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The Lament to the Wheel of Black

Mark Wigoder-Daniels summarizes this famous epic

The Lament to the Wheel of Black exists in several rescensions. The best-known is the Kheiris rescension, which has more than 125,000 couplets. It was written down during the Engsvanyali epoch but is now no longer so popular in certain Mu'ugalavyáni circles, since the god Hrsh does not rate a single mention.

The rescension of the Lord of Hmakuyal, popular among the devotees of Ksáruł, has some modifications. Not only does the narrative treat Ksáruł rather more sympathetically, but the hero Hrugga is killed in battle with minions of Sáрку. This version is not read in mixed company!

A third rescension is popular amongst devotees of Sáрку. It emphasises how Sáрку was the real victor of the battle and the one to defeat Ksáruł. The Goddess of the Pale Bone is not mentioned.

The Ch'ochi rescension of Iodashish the Bald cites how Hrsh created the world, replacing mention of the One Other with Hrsh. It is much shorter than the Kheiris rescension, omitting details concerning many of the aspects of the gods. This is the version of the epic in vogue in Mu'ugalaváyá.

Overview

The reciter of the epic is not a participant in the events described, merely an onlooker. The major recurrent protagonists are the deities of Pavár. The One Other plays an important role when he finally appears at the end of the Battle of Dormoron Plain. Of the other 'pariah gods', the Goddess of the Pale Bone features only briefly while the One Who Is is totally ignored. Many humans heroes are involved also, along with demons and other beings.

The Lament to the Wheel of Black starts with a description of each of Pavár's deities and their respective theologies. There is much detail concerning their repective heavens, their powers, their marriages, quarrels, fights and other relationships. Also covered are their hells, descriptions of the astrological aspects of their heavenly bodies, and information concerning how each deity is 'noble' in his or her own way (cf The Book of Ebon Bindings). There are long hymns of praise to each god (much of the foregoing information being contained therein), lists of their deeds, allies, servants, demons, and so on.

There are also many 'red herrings'—long stories, often describing human heroes of one sort or another, which relate tangentially to the main story.

The Supreme Principle

The introduction to the epic likens the continual emergence of gods and species on Tékumel to a great wheel endlessly turning in space. But this wheel is turning ever more slowly. Time is the ultimate victor.

The section on Hnálla describes how Hnálla was the first of the gods and his radiant brilliance pervaded all that was. Because he was the first, he knew the secret names of all who were to come, but none would know his. By masking his radiant brilliance Hnálla created 'not-light' from which arose Hrü'ü.

Hnálla recognized his natural emnity with Hrü'ü and so began their battles. To distract Hrü'ü he created the world, an event now celebrated every year during the feast of The Circle of Light-Giving Light on 12th Trantor. The world Hnálla created is praised for its perfection of form: circular, flat, covered with water to the height of the knee. Hrü'ü soon dismembered this world and it was divided between the other deities of Pavár, excepting only Ksáruł.

Next comes the argument in the diorite throne room of Lord Sunares the Doom-Ridden. (All of this monarch's military exploits ended in shattering defeat, from which his Queen's brother was needed to rescue him.) The argument is between the aged sage Ristesh'shar of Jgresh and the Prince of the Northern Islands (possibly Yán Kór?), who disagree about the creation of the cosmos. Ristesh'shar espouses the theory that Lord Hnálla created the Egg of the World, which the other gods quarrelled over and which was then broken to form the world as we know it. The Prince of the Northern Isles berates the sage for his folly. He recounts the story of Sfara the Fair, Handmaiden to the Lord of Sorrows, who upon couching him revealed the true secret of the world's beginnings. This was that the glorious creation of Hnálla was stifled by the black effulgence that Hrü'ü specially formulated in order to conceal the true glory of Hnálla and his shining minions from those of us who dwell within the world.

This account is interrupted by the Lord of Sorrows' discovery of Sfara and the Prince of the Northern Islands ensconced in his privy quarters. Sfara was reduced to a quivering lump of grey matter by his wrathful gaze. The Prince of the Northern Isles was then forced to flee through the Gate of Countless Torments and made his way, pursued by the five-footed steel-armoured guardians of the Lord of Sorrows, to the Realm of Fiery Woe where he misled his pursuers.

The narrative returns to the main strand. Next described are Hnálla's glittering Crown of Kingship over the gods and his Paradise of Supernal Light, the resplendent realm of scintillant brilliance. Here he dwells in the crystalline Palace of Harmonious Ecstasy, within which the joy of all who reside therein echoes melodiously from chamber to chamber. This is the waiting room to the destiny of all, after which everything shall be incorporated into the being of the Lord of Light.

Master of Negation

The section on Hrü'ü describes how he was created through the early play of Lord Hnálla. Hrü'ü resented this and yearned for independence. He realized that this would only be accomplished by utterly transforming himself, so that his being would no longer be defined by reference to his originator. Then came the fateful decision that would lead to eternal conflict. Rather than be content with simply becoming an entity in his own right, Hrü'ü decided to expunge Hnálla's light as well. He attempted to transform the world, creating chasms, mountains, rivers, seas and deserts. As the struggle wore on, he realized he would need aid and so created Vimúhla as a copy of the boundless energy of Hnálla in a less pure form. Hrü'ü forged alliances among the Demon Lords: the beast Durun, MaraSsú, Ka'ing and Narkona'a. The Demons of the Dark also came to serve him, but were later to be seduced away by Ksáruł.

Hrü'ü's (unnamed) heaven is a place where all things are in turmoil. Those who attain his paradise derive great enjoyment from the endless change and multifarious experiences.

Lord of Fire

The section on Vimúhla describes how, created by Hrü'ü, he too reacted in anger. During their battles, his outpouring of wrath on the world gave rise to volcanoes. In the early days of the world he attempted to drown all in a red carpet of conflagration, and it took all the other deities to prevent this. Later, the cities of the ancients defied Vimúhla. He covered them with a blanket of fire and again attempted to destroy the world. At his third attempt to incinerate all existence, the gods banded together to restrain him, egged on by Avánthe.

Vimúhla's heavens are the Halls of Ever-Blazing Flame and the Paradises of Ecstatic Flame. His hell, the Outer Portals of Kelku'un—a gloomy place of frigid mists. His allies among the Demon Lords are Tkel, Jneksha'a, Mrugga, Ssúddine, Nurgashte. The demon races of the Flame Dragons, the Hre-Niriu and the Blazing Warriors all serve him.

The Ultimate Warrior

The section on Karakán relates how, after the creation of Vimúhla, Hnálla realized that he would need help and thus created Karakán. The new god was formed from light in a burst of lightning and took lightning as his own weapon. Hnálla, learning from his earlier experience, treated with Karakán to make him his ally. Karakán rejected the blandishments of Hrü'ü and found a natural foe in Vimúhla, with whom he did battle.

The epic then describes Karakán's glorious paradise (unnamed), wherein each soul is seated according to their deeds and courage, and where the blessed participate in endless battles until reborn to fight again in a later age. They are attended by Lord Karakán's special Heroes of Glory, supernatural warriors clad in steel, and the Myusal, beauteous amazons who fought on Dormoron Plain.

The Knower of Arts

The section on Thúmis recounts his incarnation in the midst of the turmoil of the mighty battles between the gods. Confused at the clash of powers which resounded through the cosmos, the new god decided to observe what transpired, lest rash action lead to unwelcome consequence. He was filled with wonder at the world beneath and admired the skill displayed by the battling gods. One by one he made contact with the other gods, each responding according to their nature—hostile and threatening, or friendly and seeking alliance. Thúmis decided to support the existence of the world until he knew all that there was to know concerning it. Extending his senses, he discovered the Land of Qelem and the Planes of Forces created by the interplay of warring powers. Here he found followers among the Mighty Ones of the Pearl Mists.

Thúmis' pearl-grey heaven is described: a beautiful and peaceful place strewn with fountains whose waters bestow knowledge of the many planes and their peoples. The blessed are rewarded with marvellous feelings of power gained from aiding many with their knowledge. They then return to the living world to experience and learn more.

The Guide into Darkness

The section on Sáрку tells of his creation by Hrü'ü as an ally against the Tlomitlanyal—and also Vimúhla, in case he should rebel again. He was intended to be the counterpart of Thúmis, his knowledge of death opposing the knowledge of life. But Sáрку developed in his own way.

His heavens are the Halls of Sáрку and the Paradises of the Tomb. Their pleasures consist of a passionless contemplation of everything that was, is and will be. These heavens are guarded by elite deathly warriors: the Legion of the Mantle of Vipers and the Legion of the Despairing Dead. Sáрку's servitors are the Ones Who Writhe and the headless Tshughiyur. His allies among the Demon Lords include Gereshma'a, Ku'eth, Ashonu, Nyerebo, Ktelu, Srukárum, and Death himself.

Mistress of Heaven

The section on Avánthe describes her as the mother of all life and the wife of Hnálla. It was her role to oppose the new deity of death. She populated the world with plants, animals and then sapient beings, and the other deities gave them gifts. The epic digresses into the trials and tribulations of mankind and other intelligent races, and how matters were worked out.

Next it is told how Uresha, Queen of Chai Ajjakhan, railed against Avánthe when she failed to bear children after six years of devoted sacrifice and obedience. The goddess punished her with a curse, the stigma of which was a blue tint to the eyes. Queen Uresha was forced to leave her realm and wander for seventeen years in the wildernesses of the east until her entreaties were accepted. After Avánthe annulled the curse, the Queen returned to her realm to give birth to the great hero Shénndure who was destined to destroy the Shrine of the Evil Goddess and lay waste to her realm of Dark Enbulere.

Avánthe's heaven is serene and tranquil – a paradise of lakes and streams under a clear blue sky. The blessed till the soil with the aid of magic beasts and servants and pass their time in joyous fertility rites. They are then reborn in the world: the "seeds" of Avánthe's faith, resown to fertilize the universe. The goddess's allies are the spirits of air, water and earth.

The Obsidian Princess

The section on Dlamélish depicts her as the counterpart to Avánthe, created by Hrü'ü and Vimuhla to embody another aspect of the feminine principle. Hers is a force which channels the energies of sensuality, not for the purpose of fertility, but for personal satisfaction.

Her heaven is the Emerald Kiosk, and the poet dwells lubriciously on the manifold pleasures to be found therein. Her servitors are the Aerial Ones of Tu'unkelmu, and the Demon Lords faithful to her are Rü'üttlanesh, Pa'iya, Ngüngethib, Quyove and Maraggu.

Lord of the Excellent Dead

The section on Belkhánu explains how Hnálla and Avánthe found that fecundity alone could not stem the encroachments of Lord Sáрку. Recognizing the need for a psychopomp to direct the spirit-souls of the deceased to more fitting destinations, they gave Issue to Belkhanu.

Belkhánu's paradises are stations of transition on the way to the further Isles of Teretane. His judgement hall is described as vast and echoing with constant din and hubbub: those coming and going, the blare of trumpets summoning the marchers upon their way, and the murmur of the myriad languages spoken.

His principal servants are five Pale Attendants, who are the five faces of Death. He is also served by the Voyagers of the Farther Isles and the Ferryman of the barque to the Isles of the Excellent Dead.

At this point, the epic relates how the souls of humanity traverse the Isles of the Dead and then go on to the Paradises of the Gods, then to be reborn and fulfill another skein of destiny.

The Doomed Prince

The section on Ksaául describes how he came into being through the coupling of Sáрку and Dlamélish. As the youngest god, he discovered that all of creation had already been apportioned, leaving him with no domain of his own. His sadness turned to fury and indignation and he swore revenge. He resolved to subjugate all before him, and determine for all the others how they would be left with nothing, just as he now was.

Ksaául put a pleasant visage on his face to mask his innermost feelings and befriended the other deities, telling each secretly what he or she most wanted to hear. And he spoke what he will exploit the mutual other Planes and slowly won allies to his cause. Time passed, and the new god grew more powerful.

For his heaven, Ksaául fashioned the Circle of Sapphire. At the suggestion of his seneschal Gruganu he established his Citadel of the Twelve Pylons of Ta'lar on the Forty-fifth Plane. This was the domain of the demon Qu'u, who was Gruganu's vassal. Extending his influence, Ksaául made alliances among the Demon Lords: Hessa, Erbule, Chessu and Hursha. Next he subverted demon races who had previously aligned with other deities, including the Spawn of Tu'unkelmu and the Demons of the Dark.

Ksaául's realm is described in much more detail than those of the other deities, for here the stage is set for the events of Dormoron Plain. The courtiers are seated according to status around the throne in the six conventional directions and the two further directions of planar space (Grel and Dzai). Ksaául announces to his courtiers that the wondrous and great cosmos needs a ruler deserving of the honour, not the squabbling gods and goddesses who have inherited it from the dawn of time. He explains that he will exploit the mutual hostility of the Tlomitlányal and the Tlokiriqáluyal, inducing them to expend their efforts in battle until they are all too weak to resist him. Most of his courtiers stand and approve Ksaául's plans at once; but some demur until, with words of marvellous poetry, Ksaául cozens them to agreement.

The Battle of Dormoron Plain

This forms a continuation of Ksaául's section, describing the preparations for war. Each deity is dealt with in turn, as the poet tells of the chariots, armour and weapons, haloes and auras, and lastly their attendants and concubines. There are long lists of all the forces participating: the weapons, arms & armour, heroes, and the full order of battle.

Here we are told of Hnálla's Supernal Light of Myriad Brilliances as it breaks across the Plain. In poetry unequalled anywhere in literature, the narrator speaks of Karakan's wondrous Sword of Lightning and his myriad amazon-like demigoddesses. Several stanzas are devoted to Chegarra's shield bearer Danuo, his shield Chonkotuel, his armour and the sword Arosuel that Chegarra bestowed on him. Thúmis brings forth his Wand of Grey and uses it to summon the Heroes of Wisdom to fight beneath his pearl-grey banner. Chiténg appears, armed with his mighty sword Bloodsong.

Ksaául takes the field in his chariot driven by the loyal Gruganu. With stirring words of victory he marshalls his allies. In addition to the Tlokiriqáluyal and the Demon Lords already mentioned, he is aided by nonhuman troops such as the Miháli. These creatures are shapechangers, and the poet uses the uncertainty of their true appearance to mirror the uncertainty felt by all the battle's participants as to which alliances are true and which are false.

Numerous human participants are mentioned and their exploits extolled. Chagotlekka, Chaishyani, Ketkolel, Mraktine, Ssaivra, Ssanmirin, Tankolel... All gave their names to great lineages which extend to the present day. Tlelsu is mentioned as one of the heroes fighting in Sáрку's troop. Arkonai Vriddi, the first of that proud family, features as a warrior of Vimuhla. Heketh and Viridame are allied with Ksaául, the truth is that many of these names were added to later rescensions in order to create a history for noble families.

Dormoron Plain is where the armies meet. We are told of the battlefield, "a place as wide as the sky", bounded at its west by mountains and open deserts, at the east by the end of the universe (an endless pit out of which the sun rises every morning). The moon Kashi, a slender crescent when Ksaául's chariot reaches the Plain, is full by the time all the armies are massed.

Then comes the battling between the Tlomitlányal and the Tlokiriqáluyal – "the Lords of Glory and the Rulers of Shadow" – which lasts for millennia. In a long sequence we are told how Hrugga fights beside Hnálla and Karakán and first overcomes Death, then crushes Qu'u beneath Thenu Thrudraya Peak – known in folklore as "the Sentinel of Hrugga". (Hrugga's part in this battle is treated also in The Lament to the Reaper of Sighs.)

As Ksaául gains more and more power, his arrogance grows. Dlamélish and Vimuhla come to distrust him, and eventually desert him, becoming neutral in the great battles. Finally even Hrü'ü and Sáрку realize the significance of Ksaául's growing powers and the danger he presents. Some of the demon races leave too – the Aerial Ones of Tu'unkelmu and the Demons of the Dark returning to their original loyalties.

Although deserted by his greatest allies, Ksaául's overweening pride is such that he tries to contend against all the gods.

Each of the gods brandishes the weapon he or she will use for the decisive battle. Vimuhla alone has no weapon, having relied before on his innate strength and his three tongues of flame. It is here that the One Other makes his appearance and bestows the weapon Flamesong on Vimuhla.

As the tide of battle turns against him, Ksaául begins to see the magnitude of his mistake. He allowed blind pride to cloud the intellect which won him his earlier victories. In despair he turns to Gruganu at the Place of Reviving, and although the loyal charioteer succeeds in inspiring his master to one last great effort, it is not enough. The Battle of Dormoron Plain culminates in Ksaául's defeat.

The Aftermath

Even Hrü'ü and Sáрку agree to Karakan and Vimuhla's demand that Ksaául be killed. During disputes between the gods, the One Other enters the debate and argues the case for Ksaául's eternal imprisonment. His simple logic silences even the wrath of Karakán and Vimuhla (the latter indebted to him for Flamesong) as he explains that the way of life symbolized by Ksaául is a fitting and necessary ingredient in the universe. So the discussion turns instead to the best method of hobbling Ksaául.

It is agreed that Ksaául shall be made to sleep and then imprisoned in the Blue Room surrounded by walls, each with a locked gate. The innermost wall is erected by Hnálla, the next by Hrü'ü, then Karakán, Vimuhla, Thúmis, Sáрку, Avánthe, Dlamélish and Belkhánu. Lastly the One Other builds the outermost wall. Ten keys are created for the gates and hidden by the gods. In the jubilation at their victory, none notices that Grugánu remains at liberty.

The Wheel of Black

The epic then takes a turn which suggests the conflation of two earlier sources, as Ksaául's story fades into the background and we are told of the incursion of the troops of the Goddess of the Pale Bone. The One Other disappears from the narrative having, according to some critiques, weakened the gods by preventing their execution of Ksaául. The Goddess of the Pale Bone's minions are the He'sa – those who are seen yet unseen – and they harry the weakened forces of the gods on all sides. At last the Goddess is brought to battle by the gods, along with their allies and the human heroes.

This battle ends in the Goddess's defeat, and for a time she is forced to withdraw. But the Wheel of Black continues its inexorable cycle...

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