WATER-OF-IMMORTALITY MYTHS IN ALTAIC AND JAPANESE CULTURES

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Abstract

Being immortal and forever young is one of man’s everlasting pursuits reflected in primitive religions and old myths. Some of these myths tell stories about a mysterious water: by drinking or showering in this water, people or animals are immortalized; and sprinkled on plants, this special water will turn them into evergreens. In this paper, “Water-of-Immortality” refers to such divine water in various myths from different ethnic backgrounds. Water of immortality myths prevailing in Altaic-speaking (e.g. Mongolian and Kazakh) areas, Japan and the Korean Peninsula, share certain characteristics. This essay concentrates on the analysis of such myths in Mongolian, Kazakh and Japanese, using comparative approaches in folklore studies like typological comparison and motif interpretation. The observation of similarities and differences among the Water-of-Immortality myths will help us track the development and changes in this type of myths so as to prepare for more intensive research.

Keywords: Altaic, Water-of-Immortality, water-moon

I. Water-of-Immortality Myths in Mongolian and Kazakh Ethnic Groups

Both the Mongolian and the Kazakh ethnic groups belong to the Altaic language family and their cultures are closely connected. Their Water-of-Immortality myths possess quite a few similar elements and can be classified into the same type. Mongolians and Kazakhs live far away from Japan, a culture so different in every way, but the three have much in common\(^1\) in terms of their Water-of-Immortality myths. I shall start my analysis with the former two.

\(^1\) Some scholars argue that the Japanese and Korean languages should be categorized as Altaic as well. However, no final conclusion has been reached.
In Mongolian mythic tradition, the Water-of-Immortality used to be called möngke usu, which means “the water of everlasting life.” After the introduction of Buddhism into this area, it was re-named arsiyan, which means “the nectar of everlasting life.” In Mongolian Water-of-Immortality myths, there are basically two types. One is that God wished human beings to become immortal, and sent birds like ravens to deliver the Water-of-Immortality. However, the bird spilled it during the journey, and the mission failed. From then on, no man can escape death, and trees like pine and cypress, thanks to the water spilled over them, turned evergreen (Fig. 17). This is the first or “bird-spilling” type of the Water-of-Immortality myths. Here are some examples.

In the myth “Raven Spilled the Nectar of Life” prevailing in the area of Khalkha Mongolia, Borhon Bagši sent a raven to carry the nectar of immortality to man’s world, so that human beings could become immortal. The raven was too tired en route, so he decided to have a rest on a spruce tree. A sudden cry of an owl nearby shocked the raven, and he spilled the nectar of immortality out of his beak. Hence, human would age and ultimately die, but the spruce trees maintain their youth (Tserensodnom 81). A variation of this myth exists in the Xilin Gol League in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region in China, with Borhon Bagši replaced by a Khan (Sengergercin 140). And in a version originally called “Why are the Pine, Cypress and Chinese Ephedra Trees Evergreen?” a swallow appears as the messenger:

A kind-hearted swallow wished human beings immortality, so he had several drops of nectar of immortality in his mouth and flew to the human world. During the course, he was stung by a wicked wasp, and it was so painful that he cried, spilling the nectar over the leaves of pine, cypress and Chinese ephedra trees. From then on, these plants became green and young forever (Gaadamba 745).

This variant is deviant from the motif of god dispatching birds, but there is a hidden motif in the myth’s prototype, because in the original Altai version of the Turkic language family, there is the same “god dispatching birds” motif:

When the first man was created by God Uligen, he was lifeless. In order to give life to this man, God Uligen dispatched a raven to Khudai in Heaven and asked him to bestow “life” on the man. The raven received the “life” from Khudai, took it in his mouth and flew back. The journey was so long that the raven became more and more tired, hungry and thirsty. He saw corpses of horses and camels on the ground again and