

ISSUES

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Mongol Creation Stories: Man, Mongol Tribes, the Natural World, and Mongol Deities

Abstract

The translators introduce a loosely connected series of Mongol stories about the creation and the beginning of the world. The interest of the stories lies in particular with the parallels they offer to stories that are widely known in East Asia, such as that of the Swan Maiden, the Heavenly Archer, and the victory over the devilish black Dragon King.

Key words: creation stories — Śākyamuni — creation from a frog —
Swan Maiden — Ursa Major — Heavenly Archer —
deified humans — Dragon King

AMONG the folklore accounts collected in recent years by scholars in Inner Mongolia have been a number of stories that portray the Mongol view of creation. This paper presents several of the published folklore accounts pertaining to the origins of man, the Mongols, the natural world, and various Mongol deities.

THE ORIGIN OF MAN, THE MONGOLS, AND MONGOL TRIBES

In one tale the creation of the world is attributed to a lama named Udan:

Long ago there lived a lama named Udan who created everything in the world. When he was five hundred years old, heaven, earth, and everything else had yet to appear. When he reached the age of one thousand Udan divided heaven and earth into separate entities, creating a nine-story heaven, a nine-story earth, and nine rivers. Finally the lama made a man and a woman out of clay. They married and had children, and the entire human race descends from them. (BAJAR 1988, 27)

The foreign influence of Lamaism is at work here. The word *lama*, for example, was probably added to the tale after the spread of Buddhism to Mongol regions. It should be noted, however, that many Buddhists and Lamaists consider the Buddha to have been the creator of the world, so that this account is somewhat at odds with this Buddhist belief.

Another creation story, "Why Man Has No Hair," explains why man is not hirsute and also hints at why he became mortal. The creator god in this story is Burqan Tenger.

Long long ago God descended to earth and made a man and a woman out of clay. Before returning to heaven to get some holy water with the power to animate anything, he ordered his dog and cat to protect the clay people from the devil. After God ascended

to heaven, the devil came to harm the people. The dog and the cat protected them, though, thwarting the devil's plan. Finally, the devil deceived them by giving a piece of meat to the dog and a bowl of milk to the cat. While the dog ate the flesh and the cat lapped the milk, the devil urinated on the people and fled.

When God returned with the holy water and discovered what had happened, he was enraged. Scolding the dog and cat for neglecting their duty, he forced the cat to lick the hair off the bodies of the people whom the devil had defiled (God created humans with hair all over their bodies). The cat licked off the hair everywhere except their heads, armpits, and crotches, since the former had not been dirtied and the latter two were hard for the cat to reach. God then put the hair that had been licked away by the cat onto the body of the dog, so that humans are now naked and dogs have hair. The Mongol saying that the tongue of the cat and the hair of the dog are dirty has its origin here. Man and woman, who were animated by drinking the holy water, should have been immortal but became mortal instead because of their defilement by the devil. (GADAMBA and ČERENSODNOM 1984, 742)

In this account, everything made by Burqan Tenger has both positive and negative aspects. There is duality in all that is created: beauty is tempered by ugliness, joy with suffering.

The following account offers an explanation for why the Chinese population is so much larger than the Mongolian:

God made many people from clay and placed some in the north and some in the south. After many years God, thinking that man must have multiplied, came down to take a look. When he found that the population had not increased, he recalled that he had made males but no females. He therefore put many hens in the south and seven ewes in the north. The men and hens of the south are the ancestors of the Chinese. Seven men in the north received the seven ewes. One of the men, out of greed, killed his sheep to eat at once. But after seven days the remaining ewes turned into beautiful girls and married the men. These are the ancestors of the Mongols. The Mongols' population growth is very slow because they are descended from ewes, and the Chinese multiply rapidly because they are descended from hens. (MANDAQU 1981, 105)

This tale probably springs from nomadic culture, since the nomadic

Mongols commonly keep sheep but not chickens, which are raised by farmers and are used in the story to symbolize the Han Chinese.

There are at least two popular accounts concerning the origin of the Mongolian tribes, one involving the Dörbed tribe and the other the Buryat tribe.

Long long ago the Dörbed tribe lived near Nidu Mountain. The mountain towered so tall that its snow-covered top was perpetually lost in clouds. A spring of water gushed forth and flowed into a lake near the mountaintop. The lake was surrounded by forests.

One day a young hunter went up the mountain and reached the lake. There, to his great astonishment, he heard the sound of laughing voices. Curious, the young hunter approached and found four goddesses playing and dancing. He watched them, spellbound, as they frolicked in the lake one moment and rested in the sky the next. Returning to his senses, the hunter hurriedly descended the mountain to his home. Taking his catch-pole, he returned to the lake and hid behind a bush. As the unsuspecting goddesses played he tossed his pole and caught one. The other goddesses flew up into the sky. The young hunter voiced his love to the goddess he had captured, and with great pleasure she accepted it.

They led a happy life, but because goddesses cannot live long on earth she eventually returned to heaven. Once there, however, she realized that she was pregnant, for her body grew heavier and heavier. Flying down to the side of the lake, she gave birth to a boy. She made a cradle and hung it from a tree branch, then placed the baby boy inside. She then put some of her own milk into a pot and hung the pot from a branch above the cradle, all the while missing the young hunter. The goddess found a small yellow bird that lived in Tangγud and had it perch in the tree to sing day and night and look after the baby. Having prepared everything, the goddess returned to heaven.

At that time the Dörbed tribe, being without a good leader, asked a fortune-teller how to find one. The fortune-teller told them that if they looked in the bushes by the lake on Nidu Mountain they would surely discover what they sought. Delighted, the Dörbed expressed their appreciation to the fortune-teller and, on a good day, went up the mountain. There, drawn by the yellow bird's song, they found the baby. The Dörbed took the infant home, believing him to be from heaven and the one destined to be their future leader. The small yellow bird flew around the

cradle, unwilling to leave, but at last was forced to fly away into the blue sky.

When the boy grew up, he achieved great deeds and became an outstanding hero. He was the forefather of the present Dörbed tribe. (ÖBÖR MONG᠎OL-YIN KELE UTQA ǰOQIJAL SUDULQU GAJAR 1963, 10)

Many years ago, Bar᠎utai, hunting around Lake Baikal, found seven beautiful girls playing in the lake. Bar᠎utai silently approached the lake and stole the clothing one of the girls had removed and placed there. After swimming in the lake, the girls went to get their clothes as Bar᠎utai watched stealthily from behind a tree. All of the girls but the youngest, whose clothing had been stolen by Bar᠎utai, put on their clothes, became swans, and soared up into the sky. Bar᠎utai then grasped the sobbing girl. They married and had eleven children, but the woman was unable to reclaim her clothes from the hunter no matter how often she begged him. One day, the woman found her clothing and put it on. She then became a swan and flew away through the yurt skylight. The children were the Buryat's ancestors. (GADAMBA and ČERENSODNOM 1984, 1023)

The above two stories trace the origins of these two tribes to goddesses and hunters, both of which were venerated in ancient times. These two accounts likely originated in ancient times because of the role played by the swan and the yellow bird. Among ancient Mongol tribes the swan was a totem, and the Buryat and Bar᠎a tribes sacrificed to it (ZHAO 1988, 32).

ON NATURAL PHENOMENA

Some folklore accounts are concerned with the sun, moon, stars, wind, and earth. This suggests the interest the ancient Mongols had in the origins, transformation, and development of natural phenomena. Let us first examine accounts dealing with the earth.

In ancient times, the earth was submerged in water and formed a boundless ocean. When the lord of the universe, Buddha Śākya-muni, was flying over the ocean to find a way to create the earth, he saw a frog swimming from north to south. Observing the golden-bodied frog, Buddha used his fingers to divine that the earth would be created on the back of the golden frog. Buddha unslung his bow and arrows and shot the golden frog's east side,

turning the frog in a northerly direction. Fire gushed from its mouth and water spouted from its rump. Buddha threw golden sand on the frog, which became the earth where we now live. The part of the arrow protruding from the frog's east side became a forest, while the arrowhead that had passed through the frog to the west became a metal area. Because of the fire which gushed from the frog's mouth, the north became an area of fire. Because of the water spouting from the frog's rump, the south became a watery area. So our earth consists of the above five elements (fire, wood, water, metal, sand) and exists on the body of the frog. When the frog moves its legs or shakes its head, earthquakes result. (SEČEN 1987, 119)

In Mongol folklore there are also descriptions of how the world came to have form. A few examples: the edges of sky and earth came together in the way two pots are set against one another; there are ninety-nine golden columns holding apart the sky and earth; the world has three stories, the upper one being heaven where gods and goddesses live, the middle one being earth where man dwells, and the lower one being the place where man goes after death; heaven (sky) is the father and earth is the mother of man, animals, etc.

Some scholars have argued that the ancient Mongols created simple stories because of a lack of a broad explanatory base of knowledge, while other scholars argue that they were longer and more complicated when initially created and subsequently lost various elements under the influence of Buddhism and other philosophies (SEČEN 1987, 116). Other stories lost various parts in the process of being retold from generation to generation over a long historical period. The following are two brief examples dealing with the origin of the earth.

In the beginning the world was covered with roiling gas. The temperature increased and dampness was generated from the warm gas, causing it to rain heavily. The world became a vast ocean, and at last dust and sand rose to cover the ocean surface and become earth.

The primordial world was dark gas with no separation between earth and sky. After many years, brightness and darkness separated, with brightness becoming the sky and darkness becoming the earth. After many more years, forty-four *tenger* (gods or buddhas) appeared in the east and fifty-five *tenger* appeared in the west, south, and north, and the Great Bear was taken as the standard. Thus there were ninety-nine *tenger* in heaven. At that

time the earth was floating and had not stabilized, and there were neither animals nor vegetation. The *tenger* then created man and had them descend to earth to plant vegetation. At last the earth stabilized. (SEČEN 1987, 120)

From the foregoing we infer that ancient Mongolian thought saw the world as generated from dark gas. There were also explanations concerning the origin of wind, stars, the sun, and the moon. The following stories explain how the wind, Ursa Major, and the sun took form.

There is an old woman in heaven who has a skin sack containing the wind. If she is angry, she opens her sack and the wind blows on earth. If she is furious, she opens the sack wider and wider and the wind becomes stronger. When she is in good spirits, she closes the sack and the wind stops. Thus, people shouldn't willfully offend the old woman. (ANONYMOUS 1984, 16)

Long ago two brothers met a man as they set out hunting one morning. "What are you doing?" they asked him. The man answered, "I am waiting for a bird I just now shot to fall from the sky." When noon came, the bird dropped from the sky, impaled by an arrow. The three then became (sworn) brothers. They went on and met four persons in succession, the first a man who could hear any sound on earth and in heaven, the second a strong man who could pile mountains on top of each other, the third a runner who could catch antelopes, and the fourth a magician who could drink up the sea. These seven men became (sworn) brothers and defeated Magpie Khan by employing their skills. In the end they became Ursa Major. (GADAMBA and ČERENSODNOM 1984, 735)

Long ago an old man's cow gave birth to a calf, the front part of which resembled a man and the rear part of which resembled a cow. Its name was Ama-čayan. The calf grew up and performed many good deeds on man's behalf and so went to heaven and met Čayan (White) Khan. The khan told the calf, "You did many good deeds for man but they dealt with you in an ill manner. I struggle with the khan of the devils every day and am going to defeat him with the (fighting) style of bulls, so please aid me." In order to help the khan, Ama-čayan disguised himself as a doctor, went to the palace of Devil Khan, and slew him. But the wife

of Devil Khan, a *mangγus* (monster), realized what had happened and threw an iron scraper at Ama-čayan's back as he was ascending to heaven. Am-čayan was cut into seven pieces, and these pieces later became Ursa Major. (ČERENSODNOM 1987, 40)

Long long ago, seven suns rose in the sky so that the rivers and vegetation on earth dried up and men and animals had great difficulty surviving. At that time, there lived a famous archer named Erkei-Mergen. People went to his home and said, "Please shoot the suns in the sky and let us live in happiness."

Erkei-Mergen was a brave, young, and proud man. He promised, "I want to shoot the seven suns using only seven arrows. If I can't accomplish this I will cut off my thumbs, never drink again, and live as an animal rather than as a man." The archer then began to shoot the suns from east to west. He shot down six, but while he was taking aim at the seventh a martin flew in front of the sun and was shot in the tail. From then on, the martin's tail has pointed in two different directions. The last sun was frightened of the archer and fled behind West Mountain. Angry at the martin, the archer decided to catch it using his fast horse, Qarčagai-Alag. The horse vowed, "If I can not catch the martin before dusk, you can cut off my four limbs and abandon me on the open steppe. I will not live as a horse any longer." But when dusk came, the horse had still not caught up with the martin. Erkei-Mergen, angry at his horse, cut off its front feet and left it on the steppe. The horse then became a jerboa, explaining why the jerboa's forelegs are shorter than its hind legs. This also explains why the martin always flies around those who ride horses with a chirping sound that translates as "Can you catch me?" Erkei-Mergen cut off his thumbs as he had promised and became a marmot, living in a dark hole. This explains why the marmot has only four claws. Marmots exit their holes in the morning and the evening because Erkei-Mergen still remembers his vow and desires to shoot the sun. And man does not eat the flesh of marmots because they evolved from Erkei-Mergen. From then on day and night have appeared in turn, since the sun flies behind West Mountain in fear [when the marmot exits its hole at dusk]. (GADAMBA and ČERENSODNOM 1984, 735)

God decided to punish the crafty monster, Raqu, but could not find him because Raqu had gone into hiding. God ordered the sun to find Raqu, but the sun could not do so. The moon found

the place where Raqu was hiding and told God. Raqu was thus arrested and punished. From that time on, Raqu has been feuding with the sun and moon and always chases them. Solar and lunar eclipses occur just as the sun and moon are about to be caught. And when this happens, people shout and play musical instruments in order to frighten Raqu away. (SEČEN 1987, 121)

DEIFIED PERSONALITIES

Deified personalities are human in appearance but divine in ability and power. The following three examples demonstrate this.

Long ago a herdsman tending a herd of horses for a prince lost the animals. He couldn't find them no matter where he looked. Later, an old man named Ĵayači, a horse breeder for the prince, told the herdsman, "Your lost horses ran to Altan-Bumbai Mountain and Erdeni-Bumbai Mountain located twenty kilometers southwest of here." The herdsman went there and found the horses just as Ĵayači had said. Even when Ĵayači was on the verge of death he still would not leave his horses. One day the prince asked him, "Why are you unwilling to leave?" Ĵayači replied, "I hope that after I die, you will bury me between Altan-Bumbai and Erdeni-Bumbai mountains dressed in the clothing I wore when herding, and put my catch-pole beside my head. I also wish to be carried to my burial on my yellow horse." When the prince agreed to this, Ĵayači stopped breathing. He was buried in accordance with his last request. After a few months had passed, some of the prince's herds of horses were stolen and driven to Altan-Bumbai and Erdeni-Bumbai at midnight. A pestilence then spread among the horses and they began to die. The prince went to Ĵayači's grave, offered sacrifices to him, and said, "You have gone away and must be tired. The children in our home place are frightened of you. I suggest that you not leave here again. I will draw your image on a cattle skin and put it in my yurt to worship. This way you can see the horses and other domestic animals every day and you will feel very happy." Returning to his home, the prince drew an image of Ĵayači on a cattle skin and worshipped him. From the following day horses were never stolen or taken ill again. And Ĵayači, who had been seen at night, never appeared again.

After a few months, Ĵayači's wife also died. Soon after, some children became ill. People understood that this was because she missed children, since she had loved children very much during her lifetime. As soon as they drew her image on a clean white

piece of felt and worshipped it the children recovered. Later, people worshipped ǰayači as the protecting deity of livestock and his wife as the protecting deity of children. When people came to use cloth, herdsman moved the images of ǰayači and his wife from cattle skin and felt onto white cloth. (ÖBÖR MONGĜOL-YIN KELE UTQA ǰOQIJAL SUDULQU GAJAR 1963, 6)

Qobolta stole a heavenly cow while in paradise and killed it to eat on a snowy mountain. The Lord of Heaven noticed this and sent an emissary to arrest Qobolta. Qobolta told the emissary, "The fact that I have stolen a heavenly cow is proof of the fact that I have been in heaven. I killed the cow in order to make a god image." The emissary replied, "I will not punish you if you really can make a god image," and returned to heaven. Qobolta cut the skin of the cattle into strips as wide as a finger, and wrapped each cattle bone with one of these strips. Next he distributed the images to everyone on earth, telling them, "This is the deity Bumal. If you sincerely believe in him, you will surely be healthy and happy all year and your domestic animals will breed and multiply." Qobolta was the first to believe in the deity. From that time on, Bumal became the embodiment of God for the Mongols. They always drew his image on cattle horns and put it outside their yurts to worship. (ÖBÖR MONGĜOL-YIN KELE UTQA ǰOQIJAL SUDULQU GAJAR 1963, 6)

Many years ago, the brutal black Dragon King lived on the land and not in the sea. His constant attacks made him a dangerous enemy to man. At that time, there lived an old man who was only one span high but had a beard two spans long. He had a sack made from camel-neck skin, a spoon made of wild buck horn, and a billy goat. One day the old man set off to subdue Dragon King. On the way, the old man came to the sea. The sea asked, "Where are you going?" "I am going to vanquish the Dragon King," replied the old man. "How can you defeat him?" the sea inquired in an arrogant and contemptuous tone. The old man was very angry, and drew the entire sea into his spoon with a single dip, leaving the seabed dry. Putting the sea into his sack, he went on until he met a fox. "Where are you going?" asked the fox. "I am going to defeat Dragon King," answered the old man. "How can you do that?" the fox mockingly inquired. The old man was furious at this question, scooped up the fox, and put him in his sack. Next he met a wolf. "Where are you going?" asked

the wolf. "I am going to defeat Dragon King," replied the old man. 'How can you defeat Dragon King?' the wolf asked in a ridiculing tone. The old man was infuriated at the wolf, beat it with his spoon, and threw it too into his sack. He then continued his journey and arrived at the rear of Dragon King's palace. Climbing a hill behind the palace, he shouted, "I want to vanquish man's enemy, Dragon King." His voice was so loud that it shook the hill and Dragon King's heart. The proud Dragon King replied, "If you offend me so openly, I will release my ten thousand sheep to raise a dust that will settle upon and kill you." The ten thousand sheep then ran forth, but the old man set free the wolf from his sack. The sheep saw the wolf and fled, scattering in all directions. Then the Dragon King said, "I will send my two dogs to devour you," and set free Qasar and Qusar, his two dogs. The old man let the fox out of his sack. The fox fled from the dogs, and the dogs chased it far away. Dragon King began to be afraid, and ordered his ten thousand soldiers to attack the old man. But the old man wasn't worried and waited for the troops to approach. When they came near he opened his sack, and the sea poured out and rushed in with powerful waves upon Dragon King, his soldiers, and his palace. From then on Dragon King never lived on land but only in the sea. (ÖBÖR MONGĠOL-YIN KELE UTQA ǦOQIJAL SUDULQU ǦAJAR 1963, 3)

Mongols living in the eastern part of Inner Mongolia made sacrifices to Ǧayači and Bumal until the 1940s. Ǧayači was venerated as the god who guarded livestock and Bumal as the protector of children. In general, it is thought that the two accounts related to Bumal and Ǧayači are uninfluenced by Buddhism and arose from ancient Mongol society and culture.

The brutal black Dragon King may be understood as the embodiment of natural catastrophe. In the defeat of the King, the Mongols express their desire to surmount the difficulties imposed by Nature.

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