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## The Ural and Altaic mythological parallels in the epic tradition of the Kyrgyz

### УРАЛО-АЛТАЙСКИЕ МИФОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ПАРАЛЛЕЛИ В ЭПИЧЕСКОЙ ТРАДИЦИИ КЫРГЫЗОВ

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**Abstract:** *the focus of this article is on the image of mythological World Tree widespread in the Eurasian epic folklore. It attempts to track the connection of this image to the traditional world picture and other well-known symbolic images denoting the elements of sacred spaces. While researching the common features of symbolic picture of sacred spaces in the epic traditions of the Turkic peoples of the Ural-Altaic cultural heritage, the article draws a parallel with images existing in the ancient Russian epic traditions and Scandinavian mythology.*

**Аннотация:** *в статье рассматривается распространенный в эпическом фольклоре многих народов Евразийского ареала образ мирового древа. Отмечается связь этого образа с традиционной картиной мира и другими сопутствующими образами-символами, служащими обозначениями определенных частей сакрального пространства. Выявляется общность символической картины пространства в эпических текстах тюркских народов Урало-Алтайского культурного ареала, а также наличие параллельных образов в эпической традиции древней Руси и скандинавской мифологии.*

**Аннотация:** *макалада Евразиялык ареалдагы көптөгөн элдердин эпикалык фольклорунда таралган дүйнөлүк тамыр образы каралган. Бул образдын дүйнөнүн салттуу картинасы жана башка аны коштоочу сокралдык ааламдын белгилүү бир бөлүктөрүн белгилеген символ-образдар менен болгон байланышы белгиленген. Урал-Алтай маданият ареалындагы түрк элдеринин эпикалык тексттериндеги мейкиндиктин символикалык картинасынын жалпылыгы, ошондой эле байыркы Рустун жана скандинавиялык мифологиясынын эпикалык салттарында параллелдик образдардын бар экендиги көрсөтүлгөн.*

**Keywords:** *mythological picture of the world; traditional world outlook; World Tree; the epic «Manas»; shamanistic disease; space symbolism.*

**Ключевые слова:** *мифологическая картина мира; традиционное мировоззрение; мировое древо; эпос «Манас»; олонхо; алтайский эпос; шаманская болезнь; символика пространства.*

**Негизги сөздөр:** *дүйнөнүн мифологиялык картинасы; салттуу көз караш; дүйнөлүк тамыр; «Манас» эпосу; олонхо; алтай эпосу; шаман оорусу; мейкиндик символикасы.*

The Kyrgyz are known to be one of the ancient and strongest ethnic components of the Old Turkic nomadic world; therefore, it is impossible to research the archaic Kyrgyz world-view without reference to the common Old Turkic mythology. It should be noted that reconstruction of the archaic Kyrgyz world-view cannot be regarded as mechanical dismember of Old Turkic common heritage into some ethnic though original and distinctive mythological systems. The idea of unity in ethnic and culture genesis of the Ural and Altaic civilizations in the ancient and early medieval time is beyond any doubt. Moreover, recently more scholars appear to have supported this hypothesis.

A substantial part of old Turkic mythological world picture was reconstructed thanks to comparative-historical research of objects in material and spiritual culture of definite ethnoses of large cultural areas. In this regard, a special attention must be paid to the recent research on the reconstruction of traditional world view of South Siberia Turkic tribes [1]. Comparative research shows that plot of mythological ideas of South Siberia Turks are in general almost similar to world picture of the Kyrgyz with few exceptions. Review of existing literature on the reconstruction of ancient Kyrgyz outlook reveals the existence of at least three main blocks of information on mythological conceptions: first, the Orkhon-Enisey written memorials; second, folklore and ethnographic materials of Turkic people of South Siberia and Central Asia; third, Kyrgyz folklore itself with extensive epic traditions.

Awareness of certain facets between the above mentioned three sources of information on ancient Kyrgyz mythology has to become an objective element, which helps to avoid generalizations as well as possible accusations of trying to present the entire ancient Turkic mythology as belonging to Kyrgyz only. In this regard, the epic «Manas»- a proper Kyrgyz heritage, became the main source for information on mythological traditions of ancient Kyrgyz society.

Research on myths, archaic cultures containing the picture of the world are emphasized, such as: using a limited set of character-images, that have the ability to have a wide meaningful load. The image of the World Tree among them undoubtedly represents the most widespread character-image in mythological and epical traditions of many peoples inhabiting the Euro-Asian area. Researchers refer to this image as to universal prototype of human culture, coherent to ancient concept of the space structure.

The image of the World Tree is found in mythological texts of Sumer-Acadians, Indo-Aryans, ancient Iranians, Turkic peoples of Ural-

Altay and Central Asia and also in the folklore of ancient Slavic people and Scandinavians. It is assumed that such a wide-spread image represents the historical typology of the archaic culture and is considered to be the result of independent comprehension of the space category by diverse ethnic groups on their own cultural background.

Works of many famous folklorists and culturologists were devoted to the research of the image in comparative aspect has been researched by numerous outstanding scholars working in the fields of Folklore and Cultural Studies. Among others are E. M. Meletinskiy, M. I. Steblin-Kamenskiy, V.V. Toporov, S.U. Nekludov and A. Sagalaev [2]. It has to be also mentioned that identification of similarity in the interpretation of the image of World Tree in totally different cultural areas was very often explained only in historical and typological dimensions. And only in cases of coincidences in chains of narrative elements, symbolical and figurative-logical structure of the context, the borrowings were considered.

The theory of borrowings and migration of plots gradually lost its' position, first under the pressure of spontaneous-generation theory and then by the school of historicaltypology. The foundations of the latter luckily coincided with modern sociological theories of society evolution and its' ideological forms. However, the ongoing research on cultural genesis based on archeological and linguistic data have identified new proofs of close connection of historical and cultural fates of nations inhabiting enormous Euro-Asian continent. Identities of some cultural elements can be traced back to the time when a myth was the only universal way of learning about the world.

The World Tree is deemed as one of the central mythological images with conceptual significance for archaic culture as well as invariant and poly-semantic features. In mythological and epic texts, the World Tree is presented as a symbol of partial tripartite space interrelating the upper, middle and lower levels. It is also associated with the visions people have about their own tribe's land, as well as the vitality and happiness of characters depicted in myths and epic poems. In somecases, the World Tree is presented as the patron of young heroes left without parental care.

Epic poems of Yakuts and Altay people demonstrate this image is in greater details. The beginning of the Yakut *Olonkho* usually contains epic introduction, which describes a sacred tree growing in the center of the hero's land. It is presented non as a space axis linking different zones of the world.

On the very top of a high crossСчепape,  
walled by the black whirlwinds, and spirits of  
sacrificial animals Stood alone a branchy sacred  
tree of happiness, Its eight branches sprouted up to  
the sky. Its ninth branch sprouted, Coming down  
from the highest heaven, And on top of it Mighty  
eagle loudly squawks [3].

It is notable that the country of the hero in Yakut *Olonkho* is portrayed as the only country on Earth. Accordingly, the hero acts as the original manto fight the monsters coming from other worlds.

The plot of the Altaic heroic epic also starts with a description of a sacred tree growing in the center of the Altai land. The poetic description of the sacred tree symbolizes the power and happiness of people living in the country of Altai. But the epic tradition in this case is a derivative of the original mythology. Invocation by the narrator of the distant sacred times necessarily calls for putting everything in order within a space, the description of the structure of the world marked by the most significant sacred objects. The image of the sacred tree in the Altai epic goes hand in hand with other sacred images that form general mythological context of the space.

There in the middle of a strong poplar that witnessed seven generations

Sit two identical black golden eagles And  
do not let the moon-winged birds fly Under  
three heavens

They do not let the four-legged animals go  
Through the three parts of the Altai land [4].

It is worth noting that the text above depicts the sacred tree alongside the image of the eagle, which stands for the sky or the upper world. The Indo-Iranian mythological texts present the Garuda bird, which performs the role of a mediator capable to fly through the borders of the three worlds. This is the bird that the heroes of myths and fairy tales use to fly between their own and alien worlds. Such qualities are attributed in the Sumerian-Akkadian mythology to the Anzud bird, nesting up on the sacred tree.

When the heaven moved away from the earth, that is when,  
The earth moved away from heaven, that is when,  
The seed of mankind's appeared first, that is when,  
And pulled out the sky, that is when,  
CevtditvEnlil owned the land, that is when,  
There was only one tree, There was only  
one Tree ... [5]

Shumero-Akkadian mythology about the hero of Lukalband, who fed the sacred bird's chicks and gained a wonderful skill to fly across the worlds is one of the oldest records about the World Tree. The sacred tree is mentioned in the hymns of «Avesta», which constitute the fundamentals of Zoroastrianism. Researchers believe that Zarathushtra reformed the ancient beliefs belonging to the Aryan or Indo-Aryan tribes during ancient times when they shared one and the same land as one unity. They called themselves Arians. Although the hymns of "Avesta" had not been fully decoded, there is a mention of the Gaokern Tree worshiped by prophet Zarathushtra.

I will pray diligently  
To the Gaokern tree,  
To the powerful and strong Gaokern,  
Given by Mazda  
We will pray diligently [6].

There is no doubt that the tree mentioned in «Avesta» is an analogue of the World Tree, which is the central mythological image shared by many nations of the Eurasian continent. In Turkic mythological and heroic epic texts, the image of a wolf represents, as a sacred totem, the middle world, i.e. the world of humans. For this reason, the description of a sacred space in mythological texts of Turkic peoples contains the image of a wolf as well as the images of a sacred tree and a sacred eagle. The Lower World is usually symbolized by the image of a dragon or a snake. This is basically, a symbolic picture of the world built in common Turkic mythology by drawing from diverse mythological and epic texts.

It is commonly believed that the ancient Russian folklore has no direct description of a sacred tree and images associated with it. However, the famous «The Tale of Igor's Campaign» contains an interesting reference to “a tree” as related to the specific style of «prophetic» Boyan, the teller. The author of «The Tale» attempts to depart from the “prophetic” teller's old style of «mythological» tales that feature certain conventionalities. Instead, the author speaks about the need to reflect the real events of the time. Let us, however, begin this song With fairy tales of our time,  
Not according to Boyan's contemplations [7].

So, the question is, what had been «prophetic» in Boyan's style of reciting? It is likely that this style embraced a special beginning that covers the first-creation times. It is possible that the tale began with a description of the space structures similar to the epic songs of ancient Turkic people. It is no coincidence that «The Tales» describes the sacred tree along with the images of an eagle and a wolf.

«Who if not you, prophetic Boyan,  
Will create a song  
So that the ideas flow over the tree in a form of a grey wolf on Earth  
And as a blue-grey eagle in the sky» [8].

It is quite appropriate here, in our opinion, to compare the style of prophetic Boyan with Turkic mythological epic traditions. Ancient Russia had close ties with Turkic peoples living in the steppe for many centuries. Historical contacts of the Kievan Rus with great steppes were not limited to only military clashes; these contacts covered many aspects of the life of Old Russian society. It should be mentioned that the name of «prophetic» teller–«Boyan» has a Turkic origin, and in many Turkic languages it means «a narrator», «a story-teller».

In Russian, the phrase “*flow over the tree like ideas*” has become a synonymous to *verbosity*, *creative fantasy* without any connection to concrete events. At first glance, this interpretation matches the semantic content of the passage under analysis. However, it must be noted that this phrase acquired this meaning because of incorrect translation of lines of the text in «the Tale».

The initial mythological and poetic meaning of this phrase becomes clear only when instead of the word «thought» we use the Russian word “mouse” (*мышь* or *мышь*) that fits the entire context.

This is the hypothesis that E.L. Moroz, a Russian folklorist suggested [9]. This means that in this passage of «the Tale» we are talking about an ordinary mouse or a squirrel that runs along the trunk of a tree. Such re-interpretation of the text appears to be appropriate when we study this excerpts in the broader context of mythological comparisons. The closest parallels to this reconstructed picture can be found in the Scandinavian mythological songs of the «Elder Edda», where the image of a sacred tree considerably overlaps with what we see in «the Tale». In Scandinavian myths, the World Tree is depicted as an ash tree, which has a squirrel running up and down its trunk. This is the squirrel, who acts as a mediator connecting the lower and the upper worlds. The picture is also complemented by images of an eagle and a dragon sitting on the tree.

Comparative analysis allows us to set other semantic variations of this image in ancient Scandinavian and Turkic mythologies that expand our understanding of historical-genetic identity of the archaic culture of these peoples.

Some South Siberian ethnic groups believe that souls of future shamans settle like birds on the branches of sacred family tree before they are born. The Yakuts, for instance, had similar visions. The *Olonkho*, Yakutian epic story describes: «Each branch of this tree has a nest and a hollow on its roots, Shamans whose souls are formed in the nests on higher branches are stronger than those having grown up in the lower nests. The family tree like this grows in all the three worlds, celestial (upper), terrestrial (middle) and subterranean (lower) worlds. Shaman’s soul would fly to heaven or

subterranean spheres or would stay in terrestrial world depending on the choice of Spirits» [10].

Thus, the mythology of Turkic peoples directly connects the birth of a human with the World Tree or Family Tree. Some mythological visions of the Family Tree have developed into folklore songs and lost their original sacred meaning. However, there remains yet a line of symbols that bring together images of a new born baby, tree and bird in oral literature of different nations in a remarkably consistent manner.

In his search for the origins of ancient Brits, Walter May, an English poet and translator, who became known for his novel translation of the epic «Manas», brings in as examples the languages and songs of people living in the Caucasus, Ukraine and Britain. He considers Ukraine as an interim geographical space in migration of the Alans to Britain. «Thousands of famous warriors, the best in Asia and Europe of those times, were recruited to join the Roman army and they fought everywhere together with the imperial forces. This is how they came to Britain in the first century AD, and this is how the second big connection was built between Britain, Caucasus and the Alans» [11].

Among various examples used by Walter May as foundations for his theory two lullabies Ukrainian and English- are worth mentioning. -The Ukrainian lullaby has the following lines: «Sleepy, sleepy, my baby son, I will make a cradle for you, I will hook it onto the tree, to the branch, The sun will warm you up, The dew will wash you all over, The falling leaves will cover you, The wind will start to rock you, And birds will start humming songs».

Walter May believes that this Ukrainian song as an analogue of the English lullaby:

«Go to sleep, baby, on top of an oak tree  
When the wind blows, the  
cradle will rock  
When the  
branch breaks, the cradle  
will fall  
Down will come  
baby,  
cradle and all» [12].

The version of English lullaby perfectly corresponds to the mythological visions of South Siberian peoples of the birth of a baby on the branches of a holy tree.

The sacred Family Tree is a patron of a hero in myths and epic songs of the Turks not only at their birth but also in their early childhood. During hard times, the relatives of the hero appeal to the Family Tree to protect the hero from enemies. The Altaic epos «Maadai Kara» describes a young orphaned hero who was entrusted for care of the saint birch tree. The tree saved him from enemies, and fed him with its birch sap [13].

A similar story is mentioned in the Kyrgyz epic «Manas». When Manas died his wife Kanykei had to flee from persecution of relatives to save the young baby-her. On their way, the exhausted fugitives meet the tree Baiterek, which feeds them with sap and gives them an opportunity to rest and regain their strength.

In mythological thought, categories of life and birth are closely related to the categories-death and rebirth. Rebirth or a new birth is a common element of rituals related with initiation and acquisition of shamanistic abilities. Shamanistic rituals of South Siberian Turkic peoples use the same set of mythological symbols as in the cases of death and birth. The soul of a newly born person (a shaman) must be returned to the Family Tree and then come down to the middle world. Such a rebirth gives an opportunity to acquire special sacred knowledge and abilities. As it was mentioned, the sacred tree plays an important role in the rituals of gaining sacred knowledge in the shamanistic cults of Turkic peoples of South Siberia. Ethnographic literature enlists a number of examples of the so-called «shamanic diseases» which overtakes the spirits of people before they acquire special abilities. A person is tormented by various visions, quite often he or she behaves like a person losing sanity. Such people can suddenly leave home, climb a tree and stay there for a long time under a trance [14]. The meaning of these actions remained opaque for a long time. Very often researchers saw in the «shamanic disease» the signs of a real mental disease of a chosen person. It is thanks to broad comparative studies the scholars came to a conclusion that «shamanic disease» was a specific scenario of the initiation ritual. Like in the initiation process, the «disease» phase also sees there is a connection between the chosen person and the Spirits.

The chosen person is visited by the Spirits, which torment him, make them fulfill their will, and grant him special abilities and knowledge. The chosen person “dies” in his former life and «is born again» as a completely different person. He receives a new name, acquires a different status, and, most importantly, acquires the Spirits-that protect him. One of the signs of chosenness is the eloquence which, according to beliefs of

ancient Turkic peoples, was highly valued by the Spirits. But this gift of Spirits come through painful trials.

In Scandinavian mythology, we see an almost similar vision of becoming eloquent. The "Elder Edda" ("All Wise Sayings,104-110) describes the story of Odin's kidnapping honey of eloquence from giants. It also describes a painful shamanistic initiation of Odin, pierced by a spear and hung for nine days on a World Tree [15].

A comparative analysis of the mythological images and symbols of the peoples of the Eurasian continent resulted in the following line of associative connections and symbols grouped around the images of a sacred tree: a family tree, a bird, a squirrel, a wolf, a snake (dragon).

A tree is a sacred symbol of space, the world axis that connects the three zones of the world, family protector, the source of a new birth and the acquisition of shamanic abilities. The functions of the main mythological images grouped around this central symbol prove to be identical both in the epic tales of Turkic nations as well as in the mythological epics of ancient Scandinavians and Slavs.

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