Num Encyclopedia Article

Num

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NUM is the highest god of the Nentsy, a Samoyed people of western Siberia. He is the creator of the world but remains relatively remote from humans, both during life and after death (when humans descend to the underworld). Contact with Num is established only exceptionally, through spirits and through shamans and their assistant spirits. In the Nenets religion Num is the father of Nga, the god of evil and of death, and is therefore his antipode. (Among the Selkup, Nom is the highest god but does not participate in a polar opposition; in Selkup *nga* means simply "god.") The sacrifices offered to Num on specified occasions are in the form of animals, food, clothing, and money. In the terminology of syncretic Samoyed Christianity, "Num bread" refers to the eucharistic wafer, the Host.

Literally, *num* means not only "the highest god who resides in the heavens" but also "sky, firmament." The term is found in all Samoyed languages and can be reconstructed for proto-Samoyed religion with the meanings "heaven above" and "highest god." However, because the obviously cognate forms *nu-* and *num* with the meanings "up, above, top" and "sky" are also found in Khanty and Mansi (two Finno-Ugric languages related to Samoyed and spoken to the west and south of the Samoyed area), it is likely that *num* is a cultic word that in the course of time has migrated over western Siberia. Attempts to connect *num* with the root *jum(a)* found in the Finnish word for "god," *jumala* (*-la* is a local suffix), must be rejected on phonological grounds in favor of the assumption that *jumala* and related terms in some other Finno-Ugric languages are borrowed from Indic (cf. the Sanskrit *dyumān*, "bright, shining," which refers to an attribute of Indra).

Bibliography

There are no works specifically devoted to Num. The interested reader may, however, profitably consult *The Samoyed Peoples and Languages* (Bloomington, Ind., 1963) by Péter Hajdú and *The Mythology of All Races*, vol. 4, *Finno-Ugric, Siberian* (Boston, 1927) by Uno Holmberg.