

## MYTHOPOETIC BASIS OF SOSRUKO CHARACTER (BY THE ADYGHE VERSION OF NART SAGA)

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**Abstract:** The research topicality is due to the one-sidedness of the existing interpretations of one of the key heroes of Nart epos – Sosruko, emphasizing his “solar”, “fire” nature. In this connection the paper is aimed at revealing the most ancient mythological conceptions in Sosruko character, related to his chthonian essence, as well as at revealing the sacral, divine nature of the character within the sphere of perception of the preceding epic tradition and cosmogonic conceptions, corresponding by stage to the period of chthonian gods’ omnipotence. The paper applies systemic approach combining the structural-semiotic, historical-cultural and comparative-historic methods, which enables to comprehensively research the epic personage in the structural-semiotic aspect, in the context of his stage development and comparative-typological characteristics. The paper reveals the complex, ambivalent character of Sosruko, in which, alongside with the traces of solar cult, one may see the signs of the most ancient chthonian god, “the binder”, possessing magic power, connection with the power of “underground fire”, ability to control elements and the cult of “the dying and resurrecting deity”.  
**Keywords:** epos, Nart saga, Sosruko, symbolism, deity, mythology.

### 1. Introduction

At the present stage of development of Nart saga studies in Russia, there is a need to further deepen the research of epos in correlation with myth. One of the topical issues of the Russian folklore studies, pertaining to this area and requiring research, is the character of the key hero of Adyghe Nart sagas – Sosruko – Sosryk”uè (Kabardian-Circassian); Sausyryk”o, Sèuèsyryk”uè, Sosyryk”o (Adyghe).

Sosruko is an epic hero of the Adyghe version of Nart epos, who has not yet been studied in the aspect of revealing the mythopoetic bases of the character. Researchers of Nart epos pointed out the “fire”, “solar” nature of Sosruko, performed etymological analysis of his name, provided general characteristics of the sagas, analyzed plots and motives, and studied the artistic techniques used in creating his image. Analysis of folklore sources, research of structural bases of mytho-epic tradition, symbols and sings, epic motives makes it possible to view this character from a different viewpoint. This gives reason to suggest that Sosruko character comprises, as it often happens with the most archaic personages of epos, the traces of various, and sometimes contradictory, mythological conceptions referring to different

stages of development of mythopoetic perception. Research of Sosruko character in this aspect will help to clarify, *inter alia*, the process of evolutionary changes which were taking place in Adyghe mythological perception, and were finally embodied in the ambivalent, contradictory features of this character and the motives connected with him.

The research objective is to analyze the main epic motives, symbols and signs, related to Sosruko character. The goal is to reveal the most ancient mythological conceptions which served as the basis for the character of one of the most archaic personages of Nart Adyghe epos. The research tasks correspond to the (established in folklore studies) interpretation of epos as a phenomenon of verbal art, the worldview basis of which is the conception of primitive myth. “Archaic epos (even if deities are not its heroes, like, for example, in ‘mythological’ songs or legends of the ancient Scandinavians) summarizes the historical past through the language and concepts of primitive myths, largely following the above tradition of primitive narrative folklore” [Meletinskiy, 1977: 35]. According to V. N. Toporov, “[t]he main content of texts (in semiotic sense) of that epoch is in the struggle of regulating cosmic principle with the destructive chaotic element, in describing the stages of successive creation and development of the world, while the main means of understanding (specific-figurative comprehension-experience) of the world and resolving its contradictions (and paradoxes, in particular) is provided by a myth interpreted not only as a set (or a system) of myths, but also – and most importantly – as a specific type of ‘thinking’, chronologically and conceptually opposing the historical and scientific types of thinking” [Toporov, 1988: 9].

The national versions of Nart epos in various aspects were studied by Russian and foreign scholars: G. Dumézil [1976], J. Colarusso [2002], V. A. Abaev [1982], A. I. Alieva [1986], A. M. Gadagatl [1967; 1987], M. A. Kumakhov and Z. Yu. Kumakhova [1985; 1998], A. M. Gutov [1993], A. T. Shortanov [1974], U. B. Dalgat [1972], Sh. Kh. Salakay [1976], Z. D. Dzhapua [2017], A. O. Malsagov [1970], A. Z. Kholaev [1974], T. M. Khadzhieva [1994], etc.

The study of Adyghe Nart epos can be divided into three main areas: identification of the genetic core of Nart epos [Gadagatl, 1967; 1987], research of poetics and typology of the Adyghe Nart epos [Alieva, 1964; 1968; 1975; Gadagatl, 1967], and study of the language of the Adyghe Nart epos [Kumakhov and Kumakhova, 1985; 1998]. Works by A. M. Gadagatl [1967; 1987], A. T. Shortanov [1974], B. I. Kuashev [1968] contain valuable observations of the features of artistic form of the Nart epos.

In the recent decades, a number of works were devoted to the study of Adyghe mythology [Shortanov, 1982], mythopoetic bases of Adyghe cultural tradition: conceptions of creation of the world, of space and time parameters of mythopoetic model of the world [Mizhaev, 2002; Shenkao, 2002; Kudaeva, 2008], based, *inter alia*, on the analysis of epic sources.

As for the works by foreign authors, we should note the book by Özbek Batray “Die tscherkessische Nartensagen” [1982], the work by Balkar Selçuk, devoted to the comparative study of Circassian and Ancient Greek mythology [2014], and the work by Y. Ö. Özbay, “Mitoloji ve Nartlar” [1990] in which the main characters, mythology and world outlook conceptions, embodied in Nart epos, were studied. One should note the special significance of the works by Georges Dumézil, who considered the general issues of the genesis and historical links of Nart epos, as well as a number of specific motives and characters, mainly referring to the Ossetian version of Nart epos [Dumézil, 1976]. An inestimable contribution to the research and popularization of epic heritage of Caucasus peoples was made by a collection of Nart epos (Adyghe and Ossetian versions of epic tales), published by John Colarusso [2002].

Among the works dedicated to the study of Sosruko character, one should note a PhD thesis by A. I. Alieva, viewing the “principles of cyclization, characteristic features of plot

construction and composition, correlation between poetic and prosaic parts of the epos, and, in connection with that, certain features of Adyghe folk prosody; as well as the system of figurative means..., features of performance and existence of tales about Sosruko” [Alieva, 1964]. In her further works, A. I. Alieva broadens her research of Nart epos poetics, complementing it with the study of other epic cycles [Alieva, 1968; 1975]. Also, the character of nart Sosruko was studied in an article by A. O. Shogentsukov [1948], devoted to the plots and images of the main personages of the epos, and an article by Kh. G. Karmokov [1975], in which an origin of Sosruko name is considered. It should be noted, however, that there are still no works aimed at comprehensive analysis of mytho-poetic conceptions underlying the character of Sosruko.

In this regard, we consider it relevant to research the character of one of the most multisided and ambiguous personages of Adyghe Nart saga, in order to reveal in it a complex of mythopoetic conception of various stages, which, in turn, will facilitate both the creation of a comprehensive work on the mythological bases of the Adyghe epic heritage and, in general, solution of many disputable questions referring to Nart epos.

## 2. Materials and methods

The source of the study is a cycle of epic tales and pshinatl (pšynal”è – Kabardian-Circassian), which compose the epic biography of Sosruko, and some other tales, of which he is a personage. The analyzed folklore sources are verified authentic Adyghe Nart epos published in Russia: the materials contained in publications and works by pre-revolutionary and contemporary scholars, texts of epic tales published in various collections [Kardangushev, 1963; 1969; Broydo and Sokolova, 1963; Gadagatl, 1968; 1969; 1970; 1971; Šortèn, 1951; Alieva, Gutov, Gadagatl, and Kardangushev, 1974]. The work uses an integral, systemic approach, comprising the structural-semiotic, historical-cultural and comparative-historical methods of research. The research is based on the system of basic categories and oppositions (top/bottom), archetypical motives (the motive of a dying and resurrecting deity, the motive of “cutting off legs”, etc.), patterns and symbols of universal character.

## 3. Results

Analysis of epic tales related to Sosruko, the main motives, symbols and signs, enabled to reveal a specter of various conceptions complementing and deepening the existing image of Sosruko character as an embodiment of a solar and fire cult. In the character of one of the most contradictory heroes of the Adyghe Nart sagas, one may trace the signs of the most ancient deity, chthonic in its nature – “the binder” who embodies the element of “underground fire” and is linked with other elements (snow, fog, frost, ice). Formation of the universe, its natural objects, developing them from liquid substance (“Song of old narts”) is connected with Sosruko, who performs the function of “the first man” growing and maturing in parallel with the process of the world formation. In the epic hymn, Sosruko appears to be one of the primary elements of Adyghe mytho-epic cosmos. In plots about Sosruko, the universal motive of a dying and resurrecting deity, alongside with the traditional meaning of cyclic resurrection of nature and cosmos, of lodging a hero with curing power and immortality, is complicated with additional, opposite connotations and is associated with losing fertility and original abundance (vanishing of the “fat” of earth).

## 4. Discussion

Researchers of Adyghe Nart epos repeatedly marked the “solar”, “fire” essence of Sosruko character [Gadagatl, 1967; 1987; Gutov, 1993; Dumezil, 1976; Mizhaev, n.d.]. “Sosruko character possesses the features of a solar deity: the top of his cap is the sun; he owns a talisman glaring like the sun. Also, Sosruko possesses, in rudimentary form, some

functions of a demiurge peculiar to a god of the sun (see: Tha, Thašho)” [Mizhaev, n.d., vol. 2: 464]. A. T. Shortanov sees the symbols of fire and metal in Sosruko image: “In Sosruko one may see a peculiar symbol of fire and metal. His birth out of a stone, his tempering (after which he becomes “iron”), stealing fire, and, finally, his death due to an iron wheel – džan-šerh – all this apparently confirms such interpretation of the character” [Shortanov, 1974: 19]. The solar nature of the hero was also marked in the study about poetics and typology of Nart epos by A. M. Gutov [1993]. He wrote: “Especially consistent is a number of components indicating the solar nature of the hero. Among them: the birth of the hero as hot, burning; constant epithets characteristic for solar personages (nèhu ‘light’ and dyšafè ‘goldish’); mentioning of the sun in the dithyramb beginning:

Za’ mè’uhu dyšafè,

Dyg’èr za’ pya’è šygu –

Whose light shield is goldish,

Above whose helmet there is the sun [Gutov, 1993: 147].

The death of the Nart hero due to an iron wheel džan-šerh (Žan-šerh” – Kabardian-Circassian – ‘sharp wheel’), which symbolizes the sun, was considered by George Dumezil to be an echo of the solar cult [Dumezil, 1976: 68-76]. At the same time, based on the analysis of both Ossetian and Kabardian (Adyghe) versions of the epos and highlighting the apparent direct similarity between their personages, to which George Dumezil “refers the same mythological explanation”, he admits that not all characteristics of Sausuruk/Sosruko (Kabardian-Circassian, Adyghe) and Sozryko (Ossetian) refer to solar conceptions. He wrote: “One cannot, of course, say that all features, all heroic deeds of Sozryko refer to the sun. As any other deity, which had once embodied a natural phenomenon and later was turned into a fairy-tale character, he is ascribed various adventures. But his cycle, the only one in the Nart epos, presents the topics – and these topics are the key ones – in which the sun cult is still clearly seen” [Dumezil, 1976: 68]. As one of the arguments, G. Dumezil gives an example from the Adyghe (“version of Cirkassians-Abadzekhs”) version of the epos, according to which Sausuruk, advised by Sataney, before a fight “put on a talisman under his dress, glaring like the sun”. At midday, when he saw his rival approaching on horseback, he unfastened his dress and opened the talisman. Dazzled by the light, the rival’s horse reared up and fell down, crushing the rider to death” [Dumezil, 1976: 69].

Digressing a little from considering the mythopoetic conceptions related to Sosruko character, we should note that the analysis of mythopoetic bases of Adyghe traditional culture, made in previous research [Kudaeva, 2008], enabled to conclude that the direction towards the “earthly”, “middle” and “lower” cosmic tier of the Adyghe mythopoetic model of the world determines the specific features of the Adyghe ethno-cultural mythopoetic model of the world. According to the Adyghe mythopoetic conceptions, the life of a human is focused on the earth, interconnected and interdependent with the “lower” chthonic world, while heaven is some abstract and inaccessible substance. The “middle” and “lower” worlds in the mythopoetic structure of the universe determine and organize the main principles of the world order and existence of a human in it. In the “middle” and “lower” worlds, as a rule, the archaic scenario of cosmological drama is performed, the regularities and the paradigm of the human existence and the world are determined there.

The specificity of Adyghe mythopoetic conceptions seems to determine also the key characteristics of one of the main heroes of Adyghe Nart epos. Analysis of the key motives and plots, as well as the mythopoetic symbols related to him, shows the complexity and ambiguity of this character, which preserved the features of both the solar cult and some other

ancient mythopoetic conceptions, preceding the former and containing the signs of its divine, chthonic essence.

The suggestion of ambivalent character of the epic hero, of the presence of the signs of chthonic, divine essence in him, is confirmed by both the key facts of his epic biography and the key features of his character, symbols and signs connecting him with the “lower”, chthonic world.

Sosruko character is one of the most archaic one in the system of characters and personages of Adyghe Nart epos. The “fire” essence of Sosruko is undoubted, but the nature of that fire seems to be connected not only with the solar cult, but also with the chthonic, “underground” fire. This suggestion is confirmed by the description of “burning” of the hero from a stone; he appeared in the form of a flaming baby, which is connected with the divine smith Tlepsh (L’èpš – Kabardian-Circassian), the ruler of the “underground fire” and metal. Tlepsh is a chthonic deity with the functions of “a fire god” [Mizhaev, n.d.: 428]. He is a skillful healer, a cultural hero, the creator of the first tools: a scythe, tongs, a hammer. (Mafa’èr a’ a’ègum k’olyndyka’ra’ / Zèpèlyndyka’ra’ a’ a’èša’ag’èš – “Fire is burning in his palms / It is burning for what he creates...”) [Kardangushev, vol. 1, 1963: 273]. Extracting Sosruko out of the stone, tempering him with fire, turning him into “A black man”, “an iron man”, symbolically reproduces the process of turning ore/stone into metal and objectifies the successive connection of a chthonic deity and an epic hero.

The chthonic nature of Tlepsh, his connection with the “underground” world is revealed in a number of symbols and signs related to him. The “secret” smithy of Tlepsh is arranged in a huge cave (bg”uènša’ag” – Kabardian-Circassian) near a forest, and he lets nobody there. The process of making iron items is also kept secret. The divine smith, according to other versions of epic tales, does not let anyone look into his sleeves when he forges iron items. When this prohibition is finally violated, he closes his smithy and disappears. The foundation of his anvil lies in the deepest, the seventh tier of the lower, underground world.

Áta’èpsyk”uè dež, mèzl”apèm  
 L”èpš ka’yš šèhu ša’ša’auè ša’èšš,  
 Psè zy’ut a’ ka’yš ša’yh’ak”ym,  
 K”yr bg”uènša’ag”š zyša’èsyr ar,  
 Narthèr k’uèrè šè edžèm,  
 Džatèr k”yhauè k”yša’oka’  
 Next to Yatepsuko, at the foot of a forest,  
 Tlepsh arranged his secret smithy,  
 Not a single living soul may enter it,  
 In a deep cave he sits,  
 [When] narts come and call him thrice –  
 Out he comes, his sword drawn.

(Nart L’èpš”rè H”udymyž”rè – “Tlepsh and Khudymyžh”) [Gadagatl, vol. 1, 1968: 241].

Tlepsh is covered with iron dust (G”uša’ fa’ea’ž’hèr k”ypka’èryta’èt’u – “Iron mud flows down from you” – Pša’natl Lašin). One of his hypostases is a snake. As is known, in some Middle Eastern and other cultures a snake embodies the chthonic principle, the elements

of water and fire. In a plot of a historical-heroic epos about Andermikan (“Unautka son”), which belongs to a later stage, there is a motive confirming the “snake” nature of Tlepsh. According to the plot, the hero meets a stranger – an old man, and goes to a raid with him (zek’uè – Kabardian-Circassian). After persistent requests to open his name, the old man turns into a snake, and his staff – into a long sting. Later, coming to Tlepsh’s smithy for the weapons he had ordered, Andermikan recognizes his companion – the old man – in Tlepsh [Šortèn, 1951: 292-303].

Tlepsh participates in Sosruko’s life throughout his epic biography: makes weapons and armors, forges bells which help him defeat Totresh. The epic hero marries Tlepsh’s daughter.

One of the signs representing the chthonic basis of Sosruko’s (as well as Tlepsh’s) character, his connection to the “lower” world, is, in our opinion, the motive of “cutting off legs” in the plots about the hero’s death. Jumping ahead, we should note that this symbolic predicate has a broader sense than just belonging to the “other” world, being, as well as in many cultural traditions, a sign of sacral, divine essence.

Lameness, “cutting off legs” are the signs uniting the divine personages of Adyghe mythology Tlepsh and Sozeresh, the epic hero Sosruko and the hero of feudal epos Andermikan. Tlepsh is lame on both legs, like Hephaestus of Ancient Greece. According to V. Ardzinba, “this name of the deity of smith and smithy (Tlepsh) is probably the source of the name of Olympic god of fire and smithy Hephaestus (Ancient Greek: Hyaiotos)” [Ardzinba, 2015: 57].

Tlepsh is lame because the narts, who were angry with him, cut off his legs with a sword which he made himself. According to some variants, Tlepsh makes new iron legs for himself, according to others – he dies of wounds, disappears, or leaves.

Sosruko is bandy-legged and, like Tlepsh, lame. Legs – in different versions knees or thighs – is the place where Tlepsh held with tongs when tempering – the only vulnerable place on the iron body of Sosruko (the motive of “a vulnerable place on invulnerable body”). According to some variants of epic tales, Sosruko dies of wounds – his legs are cut off during nart festive by a wheel Zhansherkh (Žan-šèrh” – literally “sharp wheel”); according to others, he is buried alive and continues living under the ground, in “another”, lower world.

Sosruko is lame because mother of Totresh whom he killed (according to one of the variants) throws scissors after him and they pierce his heel: “Oh, you, born by a strumpet witch, ruined me! – she grasped steel scissors and threw them at him. The scissors went through the [closed] door, pierced the soft heel of Sosruko and went into the ground” [Alieva, Gutov, Gadagatl, and Kardangushev, 1974: 51, 200]. According to another variant, his mother, Sataney, throws the scissors for the same reasons. “The mother became very angry and, when Sosruko was leaving, she took steel scissors, threw them at her son and hit his heel. The steel scissors did not pierce deeply, blood just spurted. “My body is steel, I am as strong as an elephant, but you damaged my skin and I will be lame. You hit my heel and thus revenged for everything: for the murder, for the blood, and the blood is now washed away from me” [Broydo and Sokolova, 1963: 27].

Such “mark” – absence of one or both legs, lame or bandy legs – is, according to mythological conceptions of some cultural traditions, a symbol of the sacral, divine essence the personage and his belonging to the chthonic world.

In Sosruko’s image, involvement into the lower, chthonic world is also seen in the very beginning of the hero’s epic biography: before his first appearance (ritual of initiation) in Narts’ Assembly – Hasu (Hasè – Kabardian-Circassian), he was secretly placed and kept in a cave with his horse Thožej. According to one variant of the epic tale, his horse Thožej, being still a colt, came and lied down at the doors of Sosruko’s underground dwelling.

Sosruko can use magic, possesses an ability to control elements. He fixes with ice (“binds”) his rival – a giant inyzh, causes fog before a duel with Totresh, imposes frost on the narts. Binding with ice, covering with fog are the symbols of “binding magic” inherent for this character. According to M. Eliade, this is “one of the strongest features of power, having chthonic nature” [Eliade, Kalygin, and Sheptunova, 2000: 193].

It should be noted that the symbolism of binding, a knot, a net, has a very large significance in Adyghe mythopoetic tradition. This is proved by its role and sign function in the texts of cosmologic character: the key myth-epic plots (describing the initial creation in the “Song of old narts”, returning of fire in the cycle of Bataraz, Ozyrmedzh), rites and rituals, beliefs and magic acts.

Dunejr h’yka’è šauhuèm,

Ša’yl’èr mèlka’è šaubèm,

Aby šyg’uè syla’ya’fa’yg’èt

When the world was bound with a net,

When the world was trampled down by sheep,

Then I was a man in the prime of life [Gadagatl, vol. 7, 1971: 192].

The symbolism of binding, in the form of various images and signs, penetrates all spheres of ethno-cultural tradition: a net, a web, “a divine rope”, binding with ice, tying knots, magic rituals (h’èpèšyphè (Kabardian) – “binding” a wolf’s mouth – magic ritual acts aimed to protect cattle from wolves; ‘udanè fa’yca’è zèrydzèn – “binding” a person with a thread, charms and spells), etc. In the opinion of A. Closs [1936], supported by M. Eliade, the complex of binding in the Indo-European tradition has Caucasian origin [Eliade, Kalygin, and Sheptunova, 2000].

The archetype of the Magic Sovereign of the Indo-Europeans (Varuna, Uranus, Odin, Jupiter) in Adyghe mythology corresponds to the deities Pako and Tha, who bind and chain their enemies (th’èg’uša’ ka’apsè - Kabardian-Circassian – literally: “a divine rope” with which Pako binds Nasren-zhache; the titans – theomachists bound and chained by Tha to a rock at Oshamakho).

In the cosmological hymn “Song of old narts” (Nartyž’ uèrèd), creation of the world is associated with the image of a net bound into the foundation of the sky and the earth, the universe: ...da’ uafèr h’yka’è šauhuèm – “...When the sky was bound with a net”; Dunea’ž’ra’, oj ža’, h’yka’è šauhuèmè – “When the world was created, they say, with a net” [Alieva, Gutov, Gadagatl, and Kardangushev, 1974: 48, 49]. In the hymn of initial creation, the image of “a net” as a symbol of interconnection, “boundness” of the components of cosmos and existence, also corresponds to the image of “a house of cobweb” – bèdžyh” unè, built in heaven by Pako deity, angry for the absence of reverence –Pšyth’è Pak’uè – “the Prince of gods” (“How Orzames saved narts from hunger” – Uèzyrmès narthèr g’ablèm k’yzèryra’g’èlar) [Šortèn, 1951: 364-369]. The epithet of Pšyth’è – “the Prince of gods”, i.e. “the chief”, “the supreme” god, as well as a number of his functional characteristics (the seven deities subordinate to him; power over the world, its fertility, rain, wind, fire, consequently, the living element per se), shows that at the archaic stages of mythological beliefs development Pako was the supreme deity of Adyghe mythological pantheon, preceding Tha the Great (Th’ašhuè) in terms of stage.

The image of a net in the cosmogonic picture of the world creation corresponds to the symbolism of “a house of cobweb” of the supreme mythological deity-binder Pako, sitting in center of the net-cobweb of the universe and ruling the destiny of Cosmos.

In the context of significance of “binding” symbolism (a net, a cobweb) in mythopoetic conceptions of the Adyghe peoples, the features of a “binder” inherent in Sosruko character are a sign of his divine, chthonic essence.

In the Russian research, a viewpoint is established that the narts’ hostility towards the epic hero is based on the changed social conditions, class differentiation of the society, expressed in such attributes as žemyh” ueryl”huuè emynè – “the devil born by a cow herdsman”, etc. [Alieva, 1968; Gutov, 1993; Shortanov, 1974]. Supposedly, it is the features of Sosruko’s sacral essence, destructiveness of his nature as a chthonic deity related to the “lower” world that determined perception of him by the nart, i.e., the human, society as an alien and hostile power which should be opposed.

The sacral, cosmogonic function of the epic character is also traced in the Adyghe mytho-epic conceptions about the world formation and the role Sosruko plays in it. It should be noted that the Adyghe mytho-epic conceptions lack an extensive system of cosmogonic ideas related to the beginning of time count, the beginning of creation. The single known fragment of such conceptions is the above-mentioned “Song of old narts” (Nartyž’ uèrèd), in which the world is shown in the process of exarticulation from a liquid substance, and its formation – development of the universe, its natural objects, - is associated, in the majority of the recorded variants, with the growth and maturing of its hero – Sosruko – “the first human” (Mizhaev, Tsipinov, Kudaeva):

Dunea’ž’ra’ šymydzëmypca’èm,  
 Ša’yl” è šh” uanta’èra’, šyzèpca’èg” aša’èm,  
 Abay šygu sygušèhèl”t.< ...>  
 Beštouž’yr k” andzègu šyhuèdèm,  
 a’ndylyž’ym ša’alèr šèbak” uèm.  
 Aby šyg” uè syla’nyk” uèth”ut -  
 When the world was still shapeless,  
 The green earth was still hardening,  
 Then I was lying in a cradle. < ...>  
 When Mount Beshtau was the size of a hummock,  
 When the powerful Indyl could be stepped over,  
 Then I was a man with streaks of grey [Gadagatl, vol. 7, 1971: 192].

This corresponds to the similar conceptions in many archaic cultures, in which the world is also specified as something unorganized and unshaped. M. I. Mizhaev also links the image of Sosruko with the beginning of mytho-poetic time, on the one hand, explaining it by the “poly-functional character of the hero, a certain proximity of his functions to the divine ones”, and on the other hand – considering it to be a probable “result of social editing of the image of a folk hero” [Mizhaev, 2002: 65]. M. I. Mizhaev also states: “The first stages of initial creation are synchronous with the growth and development of Sosruko. Adyghe epos contains vague echo of the conceptions that the beginning of epic time is the beginning of Sosruko, who performs the functions of the first human” [Mizhaev, 2002: 65]. Thus, the epic hymn (“Song of old narts”) represents the ideas of the ancient, archaic essence of the main character of the epos, “the first human” endowed with sacral nature, whose birth and maturing is interconnected with the formation of the world. Sosruko is represented in the epic hymn as one of the initial elements of the Adyghe mytho-epic cosmos.



Sosruko, as a rule, defeats his rivals with magic and cunning (Sausryk”o h’a’lyg”èka’è k”yftoka’o nèh”, aby yl”èmè k”aruo áhèl”š”ya’èk”ym – “Sosruko defeats you with cunning, but there is no strength in his legs”) (Sausryk”o a’ka’odyka’è – “Death of Sosruko”) [Gadagatl, vol. 2, 1969: 268]. Giving a characteristic of fairy-tale poetics, V. Ya.Propp marked: “Cunning is a weapon of the weak against the strong. <...> One may assert that a hero having a high moral image is a later stage compared to a hero who achieves success by any means” [Propp, 1984: 188]. Cunning, resourcefulness are the key features of Sosruko, which also confirm the archaic nature of this character, unlike, for example, “the lonely horseman” (šu zak”uè) – nart Badynoko (Bèdynok”uè), whose image refers to later plot tiers of the historical-heroic epos.

The plots describing the death of Sosruko contain direct reminiscences related to the universal archetypical motive of “a dying and resurrecting deity”, characteristic for many ethnic cultures. The narts cannot kill Sosruko and, not daring to approach the defeated hero as close as the length of his sword, they bury him alive, making a high mound over his body [Gadagatl, vol. 2, 1969: 272].

“The narts [conspired]: ‘We will not let Sosruko die in this world, we will send him alive to another world, make him suffer’, and they buried him alive. <...> Sosruko did not die, he sits alive under the ground. Every spring, when a quail cries “kuu” and burdock starts growing, [Sosruko] shouts from under the ground: “When the sky is blue, the earth is green, I wish I could appear above the ground at least for seven days, go freely around the earth! I would tear out the eyes of all my enemies, I would raze [to the ground] everyone who causes injustice on the earth!” [Alieva, Gutov, Gadagatl, and Kardangushev, 1974: 228]. Sosryk”uè a’ psèr hèmýka’auè ša’ym ša’èl”ša’ my Dunea’šhuèm k”yhuouè – “Sosruko lies alive under the ground and his call is [turned] to the world” (Sosryk”uè zèrauka’ar – “How Sosruko was killed”) [Kumakhov and Kumakhova, 1985: 146-147]. G”athè k”èsma’ Sausryk”o a’guryk mak”è ča’yča’èg”ym k”yča’è’uka’y aa’ou ca’yfmè k”èbareu ahèl” – “Every spring, Sosruko’s moans are heard from under the ground, people say” [Gadagatl, vol. 2, 1969: 265]. The fact that the buried alive Sosruko does not die but continues living in the “lower world” is substantiated in the conceptions about the structure of the underground world, the world of the dead. As is known, in the Adyghe mythopoetic model of the world, the “lower” world consists of seven tiers and is divided into two parts: in one part of “the world of the dead” life goes on, “grows” (zyhèh”uè l”ènyk”uè), while in the other it “diminishes”, disappears (zyhèša’ l”ènyk”uè). Sosruko is asked where to place him: into the part of the underground world where everything “grows” or into another part where everything “diminishes”, and he asks to place him into the part where everything resurrects, “grows”. Of interest is the comment of the text performer (narthèmrè a’nyž’hèmrè zyhèh”uèu ál”ytèr H’èdryhèrata’ – narts and inyzhes understand “grows”, “increases” as “the world of the dead”), which apparently reveals the inversion character of the chthonic world, its destructiveness in relation to the human world, in mythopoetic world outlook.

In tales about Sosruko, his birth and returning to the earth, into the “middle world” are connected with the threat of losing the “fat” of the earth – disappearance of the earthly abundance, in other words, the end of the “golden age” [Broydo and Sokolova, 1963: 31-33]. In the tale “How Sosruko was at feast with giants – inyzhes” (a’nyž’hèm a’ g”usèu Sosryk”uè th’èl”è’um zèryšya’ar), an old woman, the hostess of the feast, cooks an abundant dinner for Sosruko and his companions-giants out of two dried mutton ribs and two handfuls of flour (a motive of “inexhaustible food”). When the guests ask her how she managed to cook full cauldrons of food out of such a small amount of meat and flour, she answers: Dunejr bèvu šyšyta zèmanym Sosryk”uè k”al”hunuš žaa’èrta’ zg”èta’yl”yg”auè šytaš. Zy gufa’èg”uè guèr šyza’a’èm dež k”èsstèžynš, žysa’èra’, - k”ažyra’a’aš fyzyž’ym – “When there was abundance

in the world, they said, that Sosruko would be born and I put [it] by, [deciding]: “I will get it when I have a feast,” said the old woman” [Kardangushev, vol. 2, 1969: 256].

In another tale, disappearance of abundance is associated with returning of the hero from the world of the dead. “For a long time they were saying that Sosruko would resurrect, and at the moment he steps on the earth, abundance would exhaust. There will be no abundance, not even sufficiency on the earth” [Broydo and Sokolova, 1963: 31]. According to the further plot, which is the variant of the abovementioned one, the resurrected Sosruko with his companions stays for a night at a lonely old woman who, cooking food for the guests, puts a quarter of a millet grain and a quarter of a mutton rib into a cauldron, and the large cauldrons cannot hold the ready food. When the surprised narts ask why this happens, the old woman answers: “Long time ago, when the nart Sosruko had not yet returned to this world, there was such abundance on the earth. What I now treat you with is the remnants of the past, let from my deceased sons. Now people do not have and cannot have such abundance, as the nart Sosruko resurrected” (“If Sosruko returns, the earthly abundance will exhaust”) [Broydo and Sokolova, 1963: 32]. The giant – inyzh, resurrected by gods on the request of Sosruko (a caravan of camels can go through a hole in his thigh bone), exclaims: “There was a talk that if nart Sosruko returns, abundance will exhaust. Now you appeared and the earth lost its abundance” [Broydo and Sokolova, 1963: 33].

Thus, the motive of appearance-birth/returning of Sosruko contains contradictory meaning trends, corresponding, on the one hand, with the archetypical motive of the cyclic resurrection of nature, and on the other hand – associating his appearance with the exhaustion of the earthly abundance. The latter characteristic contains traces of the ancient divine nature of Sosruko character, threatening and hostile towards the earthly, “middle” world, which is inherent for the chthonic creatures of the “lower” world. According to M. I. Mizhaev, the loss of the abundance and “fat of the earth” characteristic for the “golden age”, in epos (“Tale of Thagaedzh, Amish and Mamysh”) signifies the end of mytho-epic time and beginning of historic time, the human world.

The motive of “the dying and resurrecting deity”, traced in the plots about Sosruko, in various cultural traditions is connected to the conceptions of the cyclic dying and reviving of cosmos, resurrection of nature, fertility. In some tales about Sosruko this motive is filled with the opposite meaning and is connected with the loss of fertility and initial abundance. In other words, the birth and “rebirth”, returning of Sosruko to the earth from “another” world, the world of the dead, bears eschatological connotations.

The motive of “the dying and resurrecting deity” is also connected to the conceptions, traditionally related to it by meaning and showing the vivifying power of Sosruko, as well as with the motive of the hero’s “immortality”. These are various myth-epic tales about the tears of the hero buried alive, which became “aqua vitae”, the water of “eternity”, giving not only recovery and life, but also immortality. In particular, in the plot about an immortal eagle shot by a hunter and eaten by his wife (“Aqua vitae at Oshkhamakho”) [Broydo and Sokolova, 1963: 93-94], an old woman who ate the meat of a huge eagle, who had drunk water from the springs at the foot of Oshkhamakho, becomes immortal [Broydo and Sokolova, 1963: 93-94]. In another tale, the tears of Sosruko, breaking through the earth and becoming the hot springs, cure the sick people.

The motive of the cyclic “resurrection”, “restoration” of the world is also present in the tale which associates the yearly coming of spring and resurrection and blossoming of nature with the image of the buried but “alive” Sosruko. Sosryk”uè psèuèè ša’ym zèryša’ata’è l’andèrè g”è k”ès g”athèr mèg”ag”è, udzhèra’ ša’ym k”yhopš. Ezy Sosryk”uè a’ psèr hèmÿka’auè ša’ym ša’èl”ša’ my Dunea’shuèm k”yhuoa’è. K”yhuoa’èr, dunejm bzadzàša’èu tethèr, k”uanšag”è zezyh’èhèr dunejm tra’hunu. Sosryk”uè my dunejm k”yhuoa’èhu, a’ nèpsyr k”yša’èhu. Kavkaz k”urš l’apèhèm k”yšÿša’èž psynè pštyrhèr Sosryk”uè a’ nèpsš. “Sè

ca'yuhèm sèbèp sašyhuèmyh"užyfka'è sa' nèps utaša'èhèr abyhèm sèbèp áhureh"u", - žea'èr Sosryk"uè, Sosryk"uè a' nèpsyr zè'usè symadžèhèr uzynšapè mèh"už – "Since Sosruko was buried alive, spring comes every year, everything blossoms and grass shoots from under the ground. Sosruko lies under the ground alive and his call is [turned] to the [earthly] great world. He calls, he wants to banish those who does evil and injustice. He calls, and tears run [from his eyes]. At the foot of the Caucasus, the running hot springs are tears of Sosruko. "If I cannot help people, let my tears help them," says Sosruko. The sick people, touching the tears of Sosruko, become quite healthy" [Gadagatl, vol. 2, 1969: 288].

The chthonic features of Sosruko character, in the context of conceptions about the "other", "lower" world, "the world of the dead" in its interconnection with the "middle", "earthly" world, are also traced in the epic plots "How Sausèruk on horseback went through a hole in a thigh" [Gadagatl, vol. 2, 1969: 193-196] and "How Sausèruk invented phècèn" (ph"èka'èn sènta'raš – a game similar to chess) [Gadagatl, vol. 2, 1969: 238-241].

One should note the specificity of the structural division of the "lower" world in Adyghe mytho-poetic conceptions. Besides the vertical structure of the "lower" world space, characteristic for the Eastern traditions and consisting of seven tiers (k"at – Kabardian-Circassian – tier), the "lower" world is also divided into two zones: in one of them everything "increases", "develops", "grows" (zyhèh"uè l"ènyk"uè), in the other – irrevocably vanishes (zyhèša' l"ènyk"uè). The dying Sosruko is asked where he should be placed – into the part of the underground world where everything "grows" or into another part where everything "diminishes", and he asks to place him into the part where everything resurrects, "grows". However, for the giants-inyzhes and narts, the world where everything "grows" was H'èdryh' – "the world of the dead", and when they try to bring Sosruko there, he "does not let them approach him to the length of the sword". As a result, Sosruko is buried alive: Sosryk"uè a' psèr hèmkyka'auè ša'ym ša'èl"ša' my Dunea'šhuèm k"yhuouè – "Sosruko lies alive under the ground and his call is [turned] to the world" (Sosryk"uè zèrauka'ar – "How Sosruko was killed") [Šortèn, 1951: 146-147]. Of interest is the comment of the text performer (...narhèmèrè a'nyž'hèmèrè zyhèh"uèu ál"ytèr H'èdryhèrata' – narts and inyzhes understand "grows", "increases" as "the world of the dead"), which apparently reveals the inversion character of the chthonic world (chaos), its destructiveness in relation to the human world.

Transfer from one cosmic zone to another, from the "middle" world to the "lower" one, is the basis of many mytho-epic and fairy-tale plots. According to the above-mentioned tale "How Sausèruk invented phècèn", Sosruko invents this game in which, according to his rules, anyone who defeats Sosruko or is defeated by him will inevitably be killed ("Nobody but Sausèruk knew how to play, and people began to watch with interest how he plays. The one who decided to play with Sausèruk was set a condition: "If I win, I will kill you; if I lose, I will kill you"). The story goes on like this: Sosruko's bride, who suddenly died before the wedding, gives birth to a son in the "other" world. The mother and son find themselves in that part of the "other", "lower" world where life continues, where "everything grows and develops". Having learnt that Sosruko threatens to kill everyone who decided to play ka'èn sèntraš with him, his son appears on the earth, in the "middle" world, and plays the game with the hero; then, not letting the hero kill him, he runs away and decoys Sosruko, who pursues him, into "the world of the dead". There Sosruko meets his beloved and the son, the latter turning up before him once in the appearance of a youth, then in the appearance of a grey-haired old man, thus showing that life goes on in the "other" world. Sosruko's beloved, who resurrected for a while, helps him understand that he is wrong and cruel to set such rules of the game with people. (Santa'rašèm k"ybdeša'èrè ca'yfèr bg"èmartymè, ua'g"èmartyma' uuka'yneù zèrèp'uag"èr h"unèu šytèp, ar aš šyg"èta'yl", santa'rašèr ca'yfymè k"ahèrèm, - k"yra'ua', bzyl"fyg"èr la'èž'yg"è. Sausryk"o k"yča'èka'yž'a' k"èka'ož'yg". Santa'rašèmdžè – ca'yfmè santa'rašèr k"ahènèž'yg" – "This is wrong to play sèntraš and kill anyone who

played with you and both won and lost. Now you stop doing that. Let sèntraš be left for people”, said the woman and stopped speaking. Sauseryko went out and returned home. As for sèntraš, this game was left for people”) [Gadagatl, vol. 2, 1969: 238-241].

This tale possesses the moral-ethic orientation, not characteristic for the heroic epos; apparently, this piece was created in the later period. Another tale “How Sausèruk on horseback went through a hole in a thigh” is similar in character [Gadagatl, vol. 2, 1969: 193-196]. The plots contain the motive of copulation of Sosruko with the deceased bride; she gives birth to his sons in the world of the dead; the sons return to world of the living to help their father, in the first case, to set the humane rules of the game, and in the second – to obtain wealth for him (Cf.: in the Ancient Egyptian mythology, Isis in the image of a female eagle descended to the reassembled body of Osiris, conceived and then gave birth to a son Horus). In both plots, there are conceptions according to which those who stay in the “other”, “lower” world (in this case the Sosruko’s sons, born dead) can see what happens in the “middle” world, move from one cosmic zone to another and influence what happens in them. Such conceptions also emphasize the connection of the epic hero with the “lower” world.

Similar motives are contained in the plot “Soslan in the Kingdom of the Dead” – the Ossetian version of Nart epos. Having decided to marry the daughter of the Sun, Soslan has to get the leaves of the tree “aza”, which is growing only in the Kingdom of the Dead, – as a part of the required bride price. Finding himself in the Kingdom of the Barastyr, he sees many quaint scenes, which, as is later explained to him, are the requitals awaiting the people for the good and evil deeds. With the help of his previously deceased wife, Soslan obtains the “aza” leaves from the ruler of the “after-world” and sets out back. On his way back he faces the intrigues of Syrdon who, possessing the gift of shapeshifting, finds out the secret of immortality of Soslan and his steed. Nevertheless, Soslan manages to get home alive, and the Sun’s daughter Acyruhs becomes his wife [Skazaniya o nartakh, 1978: 211–232]. However, in Ossetian version, the Soslan character reveals the undoubted connection with the solar cult (marriage with the Sun’s daughter, etc.).

## 5. Conclusion

Sosruko character is one of the most archaic and complex ones in the Adyghe nart epos. Analysis of the epic motives, personages and symbols, related to Sosruko, enabled to conclude that his character is not limited to the features making it possible to interpret it as the reflection and embodiment of a “solar” or “fire” cult. From under the features of an epic hero of the Nart saga, shows a comprehensive, contradictory image of an ancient deity of the chthonic rank, a “binder”, possessing the magic power, the connection with the element of “underground fire”, and the ability to control the natural elements (rain, snow, fog, frost, ice). The symbolic predicate of “cutting off the legs”, lameness, bandy legs of Sosruko, like in many archaic traditions, is an evidence of the sacral, divine essence of the hero, his belonging to the lower, chthonic world. The universal motive of “the dying and resurrecting deity” in the plots about Sosruko, alongside with the traditional meaning of the cyclic resurrection of nature and cosmos, lodging the hero with healing power and immortality, is complicated by additional, opposing connotations and is connected with the loss of fertility and initial abundance. The materials of the paper are of practical value for developing the university courses in Adyghe philology; the results and conclusions can be used for further and deeper research in the sphere of Nart saga studies.

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