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# On Symbolism of White Colored Animals in Altaic Myths, Legends and Epic

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## 1.0 Introduction

The color of white is one of the most popular among the so-called Altaic peoples. One can find numerous examples of this color in Altaic myths, legends, and epical narrative works which tell us about ancient gods and rulers, primordial acts and events, heroic deeds and actions, etc. In this article I would like to make a comparative analysis of symbolism of merely white animals and birds mentioned in some original Altaic mythic, legendary, and epical stories.

Very often white colored animals and birds are mentioned in descriptions of different rituals and ceremonies. Peoples from East Asia as a rule sacrificed to their gods bulls, rams and cocks, and population of South-East Asia – bulls or buffalos, pigs, dogs and hens (Stratanovich 1978, p.42).

According to L. S. Vassilev, in the past in China horses and bulls of certain color and age were usually sacrificed, and when the Chinese made a ritual of lower or local status, pigs, dogs, hens and rams were used as sacrificial beings (Vassilev 1970, p.73).

In Chinese ritual of the so-called *Small incantations* the color of white of the sacrificial animals indicates the sun color (Drevnekitaiskaya filosofiya 1973, p.319), and that is typical symbolism of the white color among many ethnic groups. Without going into details, it is possible to note here that this color usually indicates the concept of light; air; the Sun; simplicity; innocence; holiness; salvation; spiritual power;

transcendental perfection, and so on. While taking into account common significance of the white color, I would like to analyze below the certain functions of white colored animals and birds in some Altaic mythic, legendary, and epical stories.

### 1.1 Korean Myths and Legends

.It is well-known that among the Koreans different agricultural rituals and rites had place, and a horse was one of the most important elements of such rituals. It is said in *Samguk Sagi* that in the mid of the 7th century the *T'ang* China established friendly relationship with the rulers of Paekche. In order to make this relationship stronger, the Chinese sacrificed a white horse and promised on oath(Kim Bu-sik 1961, p.135).

.Generally speaking, one can say that a horse, especially a white horse, was a sacrificial animal for the Koreans(Ionova 1970, p.155).

.In *Samguk Sagi* is also mentioned an image of a white dog, that functions as an omen, or prophecy(Kim Bu-sik, p.144).

.The story about the six districts in *Chinhan* tells us about the birth of their glorious king and commander-in-chief *Hyökköse* from a large red egg(Iryön 1972, p.49). The actual story says that the chieftains of the six districts climbed a high mountain where they worshipped and prayed to Heaven to send them a gracious prince to rule them. Suddenly, there was a lightning-flash and an auspicious rainbow stretched down from Heaven and touched the earth in the south by the well called *Najöng* in the direction of Mt. *Yang*, where a white horse was seen kneeling and bowing to something(Ibid, p.50). They found a large red egg lying on a giant rock near the well. When the people cracked the egg open they found within it a baby whose noble face shone like the Sun. In this way, the story is presented in *Samguk Yusa*(Ibid, p.49-50). It seems that in this case the image of the white horse plays a role of a Heavenly messenger who brought down to earth the red egg along with the future

founder of *Silla*. The motif of rainbow is extremely significant, because in some Mongolian, Turkic, and Tungus-Manchurian epic stories rainbow indicates Heaven, or Heavenly origin of main hero's stallion.

## 1.2 Japanese Myths and Legends

.Among the ancient Japanese the cult of white horse was spread mainly on the southern islands, probably that was so because of close contacts with the original population of the southern part of Korea.

.In *Kogoshui* – a concise mythic narrative work compiled by Hironari in 807, are described archaic rituals which include horse, wild boar, and cock sacrifice. Moreover, in this myth one can find mythic grounds of sacrificing namely white horse, wild boar and cock (Ermakova 1995, p.59-60).

.In *Kojiki - Records of Ancient Matters* compiled in 712 by courtier historian O-no Yasumaro(?-723), a Heavenly piebald stallion is mentioned(Kojiki 1968, part 12). The Japanese call it *futimuma*. According to W. G. Aston, this motif is associated with stars(Aston 1905, p.97-100). I would like to comment that in this case the Heavenly origin of the stallion is very important, moreover when it is mentioned in connection with the goddess Amaterasu who acts as a real demiurge.

## 1.3 Mongolian Myths, Legends, and Epic

.Kidans – the pre-Mongols who founded a vast empire in Central Asia in the 10-12th centuries worshipped a white horse as a special totem. They believed that their ancestor was riding a white horse when he met a virgin of heaven whom he took for his wife. Since that time among the Kidans, as well as among other Mongols, white horse is worshipped as totemic animal. Some scholars regard this animal as non-personified

image of fire-god(Bardahanova 1970, p. 19-33; Galdanova 1987, p.12-14). Probably, in this case, on one hand, the white horse should be regarded as a symbol of Heaven/Sun, or a Heavenly representative on the earth, and, on the other hand, as an indication of the Heaven/Sun origin of the ancestors of different Mongolian and Turkic tribes(E Lun-li 1979).

.According to the most famous Mongolian historical chronicle *Mongrol-un Niruca Tobciyan*(1240) white color is directly connected with the Sun and Moon; for instance, *Dei Secen* - a member of the *Unggirad* clan once dreamed an interesting dream, in which a white falcon flew to his place and alighted into his hand(*Mongrol-un Niruca Tobciyan* 1947, p.36). The falcon hold in its claws both the sun and moon(Ibid.). It seems that in this case the white falcon is also mentioned as a symbol of Heaven, but the link between Heaven, on one hand, and the Sun, on the other hand, is much more obvious. Besides, in the historical chronicle mentioned above is said that *Chinggis-khan* rode a white horse and wore white garment(Ibid, p. 215).

.It is well-known that white color was the color of good omen with the Mongols. In *Mongrol-un Niruca Tobciyan* one can find other examples of this epithet: "white rock" in § 80; "white felt" in 189; white standard with nine feet(= scallops) in § 202; white clothing and white gelding in § 216, and so on.

.Among the Mongols from the lake of *Kökenor* are very popular the stories which tell us about a white as an egg horse which alighted from heaven to earth. They call this horse *öndög chagan mori*(mong. 'white as an egg horse'). *Chinggis-khan* announced this horse was a divine one and that is why ordered to drive in a golden stake especially for it.

.According to the description of Central Asian peoples made in the 19th century by the Russian geographer G. N. Potanin, at that time they still wore white garments and rode white horses. Moreover, they worshipped

an eagle as a totemic bird which to their mind had an organic link with a lightning which, in its turn, was an attribute of the Sun(Potanin 1881, p.144).

.Buryats worshipped white horses as indication of their ancient solar-lunar cult. They believed that the white color of horses, as well as of milk, especially the white color of mare's milk, had sacred nature, that is why they sacrificed white animals to their gods. In addition to this it is possible to say that side by side with such a sacrificial animals the Buryat people made the so-called *sagaalaha* – or the ritual of milk spraying, in order to bring a good omen. Another point is that Buryats and other Mongolians sacrificed white animals on a white felt, which should additionally purify the sacrificial animals.

.In the most famous Kalmuck heroic epic story *Jangar* is said that the mane of the main hero's stallion was white as silver(Jangar 1990, p.375).

#### 1. 4 Turkic Myths, Legends, and Epic

.Yakuts believed horses had heavenly origin. Maybe this is the reason Yakut folk tales and myths describe images of winged horses. It is known that at the time of the folk festival *ûsûah*, a big milk-white stallion appeared from the middle of a white cloud and neighed loudly. Similarly to Mongols, Yakuts also have a cult of a white horse.

.In different Yakut mythic narrative works widely known as *olonho* one can find a lot of horse personages and images. Many of them are white colored horses. For example, *olonho* which title is *The Descendants of Yuryung Aiyy Toyon* tells us that the main hero made a sacrifice using three horses with white heads(Emel'yanov 1980, p. 19).

.There are some Yakut *olonho* which go that main heroes or personages were born by the Heavenly horse. Moreover, in several *olonho* the main hero and his stallion are said to be born by the same Heavenly mare(Ibid., p.25). Quite often the stallion has prophetic qualities and describes the way in which the main hero comes into being. According to this prophecy the main hero, whose name is *Dyyrai Byogyo*, was born in the Heavenly sphere and after that was sent to earth, and became the ancestor of mankind(Ibid., p.26). So, in this *olonho* Heavenly horse in fact plays a part of the supreme god, and acts as a brother of the main hero.

.Almost the same cult one can find among the Turkic peoples residing the *Sayan-Altai* region. In the past they sacrificed white horses to the gods of mountains and heavenly gods. They called such a sacrificial horse *izyh*(compare it with the Yakut *ûsûah!*)

.It is said in some Altaic epics that there is a Heavenly horse which is usually white in color. According to the beliefs of the indigenous population of the *Altai* mountains region, such a horse is a clan's divine protector – the so-called *erjine*, a Heavenly messenger.

.In the Altaic epic *Maadai-Kara* one can find very interesting symbolic link between the above-mentioned description of white colored horses of the epic heroes and the description of the horse of the main personage of this epic: the horse of *Maadai-Kara* had two brands – that of sun and moon. Moreover, the blanket of *Maadai-Kara* was decorated with the image of the Sun, and his felt was decorated with the image of the Moon(Maadai-Kara 1981, p.10-11).

.Similar characteristics of the main hero's horse one can find in Kazakh epic *Koblandy-batyr*(Nurmagambetova 1988).

## 1.5 Tungus-Manchurian Myths, Legends, and Epic

.The local population of Manchuria and the region near the *Amur River* regarded the horse as a totemic animal. They sacrificed white horse and other white animals and even buried them along with dead people.

.The *Mohe* people for instance believed that a horse should follow the soul of the dead person in the Afterworld, that is why they sacrificed horses and pigs to souls of dead people(Derevyanko 1987, p.95).

.In heroic epical story *The Courageous Hero Sodani* of the *Evenk* ethnic group the horse of the main hero is called *horse-rainbow*. Such an epithet is extremely important for the reconstruction of the Heavenly/Sun origin of the white horse(Evenkiiskie geroicheskie skazaniya 1990, p.199).

## 2.0 Conclusions

Among all animals the so-called Altaic peoples worshipped a horse most of all. Such a worship seems to result from the important role that the horse played in everyday life of ancient Central Asian nomads. The sources of the horse's cult probably are connected with the solar and star cult, because the most venerated animals were that of white color. The cult of white horse was extremely popular among the ancient nomad tribes in the above-mentioned region, especially among the *Huns*. The Turks and Mongols who appeared in Central Asia in later historical epoch, regarded a white horse as a Heavenly being residing Heaven. That was the reason quite often such a horse to be described as a winged horse. The image of the white winged horse one can find in Mongolian, Turkic, and Korean myths and legends. Among the Mongols and Turks, the horse is a totem. Moreover, similarly to ancient Koreans, they believed that the white winged horse had a divine origin. According to their views, such a horse often came down to earth as a Heavenly messenger or Heavenly representative. Koreans call it *ch'ŏnma* or Heavenly Horse(Tomb of the Heavenly Horse in *Hwangnam-dong, Kyŏngju, Silla*), and the Mongols call it *dalitai morin*. The Tibetans still believe in the horse of fortune or luck, generally inscribed on flags with charms and allowed to flutter in the wind. They call these horses *lung-ta(rlung-rta)*, lit. 'the wind-horse'.



In Altaic epics, the Heavenly horse is regarded as a protector of the people. Yakuts also believed in the Heavenly origin of the horse, and in such a way connected the cult of horse with the solar cult. According to them the white horse is the Heavenly supreme god, while the white Heavenly mare is the goddess–mother of the main hero in many *olonho*.

The local population of the *Altaic mountains* believed the white horse had not only Heavenly origin, but, as a result from this, it also possessed certain sacred power. They believed that a horseshoe hanged up on a wall over a door, or a threshold should protect from ghosts and demons. In order to protect themselves from poisonous snakes they encircled their stands with a rope which was woven from horse mane and tail. As a symbol of light and good the white horse, or even broader, the horse was treated as a contradiction to a snake, which was an embodiment of wicked forces and black power.

The horse sacrifice was of the highest status among the Altaic peoples who believed that the horse, and especially the white horse, should be sacrificed merely to the most important gods (Galdanova 1981, p.53).

There are some other white colored animals (bulls, pigs, hens, cocks, falcons and so on) mentioned in different Altaic myths, legends and epic. Mainly they are mentioned as sacrificial objects to the most honored gods and goddesses.

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