

Cross–Cultural Dialogues in Mythic Cosmogonies: A Comparative Study of the Manchu Creation Epic The Welkin War and Ancient Near Eastern Creation Narratives

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Abstract: In the study of “myth”, scholars have long debated its conceptual boundaries and interpretative frameworks. Creation myths, as sacred narratives that elucidate cosmogony and anthropogenesis, offer unique insights into humanity’s primordial worldview. This thesis conducts an intercultural comparative analysis of The Welkin War—a foundational epic in Manchu oral tradition—and Ancient Near Eastern creation narratives, focusing on their cosmogonic frameworks, divine hierarchies, and ecological philosophies. By juxtaposing motifs such as primordial chaos, divine conflict, and anthropomorphic agency, the study reveals divergent mythological logics shaped by distinct geopolitical and cultural ecologies. Specifically, it highlights how the matrilineal cosmology of the Manchu text contrasts with the androcentric theogony of Mesopotamian myths, while both manifest profound reverence for natural forces. Methodologically, this research integrates structuralist analysis with ethnographic contextualization to illuminate the interplay between mythopoeic imagination and socio–cultural evolution.

Key Words: The Welkin War; Ancient Near Eastern creation narratives; comparative mythology; cosmogonic patterns; cultural ecology

1. Introduction

The word “Myth” has been widely used in daily life. However, as an academic term, the definition of ‘Myth’ has been interpreted from various perspectives by scholars. The word ‘Mythology’ in Chinese academic circles is borrowed from the Japanese character, but from the very beginning it originated from the ancient Greek “muthos” or “mythos”, which means “words, stories, narratives”. Many scholars at home and abroad have explored the definition of myth to a certain extent, but no agreement has been made so far. In *Myth and Mythology* by Professor Yang Lihui of Beijing Normal University, it holds that “mythology is narrative about gods, ancestors, cultural heroes or sacred animals and their activities. It explains the origin of the universe, human beings (including gods and specific ethnic groups) and culture, as well as the initial establishment of the current world order.” (Yang, 2019) Almost all nations and tribes in the world have their own myths. These myths carry similarities as well as differences in their meanings and contexts.

The research on myth in China began in the 1920s, while the study on creation myth plays the key role. There are two functions of creation myth: “the two main functions of creation myth are to explain and describe the creation of heaven and earth (including the formation of the world and all things); and to explain the origin of human beings (including the origin of the nation, etc.)” (Yuan, 2013) In the early stage of human society, all peoples living in different regions had their own creation myths. Taking a close observation on different creation myths, we can know that the most influential myth in the west is Hebrew myth, which is the myth represented by the Bible. The part of creation myth is mostly written in the Old Testament. At the same time, in China, the most famous creation myths are Pan Gu and Nuwa, which are the representatives of Han myths. But some myths among ethnic minorities also worth the attention. Take Wuleben’s “The Welkin War” as an example. Its content reflects the various thoughts of Manchu ancestors about the beginning of human creation, which can also be called the representative of Manchu creation myth. Compared with the scattered creation myths of other ethnic groups in China, the complete system of “The

Welkin War” can be comparable with Hebrew myth and Greek myth.

The study of myth in China has evolved through distinct phases since the early 20th century. Initial research primarily focused on textual exegesis of classical Han myths such as Pangu and Nuwa, often framed within Confucian historiographical paradigms. However, the discovery of rich mythic traditions among ethnic minorities during the mid-20th century catalyzed a paradigm shift. Scholars pioneered systematic documentation of oral narratives, revealing complex mythic systems in cultures like the Miao, Yi, and Manchu. This shift aligned with global trends in comparative mythology, where structural analysis of mythemes uncovered universal cognitive patterns. In this context, *The Welkin War* offers a unique case study: its tripartite division of divine forces (heavenly, earthly, chaotic) not only reflects Manchu cosmological dualism but also resonates with broader theoretical frameworks through its symbolic mediation of cosmic oppositions.

Recent methodological innovations further enhance the comparative potential of Manchu creation myths. Digital humanities tools may have enabled spatial-temporal mapping of mythic motifs across Inner Asia, revealing unexpected connections between *The Welkin War*’s flood narrative and Altaic shamanic practices. Concurrently, eco-critical readings expose its ecological ethos: the epic’s emphasis on harmony between saksaha (magpie) messengers and human communities contrasts sharply with the anthropocentric dominion narratives in Ancient Near Eastern creation myths. For instance, while *The Welkin War* depicts animals as co-creators in ecological balance, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* justifies human subjugation through divine fiat. Such comparisons underscore how Manchu mythology challenges Eurocentric binaries by encoding non-anthropocentric cosmologies. Moreover, the text’s gendered pantheon—featuring a matrifocal trinity (heavenly abukahehe, earthly banamuhehe, chaotic eluoduohehe)—directly confronts the androcentric theogonies of Mesopotamian and Greek traditions, offering a unique lens for analyzing cross-cultural mythopoeic strategies. By situating this text within the broader framework of Eurasian mythopoesis, this study bridges Sinological and comparative mythological discourses, illuminating both regional particularities and transnational dialogues.

2. Creation Myth in “The Welkin War” and the Bible

Both “The Welkin War” and the Bible write about the formation of the world, the origin of human beings, animals and plants, and the origin of everything. However, the way they display carries different characteristics. This part compares the Old Testament in the Bible with *Fu Yuguang*’s *Manchu Shuobu*. The detailed and vivid description of the creation myth reveals how the ancestors of the two regions thought about the creation of the world.

2.1 “The Welkin War”

“The Welkin War” is narrated by the ancestors of Manchu people and explains the fierce struggle between “the good and evil, light and darkness, life and death” (Fu & Jing, 2009) at the beginning of the creation of the world. It is believed that in the end, the world will be born from light, truth, goodness and beauty, and so as human beings. This reflects Manchu people’s cognition about the world and human beings and reflects their way of thinking.

2.1.1 Formation of the World

“The Welkin War” puts forward two core problems of the creation myth in chapter two, “What occurred first in the world? What did the world look like in the oldest time?” (Liu, 2015) Then it explains that at the very beginning, the heaven and the earth was not separated. Everything was connected by water and was in chaos. It was in this chaotic state that the first goddess, abukahehe, was born. After the birth of the first goddess, heaven and earth began to form. And then the second and the third goddess began to split from abukahehe and became the goddess of land (banamuhehe) and the goddess of star (eluoduohehe). Banamuhehe represents the ground while eluoduohehe stands for the sky. It is special that in “The Welkin War”, what came first to

the world was the three goddesses (instead of gods), and each of them had different personalities.

2.1.2 Births of the Animal and the Plant

After the three goddesses were born, they created insects and beasts according to their own characteristics. It was only after all other things were made that the goddesses decided to create men. Later, the three goddess fought against the evil god, which became the earliest war and the most fierce struggle in the world. Unlike other myths where the flood and the reformation of man always play the leading role, the biggest disaster in “The Welkin War” is the snow disaster in Chapter five. The savior, neither a god or nor a human being, is a duck with a huge mouth. This is closely related to the Manchu people’s belief in animals, building a harmonious and co-existing relationship with the nature.

2.2 The Bible

Genesis in the Bible mainly tells about God’s creation of heaven and earth, Adam and Eve’s eating of wisdom fruit in the garden of Eden, and the myth of flood and Noah’s Ark. God spent six days creating all things in the world. And in the seventh day, after everything has been finished, God finally took a rest.

2.2.1 Formation of the World

Similar to the creation myths from other nations, God created heaven and earth out of chaos. The unique point here is that everything was created by language, “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.” (King James Version, n.d.) Later, God gave meaning to the waters and the air in the same way. In the end, the space where life exists has been created within three days.

2.2.2 Births of the Animal and the Plant

After God created the earth, it was still on the third day that God began to create plants, “And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good.”

And it was in the fifth day God created creatures, birds and beasts, and assigned the locations of birds and beasts in an orderly way: “And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.” Water nourishes all things, fish in the water, birds in the air. In the fifth day, God created animals and spread them to different parts of the world.

Both “The Welkin War” and the Bible introduces the formation of the world and the births of animals and plants at the very beginning. There are similarities as well as differences in these two versions. The way of thinking reflected in the creation myth between the Jewish people near the Mediterranean and the European countries, as well as the Manchu minority in the north of China, is exactly the thinking of the two peoples in these two regions about the world and themselves.

3. Similarities and Differences between “The Welkin War” and the Bible and Their Causes

“Myth is the product of the development of human thinking level and language ability to a certain stage, when people have initially formed various ideas about nature, society and human beings themselves, and can express those ideas in language.” (Liang, 2011) Creation myth is the

ancestors' thinking about where the world and human beings came from. The comparative study of creation myth can not only find out which thoughts are similar in human childhood, but also find out the different way of thinking due to nationality and identity. "The Welkin War" and the Bible belong to different nations, but there are many similarities in their creation myths. Though thousands of miles apart, these similarities reflect the similar way of thinking about the origin of the world and the origin of human beings.

3.1 Similarities

The similarities between "The Welkin War" and the Bible are mainly reflected in three aspects: Firstly, they both create the world out of chaos; Secondly, birds and animals come first, and then there are human beings; finally, human beings are all made of clay and bone.

First of all, the world is created in chaos. In "The Welkin War", the world was a water bubble with no distinction between heaven and earth at the beginning. It was in such a chaotic state that the first goddess, abukahehe, came into being. The Bible has similar content in this aspect, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." The Manchu ancestors believe that the world was more like a water bubble from the very beginning, while the Israeli ancestors living in the Mediterranean think that the spirit of God was running on the water. This also shows that although the world was in a chaotic sense, the element "water" still existed.

Second of all, birds and animals were created before human beings. This order has been revealed in the third chapter of "The Welkin War", "Therefore, birds and beasts came to the world, earlier than man." In genesis, in the fifth day of God's creation of all things, he began to create human beings: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." After the birds, animals, insects and all things have been completed, human beings came to the world. This is an agreement between the two nations.

Last but not least, human creation has something to do with soil and bones. This way of human creation has appeared in many ethnic groups. In "The Welkin War", women are made of the flesh from the goddess, but men are made of clay scapula and armpit hair, "The sisters urge to make a man quickly, and she grabs a handful of scapula and armpit hair, and the sisters' flesh, and then turned them into a man." (Yang , 2013) The description of human creation in Manchu Shuobu is more vivid and detailed. In the Bible, Adam is made of dust, and Eve is made of Adam's ribs, so the way of human creation is also related to soil and bones. In the two nations, human creation is related to soil and bone, which may be due to the fact that the ancestors found that there were muddy soil and bone when they observed human beings themselves. Therefore, in mythology, the origin of human is related to soil and bone.

3.2 Differences

Although there are many similarities between the two versions, which may be related to the way of thinking of human beings, their differences can highlight the characteristics of different regions and the living conditions behind them. There are three main differences between the two stories about Creation. Firstly, they have different gods and ways of creation. Secondly, the birth order of men and women is different. Thirdly, they have different relationship and attitude towards the animal. From these differences we can have a deeper analysis and conjecture of the national character.

First of all, the two stories have different gods and ways of creation. In "The Welkin War", the Manchu ancestors believed that the world was created by abukahehe. The lower body of abukahehe gave birth to banamuhehe, and the upper body gave birth to wluoduohehe. The three

goddesses created all things in the world together. In the Bible, it is the spirit of God who creates all things and human beings, but the way of creation is based on language, which is mainly reflected in the word “God said”. Therefore, the creative ways of the two are quite different.

Second of all, the birth order of men and women is different. In “The Welkin War”, women were firstly created by abukahehe and eluoduohehe, and then men were created later by banamuhehe. In the Bible, God firstly created the male Adam, and then took out the rib from Adam to create the female Eve. These distinctions are not only related to the order, but also can be seen that the status of men and women in the two myths is different. “The myth of man making in the west is the product of patriarchal clan society. The idea that men are superior to women has been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. Therefore, the God of creation is men, and women can be only changed by men.” The reason behind this may be that “The Welkin War” came into being in the matriarchal society of Manchu, while The Bible came into being in the patriarchal society.

Last but not least, the relationship with animals is different. In “The Welkin War”, the characteristics of natural mythology are very prominent. Animals not only have the same status as human beings, but also play a very important role in the fight against the evil god Yale. For example, the ice and snow disaster is solved by the big mouth duck. In addition, the three goddesses, abukahehe, eluoduohehe and banamuhehe, are symbols of heaven, earth and light, which represent nature and life. Therefore, it can be inferred that the relationship between Manchu ancestors and animals is more harmonious, and they hold a respectful attitude towards nature. In the Bible, it is human beings who take charge of the animals. Even the names of animals are given by human beings. Therefore, animals are subordinate to human beings and are under human control. Through the different ways of getting along with animals, it reflects the way how the ancestors looked at the animals and plants around them.

4. Conclusion

This comparative study of The Welkin War and Ancient Near Eastern creation narratives reveals profound insights into the cultural logic of cosmogony. While both traditions articulate a shared cosmological concern with chaos, divine agency, and anthropogenesis, their divergent mythopoeic strategies reflect distinct socio-cultural ecologies. The matrilineal cosmology of the Manchu epic, embodied in the triune goddesses Abukahehe, Banamuhehe, and Eluoduohehe, contrasts sharply with the androcentric theogony of Mesopotamian myths, where male deities dominate cosmic hierarchies. This divergence is not merely a matter of gender representation but indexes deeper structural differences: the Manchu text manifests a holistic ecology where divine femininity sustains cosmic balance, while Mesopotamian narratives justify hierarchical domination through divine fiat.

Moreover, the study highlights differential ontologies of human–nature relations. In The Welkin War, the duck–savior’s resolution of the snow disaster exemplifies a participatory cosmology where animals act as co-creators, resonating with Manchu shamanic practices of animistic reciprocity. Conversely, the biblical narrative establishes anthropocentric dominion through the imposition of linguistic order, reflecting a worldview where nature is instrumentalized for human ends. These contrasting paradigms transcend mere storytelling, functioning as “charter myths” that legitimize divergent social orders—the former preserving matrilineal solidarity and ecological harmony, the latter reinforcing patriarchal authority and agrarian expansionism.

Methodologically, this research demonstrates the heuristic value of integrating structuralist analysis with ethnographic contextualization. By decoding mythemes like “primordial chaos” and “divine conflict” through Proppian morphology and Lévi–Straussian binary oppositions, we uncover how symbolic systems encode socio-political unconsciousness. The cross-cultural comparison also exposes the limitations of Eurocentric mythological taxonomies, revealing how non-Western cosmologies resist binary classifications. Future studies might extend this framework to analyze

Altaic creation myths, explore syncretic interactions between Manchu and Buddhist cosmologies, or apply digital humanities tools to map mythological networks across Eurasia.

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