

A Reading of the Songs the Fish Owl Sings About Itself

The "Fish Owl," also known as the "Sacred Bird" and the "Protector of Land," is unique among the Spiritual Beings we read about; he holds an official status as a human protector and ally, like Okikirmui or the Sacred Grandmother, Lady of Fire. This is reinforced by the note on pg. 200, which tells us that the Fish Owl is ranked third after the Bear and the Wolf, and is characterized as tranquil, and somewhat absent except in times of crisis.

In neither of his stories does he provoke Okikirmui, and he only has pleasant relations with other Spiritual Beings, like the Lady of Fire—unlike the Bog Spirit. Furthermore, in his first song where he sacrificed himself to honor the poor boy, he was glad that his efforts united everyone in the village and spread peace, wealth, and gladness. Even though he favored the humble family, poor but strong of spirit, he wanted all of the humans to be joined in happiness and celebration, which is evidenced by the way he gathered many other Spiritual Beings afterwards to celebrate and tell them about his success, and how he continued to look on the village years afterward and noted that it was "at peace and the humans all get along well together" (204). There is another example of his goodwill towards humans in the Fish Owl's second song.

In the second song he sings—although he is less lenient on the messengers who fall asleep while recording his messages—he is still so deeply caring of the humans that he cannot rest in peace until he delivers them from the Game Spiritual Being and Keeper of the Fish Spiritual Being's famine. After he has accomplished this, he leaves the Brown Dipper Youth, one who he judges to have a "brave," "youthful heart" to protect the human world while he moves on to the upper world (230).

As in the other chants, repetition is very important—especially in the Fish Owl's first song. "Silver droplets falling, falling all around" is quite ambiguous, and is a song in itself as opposed to an onomatopoeic animal sound, like the other Spiritual Beings make. One question is whether all other Bird Spiritual Beings sing a song, or if they make a simple sound and this song also separates the Fish Owl Spiritual Being from the others. I tentatively concluded that silver

and golden droplets might be referring to beams of sunlight and moonlight, which the owl would fly underneath.

One of the most interesting features of the Fish Owl in his first song is that, instead of the Owl being personified with the features or actions of a human (although there are also examples of that), the Owl gives avian features to the poor boy he allowed to shoot him, and to the father. For example, he sings that he judged the boy to be "of noble stock, exceptional, a bird of a different feather in the common flock," almost raising the boy to his own status as a sacred bird among normal birds (198). Also, when the boy in two separate instances takes off running, the Owl says he "kicks up a blizzard of sand," which is interesting to me because conversely, a bird might "ride on a blizzard of snow" or some other weather front. Later, the father is described as having a voice "as beautiful as the cuckoo bird's" (203).

One final distinguishing trait of the Fish Owl Spiritual Being is that he has the ability to communicate with humans through their dreams, which he demonstrates in both of his songs. He told the poor family in their dreams that he was blessing them with a treasure trove of wealth, and he taught the villagers in his second song not to mistreat and to honor the deer and fish that they killed.

All of these aspects make the Fish Owl Spiritual Being unique among other spirits, and they identify him as an ally of humans. He reveres some humans by describing them with avian features, and he can communicate with them through dreams. He has amiable relations with other spiritual beings, sings a song with lyrics instead of making an animal noise, and most importantly, he cares deeply for the health and happiness of all humans—including the ones who speak or act cruelly. Probably for some or all of these reasons, he is ranked high among spiritual beings as the protector of land and villages.