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Egg Mythology in Korea and Central Asia

Alexander Fedotoff

As a symbol, the egg is one of the most popular in myths, epic stories and legends of many peoples. One can find the egg in written and oral sources in connection with authentic rites, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, cults and religions of both Eastern and Western countries. The egg can be regarded as an evidence of ancient links between different ethnic groups or some typological features in their development. The article is an attempt to analyze the egg from the point of view of its mythological symbolism among the so-called Altaic peoples or peoples of Altaic origin including the Koreans.

Introduction

Being a real crossroads between China, Japan, Russia and the Central Asian countries, in the past, Korea was influenced by foreign ideological (philosophical) and cultural values. Still, Korea succeeded in preserving her autochthonous ethnic and cultural roots. Indigenous beliefs and worships, presented in local myths, legends, rites, and rituals, prove the original nature of Korean civilization. On the other hand, a comparative study of certain cultural phenomena can shed light on her ethnic history.

As a mythic symbol, the egg is widely known throughout the world. Nowadays, Westerners exchange eggs as presents during Easter time and in this case, eggs apparently symbolize Jesus Christ's resurrection, but, going deeper, one can say that this is a reflection, or a heritage of pre-Christian agricultural rites, connected with the idea of eternal cycle of death and rebirth.

In Eastern countries (Oriental civilizations), egg mythology is even more archaic: according to an ancient Egyptian cosmogonic system, the sun was born from an egg laid by the bird great Gogotun. It is said in Chinese myths that the universe primarily resembles the contents of a hen's egg, from which Pangu, treated by the Chinese as a demiurge, was born. One can discover the idea of a cosmic egg or golden embryo floating in the cosmic ocean in the ancient Indian myth of *Hiranyagarbh*, as well. *Prājapati* came into being from a golden embryo, which is a prototype of the cosmic egg. Sometimes, *Îçvará* is described as a

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character sitting in the cosmic egg, which is located in the universal ocean. On the other hand, in northeast Asia, including Korea, egg mythology is characterized by more than just cosmogonic features. For example, one can find eggs as a mythic symbol in many narratives about nation founders, meaning that at that time in Korea, there was a well-established society.

In my paper, I would like to (1) trace the egg mythology in Korea; (2) find out its particular ethnic features; and (3) to compare them with the same mythic motifs in the mythology of Central Asian countries, or of the so-called Altaic world.

Korean Mythology

Generally speaking, Korean mythology has a stronger link with the historical development of the country and fairy tales than with the so-called World of Gods. Ancient myths about ancestors and myths about pseudo-historical characters are included in written Korean sources. The latter myths certainly were created not during the pre-historical, but in the later epoch (*Mify narodov mira*: 1987, vol. 1, 667-670). Besides, one can find the so-called cult myths connected with the mode of demonic. In Korea, mythic characters are usually semi-historical and semi-legendary rulers or ancient heroes. Almost all these myths in fact are a real conglomerate in which the motif of miraculous birth is presented, as well. In some myths and legends one can find the egg motif as a plot element and mythic symbol: in the myth about Kim Suro Wang—the founder of Kaya, it is said that he was one of the six handsome boys who came out of the six eggs that were in a golden box. That box, in its turn, came down from Heaven on a purple ribbon. Five of these eggs went, one each to a different city of the Five Kaya states, while the sixth one stayed in the castle, where out hatched King Suro (Iryön 1972, 42-43). In this myth, Kim Suro Wang is presented as a cultural character. Born in a miraculous way, he has a majestic and magnificent appearance, which happens to be additional evidence of his Heaven/sun origin.

In ancient Korean records (for example, on the stone of Kwanggaet'o Wang, erected in the 5th century), or in Chinese chronicles (for example, in 'Wei-shu,' written in the 6th century) the myth about Chumong—the founder of Koguryö and the myth about Tongmyöng—the founder of Puyö existed separately, but in Korean sources of 12-13th centuries, these two myths had already become fused. Moreover, the fused version of this myth was enriched with myths about Haeburu and Kümwa, and Haemosu and Yuhwa. Chumong was born of the daughter of Habaek whose name was Yuhwa. While in a dark room, she conceived by the rays of the sun and gave birth to a giant egg. In some other versions of

this myth, Yuhwa conceived by air shaped as a hen's egg. Kümwa, who took the woman to his palace, was rather surprised. He cast the strange egg before his dogs and swine, but they would not eat it; he cast it on the road, but the horses and cattle would not tread on it; then he cast it in a field, but the birds and beasts covered it with their feathers and fur, protecting it from the cold. At last, as it is said in the '*Samguk yusa*,' he gave it back to its mother, who wrapped it in a soft cloth and laid it in a warm place (*ibid.*: 45). Soon the shell cracked and out sprang a lovely boy. That was in fact Chumong. He looked noble and gracious like a great prince. When he was only seven years old, Chumong was as strong as a mature man. He made a bow and arrows for himself and used them with extremely good marksmanship, that is why he was called Chumong—'the good bow-man.' In this myth, Chumong is also presented as a cultural character.

The story about the six districts in Chinhan tells about the birth of their glorious king and commander-in-chief Hyökköse from a large red egg (*ibid.*: 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 flash of lightning 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.*: 50). They found there 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.*: 49-51); whereas, in '*Chewang Ungi*' written by Yi Sünghyu (1224-1300), it is said that the egg was let down from Heaven with a rope (*Mify narodov mira*, 667).

It is said in the myth about T'arhae that he was born from a large egg by the daughter of the king of Chöknyöguk. It is said in '*Samguk yusa*' that king Hamdalp'a married the daughter of the king Chöknyöguk, but she bore no sons to succeed to the throne (Iryön: 54). After offering prayer for a son for seven years she brought forth a large egg from her womb. The king decided it was a bad omen, so he made a large box, put the egg into it with seven treasures and two servants, and placed it on a boat. A red dragon appeared from the depths of the sea and convoyed the boat during the long journey. An old fisher-woman saw a large crowd of magpies that had landed on the boat dancing and singing. In great wonder, she pulled the boat to the sandy beach and found on board a large box. The old woman moored the boat near a grove of trees and prayed to Heaven to send her good luck. Then she opened the box and to her surprise discovered a handsome boy, together with seven treasures (*ibid.*).

The myth about Tongmyöng Wang goes that his mother conceived by

a cloud shaped like a hen's egg (*ibid.*: 45-47). Since this myth is contaminated with the myth about Chumong, these two characters are fused into the image of the founder of Koguryō.

After having analyzed these myths and legends and some other mythic and legendary narrative works, one can notice that the egg motif is presented therein, first, as a sub-motif of miraculous birth (Kim Suro Wang; Chumong; Hyökköse; T'arhae); secondly, as a designation of Heaven/ sun origin of the main character (Kim Suro Wang; Chumong; Hyökköse; T'arhae); and thirdly, as indication of ancient shamanic beliefs concerning human soul (Tongmyōng Wang).

Mythology of Central Asian Countries

From the point of view of Korean ethnic genesis it is more important to try to find out the egg motif in myths created by the Central Asian and North Asian peoples. Since many of these peoples were without their own letters till the middle of the 20th century, it is quite difficult to study their mythology. Mythic motifs are incorporated in mnemonic epic or folk narratives. One can find many mythic symbols in their rites and rituals, especially in shamanic practices, but it is necessary to stress that egg motifs are rarely mentioned.

1. Mongolian area

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, the white horse and grey bull are worshipped as totemic animals. Some scholars treat these animals as non-personified images of fire gods (Bardahanova 1970: 19-33; Galdanova 1987: 12-14). On the other hand, to my mind, the white horse in this case should be treated as a symbol of Heaven/sun. The white horse motif can be found in Korean mythology, as well. For example, in the myth about Hyökköse, the white horse plays a role of a Heavenly messenger who brought down to earth the red egg along with the future founder of Shilla (Iryön: 49), while in the Kidan empire the white horse became a Heavenly representative on the earth, on one hand, and indication of the Heaven/sun origin of ancestors of different Mongolian and Turkic tribes, on the other hand (E Lun-li 1979).

It is said in *The Secret History of the Mongols* (1240) that the ancestor of Temüjin-Bodonchar was born by Alan-Gua who conceived by sun rays penetrating into her belly (*Mongol-un Niyuca tobciyan* 1947: 28). This means that Chinggis-khan himself also originated from Heaven/sun. It is well-known that the above-mentioned 'father of the Mongols' was not born from an egg. Nevertheless, he was born holding in his

right hand a clot of blood the size of a knuckle bone. This clot of blood was, first, an indication of his miraculous birth and high, or Heavenly origin, and secondly, a symbol of his future heroic deeds. Still, in this historical chronicle with amazing literary characteristics there are some formal parallels with Korean myths and legends. For example, a white horse is mentioned as a symbol of Heaven (Iryön: 49); therefore it also plays the role of divine messenger. White 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 (*Mongol-un Niuca tobciyan*: 36). The falcon holds in its claws both the sun and moon (*ibid.*). To my mind, in this case the 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. It is well-known that white was the color of good omen with the Mongols.

The only direct link I have found so far between the white horse as a Heavenly messenger and an egg is in some folklore stories of the Kukur Mongols: according to these stories a white **as an egg** horse alighted from heaven to earth. It was *ondgo chagan mori* (mong. 'white as an egg horse'). Chinggis-khan announced this horse was a divine one and ordered to drive in a golden stake especially for it.

2. Tungus-Manchurian area

In '*Manjou shilu*' (1635) one can find the most ancient version of Manchurian legend about their origin. So, according to this legend once upon a time three heaven virgins Engülen, Jengülen and Fekülen bathed in lake Bulkhuri. After having bathed, the youngest of them—Fekülen found a **red fruit** that a heavenly magpie brought to or **laid** on her dress. The virgin ate the fruit and conceived. That is why she could not go back to Heaven. Then she gave birth to a son who began to speak immediately. The boy was named Bukuri Yongson. He became the founder of the imperial family Chin (*Mify narodov mira*, vol. II: 107). In this story, one can discover several allusions: first, of miraculous conception; secondly, of miraculous birth of the main character; thirdly, of an egg as a Heaven and sun symbol. I venture to suggest that the red fruit mentioned above in this legend symbolizes an egg, moreover that in some versions of the legend the heavenly magpie **laid** the red fruit.

The Nanai and Ulch peoples worshipped Heaven and sun treating them as synonyms. They believed that a human soul was anthropomorphic and therefore resembled a human body. On the other hand, they treated a soul of a small child in another way: when a small child died, the Ulch people did not dress the body. According to their views, the soul of the child, like a bird, flew up to the nearest tree.

Being undressed, the soul could reach the tree easier. So, the Ulch believed that the soul of a child looked like a small bird. Sometimes during an invocation, a shaman would take out a human soul, free it from eventual vicious spirits and after these operations the soul looked like **an egg** (Smolyak 1991: 104-105).

3. Turkic area

Yakut people believed that rivers, lakes, woods and so on had their own spirits which they called *ichchi*. In the Yakut language *ichchi* means 'owner,' 'lord,' 'keeper,' 'content,' 'sacred power,' and 'embryo in an egg.' In other words *ichchi* means 'soul,' or 'spirit.' According to Yakut beliefs 'mother-beast,' appeared as an eagle with iron wings, alighted on the mythic tree and **laid an egg**. From this egg shamans came out. It is said in another Yakut myth that shamans usually were trained on different levels of the so-called shaman-tree, depending on their status. On the other hand, some Yakut myths say that shamans of the middle world came out from **the egg** laid by a huge bird (Alexseev 1984, 1992).

North Yakuts believed that a shaman's soul came out of tetrahedral stones incubated by 'mother-beast': the stones cracked up and nestlings came out. Later on they turned into shamans.

In their folk tales, Yakuts compare small children with **golden eggs**. Formal link between representatives of khan's families and Heaven/sun is realized through such motifs as golden hair (a miraculous birth), golden house, golden utensils, golden horse, and so on.

Yakuts believed horses had a heavenly origin. Maybe this is the reason Yakut folk tales describe images of winged horses. It is known that at the time of the folk festival *ūsūah*, 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 the white horse.

In Khakas myths, as well as in the myths of some other Turkic peoples, one can find the image of Umai (Humai, Hubai, Huma)—a mythic bird that grants happiness. On the other hand, Umai is a goddess with avian features, that is why being 'mother-goddess,' Umai gives birth by means of ornithomorphic code. She is described as a bird which incubates **eggs**. (Alexseev 1984)

It is said in Altaic epics that shamans are born from **eggs** on the sacred tree. The image of a Heavenly horse is widely spread among the Altaic population. According to their beliefs such a horse is a clan's divine protector—*erjine*, a Heavenly messenger (*ibid.*).

Altaic people believed that embryos of human beings and animals (*sus* or *kut*) were brought to the earth through sun or moon rays.

4. Finno-Ugrian area

In Saam, Komi, Baltic, and Finnish myths, the egg is a cosmic symbol,

from which the earth, sky and planets are created. This egg was laid by a bird (dark, goose, pigeon or swallow).

In Karelian *runes* it is said that a bird (dark, goose, eagle, etc.) flew over the primary ocean in search of a proper place for nest. The bird laid an egg (in other versions—three or seven eggs) on the knee of Väinämöinen or on the hill in the middle of the ocean. The egg rolled down and cracked apart. From the upper part of the egg, Heaven was created, from the lower part of the egg, Earth was created, from the yolk of the egg the sun was created, from the white of the egg the moon was created, and from the so-called mixed parts of the egg—stars were created.

According to '*Kalevala*' from the lower part of the cosmic egg the earth was created and from the upper part, high Heaven was created (Koshkina 1974: 10).

The Ob River Ugrians believed in 'mother-bird' and sacred tree. If a child died, they put the body into a hollow of a tree. Moreover, they put a small stone into the child's mouth, which was likened to **an egg**.

5. Tibetan area

It is said in the Tibetan writing "*A Well of Tibetan Clans bo-ti se-ru,*" that once upon a time there was an egg. From the outer shell of the egg a white rock of Heaven appeared; from the inner liquid of the egg a sea with white shells appeared; from the outer part of the middle of the egg, six clans of sentient beings appeared; from the yolk of the egg—eighteen descendants of the egg appeared. According to this, from the shell-egg a boy was born. That was the ancestor of the Tibetans—Yelmon Gyelpo.

Conclusions

According to Mircea Eliade the cosmic egg conception is presented both in ancient myths and rituals. One can see, the universal, mythical symbol of the egg is present in Korea and Central Asia primarily in myths, legends, folk tales and epics. In Korea, the egg mythology seems to be not so ancient, because the egg functions merely as a sub-motif of miraculous birth in narratives that tell of nation founders. These founders usually have a divine origin, that of the Heaven or the sun. In such a way, cosmogony itself with the cosmic egg as its very important symbol is used as a model for the anthropological primordial act. In other words, the birth process of the above-mentioned founders of different Korean states imitates the creation of the universe. That is why from this point of view the egg in Korean myths and legends symbolizes resurrection rather than creation, because the egg guarantees the recurrence of resurrection, or the primordial act.

Quite often the egg is golden and in fact symbolizes the sun. The sun origin of the egg and correspondingly of main mythic characters is indicated by the golden color of the egg itself, as well as of some other subjects that bear a relation to the main characters (box, frog, etc.), purple or red (ribbon, clouds, etc.), and white (horse, light, cock, etc.).

The egg motif of the sun origin dominates in Korean egg mythology. Still, there are some exceptions (Tongmyŏng Wang, for example), where the egg functions as a shamanic symbol of the soul. The latter motif is much more ancient than the first one.

In the egg mythology of the central Asian peoples, shamanic beliefs are predominantly promulgated. As a cosmogonic symbol, the egg is a comparatively rare phenomenon, known mainly to Finno-Ugrian peoples.

There is a striking similarity between Korean and Tibetan egg mythology. On the other hand, in the Tibetan myths one can find more archaic features, when the egg symbolizes, first, a cosmic egg, and, second, a place, from which a national founder was born. Therefore, one can suppose that the Tibetan egg myth is presented in more archaic form than the Korean one. It is probably more closely connected with the Chinese cosmogonic myth about Pangu and indicates the intermediate period of the evolution of egg mythology.

In proper Altaic mythology, the egg is associated with the sun (indirectly—through sun rays, or directly), moon (directly); red fruit (I suppose that in the Manchurian myth cited, originated from an egg, because it is said that the red fruit was left or laid by a magpie); white or Heavenly horse and so on. The image of the white horse can also be found in Korean mythology (for example, in the myth about Hyökköse). Among the Mongols and Turks, the horse is a totem. Moreover, similarly to ancient Koreans, they believed that the winged white horse had a Heavenly, or divine origin. According to their views, such a horse often came down to earth as a Heavenly messenger. Koreans call it *ch'ŏnma* or Heavenly Horse (Tomb of the Heavenly Horse in Hwangnam-dong, Kyŏngju, Shilla), and the Mongols call it *dalitai morin*. The Tibetans 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. This horse, as well as the horse of Mongols, Turks and some other peoples was white in color, and as I mentioned above, white is directly associated with the sun and moon. In Altaic epics, the Heavenly horse is treated as a protector of the people. Yakuts also believed in the Heavenly origin of the horse. In other words, the cult of the horse, widely spread among the Altaic peoples, is connected with the solar cult.

Last, but not least: treatment of the egg as a human soul, or as a quintessence of the sentient being is similar both in Korean and Altaic myths. Whereas, in Altaic mythology, this is the basic belief (Yakuts

compare small children with golden eggs; the Ulch people believe the human soul to be a small bird, and so on), in Korean myths, one can find just an allusion to such symbolism.

Finally, it should be stressed that as a mythic symbol, the egg is presented in the mythology of the central Asian peoples in different ways. Still, one can discover striking similarities within the interpretation of the cosmic egg idea, which provides a good basis for making further comparative studies of Korean and Altaic mythology.

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