Forest in the traditional beliefs of the Russian population of Vodlozero land

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The material collected by the author in 1994-2000 makes it clear that the forest in the traditional understanding of the Russians who lived in the Vodlozero area, is not a territory covered by wood. They perceive it as an animate media. The people of Vodlozero in their charms call it “holy wood”. According to their cosmology the forest is one of the four elements of the universe (the others are the earth, water and air). The wood tzar rules the forest. Sometimes it also called “father-wood”. The ultimate ruler of the humans and nature, according the beliefs of Vodlozero people, is the Holy Father, whereas the devil and his servants inhabit the underground world. A human soul is sent either to hell or to heaven, whereas the dead keep living on the territory within the cemetery walls. Therefore, the wood groves on cemeteries are ruled by the dead but not by the holy father or wood tzar. The same applies to the islands turned into cemeteries, like Kingostrov (XV century) or Ilamostrov (XVIII century).

The ruler of forest element (wood tzar) is immortal. He commands over all other wood spirits and goblins. According to Poljakov (1991), in XIX century the people of Vodlozero also believed in water-nymphs, which appeared on the tree branches in hot afternoons. “Lembois” (much similar to Karelian “karu”) were forgotten by mid-XX.

Tales about “wood old men” (analogue of Karelian “heine” – a devil with a small bell) are still alive in the Vodlozero area like in all other lands of the Russian north. It is believed that the goblins lure the children to the wood by ringing the bell. They keep the kids, feed them, warm in the night and protect from mosquitoes, until a sorcerer throws chip crosses on foot trails.

It is believed that the wood goblins live in monogamy families. Each family inhabits its territory, with water systems and large mires serving as natural boundaries. The goblins on their territory are the owners of trees, birds and animals. Whereas the plants of the lower level, as well as most of berries and mushrooms, belong to the “earth tzar”, “mother-earth” and their servants (like “masters” of islands, meadows, etc.). That is why the Vodlozero people, when entering the forest to pick berries, address two nature rulers: “Father-wood, Mother-earth, permit us to pick berries”. The waterfowl, according to local belief, is not commanded by wood goblins. The witches in Vodlozero, when praying for successful hunting on geese or ducks, charm the spirits of the water but not the wood masters. The mires were not completely owned by wood goblins either. Even today it is believed that a man is drowned in a mire by “kikimoras” but not by a wood goblin. They are promised a pie if the man escapes the bog and returns safely home. The wood goblins rarely come out of the forest to a village. Appearance of it in a village (always at a sunset or in twilight) is an omen of death. People avoid building houses on goblins’ property. It is thought that settling in such a house would cause death of one or even three inhabitants.

Wood goblins, according to Vodlozero people, are mortal creatures, but live much longer than humans, a 180-year goblin is considered a broom, old age is 580-600 years. A goblin can be a widower. A man can kill it with a silver bullet or a with a button with a “cross” made by 4 holes and stitched in that way to the clothes.
It is believed that the wood goblins do not appear in their true form so as not to scare the humans out of their wits. Only the witches may see them in their true appearance at the moment of communication. They can turn into a hare or a bear to help to steer the cattle. A goblin in the image of a man is usually accompanied by a black dog, the size of a fox. Barking of such a dog in the forest is a sign that the man would soon get lost. It is believed that the face of a goblin is darker than that of a human and the eyes are big and shining. As a rule they remotely remind some acquaintance or a long-dead one. Sometimes description of a goblin is similar to that of Yeti in popular fiction (“Big-foot” of the north-taiga zone): naked and hairy all over. The height of goblins can vary from that of the tallest tree to that of a mushroom. They can change their height and run in the tree tops with terrible noise and whistle, bending the trees to the ground. Sometimes the goblins remain invisible. They fell trees in windless weather, pinch people from behind (usually girls and women) to make fun of them. Allegedly, they are afraid of hunters with rifles, seldom try to tease them or divert from the right way.

The hunters may meet goblins only in wood cabins if they occupy them without asking permission. Very often it may happen if a hunter forgets to make a fire in the stove or at least to stir the old ashes. In that case the intruder may be terrified by appearance of the wood spirits and even have to fight them. As a rule, the man wins the fight but would have to keep a knife or an axe stuck in the door. Mortal outcomes of fights are also known. According to A.I. Pimenova, her four cousins were surprised by goblins in a cabin. One died with a broken neck, another had his back broken, the rest two were bitten and roughed but wounded the creature with knives and gun shots before it escaped.

According to Vodlozero people, the goblins avoid wood roads and trails made by humans. They keep to their own trails which look like runs made by wild animals. A man or an animal on such a trail would invariably lose orientation. After a while the man realizes that he is lost and goes through a simple ritual: all clothes are taken off, shaken, turned inside-out and put back in reverse order. It is thought that after this the goblin can not see the man and loses control over him. It can also help to beg the “wood masters” to let out of the wood and show the way home. Reciting of orthodox prayers may also help.

It is thought not very dangerous to mistake a goblin for a human and to get into the “first degree” contact with it. It would be enough during such intercourse to remember the first word said by the “unholy” one. The contact is then immediately discontinued and the goblin, uncovering in one way or another his true origin, disappears. The same happens when the name of God is somehow mentioned in the talking. The Vodlozero people also believe that the same reaction is caused by strong odor from human footwear, dirty socks or puttees. But the same factors do not help that unfortunate who has been cursed by a spouse or a close relative when going to the forest or the one who boasted to come back in a short time. Such people become hostages of the evil spirits and stay in the wood until special people with magic craft interfere. After special rituals it may be possible to find such unfortunates, dead or alive. Much depends on the strength of the curse and closeness of keen to the one who made the curse. The same may happen to the cattle when letting it out to graze.

The witches appeal to the goblins to help find the cattle or people lost in the wood, to make spouses love or hate each other. The latter is done by appealing to the spirit through the smokestack in the house after midnight. All other cases, according to the Vodlozero witches, require contacts with wood spirits in a forest on a trail or road crossing. The spirits are called by cutting of three trees at such crossing, by thrashing the crossroads with a twig or by drawing of crosses on the ground with a ring finger. A gift has to be left on the crossroads in the form of a boiled egg, pies, small silver change of uneven sum or a silver rouble.
The Vodlozero people believe that with the start of concentrated clearcutting the number of the wood goblins has significantly decreased. The spirits left the slashed areas. It is to some extent true even in respect of the territory of national park Vodlozerski, where the forests remain mostly untouched.

Some of the traditional rituals of Vodlozero people, concerning communication with the wood spirits and wood elements, have become forgotten. Thus, the hunters do not sacrifice to the forest the first kill of the year. The concept that the wild animals possess a part of what is called “the soul” in humans is preserved only as a cultural superstition: the head of killed bear and eyes of elk are left as gifts in the forest. The concept of the tree’s soul is almost forgotten, although the rituals connected with cutting of trees, transportation of them to the village, using of timbers for construction, splitting of wood and burning of fuel wood are still observed. For instance, the trees marked for construction of a house are preferably felled in winter, when the “wood” and trees “sleep”. Before cutting, permission is asked from the “wood hosts” and one crosses himself. The first tree to be cut has to be touched with a palm to beg absolution. The felled trees are transported root first as dead men, otherwise a relative may die. The first 40 days the timbers are debarked but not cut into frame. It is though that during this period the trees mourn their demise but the tree soul is keeping close like a human soul. An axe should not be stuck into a tree unnecessarily for fear of a vengeance. For the same reason an axe should not be left stuck in a stump used for splitting wood. It should be put alongside on the ground with the edge towards the wood (or towards the future log cabin). The tree soul may be still living in it after physical death of a tree.

It is obvious to the author that the traditional beliefs of Vodlozero people related to the wood elements and the tree soul do not permit this folk group to treat the forest as inanimate resource which can be wasted thoughtlessly.

References