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**‘ROCKS GROW OLD TOO...’  
FROM KILLING OLD MEN TO VENERATING  
ELDERS IN THE NARTÆ SAGAS**

The original purpose of the research<sup>1</sup> was to look at the concepts and forms of crime and punishment from the aspect of legal ethnography in the Nartæ sagas recently published in Hungarian as well<sup>2</sup>, based on the latest results of researches on the Jazygian-Cumanian region. Engaged in the subject, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that a thorough research would stretch the limits of a single lecture or study while, on the other hand, its legal ethnographical aspect offered, and called for, new approaches and focal points.

Therefore, taking a single crime, this paper is focused on killing the elderly. I have relied on sources, including the following paragraph, taken from a wide range of heroic epic works mentioned and used by Georges Dumézil, also analysed by Ludwig Chibiroff<sup>3</sup>, and recently translated and published by J. Béla Kovács as well<sup>4</sup>:

*The Borætæ and the Æxsærtæggatæ families had long been enemies, unable to get along with each other. The Æxsærtæggatæ family was not large, but its male members were strong and bold. The Borætæ, however, were numerous and rich, although without strength and courage. When the Borætæ heard that the Nartæ men of the Æxsærtæggatæ had failed to return from their campaign, they said: ‘None of the Æxsærtæggatæ survived, their possessions are there for the taking. There is but one old man (Wýryzmæg) still alive, let us go and kill him, and take all their belongings’.*<sup>5</sup>

In this study I seek to answer how the position of the elderly changes in the individual, family or community values and lives over the time horizon of the Nartæ sagas. What was the meaning of death as a way of passing from the community of the living to the community of the dead? How the death of an individual (killing the old) was defined by custom in the Nartæ sagas?

## The position of the elderly in individual, family and community norms and lives

The dual nature of old age is the first thing we notice in the Nartæ's world. On the one hand, with the passing of time the deeds, achievements and growing experiences of an individual earned an increasingly important place in the community while, on the other hand, the decreasing physical strength of the elderly pushed them into the background, causing them to be a burden<sup>6</sup>.

This kind of duality is well illustrated in the Nartæ sagas as well, by the contemplations of the youth: *How should we live without the wisdom of Wyrzymæg, who always brought us to our senses? / He has grown so old, he is rather worthless now*<sup>7</sup>.

This seeming controversy can be resolved by looking at the position of the old *in the life of the Nartæ 1) community, 2) family and 3) individual* one by one. In the comparative relationship of the above three *the specific role taken in the community is dominant*. The aim of the community strategy is to ensure the long term survival and strength of the Nartæ families. It is the foundation of their values and moral norms that governs everything. Indeed, the mere survival and prosperity of the Nartæs depended on their campaigns and the successfulness of the troops setting out from the village. The gathered food ensured the survival of the members of the community. To be an esteemed member of the community, one had to be a good warrior contributing to community, family and individual wellbeing as part of successful campaigns. For example, when Dzili and his son captured a huge flock, *the elder Nartæs set Dzili in the place of honour at their meeting in the village square, and at their feasts and celebrations they placed a white bearskin under his feet, while three young Nartæs stood by with fans so that not a single fly should bother him*<sup>8</sup>.

If old age or illness made someone unable to participate in the campaigns any more, he became "worthless" (due to the fact that a warrior's prey contributed not only to his family, but to the whole community, e.g. as a feast at the Nykhash, or livestock distributed among members of the community). Wyrzymæg's last campaign also tells us about the importance of "place" in the community; about the momentary restoration of a warrior's crumbled position, who used mental wisdom to compensate for his fading physical strength - a kind of "old age respite". Because Wyrzymæg wants to prove to the Nartæs that he can be useful, even in his old age. According to Nartæ values, however, although widely known for his wisdom, cunning and bravery, he could only prove himself in battle. Therefore, he set out on a last campaign, using his foresight, fearlessness and cunning to make up for diminishing physical powers. His wife, Satana told the young Nartæs, unable to puzzle out the meaning of Wyrzymæg's call to

arms rather reproachfully: *I can see that you are quite worthless without this old man. Once again, he found the enemy's nest undisturbed by you, with huge prey to be taken. He is calling you, warning how big an army to prepare.*<sup>9</sup> ... *After their glorious campaign the gathered loot (cattle) was distributed among the three Nartæ families as usual, "not a single one coming off worse than the other... There was plenty to slaughter, supplied by the herd taken from the King of Shawfurd, enough to feast all year long.*<sup>10</sup> As long as the cattle lasted, Wryzmæg was well respected by his people. The respect regained by his usefulness earned him satisfaction and a place in the community in spite of his old age: *I can see that without my old head to think for you, even a crow would snatch and take you to his nest...*<sup>11</sup>

Every individual was linked to the Nartæ community through his tribe or family. The fact that someone was born into a specific family determined the rest of his life. As Dumézil pointed it out himself, the three main Nartæ families (*Æxsærtæggatæ*, *Ælægatæ*, *Borætæ*) represented three social functions.<sup>12</sup> The *Æxsærtæggatæ* family lived in the Upper village; they were warriors distinguished by valour, strength, bravery and military skills. The *Ælægatæ* lived in the Middle of the village; they held the feasts and celebrations, and guarded the *Wacamongæ*, the magical cup of the Nartæs. They were distinguished by mental boldness and adroitness. The *Borætæ* lived in the Lower village; they provided economic strength (by farming and cattle-breeding) and valued wealth and fortune above all. All relationships and activities were organised within these family bounds: the young warriors, and the maids by marrying fighters, ensured safety and future. It meant prosperity and the fulfilment of obligations set by the community, as well as a chance for a safe and secure old age. The death of a young warrior or a child put this safety at risk. *Oh, my son! It was unwise to think so. I have grown old. Who is to throw a handful of dirt over my body when I die?*<sup>13</sup> It is what *Büræfærnyg* asked of his son prepared to set out on a dangerous adventure. *How are we to live now? Who is to look after us in our old age?*<sup>14</sup> *Satana* mourned the loss of her son.

Possibly, the family meant the only support for the elderly, without which they became exposed and vulnerable. Indeed, the *Borætæ* wanted to kill Wryzmæg when the young warriors of his tribe had long failed to return from their campaign. At the same time, the family is a place where the double standard of ageing exists. In this respect, the Nartæ sagas provide abundant example. On the one hand, the authority of old people due to age and experience is obvious, well respected as family heads and decision makers. It is well illustrated by the formal seating arrangement of the *Nykhash*<sup>15</sup> and the distribution of prey, as well as the behaviour of young people (e.g. the young were not allowed to speak before the elders and they had to obey their orders without

a word). It was, however, severely tested by the above mentioned community values and the major rule of “usefulness”.

It was considered natural and accepted by the individual as well. Wyrzymæg is not protesting either when his failing physical strength makes him proportionally less respected by his family and the village. As Satana relays the message of her unrecognised son to Wyrzymæg: *You have grown old, master. Your grey head is ridiculed. An impertinent young lad has just come, hardly old enough to sit in the saddle, and he has asked me to tell that you are to go on a campaign...*<sup>16</sup> Indeed, he drank less wine at the Borætæ’s feast than in the old days: *he drank only as much as his soul desired.* He had been gradually excluded from active, combative everyday life. He sat at the Nykhash day after day, listening to the heroic deeds of others with a growing distance to separate him from them, entering the “antechamber” of death. *The Nartæ Wyrzymæg had grown old, his strength diminished, and he did not go on campaigns any more. The young ones, who used to seek his advice stopped coming, and some of them even laughed at Wyrzymæg. In the mornings he went to the Nykhash and spent the whole day there, listening to stories told by his people. He watched the young Nartæs competing at archery, remembering his own younger years, and brooding over the past gone for ever.*<sup>17</sup>

### **The meaning of death as a way of passing from the community of the living to the community of the dead**

Death has a unique context in the Nartæ sagas. Death is a gateway between the worlds of the living and the dead, a kind of passage. In a community where death is inevitably present in everyday life, it determines the relationship of the community’s members to death. Dying a heroic death in battle was highly valued by the Nartæ community. Real death meant obliviation and loss of honour. Heroic death was valued by the members of the community, praised in songs and remembered at their feasts and celebrations. Remembering the dead continues to be a part of everyday life in Ossetian custom to date.<sup>18</sup>

Shoshlan had the rare opportunity to enter the Land of the Dead while he was still alive. It could form the subject of an independent study to describe his meetings with the numerous old men who, according to his dead wife Vedukha, received their punishments or rewards based on their earthly lives. *Old men sitting, completely frozen, shaving their beards with icy razors, pulling the hair out by the root, leaving only small clumps on their faces.*

*‘These are the ones chosen by their people to sit in judgement, believing them to be just. Their judgements, however, were false, taking the rich men’s side*

*for some baksheesh, or just for knowing them. But now they are to pay for their sins, according to the laws of the netherworld.'*

*Then Shoshlan said: 'Passing on, I could see a silver palace. Honourable old men seated on golden benches, delicious food abundantly laid out in front of them, with cups full of sparking drinks, but no one touches anything.'*

*And Vedukha said to Shoshlan:*

*'These people never robbed anyone, they loved and helped the poor throughout their earthly lives. Barashtyr (the lord of the land beyond the grave - the author) rewarded them accordingly. They refuse to touch the food because, according to the laws of this Land, even the sight of food fills them up.'*<sup>19</sup>

### **The death of an individual (killing the old)**

Killing the old was a custom among the Nartæ as well in order to ensure the long term survival of the community. For a warrior the appropriate time to leave the world of the living was determined by his "fate", himself or the community. However, taking somebody's life wrongfully, like Dzili in the Nartæ sagas, who always served his community well, yet was murdered by the Nartæ youth because of Shyrdon's deceit and envy, was an unforgivable sin. In such cases a punishment followed: *"The Nartæ lands, instead of ripe wheat, were covered in sand, their flocks of sheep turning into stone and their fast horses going lame, their sharp swords becoming blunt and their tongues completely paralysed"*.<sup>20</sup>

However, the community's decision about the time of an old man's death was usually not questioned. According to the Nartæ sagas, not even when the Borætæ, learning that the Æxsærtæggatæ men had failed to return from their campaign, decided in the name of the community to kill Wryzmæg, the old man left behind (hoping to find an easy prey). *'Let's have a feast, invite the old man Wryzmæg, intoxicate him with drinks, and then kill him.'*<sup>21</sup> With the invitation made impossible to refuse, and seeing that Wryzmæg was already drunk, they said: *'It is time to slaughter the old bull. Büræfærnyg Borætæ said this, turning to the younger Borætæs. The old Wryzmæg then understood who he meant and realised that his life was about to end.'*<sup>22</sup> Only his son Batraz, suddenly appearing thanks to his wife Satana could save Wryzmæg's life, against the custom of the community.

In the Kabardian version of the Nartæ sagas there is a more explicit part on the community custom of killing old men and the changing of this tradition.

*Killing the eldest was a custom with the Nartæs. They fattened an ox and prepared intoxicating drinks in abundance. The Nartæs invited the one whose*

time it was to be killed to sit at the table, and offered him a cup filled with *bakhsima*<sup>23</sup>. He was kept alive until his cup had been emptied. The Nartæ were hiding in the house, each of them holding a stone, waiting for the old man to finish his drink.

The time had come to kill Osirmedz, the husband of Shatanei<sup>24</sup>. The Nartæ knew the oldest member of the community in any specific year. Shatanei, the wife of Osirmedz said to him: 'Now, they will take you and offer you a seat at the table, and a cup full of *bakhsima*. But you should not hurry to finish your drink, take it slowly and steadily. For I will make the Nartæ give up on killing the old.'

They seated Osirmedz at the table and gave him *bakhsima*. They toasted him and drank. Osirmedz drank slowly, taking his time. The grown men, each holding a stone, told him:

'Our meat is overcooked,  
And our brew is boiling over;  
Hurry up,  
Drink faster!'

But Osirmedz said: 'Don't be impatient. All I want is some words to be left in this world!' And he took his time, talking away till the morrow.

On the following day at dawn, when everyone was still there, Shatanei led Shoshruko out of the pit. 'Go to that house', she told her son. 'Your father is there, sitting at the head of the table, holding a cup. The grown men are getting impatient to kill Osirmedz.'

Shoshruko entered the house that was full of people. When he walked in, they looked at him in surprise. 'How did he get here', they asked one another.

Shoshruko remained still until Osirmedz had finished drinking. Then Shoshruko set to work. He left no one in the house: he grabbed the grown men, knocked them down and threw them out of the door. ...And this is how Shoshruko put an end to killing the Nartæ elders, just as Shatanei told him. The Nartæ continued to prepare their heady drinks year after year, but they never killed any of the old men again<sup>25</sup>.

Still, the old ones themselves were reluctant to leave everything to fate. Even the aged Wryzmæg reminded the Nartæ youth once that his time was up: *From my earliest days I had put all my strength at your service, but my old self has become a burden and you cannot expect me to be of any use now. Therefore I'm asking you: make a big chest, put me in it and throw me into the sea. You must not lay my body to rest in the Nartæ cemetery...*<sup>26</sup>

Georges Dumézil lists numerous examples for killing old people in Caucasian mythology<sup>27</sup>. A unique, so far unmentioned version is when, according to community custom, it is the duty of the son to kill his helpless, aged father.

Referring to Fritz Paudler, he recalls the Kabardian version of the researched more than sixty varieties where the son, defying the community tradition, refuses to kill his father, and is prepared to face the consequences.<sup>28</sup>

*If a man should be so weakened that he could not draw his sword with three fingers, unable to mount his horse and put on his boots unaided, or even to use his bow, make hay and guard his flock vigilantly, the Nartæ, according to old custom, would put him in a woven basket and take him from the village to the top of the Elders' Mountain. There they would fit wheels onto the basket and push him down the steep slope, right into the deep below.*

*The time had come when Badan, the father of Badanoquo reached old age, unsurprisingly, as his hair had already turned silver. Badanoquo loved his father and was filled with sorrow thinking that he should push him off the mountain. But how could he break the Nartæ tradition?*

*Sadly, he made a basket, sat his father in it and carried the basket to the top of the Elders' Mountain. There he tied a couple of large rocks to it and said: 'Father, I am going to kill you. Do not be angry: it is a tradition with the Nartæ. Please forgive me!*

*Badan made no reply, and his silence felt like a heavy burden on Badanoquo's heart. He pushed the basket, and it started on its course to his father's death. With the basket nearing the edge, Badanoquo's heart was beating even more furiously. There, right at the edge of the cliff the basket was halted by a log. The wind began to rock the basket and tore at Badan's white beard, making the old man laugh.*

*'Father, why are you laughing', Badanoquo asked.*

*Badan, still laughing, answered: 'I was just thinking that when you grow old, and your son should push you off the Mountain, your basket could be caught by this very same log. Is that not something to laugh at?'*

*The mockery in his father's laughter touched the deepest cords of Badanoquo's heart. He ran to him, making a difficult decision: 'Let the Nartæ do whatever they want to me, but I will not kill you!'*

*'If you wish to know the truth, son', the old man said, 'I do not want to linger in this world with nothing to do, for a worthless life is worse even than death. But am I truly unfit to do any good for my people? Although I'm unable to work, I still have the power of thinking.'*

*Badanoquo pulled his father free, threw the basket off the cliff, and took the old man to a nearby cave. ... 'Father, stay here hidden so no one should know. Otherwise the Nartæ will get angry for breaking the tradition.'*<sup>29</sup>

This story deserves special attention for describing a unique moment: it gives an exceptionally detailed account of the process and the dilemma of breaking community norm and tradition. The Ossetian professor of ethnography,

Ludwig Chibiroff himself researched the subject, pointing it out that although the son broke the customary norm and spared the old man destined to be killed, he kept it a secret. He chose to wait for a moment when the community itself would overrule its decision, e.g. having been saved from a natural disaster or conflict through the old man's wisdom, finding the right solution. Badanoquo did the same, and having saved the village from the consequences of three deadly plagues following his father's instructions, the Nartæ abolished the rule of killing the old.<sup>30</sup>

Dumézil considers the community norm of killing the elderly, also represented in the Nartæ sagas, as a continuation of the Scythian and Sarmatian traditions. It is clearly visible that he prefers to add further examples to the specific arguments, rather than to research the background to changing the tradition.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the above story is highly remarkable, either when looked upon as the beginning of a new era characteristic of the Caucasian or traditional Ossetian society, or when searching for the roots of 'venerating elders', a change in community based on lifestyle and property.

In times when, due to physical geographic, economic, historical and social changes the wellbeing of a family requires special cooperation with emphasis on community interests and obedience by young people in order to manage economic and family matters often involving 40-50 people, the experience and practical wisdom of the elders used for the benefit of the family and the authority to successfully settle conflicts prove to be highly valuable. Such characteristics can only be developed through age.

It should be noted that in addition to their extensive knowledge and experiences, the elders represented the community's collective memory as well, being the guardians of traditions and customs in economic and religious terms.<sup>32</sup> For example, the Nykhash, i.e. the council of elders had the authority to act and make decisions in all matters of the village community, determining issues both formally and informally. The religious celebrations and feasts were overseen by the elders, and their decisions on ceremonial orders were definitive. They were in charge of the fundamental rule that governed family and village life as well, i.e. the unconditional respect for patriarchs.<sup>33</sup>

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> KOVÁCS 2008; Istvánovits et al. 2009; АБАЕВ 1990; DUMÉZIL 1968, 441-575; 1986, 325-408; ЧИБИРОВ 2013; SZABÓ 2001; SZABÓ 2009, 57.

<sup>3</sup> ЧИБИРОВ 2008, 241-242; 2016.

<sup>4</sup> DUMÉZIL 1968, 493; 1986 353.

<sup>5</sup> *How Batraz Saved Wryzmaæg*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 366; MAY 2002, 133; KOVÁCS 2008, 211.

<sup>6</sup> МАГОМЕТОВ 2011, 326-328; Абаев 1990.

<sup>7</sup> *Wryzmaæg's Last Campaign*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 120; KOVÁCS 2008, 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Nartæ Dzili and His Son*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 514; KOVÁCS 2008, 300.

<sup>9</sup> *Wryzmaæg's Last Campaign*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 124; KOVÁCS 2008, 60

<sup>10</sup> *Wryzmaæg's Last Campaign*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 126; KOVÁCS 2008, 60.

<sup>11</sup> *Wryzmaæg's Last Campaign*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 126; KOVÁCS 2008, 60.

<sup>12</sup> DUMÉZIL 1968, 457-466; 1986, 343-354; АБАЕВ 1990.

<sup>13</sup> *The Death of Arakhzau*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 214; KOVÁCS 2008, 114.

<sup>14</sup> *The nameless Son of Wryzmaæg*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 87; MAY 2008, 247; KOVÁCS 2008, 37.

<sup>15</sup> *Nykhash*: council of elders.

<sup>16</sup> *The nameless Son of Wryzmaæg*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 89; МАУ 2008, 248; KOVÁCS 2008, 38.

<sup>17</sup> *Wryzmaæg's Last Campaign*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 120; KOVÁCS 2008, 57.

<sup>18</sup> The Ossetian cemeteries lay right outside the village boundaries. The 'houses of the dead' were visited by the whole family every Friday. They told stories and tales so the young could pass on the fore-elders' heroic deeds and lives to their own children. The numerous feasts and celebrations held to honour lost relations in the year that followed death helped to keep memories alive for a long time. Personal collection, North Ossetia, Vladikavkaz, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *Shoshlan in the Land of the Dead*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 260; KOVÁCS 2008, 145.

<sup>20</sup> *Nartæ Dzili and His Son*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 520; KOVÁCS 2008, 303.

<sup>21</sup> *How Batraz Saved Wryzmaæg*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 366; МАУ 2012, 133; KOVÁCS 2008, 211.

<sup>22</sup> *How Batraz Saved Wryzmaæg*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 369; МАУ 2012, 135-136; KOVÁCS 2008, 213.

<sup>23</sup> *Bakhsima*: alcoholic drink made from millet flour, honey and yeast. ISTVÁNOVITS et al. 2009, 362.

<sup>24</sup> Shatanei: Satana, Osirmedz: Wryzmaæg, Shoshruk: Batraz. ЧИБИРОВ 2013, 433, 523, 105.

<sup>25</sup> *Shoshruko (Kabardian)*. ISTVÁNOVITS et al. 2009, 331-333.

<sup>26</sup> *Wryzmaæg's Last Campaign*. АБАЕВ и др. 2000, 21; KOVÁCS 2008, 57.

<sup>27</sup> DUMÉZIL 1986 425-430.

<sup>28</sup> DUMÉZIL 1986, 428.

<sup>29</sup> Quote by: DUMÉZIL, GEORGES, 1986, 429-430.

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<sup>31</sup> DUMÉZIL 1986, 431.

<sup>32</sup> МАГОМЕТОВ 2011, 326-328; ЧИБИРОВ 2008, 241-242.

<sup>33</sup> The accounts of 19th century travellers often reported on 140-150 year old patriarchs and their wives in charge of the whole family.