



The Origin of Evergreen Trees

Buryat People – Russia, Mongolia, China

At the beginning of time, Father Sky had two sons, whom he called Ulgen Tenger and Erleg Khan. To Ulgen he gave the dominion of the Upper World, while to Erleg he gave the dominion of the Underworld.

The world, at that time, was composed only of water, but Ulgen managed to create the earth. With a mixture of earth and water, he began to shape animals, until finally he shaped human beings in a special way, so that they would be immortal. In this manner, they would take better care of everything that he, Ulgen, had created.

But Erleg, envious of his brother's work, and fearing that humans would take too much care of what Ulgen had created, approached the humans and spat on them. His intention was that they get sick and die.

So it was that human beings were born with the shadow of death on their backs, just like all other beings, including trees, which originally lost their leaves during the winter.

Some time later, the Raven learned what had happened, how Erleg, out of envy, had condemned humanity to die, and he grieved for the human beings. He spent several days thinking about what had happened, saddened by the thought of what life would be like for humans if they had kept their original immortality.

In the end, he came up with an idea to remedy the evil caused by Erleg. At that time, there was a very high mountain in the centre of the world, a mountain called Humber Ula. Its summit reached the foundations of the Upper World. There, in permanent contact with the

Upper World, a golden poplar with silvery leaves grew. Beside it flowed a spring of pure water: The Spring of the Waters of Life.

Raven knew that, whoever drank from those waters, would regain their health and live forever. But the path to the top of the Humber Ula was impossible for human beings, so they could never access the waters.

‘But, what if I bring them some water and make them immortal’, thought Raven.

So, no sooner thought than done, Raven flew to the top of Humber Ula, landed on the edge of the Spring of the Waters of Life and collected as much water as he could in his beak. Then, he flew off heading to the village where the first humans lived.

But they lived by a grove of pine trees and, when Raven flew across the skies above, he unwittingly frightened an owl, who, startled, screeched loudly. And the screech of the owl startled Raven, who, frightened, opened his beak, letting the miraculous water fall on the pines. So it was that the original pines, from which all conifer trees would later emerge, stopped losing their leaves in winter.

‘But, why did Raven –some people still wonder– not return to the Spring of the Waters of Life for more water?’

No one knows for sure. Some say that perhaps magic could only work once. But others claim that the lord of the Underworld, Erleg Khan, on learning what Raven had attempted, ascended to the Upper World to protest to his brother Ulgen. He urged him to see that, if humans did not die and spend some time in the Underworld with him, what subjects would he, as Lord of the Underworld, have? □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2020).

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Comments

This myth is part of the oral tradition of the Buryat People, which is the largest minority ethnic group in Siberia, although they are of Mongolian origin and share many characteristics with them. Their oral tradition remained the only way of passing down knowledge until the 17th century, when they adopted an alphabet.

Specifically, they used their folktales, myths and legends as a way of transmitting their ancestral wisdom. As in many other oral traditions, these stories –the *uliger*– were used to explain to children why things are the way they are in the world, as in the case of this story. They also transmit the values of society and its worldview.

The *uliger* are usually told by the *uligershin*, who are a kind of bard who use, as an accompaniment to their recitations, the *morin juur*. This is a musical instrument similar to the cello, but only with two strings, and it has become a symbol of Mongolia. In addition, and similar to many other oral traditions, stories were told during the winter when the group gathered around the fire. This was because they said that, if the *uliger* were told in summer, there was a risk of the cold weather returning (Seb Durban, 2007).

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 10: Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble / Universal Responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 2: Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 7e: Ensure universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction.

Principle 10d: Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

