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Ethno-Folkloristic Study of the Otherworld and Spirits

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Abstract: This article analyzes the scientific views of ethnographers and folklorists on the afterlife, as well as the mythological views of the Uzbek people regarding the otherworld. Mythological representations related to spirits and the concept of the soul are scientifically researched based on findings from world medical science and materials from Uzbek shamanic folklore.
Keywords: afterlife, spirit, soul, demon, death, life, demonological story, shamanic folklore.

Introduction

Identifying the historical-mythological foundations of our ancestors' mythological concepts related to the otherworld and their views on the afterlife, determining the role of such concepts in the evolutionary progression of artistic thinking, and analyzing their interpretation in literary works step by step rank among the important and urgent issues of world folkloristics.

To determine the process by which the interpretation of the otherworld in the mythological views of the Uzbek people transitioned into the plots of oral artistic works, it is first necessary to study the people's mythological concepts regarding the earth and the otherworld, and to clarify the semantics of demonological and animatic concepts such as "spirit" (ruh), "soul" (jon), and "ghost" (arvoh). This allows for a comprehensive and systematic investigation of the evolution of this mindset.

The Purpose of the Study:

To reveal the interpretation of the otherworld, as well as the semantic and functional distinctions between the concepts of "spirit" (ruh and arvoh) in Uzbek ritual folklore, mythological concepts, and literary sources, and to substantiate the mythological relations between the unseen world (gayb olami) and the terrestrial world through the examples of shamanic lamps (yo‘qlov / psychopomp chants) and demonological narratives.

Literature review

Since ancient times, mankind has contemplated the creation of the universe and its parallel manifestations. These very concepts served as the basis for the emergence of myths. Our ancient ancestors imagined that mythological personages endowed with divine power reside in a non-biological and supernatural space — the Unseen World (G‘ayb olami).

Concepts related to the otherworld were first systematically analyzed in modern science by the Russian ethnographer V.P. Nalimov using the example of the Komi people's mythology [1]. The scholar draws attention to the fact that there is no sharp geographical boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead: the realm of the deceased and their life after death proceed in this very space, parallel to the living, except that they cannot be seen with the naked eye. V.P. Nalimov also records the notions that after a person dies, the spirit remains in this world for a certain period as long as relatives remember them, and upon being forgotten, it passes into the celestial world [2]. P.A. Sorokin also investigated the division of the soul into two parts after death and its dispersal into the worlds of good and evil (analogues of paradise and hell) in the views of the Komi people [5].

Uzbek ethnography and folkloristics also emphasize that the soul of the deceased passes into the "true world" (chin dunyo) or the "other world" (narigi dunyo), while according to shamanic beliefs, the spirits of ancestors continue to assist their descendants. Observing the shamanism of the

Yellow Uyghurs, S.Ye. Malov indicates that there is a custom of throwing bread into a bonfire as nourishment for the spirits of the deceased [3]. In the studies of M. Jo'rayev and Ya. G'ulomov, mythological concepts concerning the existence of an underwater world are elucidated through traditions of sacrificing to the water cult and water spirits (muakkil, such as the legend of Hubbi, arangs at the bottom of the Amu Darya, etc.) [4; 8; 10].

Turning to summit and mythological spatial classification, V.Ya. Petruxin classifies otherworlds into the world of the dead, the netherworld (narigi dunyo), and the otherworld (o'zga olam). Ye.M. Meletinskiy analyzed the horizontal (surface of the earth) and vertical (heaven and underworld) structure of worlds in classical myths [6]. Meanwhile, Ye.P. Kartamysheva researched the views on the descent of the drowned into the underwater world in Scandinavian culture [7].

The problem of the soul leaving the body upon a person's death and consciousness being preserved thereafter has also attracted the attention of natural and medical sciences. D. MacDougall (1907) attempted to prove the material existence of the soul by measuring the decrease in body weight (an average of 21 grams) at the moment of death [14]. R. Moody, in his book Life After Death (1975), classified the "out-of-body experiences" of individuals who underwent clinical death [15]. Furthermore, Dutch cardiologist P. van Lommel substantiated through prospective studies that consciousness can exist independently of the body even at the moment when heart and brain functions cease [16].

Materials and methods

During the research process, the following scientific-research methods were utilized on the basis of a comprehensive approach:

1. Comparative-typological method: Concepts regarding the otherworld and spirits in Uzbek folk mythology and folklore were analyzed in comparison with world ethnographic sources (Russian, Komi, Udmurt, Teleut, etc.).
2. Ethno-folkloristic and textological analysis: Demonological narratives and shamanic psychopomp chants (yo'qlov) recorded by the author from bakhshis and traditional healers (qo'shnoch, such as Nozibuvi bakhshi, Nigora qo'shnoch, etc.) during folklore expeditions conducted in Navoi and Fergana regions (Qiziltepa, Khatirchi districts, etc.) between 2004 and 2024 were subjected to analysis.
3. Semantic-structural analysis: The conceptual and functional boundaries of demonological concepts such as "soul" (jon), "spirit" (ruh), and "ghost" (arvoh), as well as their poetic functions in oral prose, were determined.

Results

As a result of analyzing Uzbek folk mythology and folklore materials, the following scientific conclusions were reached:

1. Classification of Mythological Space and the "Otherworld" While the world of the living (humans) consists of the terrestrial (surface) world, the underwater, underground, and celestial worlds are considered otherworlds inhabited exclusively by spirits and unseen forces [11]. The motif of descent into the underwater world occupies a special place in Uzbek fairy tales and shamanic legends (for instance, the narrative by Shoira Haqberdiyeva, a traditional healer from Navbahor, regarding observing her own body from above while drowning).

2. Semantic Differentiation of the Concepts "Soul" (Jon), "Spirit" (Ruh), and "Ghost" (Arvoh) In popular conception, the concepts of spirit (ruh) and soul (jon) are distinguished as follows:

• Primary Spirit (Jon): The source that ensures a person's vitality, life, and movement. It leaves the body at the moment of death. According to popular beliefs, the soul may leave the body in the guise of various creatures (for example, a red ant or a bird).

• Secondary Spirit: A structure serving to supply consciousness with imagination and information [13].

• Distinction Between Spirit (Ruh) and Ghost (Arvoh):

Spirit (Ruh): Pure and possessing unique beauty, usually imagined in pristine white attire. Spirits are benevolent toward humans, perform a patronage function, and may manifest even to completely unfamiliar individuals.

oGhost (Arvoh): The restless spirit of a person who suffered a tragic, gruesome death or departed with grievances against the world of the living. Ghosts frequently appear to their close ones in a dissatisfied guise, sometimes with blood-splattered clothing, and serve solely to bear news regarding the deceased's condition (the cause of death).

• Pure and beautiful appearance.

• Dissatisfied, restless spirit.

• Clad in white attire.

• Suffered a tragic death.

• Provides patronage and benevolence.

• Leading sign — bearing news and warning.

• Manifests even to complete strangers.

3. The Cult of Ancestors and Saints in Shamanic Psychopomp Chants (Yo‘qlov) In the practice of Uzbek shamans (bakhshi, qo‘shnoch), pre-Islamic animistic and shamanic concepts have been syncretically assimilated with Islamic figures (saints, prophets). An analysis of the psychopomp chants (yo‘qlov) by Nozibuvi bakhshi from Khatirchi and Nigora qo‘shnoch from Qiziltepa demonstrated that:

• Shamans begin their practice with "gathering saints" (avliyo terish).

• Alongside historical figures (Imam al-Bukhari, Anbar Ana, Zangi Ata), mythological and legendary figures (Shah-i Zinda Ata, Langar Ata, Aftosh Ata) and necronyms (Qal’ai Azizon) are invoked as patron spirits in the chants.

• The figure of Anbar Ana is recorded in 15th-century historical sources (Rashahot ayn al-hayot, Manaqib-i Sulayman Ata) as the daughter of the Khwarazm ruler Bughrakhan and the spouse of Hakim Ata and Zangi Ata, and has been elevated in folklore to the rank of patroness of mothers and shamans [Secondary sources: Fakhr al-Din Ali Safi].

Discussion

The obtained results indicate that the concepts regarding the otherworld in Uzbek demonological narratives and shamanic ritual folklore share common roots with universal folklore and the folklore of Turkic-Mongol peoples.

For example, the motif of worshipping restless spirits of the deceased in Komi mythology (P.F. Limerov) [12; 18] or divine mothers such as "Sulaykhan" (Mother of Water) and "Yenkey-khan" in Teleut shamanism (N.P. Dyrenkova) are typologically similar to the images of Mother Mortu, Anbar Ana, and water nymphs (suv pari) in Uzbek shamanic psychopomp chants.

In Uzbek domestic life, the chant performed when laying an infant into a cradle — "The owner has come, the baba has left" — and protective magic practices such as placing a knife, an onion, and bread at the head of the cradle are the products of animistic concepts and the tradition of taboos. Here, "baba" serves as the tabooed symbolic name of an evil spirit, while the knife and onion act as apotropaic (protective) devices driving away malevolent forces, akin to shamanic instruments.

Recent studies in global medicine and cardiology (P. van Lommel) [16] suggest that consciousness can exist independently of brain function. This demonstrates that plots in folk demonological narratives concerning "clinical death" and "the soul leaving the body and observing events from above" are not mere fantasy, but rather a mythological and poetic interpretation of certain phenomena related to human physiology and psychology.

Conclusion

- Mythological Conception: In the Uzbek popular mindset, the universe possesses a vertical and parallel structure, where the terrestrial world is the dwelling place of the living, while the underwater, underground, and celestial worlds are regarded as the habitats of spirits and unseen forces.
- Semantic Distinctions: In oral prose, the "soul" (jon) manifests as the factor of vitality, the "spirit" (ruh) as a pure and benevolent patron force, and the "ghost" (arvoh) as the external guise of a tragic and restless deceased person.
- Syncretism: In Uzbek shamanic practice and folklore, ancient animistic concepts and elements of Islamic belief are mutually synthesized. In this context, the spirits of saints and historical figures (Anbar Ana, Imam al-Bukhari, etc.) are interpreted as the primary mythological patrons and helpers of the shaman.

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