

Fate and God in Mansi myths

In the topic of philosophy and theology, the mythologies, or rather metaphysical worldviews, of many ancient civilizations like those of Greece, the Middle-East, India and China are often discussed. Rarely, however, have I seen such discussions about smaller, less known ethnic groups, such as the Finno-Ugrians, almost as if these groups never had a metaphysical worldview of any considerable wisdom or truth to begin with. To prove that wrong I dug into the mythos of the Mansi, a Finno-Ugric group living in Western Siberia between the Urals and the Ob river. In this article I will be analysing two stories from the Mansi myth collection "City on a Seven-Winged Iron Horse" composed by the Estonian folklorist Aado Lintrop, and how they deal with the concepts of fate and God respectively.

Fate

The first story I'll be analysing is titled "The holy story of the creation of the Earth". It is a typical Finno-Ugric creation story, with an old man and woman living in a house on a small island in the middle of an endless ocean. At some point an iron loon falls down from heaven, dives into the ocean, brings mud back in its beak and rubs it on the island. This repeats a few times until the mud expands and the Earth forms. The interesting things, however, starts happening when the old woman one day comes back home with a son. This son is perhaps the most famous and beloved figure in the entire Ob-Ugric mythos, who in this story is called Tari-pēs-ńimālă-săw "Crane-hip-soft-skin", more commonly known as Mir-Susne-Hum - the World Surveyor Man. The rest of the story talks about the supernatural adventures of Mir-Susne-Hum as he slaughters evil beings and makes the world suitable for humans to live in. However, I want to talk about how this story deals with the concept of fate.

In the beginning Mir-Susne-Hum lives only with his parents, he lives so until his beard has grown long. But he has a strong drive to explore the world, specifically to find a land with many women. After consulting his parents, his father says the following line:

"Go to the corner of the collapsed stable, dig there. What you take there, you take, what you don't take there, don't take."

This kind of sentence "If something happens, it happens, if it doesn't, it doesn't" is very common in Mansi folk stories and songs and tells about the power that fate holds even against such powerful gods as Mir-Susne-Hum.

Going back to the story, Mir-Susne-Hum does as he's told, goes to the corner of the collapsed stable and digs there. What he finds is an old horse on the brink of dying. Mir-Susne-Hum flicks his finger in front of the horse and suddenly it becomes young and strong, breathing fire out of one nostril and sparks out of the other. This horse is Towləng-Luw "Winged-Horse", Mir-Susne-Hum's trusty companion.

Together they go on many adventures, in one case they are flying across the skies until they hear a thundering in front of them. Towləng-Luw says that the thundering is caused by the snoring of the giant Săt-sūje-ńăre-űltta-huine-ōika "Old Man Sleeping Over Seven Bast

Shoes”, who he claims is extremely dangerous and will kill them if he wakes up. Nonetheless, it is the job of Mir-Susne-Hum to slay evil beings in order to make the world suitable for mankind, thus Towləng-Luw comes up with a strategy to defeat the monster, after which he says the following line:

“If you are meant to continue the song, to continue the tale, then you will survive, if you’re not meant to do so, you’ll be killed.”

Without hesitation Mir-Susne-Hum readies himself to fight the giant. The battle is won by Mir-Susne-Hum and Sāt-sūje-ñāre-ūltta-huine-ōika says the following line:

“Eh, Tari-pēs-ñimälä-sāw! In the coming age you will live until the disappearance of the last man, until the disappearance of the last woman, I, however, will die.”

And Mir-Susne-Hum answers:

“When eventually the long age of man, the eternal age of man begins, no man could defeat you. That’s why I killed you.”

What is the long age of man, the eternal age of man? In order to understand the concept of fate we must first understand how the Mansis view time. Like many people of the world, Mansis view it as a cyclical process divided into ages. The age that this story takes place in is called Ēryg-jīs-pora “Time of songs”, where gods make the world suitable for the inevitable age of man - Ēlmholas-jīsəng-tōrəm, Ēlmholas-notəng-tōrəm. After the age of man ends, the supreme god Numi-Tōrum floods the world with “holy burning water” to destroy it and begin a new era.

Going back to the moment when Mir-Susne-Hum first found his horse, what his father said makes a lot more sense now - every new cycle of the world is bound to happen like the last one. Mir-Susne-Hum finds Towləng-Luw and defeats the evil giant, because in previous cycles these things have already happened and every being is subject to a great universal rhythm that determines the outcome of everything. That is, in my understanding, the nature of fate in the metaphysical worldview of the Mansis.

God

It is not uncommon for religions to be divided into the categories of monotheism and polytheism. Without delving too much into this it is a fact that no natural religion is truly polytheistic, meaning there is always some sort of godly hierarchy. This is also the case in the Mansi pantheon where the supreme god is Numi-Tōrum, also known as Numi-Kores and all other gods are inferior to him. However, rather than talking about what Numi-Tōrum looks like and what he does, I want to talk about how the beings that are subject to him see him and how important he is to them.

The story I will be taking as an example is titled “The story of the emerging of land from the water” and is much like the previous one - an old man and woman live on an island in the middle of an ocean, the woman leaves for some time and comes back with a son, who again is Mir-Susne-Hum. The plot of this story however is a bit different and instead of going on

adventures Mir-Susne-Hum actively tries to prepare the world for the coming of humans. The first problem he faces is that the island they live on is too small for humanity, so he asks his father for help:

“Father, what do you, my father and mother who have raised me, think? How do we continue living in the future? When father Numi-Tōrum makes one wind, we are blown to the ocean, when he makes another wind, we are blown to the ocean. Should I go up to father Numi-Tōrum?”

And his father answers:

“My son, who is weak in the arms, weak in the legs! Go up when the strength in your arms grows, when the strength in your legs grows! Do you ask us two, how will we live during the long age of man? By then we will have walking sticks and grey hair. Where will we then take wise words to tell you? From now on, may father Numi-Tōrum tell you wise words, may Numi-Kores teach you in the future!”

So Mir-Susne-Hum climbs up to heaven to meet Numi-Tōrum. When he arrives he bows down and pleads Numi-Tōrum to tell him how to make the land bigger. Numi-Toorum teaches Mir-Susne-Hum to dive into the ocean and bring back mud from the bottom, which will then turn into land for people to walk on. When Mir-Susne-Hum goes back down he tells this to his father, who then answers:

“How did Num-Tōrum teach you? When you increase the strength of your arms, then the strength of your back will come too, then you can raise the holy land of people from the water! If you don’t have strength it’s your own fault. If you ask us for help, then how can we give you the strength of the back, the strength of the chest? If strength is given to you, it is given by Numi-Tōrum.”

Mir-Susne-Hum attempts to dive in the water, he swims for days before he is out of strength. When resurfacing he complains to his father:

“Well, father and mother! Even though I swam for six nights and seven days, I didn’t find the bottom. The strength of my back faded, the strength of my chest faded.”

And father answers:

“Well, son! If you give me your word, then I ask you, how can I give you strength of back, strength of chest? If strength is given, it is given by father Numi-Tōrum, if might is given, it is given by father Numi-Kores.”

The rest of the events in the story repeat in the same fashion: Mir-Susne-Hum finds a problem, consults his father, his father tells him to ask Numi-Tōrum, Mir-Susne-Hum ascends to heaven to do so and comes back to fix the problem. During the course of the tale Mir-Susne-Hum’s parents grow older and older, each time more unable to help their son, yet Numi-Tōrum always manages to aid him. The lesson learnt here is pretty obvious - Mir-Susne-Hum’s earthly parents wane and grow old, their wisdoms become lesser and lesser, while Numi-Tōrum, the great God of the Ob-Ugric pantheon, always remains and

supports the world with his eternal strength and wisdom. A lesson that a human too has much to learn from.

Conclusion

Though this article is short and doesn't give much information on the actual mythology of the Mansi people, I atleast hope I have raised interest towards the mythologies and folk stories of less known ethnic groups of the world, by interpreting some perennial ideas from the perspective of the Mansi people. Unfortunately, "City on a Seven-Winged Iron Horse" is not as of yet available in any language other than Estonian, but many folk stories and their analyses, including by Aado Lintrop, can be read on the Estonian website folklore.ee in English.