leningrad Region, reads as follows:

Nouzen, blagosloväs'. Lähten puhthaha pöudha. Puhthas pöud oma madoižed pezad. Rusttaiden madoiden, kir'jävan madoiden, hahkoiden madoiden, mustoiden madoiden puutan. Nened pezad pästan tul'jädmе. *I'll rise and ask for a blessing. I'll go to the clear field. There are snake nests in the clear field. I'll burn the red snakes, motley snakes, gray snakes, black snakes. I'll scatter the nest ashes in the wind.*

(PMA Tihvin district of the Leningrad Region, Korbinichi village, June 1994, informant A. D. Silina)

This second group of incantations has apparently appeared in the Vepsian environment under the influence of the Russian population. Researchers believe this kind of introductory formula is characteristic of East Slavic incantations only (Yudin 1999: 200).

No matter what their structure may be, however, an inherent feature of most Vepsian incantations is the listing of the kinds of snakes differing in coloration. In the course of the study, 23 texts where snake colours were mentioned were found. Their analysis indicates that all texts mention, usually in the first position, the black colour – 23 occurrences, the second and third positions are occupied by motley (22) or grey (17) coloration, copper or white colours are mentioned 12 times, red and yellow – 6 times. The colours found least often are blue (2), pink and green (1) (see table).

One can assume from these data that Vepsians probably had a classification of snakes by skin colour. Fragments of informants' stories testify to its former existence. The kind of answer usually given to the question about what snakes there are ran like this:

Vsäkijäd madad oma: must mado, hahk, vasñe. Vašk' – nece medänka. Nece huba mado.

Snakes can be of different kinds: a black snake, a grey one, a copper one. A copper snake is the smooth snake. It's a bad snake.

(Fond IJaLI, No. 3662/3. N.A. Gerasimova, born 1925, Pankratovo village at Babaevski District of Vologodskii Region)

Further evidence for this assumption can be found also in materials gathered by other researchers who did not focus on the issue specifically. Thus, the "Dictionary of the Vepsian Language" gives the following expression:

Magadad oma kijavad i mustad.

Snakes can be motley and black.

(Zajceva & Mullonen 1972: 314)

Color	Incantation source											
	A1	A2	S,K	K1	K2	SP1	SP2	R	T1	T2	S1	S2
Black	1	1	1	1	1	4	4	2	3	2	3	1
Motley	2	3	2	3	3	3	3		4	3	4	2
Grey		2		2	2	1	1	5	1			
Coppery	3			4				4			5	
White						2	2	1	2	1	2	
Yellow				5							1	
Red		4			4			3				
Blue												
Rosy												
Green												
Golden												
Silvery												
Fiery												

Table 1. Frequency of snake colors as mentioned across Vepsian 23 incantations. The numbers indicate how many times a color is mentioned in an incantation.

Text sources:

A1 – Ahlqvist 1861: 64.

A2 – Ahlqvist 1861: 65.

S, K – Setälä, Kala 1951, No. 151.

K1 – Kettunen 1925: 139.

K2 – Kettunen 1925: 145.

SP1 – Sovijärvi, Peltola 1982: 33.

SP2 – Sovijärvi, Peltola 1982: 34.

R – Rainio 1973.

T1 – Turunen 1956: 191.

T2 – Turunen 1956: 192.

S1-S9 – Sääsä S., SKS No. 3576, 3578, 3585, 3588, 3589, 3590, 3591, 3593, 3594.

P1-P3 – Perttola J., SKS No. 356, 366, 367.

PMA – informer A. D. Silina, 1922, village Korbinichi

Color	Incantation source										
	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	P1	P2	P3	PMA
Black	1	1	1	5	1	1	1	1	1	1	4
Motley	4	4	3	11	3	3	3	3	3	2	2
Grey	2		2	12	4	4	2	2	2	3	3
Coppery	3		6	3	5	2	4		4	4	
White		2	8	6	2		5	4			
Yellow	6	3	5	7							
Red	5		4								1
Blue			7	8							
Rosy				9							
Green				10							
Golden				1							
Silvery				2							
Fiery				4							

The Finnish researcher Sääsiki has a record of the following informant's utterance:

Käärmiit (Finnish) oli must gad, kirjav gad, hahk gad (haarmaa – Finnish) i vašne gad.

Snakes can be: black vermin, motley vermin, grey vermin and copper vermin.

SKS, *Sääsiki S.*, No. 3581, Vehručej Prionežskii district, Karelija; U. Anikeeva, born 1881.

In folk narratives, four types of snakes are usually distinguished – black, grey, copper, and, less frequently, motley ones. These are the colours that prevail in Vepsian incantations.

Different beliefs are related to snakes of different coloration. For example, Vepsians living in Prionezhje have observed that black snakes come out before rain (Makar'ev, Stepan A. Vepsskij fol'klor: AKNC, f. 26, op.1, No. 15, l. 188). Vepsian beliefs often contain oppositions between snakes differing in colour: a black snake is better than a grey one. For example, “if the first snake you see in spring is black, life that year will be good, if it's grey – life will be grey” (Fon.

IJaLI, No. 3420/18, M. S. Triškina, born 1927, Pjažozero Babaevskii District of Vologodskii Region). Or: the first encounter with a black snake bodes one well, with a grey one heralds the receipt of bad papers (PMA, August 1994, E. E. Jakovleva, born 1911, Jaroslaviči village in Podporožskii District of Leningradskii Region). It is curious that the black colour in mythology usually has an unambiguously negative sense, whereas the colour grey is ambivalent. The above beliefs are presumably due to certain colour-related value orientations of Vepsians.

Being an essential ethnic trait in the Vepsian “snake” classification, colour has also left a mark on other ideas of this people about snakes. Much significance was attributed by Vepsians from the Tikhvin District, Leningrad Region, to snakes seen near the dwelling. One could not kill such a snake for it was considered the master spirit of the cattle shed, and its extermination was thought to cause misfortune to the cattle. In some documented statements, the kinds of snakes that could not be killed near a house were specified. A black snake could not be killed, unlike a grey one.

The perception of the snake (grass snake) as a protector of the house was quite common among peoples of Western Europe, as well as amongst Slavs and the nations living around the Baltic Sea (Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Izhorians, Votians, Finns, Swedes) (Honko 1962: 285; Lurker 1987: 371, Hiie-mäe 1986: 100). Upon reaching the local group of Vepsians, this typological phenomenon was apparently partially adjusted to the people’s ethnic tradition concerning black and grey snakes.

One can assume that in earlier times Vepsians used to have healing rites for snake bites with actions, objects and words differing dependent on the colour of the “offending” snake. Their decrepit fragments were discovered in handwritten sources. For example, according to the Finnish researcher, Perttola, charms against snake bite among Prionezhje Vepsians were sometimes directed towards a piece of cloth (black, grey or multicoloured) of the same colour as the snake (SKS, Perttola J., No. 468).

Traces of the folk classification of snakes by colour and corresponding bite treatment methods can also be discerned in the beliefs of the neighbouring Russian population. For example, people in the Starorusskii District, Novgorod Region, believe “there are twelve sorts of snakes: red, and grey, and green, from water and edge, from field and from yard. If a vermin bites, one must know which one it was to attack the same colour, otherwise nothing can be done” (Čerepanova 1996: 103). This fragment shows that in North Russian beliefs, differentiation of snakes by habitat is added to their classification by colour. The same phenomenon can be seen in Russian incantations. In general, however,

appellation by snake colour is not so typical of Russian incantations as it is of Vepsian ones. The “locus” trait is more frequent there, sometimes in combination with another one: the “method of movement”. Our observations are confirmed by the conclusion of Gura that the locus and the method of movement are significant traits in the perception of snakes for all Slavonic peoples (Gura 1997: 20, 319). Data produced by M. V. Zavyalova in the course of a comparative analysis of Lithuanian and Russian incantations against snakes also fit into this framework: rich definitions of snake coloration are present in Lithuanian incantations, but are not typical of Russian ones (Zavyalova 2000: 206).

Indication of the snake habitat, always placed after indication of the colour, was found in 16 Vepsian charm texts. It had three representations: as a serpent epithet; as its “home”; as the space the charmer threatens to ruin or drives the disease to. The snake habitats mentioned most frequently were the willow carr, rocks and fences. Analysis of the loci has shown that they all act as markers of the world of the dead the serpent belongs to.

In one of Vepsian incantations, the willow is called *gadan kust* ‘vermin’s shrub’ (SKS, Perttola J., No. 366). The connection between serpent and willow can also be traced in Lithuanian and Russian incanting and spell-casting verses. Researchers note that willow is the tree of weeping and sorrow in many cultural traditions. Because of their “sadly” drooping branches, “weeping” willows are considered a symbol of death and planted in graveyards (Tresidder 2001: 125). Besides, willow’s bendable branches were associated with the snake. Evidence of the fact that Vepsians had such ideas can be found in the Vepsian incantation *pajukeran kiškaidan* ‘I shall pierce the willow ball’.

Piles of rocks mentioned in incantations against snakes are also a kind of grave symbol. In folk cosmology, stone is often interpreted as a symbol of the dead nature, immobility and death (Tolstaja 1999: 255). It suffices here to recall the stone burial mounds erected by ancient Ves (10th to early 13th cent.). At the same time, stone, like willow, was related to the snake. This fact is evidenced by the Vepsian belief that one cannot kill a snake with a stone because it is the snake’s “Godmother”, and the only effective weapon is an alder stick (Fon. IJaLI, No. 3666/44, E. V. Vinogradova, born 1933, Prokuševo village, Boksitogorsk District of Leningrad Region).

The phrases *aidružus* ‘in a ruined fence’ or *aidan al* ‘under the fence’, often found in Vepsian charms, also combine the ideas of serpent symbolism and snake habitats. The fence, which reminds one of the snake’s long body, was perceived as the border between “native” and “alien” worlds. As many peoples believed, the border, in the form of a fence, gate, door or threshold, was the place where evil spirits resided, and its crossing was therefore always furnished with vari-

ous safeguarding actions (Vinokurova 1996: 62). The epithet “ruined” – which was applied to the word “fence” most often – was not accidental either: there can be no life in ruins.

Many Vepsian incantations contain a motif where people threaten to burn the whole serpent tribe and scatter the ashes in the wind. For instance: “We shall burn your native home to the ground, we shall reduce it to ashes”. The motif is supported also by beliefs. According to the informers, a killed snake was to be burnt – “like destroys like”.

Thus, many motifs found in Vepsian charm texts (the differentiation of snakes by colour; the close affiliation of snakes to the underworld and specific loci such as stones, shrubs, fences, etc.; the fire-related nature of the snake) have been supported throughout in the beliefs and rites of Vepsians. All these facts prove that incantations are an additional, yet very important source of information for reconstruction of mythological ideas.

SOURCES

Fon. IJaLI, – Sound archives of the Karelian Institute of Literature, Language and History.

PMA – manuscripts of the Karelian Institute of Literature, Language and History.

SKS – manuscripts of Finnish Literary Society.

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