

The Image System of Mythical Heroes in Azerbaijani Geographical Legends and Their Poetic Functions

¹ Zuleykha Zeynalova

<https://doi.org/10.69760/gsrh.0250203020>

Abstract; This article is devoted to the study of the imagery system of mythical heroes and their poetic functions in Azerbaijani geographical legends, which are among the most archaic layers of folk art. The aim of the work is to reveal the role of mythological characters in the formation of the worldview, moral norms and symbolic models of Azerbaijani culture. The methodological basis of the study consists of comparative-historical and structural-semantic methods, which made it possible to analyse the mythopoetic structures preserved in legends about mountains, rivers, stones and sacred trees.

The results of the study show that mythical heroes perform several key functions. The cosmogonic function manifests itself in explaining the origin of natural objects through the intervention of divine or supernatural forces that transform chaos into an orderly cosmos. The didactic function is associated with the consolidation of social and moral values: heroes serve as models of loyalty and courage or become symbols of punishment for betrayal. The symbolic function is reflected in the stability of archetypes — the ‘Great Mother Earth,’ the ‘Hero-Founder,’ and the ‘Enemy of Chaos’ — which continue to structure collective memory. In conclusion, it should be noted that Azerbaijani geographical legends represent a unique synthesis of mythological thinking and poetic imagination. Mythical heroes not only sacralize space and preserve ancient cosmological views, but also act as cultural codes that ensure the preservation of national identity and continuity of tradition

Keywords: *Azerbaijani folklore, geographical legends, mythopoetics, mythical heroes, cultural identity*

Introduction

Azerbaijani geographical legends are among the oldest forms of oral folk art and represent a unique synthesis of mythological, ethnographic and poetic elements. In these texts, the people sought to explain the origin of natural objects — mountains, rivers, lakes, rocks, forests — linking their emergence to the actions of mythical heroes or the manifestation of sacred forces. The sacralisation of the landscape through words was not only a way to explain incomprehensible natural phenomena, but also a means of incorporating them into the system of spiritual values of the ethnic group (Gafarli, 2019, pp. 25–26).

The relevance of the study lies in the fact that it is in geographical legends that the mythological worldview of Azerbaijanis is most fully reflected, in which nature was understood not as a neutral environment, but as animate and included in the system of relations between man, society and the

¹ Zeynalova, Z. H. PhD Student, Department of Translation and Philology, Azerbaijan University, Azerbaijan. Email: zuleykha.zeynalova@rambler.ru. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3275-4447>.

cosmos. According to E. Galiboğlu, most of these legends are based on the universal pattern of 'chaos–cosmos–chaos–cosmos,' where a mythical hero acts as a mediator, transforming the initial chaos into a harmonious space (Galiboğlu, 2020, pp. 48–49). This model confirms that geographical legends cannot be reduced to simple toponymic stories: they reflect fundamental worldview constructs. Their educational function is also an important aspect. Folk legends not only explained the origin of natural objects, but also conveyed moral values and shaped a sense of collective identity. Mythological heroes embodied ideas of loyalty, courage, sacrifice, and the sacred connection between humans and the earth. As R. Gafarli emphasises, each legend became a kind of 'poetic imprint of the people on the landscape,' transforming the geographical space into the cultural and spiritual territory of the ethnic group (Qafarli, 2019, pp. 112–113).

The historiography of the issue shows that interest in Azerbaijani geographical legends has manifested itself at different stages of the development of humanities. During the Soviet period, the emphasis was on comparative-typological analysis and the identification of common Turkic motifs. In later studies, attention has focused on the mythopoetic aspect: legends are considered not only as an ethnographic source, but also as artistic texts in which archaic consciousness is expressed through symbols and images (Sultanova, 2022, p. 6). This change in approach has made it possible to reveal more deeply their role in shaping the national worldview. Methodologically, it is important to note that legends reflect the dual nature of mythological texts: on the one hand, they date back to archaic cosmogonic models, and on the other, they undergo artistic processing and become closer to literary genres. It is precisely this intermediate position that allows us to consider them in the context of mythopoetics. As G. Aliyeva notes, the transition from mythological thinking to epic thinking was accompanied by the formation of a special imagery system, where the symbolism of heroes and motifs retained a connection with primary mythology (Aliyeva, 2017, p. 11).

Thus, the study of the imagery system of mythical heroes and their poetic functions in Azerbaijani geographical legends allows us to reveal not only ancient ideas about nature, but also the universal mechanisms of mythological thinking. These texts represent a 'poetic map of memory' that reflects the people's ideas about space, time, sacred geography, and spiritual values.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the imagery system of mythical heroes in Azerbaijani geographical legends using an interdisciplinary approach and to determine their key poetic functions in the context of ethnocultural heritage.

Main part

1. The concept of mythological consciousness

Mythological consciousness is one of the oldest forms of social worldview and developed in the course of the socio-historical development of humanity. As R. Aliyev notes, it is inextricably linked to the process of forming the first collective ideas about the world, being a product not of an individual, but of society as a whole (Aliyev, 2015, p. 45). The mythological consciousness formed

the primary models of explanation of existence, in which man perceived himself as part of the natural and cosmic order.

Researchers emphasise that, unlike mythological thinking, which is oriented towards the emotional perception of nature, mythological consciousness involves the consolidation of these ideas into stable systems of beliefs, rituals and symbols. Thus, according to R. Aliyev's observation, while mythological thinking is characterised by fear of natural forces, mythological consciousness transformed this fear into forms of belief and worship, enshrined in rituals and cults.

One of the key features of mythological consciousness is syncretism — the indivisibility of different spheres of spiritual life. In mythological texts, it is impossible to draw a clear line between ritual and play, poetry and prose, time and space. As R. Aliyev emphasises, syncretism reflects the original integrity of the world, perceived by ancient man as a single whole (Əliyev, 2015, p. 48). This understanding is confirmed by R. Qafarli, who writes that mythological consciousness was formed as a means of artistic and symbolic exploration of reality. That is why myth acts simultaneously as a narrative, a sacred act, and a model of the world (Qafarli, 2019, pp. 25–26).

E. Galiboqlu also emphasises that mythological consciousness is not just a set of myths, but a whole system that builds human relations with the cosmos according to the pattern “chaos–cosmos–chaos–cosmos”. This model reflects the universal desire of ancient man to bring order to a chaotic world and explain his place in it (Galiboqlu, 2020, pp. 48–49).

One of the key features of Azerbaijani geographical legends is the sacralisation of space. The folk worldview understood nature not as a neutral environment, but as a ‘living body’ in which each element — a mountain, river, tree or stone — was endowed with sacred meaning. Mountains were perceived as ‘pillars of the world’ connecting the heavenly and the earthly; rivers symbolised eternal movement and life; stones became guardians of ancestral memory and markers of the boundaries between the world of the living and the dead (İmanov, 2016, p. 55). This perception was based on archaic cosmogonic ideas. As M. Seyidov notes, the cult of earth, water, fire, and sky was formed as a reflection of ancient beliefs enshrined in rituals and mythological texts. For the mythological consciousness, a mountain was not just a geographical object, but also a sacred centre around which the model of the universe was built (Seyidov, 1983, pp. 17–18).

Water played a special role — rivers and springs in Azerbaijani legends were often endowed with the ability to heal and give life. This testifies to the preservation of the ancient water cult associated with the idea of water as the foundation of the universe. A. Nabiyev emphasises that in the mythological consciousness of the ancient Turks, water was perceived as a ‘living being’ capable of both purifying and destroying (Nabiyev, 2002, p. 130).

It is interesting that the sacralisation of space was also manifested in the images of sacred trees. In the 20th century, researchers repeatedly noted that in the mythopoetic consciousness of the Turks, the tree played the role of the axis mundi, connecting the earth, the sky and the underworld. In folk beliefs, the tree became not only a symbol of fertility, but also the keeper of ancestral memory

(Sultanova, 2022, pp. 32–34). The sacralisation of natural space is directly linked to the identity of a people. As F. Bayat notes, the mythological images of mountains, water and fire reflect not only cosmogonic myths, but also the formation of collective self-awareness, where each sacred place becomes a symbol of the unity of the clan and the people (Bayat, 2007, pp. 98–100).

In modern science, this tradition is considered an element of poetics. E. Javadova shows that in the poetry of M. Araz, the sacralisation of the images of the Araz River, mountains and stones continues the ancient tradition of mythological thinking, giving these natural objects semantic and symbolic functions (Javadova, 2025, pp. 2–3). Thus, the sacralisation of space in Azerbaijani geographical legends represents not only the legacy of archaic beliefs, but also a cultural and artistic code that retains its relevance in poetry and national identity.

2. Mythical heroes and their roles in Azerbaijani legends

Azerbaijani geographical legends were formed as a result of the interaction between archaic cosmogonic ideas, ethnographic traditions and poetic imagination. At their centre are mythical heroes who perform a number of functions, from explanatory to symbolic. Their imagery reflects universal models of mythological thinking, while preserving national specificity.

First and foremost, mythical heroes explained the origin of natural objects and cosmic phenomena. Through their actions, chaos was transformed into an orderly cosmos. E. Galiboqlu notes that the universal pattern of ‘chaos-cosmos-chaos-cosmos’ appears in Azerbaijani legends about mountains, rivers and forests as the main principle of myth-making (Galiboqlu, 2020, pp. 48–49). In legends about the origin of the Caspian Sea, the destructive element of water is brought into order through divine intervention, and the sea becomes a symbol of abundance and grace. Such myths not only explained the origin of objects, but also established a sacred hierarchy of space. Along with their cosmogonic function, mythical heroes also played an educational role. Legends contain motifs of heroes being turned into mountains, stones, or trees for their misdeeds, betrayal, or ingratitude. In this way, mythologized characters became examples to emulate or warnings to society. B. Shahverdiyev emphasizes that the motif of punishment and reward is consistent in the Turkic epic and manifests itself in the geographical legends of Azerbaijan as a form of reinforcing social norms (Shahverdiyev, 2019, p. 3). In such plots, mythical heroes became conduits of morality, embodying collective ideas about good and evil.

No less significant is the symbolic function of mythical heroes. They acted as personifications of natural elements and archetypal images. Some heroes embodied fertility and life, while others embodied the destructive power of nature. Myths and epics feature archetypes such as the “great mother earth,” the “founding hero,” and the “enemy of chaos,” which structured the worldview of the people. According to A. Aqbaba, such archetypes form the basis of mythological thinking, since each natural phenomenon is given a personal image in the legend, becoming part of the cultural code of the ethnic group (Aqbaba, 2008, pp. 12–14).

Thus, mythical heroes in Azerbaijani geographical legends performed several functions at once: they explained the origin of natural objects, formed moral guidelines, and reinforced symbolic models of perception of the world. Their imagery system is a link between cosmogonic myths, social norms, and poetic imagery, which makes these legends a unique source for studying the spiritual culture of the Azerbaijani people.

3. Poetics of the imagery system

The poetics of Azerbaijani geographical legends are based on a special imagery system in which mythological ideas take on an artistic form. The folk consciousness is characterized by a tendency to personify natural phenomena and transform them into poetic symbols. Metaphorical thinking permeates all levels of the narrative: the sun becomes a “fiery wheel,” lightning becomes a “heavenly serpent,” a mountain becomes a “pillar of the world,” and a river becomes “eternally flowing life” (Aliyev, 2015, p. 62). These metaphors not only served an artistic function, but also preserved the mythological worldview, cementing it in the collective memory. Archetypal images that have remained stable over the centuries occupy a special place. The epic and legendary tradition features the archetype of the “hero-savior,” associated with the figures of Keroglu and Dede Gorgud. In geographical legends, it transforms into characters associated with specific natural objects, such as springs or mountains, which have been sacralized through the exploits and sacrifices of heroes (Kazimoqlu, 2016, pp. 112–113). The archetype of the “great mother earth” is expressed through the cult of mountains and trees, and the archetype of the “enemy-chaos” is embodied in images of monsters representing destructive elements. According to A. Aqbaba, such archetypes form the core of mythological thinking, giving natural phenomena personal traits and sacred meaning (Aqbaba, 2008, pp. 12–14).

The poetic structure of Azerbaijani legends is inseparable from the epic tradition. Many motifs echo the plots of *Kitabi-Dede Gorgud*, where the sacralization of a river or mountain is accompanied by heroic deeds. F. Bayat notes that it is at the intersection of epic and legend that the mythopoetics of Turkic culture is revealed, where historical memory and artistic image merge into a single layer of worldview (Bayat, 2007, pp. 98–100).

Mythopoetic images retained their significance in 20th-century literature. Thus, E. Javadova showed that in the poetry of Mammad Araz, the images of mountains, stones, the Araz River, and trees continue the ancient tradition of mythological thinking. These symbols, which go back to mythological memory, take on new meanings in artistic language, becoming carriers of cultural identity (Javadova, 2025, pp. 2–3). In a similar vein, H. Sultanova revealed that cosmogonic and natural mythologems in the poetry of S. Vurgun and other writers function as an expression of national philosophy, combining ancient beliefs with contemporary artistic discourse.

4. The sociocultural significance of mythical heroes

Azerbaijani geographical legends, while retaining their archaic basis, go beyond simple explanatory texts and become an important element of socio-cultural heritage. In them, mythical

heroes act as mediators not only between man and nature, but also between the past and the present, ensuring the continuity of cultural tradition.

First and foremost, collective identity was formed through the images of mythical characters. Every mountain, river, or stone associated with a legend became a sacred sign of the people's belonging to their land. R. Gafarli emphasizes that myths and legends served as a “poetic stamp” on geography, reinforcing in the consciousness of the ethnic group the idea of the sanctity of the territory and the historical continuity of generations (Gafarli, 2019, pp. 112–113). Such sacred “coding” of space ensured its transformation into part of national memory and collective self-awareness.

Elements of ancestor worship and ancient religious beliefs are clearly evident in the legends. A. Nabiev points out that the sacralization of water, mountains, or trees was based on the archaic idea of an inseparable connection between the world of the living and the world of the sacred, where every natural object became a dwelling place for guardian spirits (Nabiyev, 2002, p. 130). This connection was reinforced in ceremonies and rituals that often accompanied the telling of legends, turning them into part of a collective cult. The moral and educational aspect is no less important. In legends, mythical heroes become conduits of social norms: loyalty, devotion, hard work, respect for the land and ancestors. B. Shahverdiyev emphasizes that the motifs of punishment and reward, embodied in the images of heroes turned into stone or mountains, served to regulate behavior, creating a kind of moral code for society (Shahverdiyev, 2019, p. 3). The sociocultural value of geographical legends is also evident in their artistic dimension. In 20th-century poetry, mythological images continue to live on as symbols of national memory. Thus, E. Javadova showed that in the works of Mammad Araz, the motifs of the mountain, the Araz River, or the stone not only carry an aesthetic load, but also express the idea of national steadfastness and spiritual immortality (Javadova, 2025, pp. 2–3). H. Sultanova adds that the use of mythopoetic images in contemporary literature is becoming a way of preserving cultural identity, connecting the archaic with current social realities (Sultanova, 2016, pp. 264–265).

Conclusion

An analysis of Azerbaijani geographical legends shows that they represent not only an oral heritage, but also an important layer of spiritual culture that has preserved archaic ideas about the world and humanity. Mythical heroes occupy a central place in these legends, performing a range of functions from cosmogonic and explanatory to moral, symbolic, and sociocultural. The cosmogonic function of heroes is manifested in explaining the origin of natural objects—mountains, rivers, lakes, forests—which, through the actions of supernatural forces, are transformed into sacred elements of the universe. The didactic and moral functions are expressed in stories about punishment for betrayal or reward for valor, which turns legends into a kind of code of conduct that ensures the moral education of society. The symbolic role of heroes is manifested in their archetypal nature: the images of the “great mother earth,” the “founding hero,” and the “enemy of chaos” reinforce universal mythological models in the national consciousness.

The sociocultural dimension is no less significant. Legends sacralized space, transforming the landscape into a “poetic map of memory” of the people, where each mountain or river acquired sacred meaning and became a sign of national identity. Mythical heroes reinforced ideas of collective identity, ancestor worship, and spiritual values, making these texts an important tool for preserving ethnocultural heritage.

In the poetic dimension, mythological images, while retaining their archaic origins, take on new meanings in 20th- and 21st-century literature. In particular, in the works of Mammad Araz, mountains, stones, and rivers become symbols of national resilience and cultural memory. Thus, geographical legends have not lost their relevance, continuing to live on in contemporary artistic forms. In conclusion, it can be argued that mythical heroes in Azerbaijani geographical legends are a key link connecting ancient mythological consciousness with national culture and contemporary artistic expression. They shaped the worldview model, fostered moral guidelines, sacralized space, and reinforced collective identity. The study of these images opens up broad prospects for further interdisciplinary research in the fields of mythopoetics, folklore, and cultural studies.

Reference

- Ağbaba, A. (2008). *Mifologiya* [Mythology]. Sumqayıt: Sumqayıt Dövlət Universiteti.
- Aliyeva, H. (2017). *Qərbi Avropa ədəbiyyatında Yaxın Şərq mövzusu (epik poeziya materialları əsasında)* [Near Eastern themes in Western European literature (based on epic poetry materials)]. Bakı: Azərbaycan Dillər Universiteti.
- Bayat, F. (2007). *Mifoloji dünyagörüş və türk epik ənənəsi* [Mythological worldview and Turkic epic tradition]. Bakı: Elm.4.Cavadova, E. T. (2025). Məmməd Araz yaradıcılığında mifopoetik obrazların poetik semantikasi [The poetic semantics of mythopoetic images in Mammad Araz's creativity]. *Paradigma*, 2, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.30546/30015.2025.2.101>
- Əliyev, R. (2015). *Mifoloji şüur və onun strukturu* [Mythological consciousness and its structure]. Bakı: Elm və Təhsil.
- İmanov, M. K. (2016). *Folklor və dövlətçilik düşüncəsi* [Folklore and the idea of statehood]. Bakı: Elm və Təhsil.7.Kazımoğlu (İmanov), M. (2016). *Folklor və dövlətçilik düşüncəsi* [Folklore and the idea of statehood]. Bakı: Elm və Təhsil.
- Nəbiyev, A. (2002). *Azərbaycan xalq ədəbiyyatı* [Azerbaijani folk literature]. Bakı: Turan Nəşrlər Evi.
- Qafarlı, R. (2019). *Mifologiya* [Mythology]. Bakı: Elm və Təhsil.
- Qaliboğlu, E. (2020). *Yaradılış mifləri və Azərbaycan əfsanələri* [Creation myths and Azerbaijani legends]. Bakı: Elm və Təhsil.

- Seyidov, M. (1983). *Azərbaycan mifik görüşlərinin qaynaqları* [Sources of Azerbaijani mythological views]. Bakı: Elm.
- Sultanova, X. R. (2016). Mifdən müasir poeziyaya (təbiət kultu su stixiyası əsasında) [From myth to modern poetry (based on the water cult)]. *Pedaqoji Universitetin xəbərləri*, 2, 264–270.
- Sultanova, X. R. (2022). *XX yüzil Azərbaycan poeziyasında mifopoetik ənənə* [Mythopoetic tradition in 20th-century Azerbaijani poetry] (дисс., Bakı Dövlət Universiteti).
- Şahverdiyev, B. A. (2019). *Türk eposunda mif-dini obrazlar* [Mythological and religious images in the Turkic epic]. Bakı: AMEA Folklor İnstitutu.

Received: 29.08.2025

Revised: 29.08.2025

Accepted: 02.09.2025

Published: 03.09.2025