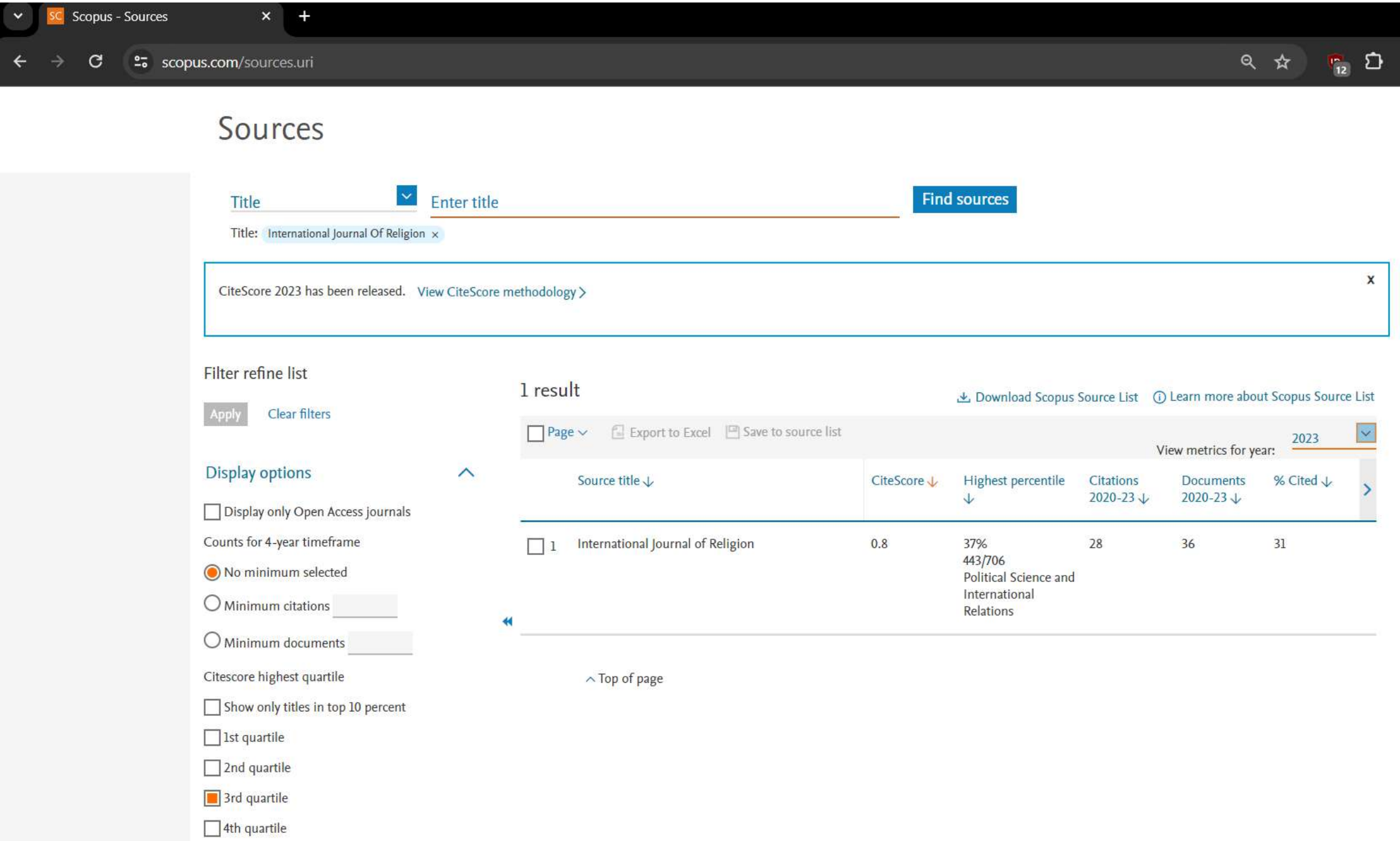

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Generation of Character Designs Based on Pre-Islamic Beliefs of Turks

Bahadir Ucan[1]

Abstract

Turkish communities had lived under the belief system of Turkic mythology, known as Tengriism, in a significant part of their history. It is noteworthy that Turkic mythology elements, which have taken such a place in the cultural life of the Turks, are not sufficiently used as visual design tools. Considering the significance of preserving cultural heritage, Turkic mythology is rarely shown in animations, video games, or movies. The primary gods, goddesses, and supernatural creatures of Turkic mythology are not directly depicted, despite the existence of some animations relating to Turkic cultures such as Keloğlan, Nasreddin Hodja, and Dede Korkut. The main concern of this article is that the elements of Turkic mythology are unable to find enough depiction. Therefore some dominant creatures belonging to Turkic mythology were transformed into character designs. As the method, two-dimensional computer-based modelling techniques were selected to compose character designs of selected Turkic mythology creatures.

Keywords: *Turkic Mythology, Tengriism, Character Design, Illustration, Intangible Cultural Heritage*

INTRODUCTION

Mythology, as a concept involving elements of oral and written traditions, forms the basis of cultural heritage values (Aça, 2016: 4). Cultural heritage is a multidimensional concept that offers various opportunities to societies as identity and a sense of belonging. In addition, cultural heritage is a deep source that nourishes creativity in artistic and cultural production and contributes economic vitality and wealth to nations (Negiz, 2017: 161). In this sense, cultural heritage development and representation have a crucial role in establishing nations' political and economic positions (Napier, 2001: 470; Rashid et al., 2023). Most popular animated series are based on mythology, fantasies, lifestyles, and superheroes from literature or comic books rendered in digital animation (Lent, 2004: 8; Khalis and Normah, 2017: 488). As an example, many character designs are derived from Greek myths and narrations (Asutay, 2022: 300; Azoddein et al., 2017; Rerkklang, 2018; Goyal, 2015;) in addition to games directly referring to Greek mythological beings. The story of the ancient Greek gods who lost their cosmic power in mythology and transformed into epic heroes over time has a similar thematic structure to the stories of the new gods produced by Hollywood films (Gariper, 2022: 95). These kinds of tales are legendary and closely related to the traditional culture that has endured from our forefathers to the present. In contrast, a few animations can be mentioned to symbolise Turkic culture, even though there isn't any direct animation production based on Turkic mythology (Uçan, 2018: 1140; Jeon et al., 2016).

METHODOLOGY

One of the most crucial factors before creating an animation is character designing. It will either attract spectators or get disregarded by them. Moreover, the animation needs a solid character design with a decent personality, proper attire, accessories, and a compelling plot (Khalis and Normah, 2017: 489). Thus, character designing of Turkic mythology elements were handled in detail.

The free and open-source graphics design software Krita 4.4.1 was used for designing characters. Gods, goddesses, spirits, demons, and other creatures were designed from oral and written narrations of Turkic mythology. Character designs are inspired by the mythological character portrayals of artists/illustrators of Turkish communities. In addition to these illustrations, sources of other mythologies as written or oral stories, fantasies, narrations, and visual elements (films, games, comics, cartoons, etc.) contributed the designs.

[1] Assoc. Prof. (PhD), Faculty of Art and Design Department of Communication and Design, Yildiz Technical University, Türkiye. E-mail: bucan@yildiz.edu.tr , ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4062-0469

Since Turkic mythology covers a high range of cultural elements, oral and written stories, legends, and narrations, selection was needed on designing. Therefore, some dominant gods, goddesses, and creatures were classified under three groups: the creation epic of Turkic mythology (group 1), guardians of nature, animals, and humans (group 2), and creatures of war (group 3). In this perspective, eleven characters were generated as Figures 2 and 4, and 6 to 14. All other figures are used under the permission of related authors.

The Creation Epic Of Turkic Mythology (Group 1)

Due to the Altai creation epic, everywhere was covered with water at the very beginning of the world. Ülgen Han transformed into a bird (eagle) and flew over the waters, but could not find a place to land. Thereupon, a voice from the sky told Ülgen Han to land on a stone coming out of the sea. Ülgen Han sat on this stone but could not figure out how to create the sky or the earth (Karakurt, 2011: 3). Ak Ana, the female goddess living in the waters, inspired Ülgen Han to make the creation (Dilek, 2020: 53). Ülgen Han started to work with the help of Ak Ana, first creating the earth and then the sky. Finally, Ülgen Han created three fish to support the earth below, preventing it from swinging (Ucan et al., 2020: 365). In this epic, similar to the underworld, the heavenly realm has similarities with the earth, but the souls of people do not exist in this realm. This realm is much brighter than the Earth. According to some narrations, it has seven suns. Shamans on Earth can visit this realm. There is a healthy, untouched nature there, and its natives have never deviated from their ancestral traditions. This realm is under the protection of Ülgen Han, son of Kayra Han. Altai shamans, referring to Ülgen Han, make a distinction in the same sentence and say inaccessible blue sky, inaccessible white sky, and revolving starry sky. It is claimed that these three different terms are used to express sky, spiritual sky, and space (Karakurt, 2011: 4; Yıldırım, 2017: 53).

Ülgen Han

In Turkic mythology; the existence of the earth and the underground worlds and the structuring of these worlds according to the concept of good and evil. The only power seen as the creator is Kayra Han. Ülgen Han, the son of Kayra Han, is described as the god of goodness, and his opposite, Erlik Han is described as the devil (Çobanoğlu, 2022: 351).



Figure 1. A three-dimensional computer-based model of Zeus (Sepetçi, 2016).

Ülgen Han is the ruler of the sky, the god of goodness and mercy, and the creator of the earth and the sky. He is described with great abilities as lightning strikes, and reigning over the skies, similar to Zeus (Figure 1) in Greek mythology (Aydın, 2019: 138; Cömert, 1999). Relative representations of the genesis of fire in Greek mythology, based on Zeus' lightning, can also be seen in Yakut culture (Gogolev, 1993; Seroşevskiy, 1896). The god Ulu Toyon, who resides on the third floor of the sky, is thought to send fire to mankind via the fire raven.

In this respect, Zeus in Greek mythology, and Ülgen Han and Ulu Toyon in Turkic mythology; first become apparent as deities who are the source of the fire. Although there are no strong narratives about the stealing of fire in Turkic mythology, it is generally apparent that fire was served to humans by gods. Parallel to Greek mythology, Ülgen Han, the creator god, is honoured as the source of the fire. However, Ülgen is not to hide the fire from humans like Zeus. In contrast, he seeks ways of delivering fire to humans so that their suffering can come to an end (Ögel, 1989). Ülgen Han is similar to Zeus in being the source of fire while he also resembles Prometheus in delivering it to humans (Çelik, 2021: 310-311).

On the other hand, despite the open heart of Ülgen Han in Turkic mythology, the sharp difference between the selfish attitudes of Zeus in Greek mythology is striking (Troşçanskiy, 1902; Vasilyev, 1913).



Figure 2. Ülgen Han, the symbol of well-being and the lord of heaven

Analysing the descriptions of Ülgen Han considering both Turkic and Greek myths, Ülgen Han was designed as a cartoon character on the cloud with a sword made of lightning. His main colours were selected as blue and green referring to the sky and nature with brown items of clothing to underline his role in creating the earth (Vasilyev: 1913). His body was depicted as extra muscular to define his strength and power. Clouds were illustrated to underline his sovereignty on earth, humans, animals, and all creatures over heaven (Figure 2).

Clouds of Ülgen Han had a connection with Turkic traditional arts similar to motifs of Rumi and clouds. The Rumi motif, originated in Central Asia and was developed by the Anatolian Seljuks; is a type of motif that is generally created by stylizing the wings, legs, and or bodies of animals and has been used for centuries in Turkic ornamental art. The cloud motif is a type of motif stylized by nature. It is also known as the Chinese cloud; stylized and widely used in Turkic decorative arts. According to documents belonging to Chinese art; it is the expression of the steam or fire coming out of their noses during the struggles of the mythological beings, the Simurgh and the dragon (Alparslan, 2013: 153). In the character, motifs of Rumi and clouds were exaggerated in a caricaturistic way compatible with the general drawing style of characters.

Ak Ana

Ak Ana or Ak Ene guided and inspired Ülgen Han to create the earth and the sky, showing herself out of the waters or named Ürüng-Ayızıt (Novik, 1984; Urmançi. 2011). In Altai Turkish, white represents heaven, and gods living in heaven are to be named Aktu/Aklılar. Aklılar lives on the third floor of heaven which is surrounded by lakes (Küçük, 2013: 119).



Figure 3. Ak Ana, Deniz Karakurt (Karakurt: 2011, 45).

Deniz Karakurt (2011) illustrated Ak Ana as an attractive woman dressed in white wandering on the waters and waves (Figure 3). The water-dominant aspect of Ak Ana is described through the direction of the waves towards her. The clouds that stand out apart from the strong waves indicate the position of Ak Ana in the universe of the heavens.



Figure 4. Ak Ana, the main goddess of Turkic mythology.

During the character design of Ak Ana, the main features of the mythological being, which is prominent in written texts and narratives and emphasised by Karakurt, were taken into consideration. Therefore as a character, Ak Ana was designed as a beauty coming out of the waters (Figure 4) holding a wand and wearing a crown. Her wings were modelled in the form of waves to emphasise her ability to fly (Figure 4) since her homeland is the third floor of heaven (Novik. 1984). She was coloured in white due to the meaning of her name in Altai Turkish and her belonging to Aktu/Aklılar (Küçük, 2013:119).

Erlik Han

Erlik Han is considered to be the leader of evil spirits and lord of the underworld (Eroğlu, 2006: 110). His main mission is to tackle humans and animals with tricky methods and take them to his side against Ülgen Han. The cause of many bad things such as death and illness are attributed to evil spirits, especially Erlik Han, and evil spirits are the source of all kinds of troubles (Küçük, 2005: 210). According to Verbitski (1878), the Altaic creation epic about Ülgen and Erlik is as below:

One day, while looking at the sea, Ülgen saw a piece of earth floating on the water. The ground was covered with a clay layer resembling a human body. Ülgen commanded: "Let this lifeless earth be a human!". Earth turned out to be a human. Ülgen named him Erlik; left it where he was. However, Erlik found Ülgen. Then Ülgen also took him and made himself a younger brother. After a while, Erlik became jealous of Ülgen. He wanted to be stronger than him. He envied Ülgen and thought: "I must be like him." He became hostile to Ülgen.



Figure 5. Erlik Han, Bartu Bölükbaşı (Bölükbaşı: 2022, 139).

Verbitski (1878) described Erlik as strong, ugly and old. His eyes and eyebrows are black in colour. His fork beard extended to his knees. A wild boar's moustache, resembling the molars, is located on his ears. He has black and curly hair. Its chin is like a hammer and its horns are like tree roots. Erlik, with a bright blood-like face, has a black iron sword and shield. It is the source of evil. It lives underground. His horse (mount) is fully black. His forked (double) beard has grown to his knees. Their horns are like tree roots and their whiskers are like wild boar's teeth. His bed is made of beaver skin. His goblet is made of the human skull and his whip is from black cohosh. His jaw is like a hammer. He has nine saddled bulls. He has a silver throne and lives in an underground iron palace.



Figure 6. Erlik Han is the symbol of evil and the lord of the underworld.

Erlik Han was illustrated holding a stick with a fire on top, a fury red-like skin with horns and tail on goat feet. His control over the underworld was symbolised by his scary appearance, arm floats, stick, and shield (Figure 6) as Erlik described with similar items in Verbitski's depiction. In accordance with Verbitski's definitions, Erlik's horns were designed to be noticeable on his head and two little ones added to his nose. His curly skin is coloured in reddish rather than black, since black is used for his objects.

Differing from Bölükbaşı's illustration (Figure 5), a simpler and cartoon-like drawing style is generated for Erlik and both selected characters. Mankind, who believes that death will belong to the underworld, has derived various underground gods. Among these mythological concepts that have been going on for centuries, Hades in Greek mythology and Erlik Han in Turkic mythology are the two most powerful underground gods (Koç, 2010: 23).

Guardians Of Nature, Animals, And Humans (Group 2)

Living in peace with nature has become an important attribute in Turkish culture. As a result of this harmony, pioneer mythological beings of Turkic mythology are defined through their connection with nature. Nâsırî stated the role of nature in classification of Tatar Turks' mythological beings in his Kazan Tatarlarınıñ tormışında islam diné yogıntısınnan tış barlıkka kilgen ışanular hem goréf-gadetler (1975) as grouping these beings into two parts: creatures underwater and creatures underground. Russian researcher Koblov in Mifologiya Kazanskikh Tatar (1910) examined mythological beings living on earth in more detail as those living at home, in the field (plantation), in the countryside, and in the forest.

Urmançi in Tatar Mifologiyesé Éntcyclopédik Süzlék I, II and III revealed a wide mythological universe. As an example in Urmançi's Tatar Mifologiyesé Éntcyclopédik Süzlék II (2009) monsters, giants, giant-fairies, dragons, white and black snakes defined as creatures living in the black forest or in the back of the black forest.

Suyla Han

Suyla Han is the god of fate in Turkic, Altai and Tatar mythologies. He was created from water and the light of the sun and moon. His name is Suyla, derived from his creation of water, which Turkish means water. He has

horse eyes, donkey ears, and snake hairs. Tomurtka (woodpecker) bird is his symbol. Tomurtka (woodpecker) bird is considered the messenger of Suyla Han. He is one of the most important helper gods of Ülgen Han. He assists the shaman on his journey of sacrificing Ülgen Han and protects humans and animals from the attack of evil spirits (Urmançi, 2011). His horse-like eyes can see thirty days long distance (Çobanoğlu and Yıldırım, 2013: 113).



Figure 7. Suyla Han, the god of fate.

He was illustrated as holding a shaman def (drum-like instrument) to connect him with shamans, and an axe with blue skin representing his creation of water with horse-like eyes, donkey-like ears, and snake hairs. Tomurtka (woodpecker) was also drawn as his messenger as in Figure 7.

Aan Alahçın Hatun

Aan Alahçın Hatun protects the earth and gives life to nature. She turns out to be the wind wanderer in swampy or green areas (Novik, 1984). She lives nearby the great beech tree/holly tree of Turks and cares for the well-being of humans, animals, and nature (Altın, 2016: 101).



Figure 8. Aan Alahçın Hatun with a rabbit and squirrel.

Aan Alahçın Hatun was appointed to her role on protecting nature and environment (Novik: 1984; Altın: 2016, 101). Thus, her hair made of leaves of great beech, and daisies as forelock, and a rabbit and a squirrel drawn around her hair. Some other leaves were painted on her body in the form of a necklace. Those leaves coloured in yellowish, on the other hand, her hair formed in green to represent differing seasons as summer/spring and winter/autumn. Her protection role in nature was defined with the Earth on her belly as in Figure 8.

Bayanay

Bayanay, also named May Ana, goddess of fertility and wealth in Turkic and Altaic mythologies (Verbitski, 1878; Gogolev, 1993). Etymologically, *ma (mā)* is the main mother goddess in Anatolia and has similarities with Cybele (Karakurt: 2011, 200). She is defined as a blond woman with silver hair, having a high feminine energy (Karaca, 2011: 11).



Figure 9. Bayanay, the goddess of fertility.

Regarding her strengths and beauty, Bayanay was illustrated in the form of a female warrior. Her connection to nature and animals characterized with a tiger-like skin wearing and a silver coloured wolf helmet, having a large sword on her back. Similar to her definitions, she had blonde hair and feminine appearance.

Kam

The main concern of ancient Turks, who believed that the world and the universe had a certain order, was the disruption of this order. The old kam/shamans, who acted as ambassadors between natural beings and people, worked to ensure that every action was auspicious, beautiful, blessed, and by the rules (Gökalp, 2016: 102).



Figure 10. Kam/shaman the healer, religious leader.

Representatives of the religion of ancient Turks were khagans and kam/shamans. As they interact with new civilizations and religious circles, the names and duties of kam/shamans change, leading to new religions with adaptation to new geographies. As in all belief systems, ritual is very important for kam/shamans. The ritual is rooted in game and magic (Dağı, 2020: 1030). Köprülü, And and Potapov mentioned shamans below:

Shamans had many skills such as magic, dance, music, and medicine and they had a great influence on the people (Köprülü, 1989; And, 2007; Potapov: 2012: 18).The beliefs of *kam*, *shaman*, and *bahşı* have no longer been accepted as religion in the periods of Seljuk, Ottoman, and Turkey (And, 1985; Dağı: 2020: 1032).

Bostan Dedesi

Bostan Dedesi is commonly attributed to Oguz Turks. He lives in villages on the edge of agricultural fields in rural areas. Bostan Dedesi appears in the form of an old man with his hair and beard mixed irregularly and as a country god-like being who can talk to various forest creatures and tells tales to those around him (Boratov, 2021: 40-43; Bölükbaşı, 2022: 226-227). Bostan Dedesi can be considered a prototype of Nasreddin Hodja (Bölükbaşı, 2022: 226). Özdemir (2010) defined Nasreddin Hodja as below:

Nasreddin Hodja has been a symbol of humour and critical thinking that is the basis of science for approximately eight hundred years. In one sense, Nasreddin Hodja, a wise sage of the Turkish world, has educated many followers through his wisdom.



Figure 11. Bostan Dedesi is mostly known as a storyteller.

Creatures Of War (Group 3)

War is a phenomenon that has existed since the creation of humans. All the material and spiritual developments and scientific and moral advances throughout history have not been able to eliminate the ongoing wars between people, and even caused it to become stronger both technologically and intellectually, increasing its spreading area and power of destruction (Göksu, 2009: 266).

Kızagan Han

Kızagan Han is the god of war in Turkic and Altai mythologies. He lives on the ninth floor of heaven. He is the son of Kayra Han (Karakurt, 2011: 132). He is leading armies, and protecting warriors in defeating enemies. He is described as standing on his camel with a red horse halter. Many victories of Turks are dedicated to Kızagan Han (Çoruhlu, 1995; Çoruhlu: 2014: 99).



Figure 12. Kızagan Han, the god of war

Apart from the god of war Kızagan Han, Turks established a relationship between the camels and the rains, which caused lightning and flood. They have put forward various mythological narratives on this subject (Buluç, 2001: 322). In these narratives, it is seen that there are young people who have the power to make thunder, lightning, and rain on the back of a camel flying in the sky. Each of these young people is a god who has the power to direct different weather events. Although the flying camel is accepted as the cause of these events in the narratives, they are mainly gods who make thunder, and lightning and have the power to make rain. The flying camel appears as the mount of the sky gods, as in the god of war Kızagan Han (Alptekin, 2021: 240).

Mergen Han

Kayra Han has three sons: Ülgen Han, Mergen Han, and Kızagan Han. Ülgen Han represents mercy, his appearance, Kızagan Han represents anger and revenge (war), his power, and Mergen Han represents wisdom, which is his sovereignty (Chaptukova, 2014: 51). Concrete physical qualifications about Mergen Han are insufficient, stories and narrations are about his characteristics (Karakurt, 2011: 152).

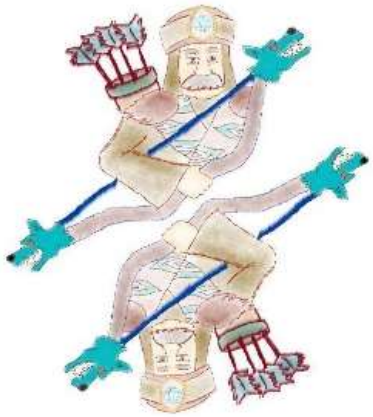


Figure 13. Mergen Han, the god of wisdom.

According to narrations of ancient Turks, Mergen Han is considered to be the god of wisdom. He lives on the seventh floor of heaven near the sun. Mergen means archery. The origin of this name probably occurred as a reason ancient Turks ascribed their ability to make long-range plans to archers as a sign of wisdom (Bölükbaşı, 2022: 331).

Çıvılar

Kaşgarlı Mahmut, in his masterpiece *Dîvânu Lugâti't-Türk* mentioned on çıvılar. Kaşgarlı defined *çıvı* as related to *ervah* (animal-ancestral) belief. Due to this belief, *çıvılar* is a kind of goblin. According to Kaşgarlı when the people of two towns fight each other, çıvılar also fights among themselves. The victory depended on the fight between these goblins and their side (Şahin, 2009: 161).

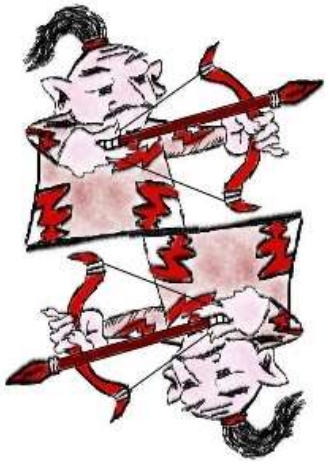


Figure 14. Çıvılar, goblin warriors.

CONCLUSION

Since mythology is a notion that encompasses all aspects of oral and written tradition, it has significant relevance in representing the cultural heritage of communities. It is commonly known that mythology can vary in societies and that other geographies may also have similar features of mythology.

Turkic mythology has evolved over a large geographic area, interacting with various cultures, and fusing especially Chinese and Indian religious tendencies with its cultural values. Although it is a mythology with numerous, strong oral expressions and traditions as sources, visual representations of Turkic mythology are countable.

Heroes of Celtic, Scandinavian and Germanic myths had also limited illustrations till the 19th century similar to the Turks. However, these epics and heroes have begun to be depicted by Western communities since the 19th centuries, and Greek-Roman influence on these depictions are recognizable. Original illustrations through myths have been noticeable in China, India, and Iran, which are relatively outside of the social impact of the West. It might be claimed that the miniatures of Chinese, Indian, and Iranian geographies acquired their own unique descriptive style.

Turkic mythology in particular is underutilised for this purpose, despite the fact that mythology has always served as inspiration for designers and artists. As Turkic mythology finds opportunities to be portrayed in animations, games, or other forms of media, it can gain recognition on a national and international level. In contrast, thousands of animations, games, etc. are directly derived from Greek mythology which is mentioned comparatively in this article, and many heroes in comics were designed with inspiration from figures in Greek mythology worldwide. These myths can be found in practically every aspect of visual design, including movies, video games, logos, posters, and corporate identities and emblems.

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