

Legends of Baikal

Hundreds of years before Russian fur traders reached Lake Baikal, Mongol tribes had settled in the area. These legends are examples of their cultural heritage. What sort of beliefs are held by the people who told these stories? How do the stories explain natural phenomena?



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One day a hunter was out shooting when he saw three beautiful swans flying toward a nearby lake. He followed the swans, saw them come down by the lake, take off their feathers, become women, and swim from shore. These three swans were the daughters of Esege Malan (a Buryat ancestor). The hunter stole the feathers of one of these swans, and when she came from the water, she couldn't fly away with her sisters. He caught the maiden, took her home, and made her his wife. Six children had been born to them when one day the daughter of Esege Malan distilled a strong brew, and after her husband had drunk much, she asked for her feathers, and he gave them to her. At that moment she turned into a swan and flew up through the smoke hole. One of her daughters tried to catch her and keep her from flying away, but only caught at her legs, which the girl's dirty hands made black. This is why swans, a sacred bird among the Buryats, have black legs. The mother circled around, came back within speaking distance of her daughter and said, "At the time of the New Moon, you will put out mare's milk and tea and scatter red tobacco." From this swan, the daughter of Esege Malan, came all the Trans-Baikal Buryats.

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"There are not only fish in the lake," declared a Mongol, "there are spirits, each one naughtier than the other. The lord of the waters rules them, and when he's angry, it's no joke for the fishermen; he juggles with the boats like a sorcerer with shells."

"Foolish savage," a soldier said to me, "he believes in spirits. Isn't he an idiot?"

And the soldier added with conviction, "It's not a spirit, it's a devil who is hidden at the bottom of the lake."

"Who told you?"

"The old people have seen him!"

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Three water babies – two boys and a little girl – came out of Lake Baikal to play upon the shore. They played until they were tired and then fell asleep. Two witches tried to capture them. But the children, waking up, cried to the great lake and the mountains, "Take us, Milky Sea Mother. Take us, inaccessible Mountain Father." Thereupon, waves rose high on the lake, rushed onto the shore, and almost swept the witches into the depths of Baikal. The little girl turned into a seal and disappeared into the lake. One of the boys turned into a black squirrel and hid in the mountains. The other boy was caught by the witch and given the name "Ekhirit-who-was-found-on-the-steep-bank," and it was said of him, "his mother was a crevice on Baikal's shore, his father was the speckled burbot fish."

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