

ANONYMOUS

Mongolian Origin Myths

TRANSLATED FROM THE MONGOLIAN BY OTTILIE MULZET

Many of these myths are very short and fragmentary in nature. Some appear to be variations, meaning that there is not one canonical version of the events that led to the creation of the world, but many narratives existing simultaneously. Clearly orally transmitted over the course of hundreds of years, the versions noted here were not written down until the late 19th or early 20th centuries. In their fragmented nature, intensely oral character, deceptive simplicity, and repetitiveness, they strangely bring to mind some of the Chassidic oral teachings noted down by Martin Buber.

The myths reflect a unique admixture of the early cosmogony of the Mongols with later Buddhist influences, which swept over Mongolia in several waves beginning as early as the 5th century, with the main periods of influence occurring during the 13th and 14th centuries and later on, during the 16th and 17th centuries. Very early influences, including Zoroastrianism via the Sogdian traders of the 4th - 6th centuries, can be detected, as in, for example, the emphasis on light and the term Xurmast Tenger (from Persian Ahuramazda).

The myths included here are taken from the volume Mongolian Mythology, compiled by D. Tserensodnom, and published in 1989.

How the Earth was Made

1.

At first, our world didn't contain any earth or soil, everything was covered with water, they say. Then Xurmast

Tenger sent a *galbingaa* bird to our world. That bird was thirty thousand years old. After ten thousand years, it laid an egg, they say. Then the *galbingaa* bird didn't find any dry land on which to place its egg, so it flew and it flew above the orb of the water until it finally plucked out its own feathers to make a nest on top of the water. On top of the nest, as the bird sat there, the gathered dust turned into soil. After three times ten thousand years, from the egg that had emerged, there came all sorts of beings, and at the very end of that there emerged a man. And that is how our earth, covered with soil, came to be.

2.

At first there was no ground, there was fire and water, and wind, all mixed up together. Then Buddha took some soil, and put it down on the water, and then there was the earth, and plants, trees began to grow and spread, they say. Then Buddha made man too.

Although they say that then Buddha became the largest star of the constellation known as the "Seven Gods."

3.

They say that Šagžtöv Burqan made the ground and the earth. At first there was no earth, there was an ocean of water everywhere, so Burqan took a pinch of soil from the heavens and he came and sprinkled it, and so our world came into being. And then on the earth there came to be grass and plants, animals for hunting, and people. The first people had hair all over their bodies, but Burqan didn't like this, so he left hair only on their heads, their

eyebrows, their beards, their temples, and he plucked all the rest. Then he left a little hair remaining on the armpits and the groins of people. After, Šagžtīv looked for a place where there would be a woman with a child, he found one, and so people came into being. The first man did not listen to the word of God, so in response to his sinful deeds, Burhan punished him. The first man could bend his legs at the knee going forward, and so he could run much faster than any animal. As a punishment, though, his legs then bent backwards, and a man could only move very slowly and sluggishly.

The first Man was unbelievably tall, and lived to a long age. Today, though, his bones grow weak, his body grows small, and his age grows short, they say. At the end of time, a man will live to only seven years of age, a child born yesterday will reach maturity tomorrow, the horse he rides will be as big as a rabbit, and a man will never be taller than his own elbow, they say. At that time three suns emerged, and the earth became very hot, there remained only the mountains and the ridges. After raging fires there fell leaden rain, the mountains and the ridges became flattened out and everywhere was lava ash. Then the wind wasn't blowing, so the earth settled down. Two whales and one frog had just gotten free, and so there remained only the empty space where they had been. As for how long this time lasted, not a single person knows. At the end of this epoch, Maidar Burqan came and made some earth and some soil again. So it's on the backs of those two whales and the frog, who now hold up our world, that the world was first created.

How the Mountains and Water Came to Be

A long time ago, a female goddess had son and he died. The goddess was sitting and crying and her tears became a river and they began to flow. Another god was just then going around the world, circling around it. In order to dam up the flowing river of tears, the god transformed the woman into a mountain as she was

sitting there, they say. The plants and trees that grew from the mountain are the hair of the goddess, and the flowing rivers are the tears of the goddess.

The Origin of the Universe and Man

In an ancient time, in the golden world, there were no people or no animals, there was just something flat and blank. In this time, there were only the older and younger sisters, Moon and Sun, the two. Sun said to Moon:

“You go around during the day. I'll go around during the night.” To this, the Moon grumbled:

“No way, during the day there are so many people about. You go around during the day. It would be shameful for me to be going about during the day.”

“Fine then, I'll go around during the day, you go around during the night,” said the Sun. The Earth was completely empty, there was no water, no trees, no plants, no hills or mountains, so it was very boring for the Moon and Sun. That's why there had to be human beings in the world. So then Šagžtīv Burqan made man and women, the two. From the woman, a kind of stomach like thing protruded. Šagžtīv Burqan cut open that stomach, chopped it into many pieces, and the pieces turned into many small children; he dispersed them in all directions, saying:

“You settle in this area, and you settle in that one,” he said, and he sent them to all different kinds of places. After that, Šagžtīv and Maidar, the two, placed a bet to see in whose vase the flower would blossom first. Then when in Šagžtīv's vase the flower blossomed, Maidar opened his eyes, took the flower, and put it in his vase, and said:

“Oh, Šagžtīv! Look—in my vase the flower has blossomed,” he said. Because Šagžtīv was a mild and gentle Burhan, he pretended he hadn't seen anything, and he said:

“Ah, that's good, the next eon will be yours. But in your eon, people will be liars and thieves,” he said.

How the Sun Came to Be

In the time when there was no sun and no moon, from the bodies of people, sparks flew, and they went flying around the heavens. Then one of them became ill. They say that Burhan sent a healing lama to look for medicine. The lama took up his narrow cane that was ten thousand *alds* long, and, searching and sweeping the outer oceans beyond this Zamba Tiiv, found a medicine, turned around, and flew across the heavens. When the lama found the sick man, and healed him, in the heavens, Burqan made a mirror of golden color radiate light. This mirror became the sun that is in the heavens now, they say. After this time, the sparks ceased to fly from the body of human beings—they became the light of the sun that nourishes the life of Mankind, they say.

Sun and Man, the Two

In ancient times, man's body was full of light, when one man was born, a fruit-bearing tree began to grow, they say. Each human being was filled with light, and each lived by eating the fruit of his own tree. Then, because from one of these trees, fruit was stolen, and it was the very first theft, an act of defilement had occurred. Then it happened that all kinds of trees became without fruit, and the being known as man became without light. Because of this, Burhan gathered up all the light of those many people, and made the Sun and the Moon. Because man gave the Sun its light, he worships the Sun, and he lives protected by the sunlight, they say.

Galbingaa: *This is the kalaviṅka bird, which hails originally from Indian Buddhist mythology; in Sanskrit, it can designate 'sparrow,' but in South Asian Buddhist mythology, its voice is associated with the voice of a Buddha or bodhisattva calling human beings to the path of enlightenment.*

Xurmast Tenger *refers to the Heavens, or the Diety (Tenger) who resides there, or to Indra, lord of the 33 tngri (sky deities). In Persian: Ahuramazda.*

Šagžtöv Burqan *refers to shakya thub ya, or Śākyamuni Buddha. Maidar Burqan refers to Maitreya, the bodhisattva or Buddha of the future, after Śākyamuni Buddha.*

Burqan *refers to Buddha, a deity, or God.*

An ald is a fathom.

Zamba Tiiv *refers to our world (from Tibetan 'jam bu gling).*