

NAMING THE WATER WOMAN: A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF AQUATIC-FEMALE MYTHONYMS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK FOLKLORE

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Abstract

The female water spirit is among the most widely attested figures in world folklore, yet the comparative literature on it remains concentrated on European material. Turkic and Central Asian traditions are largely absent from the discussion, and no study has compared the English and Uzbek naming systems directly. This article asks what the two traditions name, how finely they divide the semantic space of the aquatic female being, and what the structure of each nomination field reveals about the conceptualisation behind it.

Keywords: Mythonym; folk nomenclature; water spirit; mermaid; Uzbek folklore; contrastive folkloristics.

Introduction

Few figures recur across folk traditions as persistently as the woman associated with water. She appears in Greek myth as the nymph, in Germanic tradition as the nixie, in Scottish story as the selkie, in Slavic belief as the rusalka, and in Central Asian narrative as the pari of springs and canals. The recurrence has invited two familiar explanations: diffusion from a common source, and independent generation from a shared human experience of water as simultaneously life-giving and lethal. Both explanations operate at the level of the figure. Neither has much to say about the words.

Yet the words are where a tradition records its distinctions. A folk nomenclature is not a neutral label set laid over a pre-existing category; it is a classification in its own right, and the parameters along which it divides the space tell us what the speakers of that tradition considered worth distinguishing. If one tradition has six words where another has two, the difference is not merely lexical richness. It indicates that the first tradition found reasons to separate cases that the second treated as one.

This article compares the nomination fields of two traditions that have not previously been set side by side: the English and Celtic field, and the Uzbek field together with its immediate Central Asian neighbours. The choice is motivated by maximal contrast. The first developed on an island surrounded by cold salt water, within a Christian frame that regarded the figure with suspicion. The second developed in a doubly landlocked region whose water comes from mountain snowmelt distributed through canals, within a syncretic Islamic frame that absorbed older Iranian and Turkic beliefs. If nomination systems encode anything about the relationship between a community and its water, these two should differ measurably.

Three questions organise what follows. First, what does each tradition name, and how many distinct designations does each field contain? Second, along which parameters does each field make its primary cuts? Third, where the two fields diverge, what accounts for the divergence?

The article is descriptive and comparative. It does not advance a claim about historical contact between the two traditions, and it does not treat either field as a survival of a reconstructable proto-system. Its contribution is a quantified description of a nomination field that has not been described in the international literature, and a demonstration that the two fields are organised on different principles.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Mythonyms as a lexical class

A mythonym is the proper or quasi-proper designation of a mythological being. The class sits awkwardly between proper nouns and common nouns: mermaid is a count noun that pluralises freely, while Anahita is a theonym that does not. Between these poles lies a graded zone occupied by most of the designations examined here, which behave as common nouns in narrative but retain the referential specificity of names.

What makes the class analytically useful is that its members carry an unusually dense semantic load. A single mythonym typically encodes, at minimum, the gender of the being, its habitat, and its disposition toward humans. Several encode morphology as well. The word therefore functions as a compressed description, and the set of words functions as a taxonomy.

2.2 Nomination density and conceptual salience

The working assumption of this study is that the number of distinct designations a tradition maintains within a semantic domain is an index of that domain's salience, and that the parameters distinguishing the designations indicate which aspects of the domain mattered. This assumption is standard in lexical typology and requires no stronger commitment than that communities elaborate vocabulary where they have reason to.

The assumption does carry one risk worth naming. Attestation is not uniform. English and Celtic material was collected systematically from the early nineteenth century by antiquarians working in a national-romantic frame, while Uzbek material was collected later, under different institutional conditions, and much of it reached print through Russian-language ethnography. A difference in the size of two recorded fields may therefore partly reflect a difference in collection history. This limitation is revisited in Section 6.

2.3 The gap this study addresses

The scholarly literature on water spirits is substantial and overwhelmingly European in coverage. Comparative treatments extend readily from Greek nymph to Germanic nixie to Celtic selkie, and the fairy-tale scholarship of recent decades has added sophisticated readings of the figure as a site of gender anxiety. Central Asian material enters this literature rarely, and when it does it is usually introduced as illustration rather than as a system to be analysed on its own terms. The consequence is that generalisations about "the water spirit" rest on a sample drawn from a single macro-region.

3. Data and method

3.1 The two datasets

Nine English and Celtic designations were assembled from standard folkloristic and lexicographic sources, with regional attestation recorded for each. Nine Uzbek and neighbouring Central Asian mythonyms were assembled from Uzbek folklore collections and from the ethnographic literature on pre-Islamic survivals in the region. The second set deliberately extends beyond Uzbek proper to include Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Iranian and Indic designations that circulate in the same cultural area, because

the Uzbek field cannot be read in isolation from the Iranian and Turkic strata that compose it.

A designation was admitted if it was attested in at least two independent sources, referred to a female or predominantly female being, and had water as its defining habitat. Designations referring to generic fairies without a water attachment were excluded, as were purely literary coinages without folk attestation.

3.2 Coding parameters

Each designation was coded for five parameters. Etymological structure records the morphemes composing the name and their source languages. Morphology records the physical form attributed to the being: hybrid, shape-shifting, or fully anthropomorphic. Dominant function records the role the being most often plays in narrative. Water type distinguishes salt, fresh, and unmarked. Region records the area of attestation.

Coding was carried out by the author and checked against the source descriptions in a second pass. Three cases proved indeterminate on the morphology parameter because sources disagree; these are discussed where they arise rather than resolved by fiat.

4. The English and Celtic nomination field

Table 1 presents the nine designations with their coding. The field is immediately striking for its internal differentiation: these are not nine words for one being but nine words for recognisably different beings, separated above all by what kind of body they have.

Table 1. Designations of aquatic female beings in English and Celtic tradition

Designation	Region	Etymology	Morphology	Dominant function	Water
water nymph	General English	Gk. nymphē "young bride"	Fully human	Patron of the source; healing	Fresh
mermaid	General English	OE mere "sea" + maid	Half fish, scaled tail	Portent; seduction; ambivalent	Salt
merrow	Ireland	Ir. murrúch "sea singer"	Green-haired woman; magic cap	Marriage; prophecy	Salt
ben-varrey	Isle of Man	Manx ben "woman" + varrey "sea"	Mermaid type	Benevolent; gives gifts	Salt

Designation	Region	Etymology	Morphology	Dominant function	Water
selkie	Orkney, Shetland	Sc. selch "seal"	Seal ↔ woman	Marriage; longing; return	Salt
kelpie	Scotland, N. England	Gael. calpa "colt"	Horse ↔ human	Drowning; warning	Fresh
each-uisge	Scottish Highlands	Gael. each "horse" + uisge "water"	Horse ↔ young man	Luring and devouring	Loch, sea inlet
morgen	Wales	Celt. mor "sea" + gen "born"	Fully human	Healing; prophecy; marriage	Lake, spring
undine	Continental → English	Lat. unda "wave"	Human; soulless	Gains a soul by marriage	Fresh

Three observations follow. First, the dominant organising parameter is morphology. The field divides cleanly into hybrid beings, shape-shifters and fully human forms, and this division cuts across both region and function. A speaker of this tradition who hears selkie knows immediately that a seal is involved; one who hears mermaid knows a tail is involved. The body is the primary fact.

Second, hybridity is concentrated in salt water. The mermaid, merrow and ben-varrey are all marine and all fish-tailed; the fresh-water designations are either fully human (water nymph, morgen, undine) or equine shape-shifters (kelpie, each-uisge). The correlation is not perfect, but it is strong enough to suggest that the fish-tail is a specifically maritime elaboration.

Third, the etymologies reveal a layered field. Three designations are transparently Germanic or Celtic compounds built from a water morpheme plus a gender morpheme: mere + maid, ben + varrey, mor + gen. Two are borrowed wholesale from classical and Latinate sources (water nymph, undine). Two derive from the animal involved rather than from water at all (selkie from seal, calpa from colt). The field is thus a composite of native compounding, learned borrowing, and metonymic naming from the animal form.

The functional column shows a marked skew toward danger. Of the nine designations, four have drowning, devouring, seduction or ominous portent as their dominant function. The benevolent cases — ben-varrey, morgen, water nymph — are the

minority, and two of the three are fresh-water. Where the English tradition names a marine female being, it usually names something that kills.

5. The Uzbek and Central Asian nomination field

Table 2 presents the second dataset. The internal logic is visibly different.

Table 2. Designations of aquatic female beings in Uzbek and neighbouring traditions

Mythonym	Tradition	Form attributed	Dominant function	Habitat
suv parisi	Uzbek	Beautiful young woman, long hair	Tempting, testing, offer of marriage	River, lake, canal
suv onasi	Uzbek	Older or young woman	Protects water sources; warns children	Deep lake, spring
ob-pariy	Tajik	Beautiful woman in white	Attracting, deceiving, testing	River, canal
su perisi	Kazakh	Young woman, sometimes half fish	Luring; bestowing wealth	Lake, river
su anası	Kazakh	Old woman	Guarding water; punishing	River, spring
jer-su iyesi	Kyrgyz	Unseen spirit	Patron of earth and water; requires offering	Earth and water
apsara	Indic	Divine dancer	Dancing at the celestial court; testing ascetics	Celestial waters
anahita	Iranian	Powerful goddess	Waters, fertility, patron of battle	All waters
naga	Indic	Half serpent, half human	Guardian of subterranean water; rain-giver	Subterranean water

The organising parameter here is not the body but the role. The field divides into the tester-bride (suv parisi, ob-pariy, su perisi), the guardian of the source (suv onasi, su anası, jer-su iyesi), and the divine or cosmological figure (anahita, apsara, naga). Morphology varies within each group and is not what the designations are tracking. The most consequential finding is negative. Hybridity — the defining feature of the English mermaid — is essentially absent from the core Uzbek designations. The suv parisi is a woman: supernaturally beautiful, but anatomically human. The single hybrid in the table, the naga, is Indic rather than Turkic and is serpentine rather than

piscine. The Kazakh su perisi is recorded in some sources as half fish, which is best read as a later contact feature rather than a native trait.

A second finding concerns water type. Every Uzbek and Turkic designation in the table is anchored in fresh water, and the specific habitats named are telling: river, canal, irrigation ditch, spring, deep pool. The canal in particular has no counterpart in the English list. It is a constructed watercourse, and its presence in the habitat column indicates a tradition in which the supernatural inhabits infrastructure as readily as wilderness.

A third finding concerns the etymology of the central term. Suv parisi is a compound of Turkic suv "water" with Iranian pari, a being of the Zoroastrian and later Persian imaginary. The core designation of the Uzbek field is thus itself a record of cultural layering: a Turkic environmental noun governing an Iranian supernatural one. The English mermaid, by contrast, is a wholly Germanic compound. Where the English field borrows at its periphery and compounds natively at its centre, the Uzbek field is hybrid at its centre.

The age parameter also distinguishes the fields. The Uzbek system systematically opposes a young tempting figure (parisi) to an old protecting one (onasi, anasi, literally "mother"). The English field has no equivalent morphological opposition; its beings are young by default, and age is not a naming parameter.

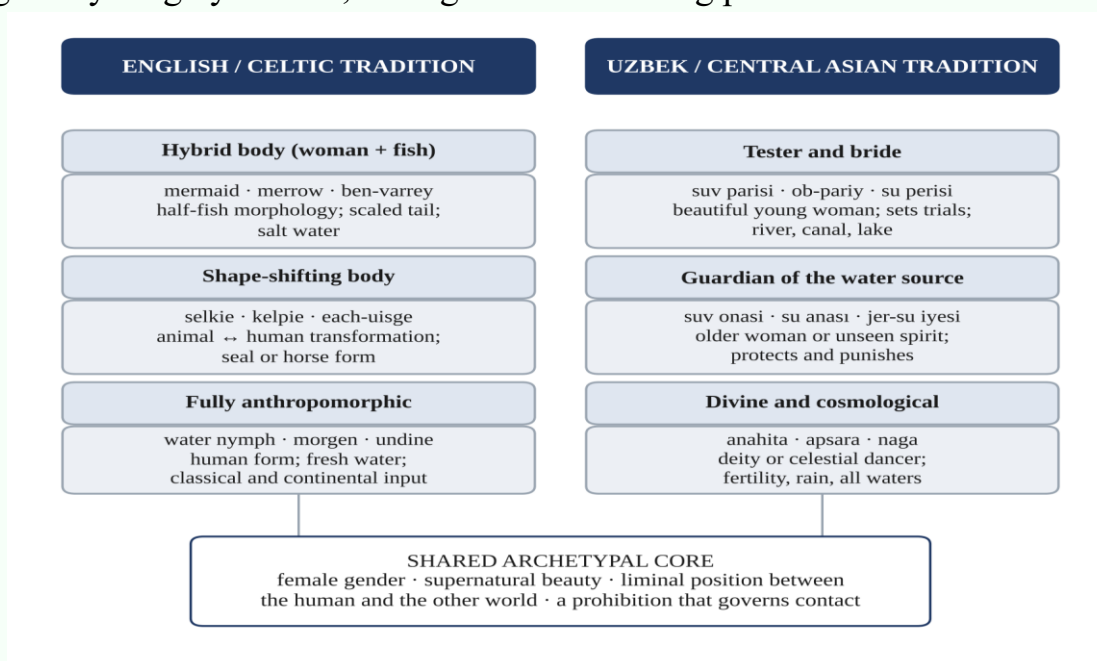


Figure 1. The two nomination fields and their shared archetypal core. The English field is partitioned by morphology, the Uzbek field by function.

6. Contrastive discussion

6.1 Two principles of classification

Table 3 sets the two fields against each other on the parameters that proved discriminating.

Table 3. Contrastive summary of the two nomination fields

Parameter	English and Celtic field	Uzbek and Central Asian field
Primary organising principle	Morphology of the being	Narrative function of the being
Hybrid forms	Central (mermaid, merrow, ben-varrey)	Peripheral and non-Turkic (naga)
Dominant water type	Salt water for the hybrid core	Fresh water throughout
Constructed watercourses	Not attested as habitat	Canal and ditch regularly attested
Age as a naming parameter	Not used	Systematic: parisi (young) vs onasi (old)
Etymological profile of the core term	Native Germanic compound (mere + maid)	Turkic–Iranian compound (suv + pari)
Dominant disposition	Hostile or ambivalent	Testing and protective

The contrast is best stated as a difference in what each tradition found worth encoding in a name. The English field answers the question "what is it?" — what shape does it take, what animal is involved, where does its body end and the water begin. The Uzbek field answers the question "what does it do to you?" — does it test you, guard against you, or grant to you.

6.2 An ecological reading

The simplest account of this difference is ecological, and it should be stated carefully because ecological explanations in folkloristics are easy to overstate. The English and Celtic tradition developed among communities whose relationship to water was mediated by the sea: fishing, coastal navigation, and the real and frequent experience of drowning. Water in this setting is an element one enters, and the body of the being that lives there is an urgent question because one may meet it bodily. Hybridity and the fish-tail belong to this frame.

The Uzbek tradition developed among communities whose relationship to water was mediated by irrigation: the allocation, maintenance and protection of a scarce resource

moving through built channels. Water in this setting is something one manages and must not spoil. The salient question is not what the spirit looks like but whether it will permit, test or punish. A guardian who punishes those who foul the spring is a functional necessity in such a system in a way that a fish-tailed seductress is not. The caution is this. Ecology constrains plausibility; it does not determine content. Coastal traditions exist that do not produce hybrid beings, and irrigation societies exist that do. What the ecological reading explains is the direction of elaboration — where each tradition invested its lexical attention — not the existence of the figure, which is common to both.

6.3 Religious framing

A second factor is the religious frame within which each field was transmitted. The English field passed through a Christian filter that had an established category for a beautiful female being who lures men to destruction, and the mermaid was absorbed into it, appearing in bestiary and church carving as an emblem of worldly temptation. The hostile skew in the functional column of Table 1 is partly an artefact of this absorption.

The Uzbek field passed through an Islamic filter that accommodated pre-Islamic spirits under the broad and religiously tolerable category of the jinn, and that in its Sufi register could read the beautiful inaccessible being as a figure of divine beauty rather than of sin. The pari was not demonised in the way the mermaid was. This difference in reception plausibly contributes to the opposed dispositional profiles of the two fields.

6.4 The shared core

What survives the contrast is a small set of features common to both fields, shown at the foot of Figure 1: the being is female, supernaturally beautiful, positioned at the boundary between the human world and another, and contact with her is governed by a prohibition whose breach ends the relationship. These four features are stable across traditions that differ on every other parameter examined, which is a reasonable basis for treating them as the archetypal core and the rest as culturally specific elaboration.

6.5 Limitations

Three limitations bound these claims. The first, already noted, is the asymmetry of collection history: the English field was recorded earlier and more systematically, and part of its apparent differentiation may be an artefact of that. The second is that the Uzbek dataset was extended to neighbouring traditions to reach comparable size, which means the two fields are not strictly commensurable units. The third is that attestation counts were not weighted by frequency of occurrence in narrative; a designation attested in two sources and one attested in fifty are treated alike.

7. Conclusion

This article has compared the nomination fields for aquatic female beings in English and Celtic tradition and in Uzbek and neighbouring Central Asian tradition, and has found that they are organised on different principles. The English field partitions the domain by the body of the being, elaborating most finely around salt water and the hybrid fish-tailed form, with a dominant disposition that is hostile or ambivalent. The Uzbek field partitions the domain by what the being does, is anchored throughout in fresh water including constructed channels, opposes a young tempting figure to an old protective one, and has a dominant disposition that is testing and protective.

The central negative finding is that hybridity, which comparative treatments routinely treat as near-definitional for the water spirit, is absent from the core Uzbek designations. A generalisation built on European material does not transfer. This is a modest result, but it has a methodological consequence: comparative statements about "the water spirit" should specify the sample they rest on.

Two further studies follow naturally. The first would extend the Uzbek dataset through systematic fieldwork in the irrigation districts where the canal-dwelling pari is still reported, since the written record is thin. The second would examine how the two fields behave under the pressure of global media, where the Disney mermaid now circulates in Central Asia alongside the local pari, and where the morphological and functional principles described here may be beginning to merge.

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