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THE CONCEPT OF SOUL IN THE TRADITIONAL WORLDVIEW OF THE MORDVA

According to the traditional worldview of the Mordvinian people, the soul (*vaime* – Mokshan Mordvinian, *oime* – Erzian Mordvinian) is the initial cause of life. Originally, it was understood as breath given to the first human created by the Erzian Supreme God “Chipaz” (*chi* – sun, *paz* – god). Another version is that the Erzian deuce “Shaitan” created the body of the first human but he couldn’t give life to it. So Chipaz agreed to give a soul to Shaitan’s creation but on condition that the soul would be returned to Chipaz after human’s death. According the traditional views of the Erzian Mordva of Simbirsk and Penza provinces, the son of the Supreme God, “Nishkepaz”, has many houses where the souls of good people live. The texts of prayers describe Nishkepaz as the seventh god, standing above the other six gods. He makes stars out of the souls of happy people after their deaths. Similarly, the Erzian Mordva of Nizhny Novgorod province believed that the souls of people to be born were stored behind clouds in the house of the goddess “Ange Patyay”. The goddess sent her helpers to Earth to give souls to newborn babies, and she was invisibly present at the birth of children.

According to later views, human beings receive their souls either from their mother or from God when they are born. The Mordva believed that the soul lives in the human heart. It was assumed that the soul could leave the body of a sleeping person and return to its place when the person woke up. If the sleeping person was a sorcerer or witch, their soul left their body to do harm and evil deeds. According to a traditional folk belief of the Mordva, the souls of witches and sorcerers obey to deuce.

The Mordva people thought that the soul left the human body after death and transformed into a light-blue cloud. In funeral and remembrance laments, the soul is represented as a green butterfly which symbolizes the light and immaterial nature of the soul. When a person dies, the Mordva people usually say “*Vaimots liss*” (Mokshan Mordvinian) or “*Oimenze noldyze*” (Erzian Mordvinian) which means “one let their soul go”.

By custom, a glass of water used to be placed next to a dying person, “*vaime ved*” (Mokshan Mordvinian) or “*oime ved*” (Erzian Mordvinian) which means “the water for a soul”. The Mordva believed that the soul would wash itself in this water. Over the glass, a wooden chip was placed as a symbol of a bridge to the next world. A coin was put in the glass of water to propitiate the soul. A loaf of bread or a scone was placed near the glass with the same purpose.

In Erzian lamentations, the third saint who was sent by God to Earth in a cradle took the soul after human's death and brought it to the river to wash. It was considered that after human's death their soul could enter into a child to be born or into a woman's womb (after that she got pregnant). Another version had it that the souls of dead people went to the next world which was located somewhere in the east underground. The Erzian Mordva of Nizhny Novgorod province used to believe that the souls of all dead people were taken by the third son of the goddess Angye Patyay, "Nazarompaz". Then he sent the souls of all good and kind people to the kingdom of his elder brother, the Supreme God "Nishkepaz". In turn, the souls of all bad and evil people were sent to deuce.

According to a traditional folk belief, if a dead person's body became hairy in the coffin, this fact was interpreted as the God hadn't accepted their soul; so it roamed the village and couldn't find any place to rest. If a person lived a right, pious life on Earth, their soul was transferred to Heaven on a piece of stretched thread or on a lock of hair. The Mordva believed that after a person's death, their soul could see and hear everything that was going on Earth, i.e. how the body was mourned and buried, what was said of the dead person. Therefore, it was tabooed to give bad characteristics to a dead person.

According to later views, after conversion to Christianity, the Mordva started to believe that the soul of a dead person stayed in the house for 40 days. After that, the soul was seen off to the next world. People organized remembrance parties and went to the cemetery to leave some food on the grave. Nowadays it is widely believed that on Easter the souls of dead people come home to visit their family.

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