



Reflections on The Historical Foundations of The Images of The Witch and The Sorceress in Uzbek Folklore

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Abstract: The emergence of mythological images based on the worldview of early humans and their participation in epic works represent a unique interpretation. In the earliest mythological conceptions, the distinct forces and elements of nature were personified as female figures, and corresponding spirits were named after women. This theory is associated with the matriarchal stage of early state formation in human society. In epic works—products of the people's poetic thinking—female characters initially portrayed with positive attributes gradually began to appear in negative interpretations, symbolizing evil, rivalry, and threats to societal peace and harmony. Among such figures are the yalmog'iz (hag) and the sorceress. These characters were originally formed as mythological rivals representing evil, magic, and connections to the supernatural world. This article presents reflections on the genesis of these figures.

Keywords: yalmog'iz, sorceress, mythological image, mother, rival, evil, old woman.

Introduction: The mythological foundations concerning the creation of the universe, epic space, and the unreachable land trace back to ancient times.

In the ancient manuscript Ta'birnoma, the universe is described as consisting of three parts: the sky, the earth, and the underworld [1, p.49]. In ancient Turkic myths, the sky was the dwelling of deities, the earth was the domain of humans, while the underworld was

considered the abode of evil spirits such as devils, dragons, and yalmog'iz hags [2, p.16]. Erich Fromm emphasizes that myths are a crucial means of expressing the human soul, inner world, and psyche through the language of symbols, and evaluates myth as the origin of all art [3, p.183].

Mythology holds an essential place in the history of human thought. Without it, it is impossible to study any ethnic layer or the origins of human-cosmos relationships [4, p.91]. Concepts associated with mythological beings are characteristic of all the peoples of the world [5, p.283].

As the matrilineal system collapsed and was replaced by a social order based on patrilineality, male dominance in society intensified. As a result, religious and cultural beliefs such as worshiping women as goddesses, deifying them, or venerating them as protectors gradually weakened. In epic works – products of the poetic thinking of the people – female characters who were once depicted with positive qualities began to be portrayed in negative interpretations, symbolizing rival women who promote evil and disrupt peace and harmony in society.

The earliest representations of rival women in the folk imagination formed under the images of alvasti, witches, yalmog'iz, maston, and the qarasoch kampir. In epic works, their main function is shown as causing suffering to people, sowing seeds of oppression and hostility in society, obstructing the hero from achieving their goal, using cunning and deception, and employing magical sorcery [6]. Rival women are typically depicted in the human imagination as old, ugly, and unattractive crones. This indicates that they are united under the general “sign of old age” [7, p.45]. This sign of old age is, in fact, the cultural crisis of the matriarchal system that had begun to lose its historical function. The portrayal of rivals as elderly women serves to diminish the social status of women and restrict their actual societal participation. Traditionally, the period when evil forces are considered to be most active is compared to winter, and this belief is also connected with the aforementioned perspectives. The end of spring and the arrival of severe cold in folk imagination are interpreted as the awakening of negative, irrational forces – that is, the revival of evil spirits.

One of the characters created based on these beliefs is Ayozi Momo, a mythological figure representing the cold and terrifying face of winter. It is believed that each of the ninety days of winter is associated with one of the sons of this old woman (Ayozi Momo). If the winter is mild and the ninety days are warm, Aziz

Momo becomes enraged, and during the final six days of winter—called the Ayamajuz days (corresponding to March 13–19, which include the ahman-dahman, xezim-xirmon periods)—severe cold occurs, and Ayozi Momo is said to address her sons with the words: “To'qson, to'qsoning ham mening bir kunimcha yo'qsan”

(“Ninety, not even all ninety of your days equal one of mine”) [7, pp. 390–391].

Moreover, in many sources, Ayozi Momo is mentioned by the name Ayamajuz, and in modern literature and poetry, this name is more frequently used. Ayamajuz (from Arabic: ayyām – days, 'ajūz – old woman) [8, p.111] is a mythological figure who, dissatisfied with the inability of her ninety sons to bring enough cold, brings a bitter wind in the early days of spring—right when trees begin to blossom [9, p.156].

According to other sources, “Based on long-term observations, people noticed that the week before Navruz was always cold, even causing the ground to freeze, and thus they began referring to it as Ayamajuz, Ayyom, or Shisha kunlari (Glass Days)” [7, p.391]. Thus, the name Ayozi Momo refers to the bitter cold that occurs in the early days of spring, just before the end of severe winter.

Another group of mythological figures interpreted as evil forces or rivals are yalmog'iz and witches. In humanity's earliest perceptions, these characters initially appeared as supportive, protective women, but later were portrayed as tormenting, oppressive figures—rivals to the heroes in epics, hindering them, envious and cunning women. The formation of these characters in the public consciousness as “negative types,” rivals, and symbols of evil is closely linked to the gradual collapse of the matriarchal era and the firm establishment of the patriarchal order, as noted in many sources.

Some sources state that the origin of the yalmog'iz figure is tied to the dominance of female clan leaders and the influence of the sacred grandmother cult [10, p.81]. The Russian folklorist V. Y. Propp also noted that “Yalmog'iz originates from an ancestral totem associated with the maternal line” [11, p.41].

The dual representation of the old woman figure—sometimes as a protector, sometimes as a rival—is connected to the transitional stages of the primitive era and the dualistic worldview of life, which was based on the conflict between good and evil [22, 23]. As an example, we can refer to one Uzbek folk tale: Olmos Batir. In the semantic structure of the tale, the image of the old woman plays an important role. The tale includes two distinct old woman characters, each performing a different function: one is portrayed as a helper and protector, while the other is depicted as a

rival. In the first stage of the tale, Olmos Batir encounters a cave during his journey and meets an old woman “whose face radiates light.” This old woman cannot be evaluated as a rival; rather, she is a wise, advising female figure—a protector guiding the hero.

In V. Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* [12, p.168], the old woman whom Olmos Batir first encounters fulfills the function of the “donor.” She listens to Olmos Batir’s intention, gives him magical items (a mirror, a comb, and a needle), and also arranges the help of her ogre sons. These aspects show that the old woman serves to help the leading hero achieve his goal [13, p.4].

The later-appearing Yalman old woman in the tale is completely different; her main task is to oppose Olmos Batir and test him. She is the one who has imprisoned the bulbulig’oy bird and is depicted as a female figure representing evil forces. Fighting her is one of the main trials the hero must face in the tale. Olmos Batir uses the magical items given to him by the first old woman to escape from her [13, p.4]. It is clear from this that the Yalman old woman is portrayed as the antagonist of the main hero and is depicted as an evil force in the tale.

If we consider the etymology of the word yalmog’iz, it consists of *yal* – brave, heroic; *ma* – unknown; *g’iz* – girl, thus forming the meaning “an unknown brave girl” [14, p.121]. This semantic structure shows that the character initially existed in ancient sources as a positive and powerful female figure. However, over time, especially during periods when patriarchal ideology grew stronger, such independent and courageous female characters began to be interpreted as threats to society. As a result, the image of yalmog’iz transformed into a negative figure – an evil old woman.

Folklorist K. Imomov, who described yalmog’iz as a syncretic image and a character who either causes the emergence of conflict or its resolution in folk epics [10, p.252], may have had this dual interpretation of the figure in mind.

Among the people, another form of the yalmog’iz character appears under the name Yosuman kampir. “Yosuman – in folklore and written literature – is a negative character symbolizing deceit. Yosuman typically destroys the lives of pure individuals through trickery and cunning. She sows discord between a girl and her father, a mother and her son, or between

lovers. For example, in Alisher Navoi’s epic *Farhod and Shirin*, Yosuman renders the invincible Farhod unconscious with deceit and brings him to Khosrow. In legends, fairy tales, and epics, Yosuman is also referred to as a witch, a sly, cunning, and deceitful old woman” [15]. As can be seen, Yosuman, yalmog’iz, and witch are different names for the same character.

At the same time, “the yalmog’iz figure is found in the folklore of nearly all the peoples of the world, and in many nations’ fairy tales and epics, its twofold nature is evident: either as a helper and protector of the epic hero, or as an opponent and bringer of harm” [16, p.3]. According to Kyrgyz mythology, the yalmog’iz is a seven-headed demonomorphic creature. In the oral literature of the ancient Turks, the yalmog’iz is considered an active character and is sometimes compared to a dragon in terms of appearance. In some interpretations, the origin of the yalmog’iz is also linked to the cult of the protective Mother [17, p.289].

Scholars such as V. Ya. Propp and A. A. Potebnya argue that this figure emerged due to its association with the roles of shaman-sorceress, keeper of the tribal household fire, and guardian of the realm of the dead [18].

In Kazakh folk mythology, the yalmog’iz is described as follows:

“Zhalmouyz kampir – in Kazakh mythology, is a demonic creature in the form of a hunched old woman in tattered clothes. She has seven heads with yellow teeth and long, sharp claws” [19]. Like the yalmog’iz figure in Uzbek folklore, she is said to dwell far from human habitation—usually in mountains, forests, or caves.

Additionally, the name is translated from Kazakh as “gnawing mouth,” and the word kampir means “old woman.” Similar versions of this figure appear in the mythologies of the Tatars, Kyrgyz, Bashkirs, and other Turkic peoples.

According to sources, she gains a girl’s trust and secretly drinks blood from her knees each day, weakening the poor woman.

In Kazakh folk imagination, the yalmog’iz kampir transforms into the shape of a lung floating on water and swims unnoticed toward a person. Then, she returns to her seven-headed form, clings tightly to the victim, and ultimately destroys them.



Figures 1–2. The Depiction of the Mythological “Yalmog’iz” in Kazakh Folklore [19]. Among the Kazakh people, water is regarded as a medium connecting this world with the otherworld. Since the main ethnic layer—the nomadic pastoralists—frequently suffered from floods, they began to perceive water as both a force of nature and a rival. “People who experienced such natural disasters began to view water as the realm of evil powers – the ‘other world. They believed that a person who fell into it would never return” [20, p.79].

The earlier-mentioned depiction of the yalmog’iz taking the form of a lung floating on the water and deceiving people is also based on this belief. In particular, the following analogous female figures appear in world mythology:

In Hindu tradition – Shakini, a female jinn or demoness;

In German folklore – Hulda, a witch;

Among the Kets – a four-fingered woman who brings evil, illness, and disaster;

Among Native Americans – Hanekasa, a woman living in the dark world who brings death to those she meets;

In Dravidian mythology – Amma, a bloodthirsty, disease-spreading woman; Among the Abkhaz – Arunap, a man-eating woman;

In Russian folklore – Baba Yaga; In Hungarian folklore – Boszorkány; Among the Mordvins – Vir-Ava; In Greek mythology – Gello, a child-stealing demon;

Among the Kazakhs – Jez Tırnaq (“iron nails”); Among the Ingush and Chechens – Yeshandir, the guardian of the place of transition to the world of the dead [21].

According to the above-mentioned sources, the figures of yalmog’iz, witch, and Yosuman are various names for a single image – that of the female rival – which has emerged in the mythological imagination of the world's folk traditions.

This figure primarily appears in folk tales. Most often, in epic interpretations, she resists the hero, kidnaps

girls to teach them her craft, drinks their blood to stay young, possesses magical knowledge, and causes suffering to people [22].

As initial mythological representations of the female rival, yalmog’iz and witches were formed as symbols connected with evil, sorcery, and the other (underworld) realm. The maston women found in epic poems (Jorkhun Maston, Momog’ul Maston, Surkhayl Maston) are the humanized, socially and psychologically deepened, culturally developed evolutionary successors of these archaic figures. Linked to real-life settings, they embody modern traits such as intelligence, cunning, bravery, and self-interest. These characters were shaped in connection with ancient mythological notions found throughout world folklore.

In our view, the existence of a single character under various names across different regions reflects the dominance of a unified mythological consciousness, a collective worldview shared by humanity.

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