

Almasty man

“The Almastys are like people; they have arms and legs like people, except that they are covered with hair. The hair is like that of a bear, and dark. I always saw them without clothing . . . they do not know how to speak; they only mumble or bellow. They are not afraid of people, only of dogs. They run very fast.”

That is how 67-year-old Koumykov Feitsa, from the village of Kurkujin, deep in the Caucasus Mountains, described the Almastys he used to see as a youth in the 1930s. Such man-like, hair-covered creatures have been known to rural people of the Caucasus - a 750-mile-long range shared by several former Soviet republics - since time immemorial. (This creature is also known, but by many other names, all the way east to Mongolia, where it is called the Almas.) Feitsa is simply one of more than 500 witnesses in the Caucasus who have been interviewed by an intrepid 73-year-old investigator, a French-Russian woman named Dr Marie-Jeanne Koffmann.

I met Dr Koffmann almost 10 years ago. A no-nonsense intellectual of quick wit, and a surgeon by profession, she served in the Red Army during the Second World War, attaining the rank of captain and second in command of a battalion of Caucasus mountain rangers fighting German troops. After the war, she became an expert mountaineer, and then, like so many others during the Stalin era, she was imprisoned in a gulag without explanation. When she was released in 1956, she returned to her main love, mountaineering. It was soon after, while climbing Caucasus peaks, that she encountered her first Almasty reports.

Initially, Dr Koffman was highly sceptical of such accounts from the area's simple, uneducated rural people. What could they possibly know about anthropology and zoology? Today, and more than 500 accounts later, she believes that the “simplicity” of such eyewitnesses - who consistently report details that make ecological sense - supports the hypothesis of some kind of real ‘wild man’ that remains unknown to science. Unknown because of the rugged isolation of the region. And she should know. For more than 30 years, she has trekked, climbed, and ridden across this desolate land's eight republics - an area almost twice

Some 35,000 years ago, modern humans appeared in Europe and Neanderthal humans disappeared. But was their exit complete? And who are those hairy folk that people keep seeing in the Caucasus? J Richard Greenwell has met the woman with the casebook.

the size of Britain. But she has never had the fortune to observe an Almasty with her own eyes, and has had to content herself with footprints and the hundreds of eyewitness reports she has collected.

The main point Dr Koffmann stresses when discussing her findings is that, despite the many ethnic and linguistic groups which inhabit the Caucasus - Daghestan alone has more than 40 languages - all informants report exactly the same kind of hominid, both anatomically and behaviourally, and the descriptions are “devoid of any element of fantasy.”

Indeed, the Caucasus people do not ascribe any metaphysical or spiritual elements to the Almasty at all. To them, the Almasty are simply a kind of subhuman that can't talk, doesn't wear clothes, doesn't grow crops, and is almost to be pitied. Almastys are treated with caution, for sure, but they are not considered particularly dangerous. There are many recorded cases of peasants actually giving food to Almastys - especially the females.

Sifting all the data she has collected, Dr Koffmann has been able to detect logical trends. Such a large primate in that area would need to migrate according to the seasons and the availability of certain plants, including human-grown crops. This, in fact, is what the reports indicate. In Azerbaijan, for example, she has found that almost all sightings at lower regions occur between July and September, the very months when most nuts, berries and fruits - both wild and cultivated - are in season.

She even goes so far as to analyse, based on her data, the Almasty's probable diet: plants, 43 per cent; meat, 20 per cent; and various foods stolen from (or given by) humans, 36 per cent. It should be emphasised that Dr Koffmann does not include the data from the many second-hand reports she has collected over the decades. Her statistics reflect only first-hand eyewitness information.

So - assuming it exists - what could the Almasty be? Other Russian investigators have proposed a form of degenerate neanderthaloid which,



Chris Cation/Survival Anglia

instead of going extinct or being genetically absorbed by modern humans about 35,000 years ago, retreated to the most inaccessible mountain ranges of South-west and Central Asia. I use the term ‘degenerate’ because Neanderthals - which are considered the same species as modern humans, just a different subspecies - are thought to have had complex social systems, with language, clothing, use of fire, etc. Could such a population actually ‘degenerate’ in this way? Most anthropologists think not, but the Almasty could conceivably represent a more primitive form that competed less with modern humans.

In a long conversation I once had with her in Paris, I tried to get Dr Koffmann to commit to an Almasty-Neanderthal link as a working hypothesis. But that brave, indefatigable and persistent hero of the Caucasus, in proper scientific fashion, responded: “There is no material proof of this equivalence. I don't need any such hypothesis in order to conduct my fieldwork.”

After studying her long report, I am certainly more inclined than I was before to accept the reality of the Almasty - whatever it may be. But there are definitely fewer reports now than from earlier in the century, indicating a reduced population. Wouldn't it be tragic if our closest relative, in surviving to modern times, became extinct without our ever knowing for sure that it existed?

High haven? No one knows what happened to the Neanderthals after modern humans appeared in Europe. One theory is that the competition killed them off, except where they may have retreated to remote places like this. Another is that they disappeared through interbreeding, and a sub-theory of that is that the result of the interbreeding was the Caucasian race, named after these mountains. Whatever, it's from Caucasian valleys that Dr Koffmann has been able to collect more than 500 strikingly consistent first-hand accounts of naked, hairy anthropoids.

Author

J Richard Greenwell is secretary of the International Society of Cryptozoology (PO Box 43070, Tucson, Arizona 85733, USA), which is devoted to the study of unverified animals. It publishes a journal and a newsletter.

Background illustration by Dmitri Bayanov/SSC