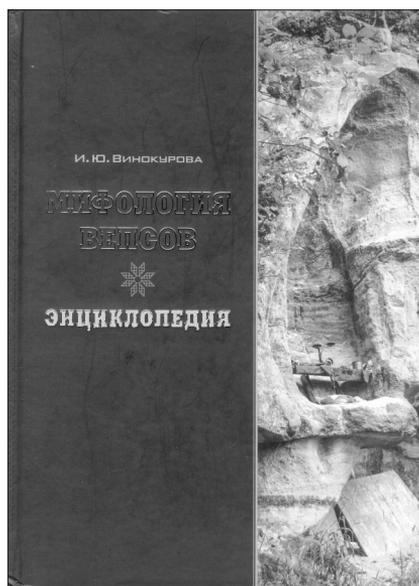


## BOOK REVIEWS

Vinokurova, Irina Iur'evna. *Mifologiiia vepsov. Entsiklopediia*. [*Encyclopaedia of Vepsian Mythology*]. Petrozavodsk: Izdatel'stvo PetrGU, 2015. 524 pp.

For centuries, mythology has been considered an important characteristic of culture and there are only a handful of nations whose mythology heritage has been given a general encyclopaedic overview. The circle of mythology nations now also includes the small Vepsian nation who speak a Baltic-Finnic language and who number 5936 people according to the Russian census of 2010. Vepsians mainly live on the south-west shore of Lake Onega and in the Veps uplands



amidst forests and lakes. The collection of Vepsian traditions and language started in the 19th century, but researchers admitted even then that this small nation was quickly becoming Russified. The main collecting and research work took place in the 20th century. Karelian-Petrozavodsk researchers and amateur historians as well as academics from St Petersburg and Finnish and Estonian researchers in the field of humanities systematically collected and recorded the Vepsian language, ethnographical materials and folklore. The archive of the Karelian Institute of Linguistics, Literature and History of the Russian Academy of Sciences is the central archive of Vepsian-related materials, including

the contributions made by Irina Vinokurova, the author of the encyclopaedia, who has published articles and books on nearly every aspect of Vepsian culture.

Researchers on Vepsians comprise an array of leading scientists: Nikolai Bogdanov, Vladimir Pimenov, Maria Zaitseva, Maria Mullonen, Anna Kosmenko, Zinaida Strogalštšikova, Nina Zaitseva, Viktor Lapin, Ljudmila Korolkova, Igor Brodski, Madis Arukask, Kristi Salve, Marje Joalaid, Vaina Mälk, Taisto-Kalevi Raudalainen, Ada Ambus and others. Previous Estonian works on Vepsian folk culture are scattered throughout various publications, but Madis Arukask has taken it upon himself to put together a joint collection of papers by Karelian and Estonian researchers entitled 'Uurimusi vepsa rahvausust' (*Papers on Vepsian folk beliefs*) (<http://www.folklore.ee/rl/pubte/ee/sator/sator16/>), which also features Irina Vinokurova, the author of the mythology. We would also like to highlight linguist Nina Zaitseva, listed above, who has worked incredibly hard for the creation and implementation of Vepsian literary language, and not just as a scholar, but in engaging in the creation process of the language in the 1980s. Her tireless efforts as the head of the working group for Vepsian literary language resulted in the creation of a Vepsian-language newspaper, *Kodima*, for which she acted as editor-in-chief. She has translated the Karelian-Finnish epic poem *Kalevala* into Vepsian and in 2012 she published an important cultural landmark, the Vepsian epic poem *Virantannaz*.

Irina Vinokurova's 'Mythology of the Vepsians: an Encyclopaedia' is important from the viewpoint of Vepsian culture, as a good example of the level of contemporary research, but also a significant landmark in the field of international comparative mythology. The preparation process of this encyclopaedia started as part of the 1994 international project 'Encyclopaedia of Uralic Mythologies', which also determines the structure and content of the publication. The need to provide a much broader picture of higher mythology became evident when preparing the edition on Komi mythology (*Мифология коми*, published in Russian in 1999). Essentially, the publication turned out as an encyclopaedic introduction of Komi folklore, mythology and religion. The edition of Vepsian mythology also contains introductory chapters providing an overview of the history, language and culture of Vepsians, the research history of their religion and primary researchers, as well as numerous general concepts. It also encompasses a wider range of religious and folkloristic material.

The general overview of mythology presents the layers of Vepsian religion and highlights the effect of Christianisation on concepts related to folk culture. The overview of cosmogony introduces creation myths – the world being created from a bird's egg; attention is given to dualistic creation myths. Cosmography also comes under closer inspection – central concepts such as spirit manifestations, the afterlife and fairies. In accordance with precious works on

Finno-Ugric mythology, Vepsian tradition has also placed emphasis on such practices as sacrifices, celebration of special dates, and animals and birds as important parts of the mythological worldview; it introduces the institution of witches and sages. We should point out that Vinokurova has written a number of studies and overviews on special dates and in 2006 also published a lengthy and unique monograph focussing on folklore and religion related to animals.

The main body of the monograph comprises 369 keyword articles that follow the general fields mentioned above and wherein the task of the researcher was to prepare the keywords based on fragmentary historic reports and the allowances enabled by the material that was collected in previous centuries and influenced by Christianity. The keywords seem to display the options provided by Vepsian material in sufficient versatility. We can find interesting information about the elaborate system of fairies, about *lemboi* and *rahkoi*, the concept of God and the mythical entity Sünd. Sünd denotes a Christian God and Jesus, a dead ancestor and the mythical forefather of the tribe, constituting a fascinating religious mixture.

The work provides an interesting overview of healers/witches (*noid*, *noidad*, *t'edai*), persons who were considered to exist between the spirit world and the world of humans and who were traditionally believed to have supernatural powers. Witches who lived as peasants did both good and bad deeds, and according to Vinokurova, witches were generally – and as late as the 1930s – older men. The mass repressions that started in the 1930s and World War II caused a great transformation by changing the demographics of the villages and leading the profession of witches to be slowly transferred to older women, whose primary task was now healing and to a lesser extent also love magic. (A similar transformation has also been observed by several researchers in the practice of the Vepsian Orthodox Church, where women took over the roles of clerics and conducted various religious practices.) There was at least one witch (*ak*, *bab*) active in every Vepsian village as recently as the late 20th century. Well-known mythical motifs include so-called wedding witches who were charged with protecting the people at a wedding and the bride and groom from evil and also preventing them from being turned into wolves or bears. It was also believed that witches with more power could contact the forest spirits (*mechine*) and speak with them to ask for their assistance in finding missing people and animals or protecting cattle.

The *arbui* has had a remarkable role in the community – in the 15th and 16th centuries he served the function of an elder and organiser of prayers, resolving important issues in the community. Today, the term carries the narrow meaning of a fortune-teller. Similarly to other nations, the Vepsians were familiar with people who had the so-called evil eye or evil word.

There is a shorter overview of spells provided under the keyword for witches, highlighting the term *puheg* to signify verbal healers. This term indicates a kind of blowing that accompanied the magic words; other terms also point to performative traits such as mumbling the words or spitting them out, as it were. Spells were attained either through a succession line or directly from the witch itself. Texts were passed on through verbal tradition as well as by rewriting them. Additionally, the witches were not permitted to pass on magic words when still practising themselves because it was believed that the power of the words would disappear when people lost teeth or when they were passed on prematurely. At the same time, the beliefs stressed the importance of passing on spells to the next healer; not doing so was said to cause the witch to suffer a tortuous death.

Illustrative photos and figures have been added for clarification, including of sacred places and traditional celebrations related to the calendar and the cycle of life.

Mythological terms in the encyclopaedia are given in Veps in Latinised form, which is a good decision when taking into consideration the Veps language. There is an index/concordance table for finding terms in Veps and in Russian, a list of references and archive materials, a list of abbreviations and a list of place names at the end of the publication – all the classical elements of academic publications. Since the encyclopaedic work was issued by the press of the Petrozavodsk State University it can easily be purchased from their website (<http://press.petrstu.ru/UNIPRESS/Magazin.html>).

The scientific value of ‘Vepsian Mythology’ is immeasurable, seeing as it is an emblematic publication whose use will prove beneficial to researchers of mythology, academic scholars and a wider circle of interested people. The translation of this masterpiece into English and other languages is vital in order to increase its circulation. As such, the publication is a kind of *axis mundi* of Vepsian culture.

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