

Typology of Traditional Culture of the Mongol-Speaking Peoples

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The project "Traditional Buryat Culture" is being conducted by a group of researchers from two institutions: the Culture and Art Studies Department of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Ethnology and Folklore Department of the Eastern Siberian Academy of Culture and Art. Some of our findings have been published in a series titled "Siberia: ethnos and cultures," and in a monograph, "Rites in the Buryat traditional culture" (Skrynnikova 2002). The results presented in this report are preliminary findings drawn from one of the research stages that has not been published before. In this report I offer a new conceptual schema for understanding the typology of traditional culture.

This study is part of a larger project that extends until the year 2006, and is financed by an "Integration" grant, a program of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation. The grant is financing our publication of monographs on the symbolic aspects of the Buryat traditional culture and the Mongol-speaking community. The goal of the research is to accumulate and generalize specific empirical material on Buryat rites; to reconstruct the traditional world view; to identify the leading cultural paradigms of today's traditional culture; and to identify maintenance mechanisms for the sustainable development of traditional society.

The project discussed here focuses on the study of the world view, pantheon and customs in the traditional culture of the Mongolian peoples, as well as the role and features of shamanism. The work has been conducted in the context of cultural anthropology that combines research on ethnocultural phenomena with semiotics, linguistics, sociology, history, ethnology, and archaeology. The data were collected during field trips to the Buryat Republic, the Ust-Orda National Region of Irkutsk Province, and the Aga National Region of Chita Province. As for the data on Mongolia, it was collected from the published materials of our Mongolian colleagues. We also relied on data collected by scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Mongols, Buryats and other Mongol-speaking ethnic groups recognize their unity and cohesion and

scholars are aware of their common ethnogenetic identity. However, recent research provides more evidence for the differentiation of two different cultural types existing within the traditional culture of the Mongolian peoples. These differences developed and co-existed from the third century B.C.E. onward. I have identified the foundation of the differences and defined the two types as the East Asian, associated with the Mongoloids, and the South-West Asian type, associated with the Turkic- and Mongol-speaking Caucasoids.

The boundary between the two cultural types runs through Western Mongolia and was clear as early as the Bronze Age. We distinguish between the two types by examining archaeological artifacts: stones with depictions of deer, *kereksur*,¹ and burial mounds are widely spread throughout South Siberia and Central Asia, while slab graves predominate in the east. The foundation for these differences in artifacts comes from the dissimilarity of the pantheon. In the west, the influence of Indo-European tradition meant that a sun god occupied the focal place and was accompanied by two divinities: left/right and good/evil. However, the heaven-earth duality maintained its existence in the east, with the Cult of Heaven emerging only at the turn of the third-second centuries B.C., and the Cult of Earth predominating for a longer period.

The most representative trait of the slab graves is their rectangular or square shape (Skrynnikova 2002: 120-124) symbolizing Earth. Their square or rectangular shape suggests that slab graves were left behind by the tribes that worshiped Earth, and not Heaven. In contrast, the structures identified by E. A. Novgorodova (1989) as sacrificial altars and *kereksurs* feature circles, which symbolize the sun. The circle can be an actual depiction of the sun, a Segner wheel,² the motif of the Celestial Hunter who

¹ Round-shaped stone relic of the Bronze Age interpreted by the majority of scholars as an altar used for annual sacrificial customs related to the Cult of the Sun.

² A symbol of the sun. An image in the shape of a cross with the ends folded to the right (sun-wise). In some cases the image of the Segner wheel has four horse (or griffon) heads attached to each rotating end.

is accompanied by images of the sun in petroglyphs, and so on. These symbols are also related to socially important traditional solar rituals that involve men of the community, including the celebration of vernal and autumnal equinoxes and winter and summer solstices. Moreover, various terms describing the central attributes of the ritual are semantically uniform, e.g., *kerek-sur*, *zagal-mai*, *khoshoo chuluu/kochai chalu* (Skrynnikova 2002: 133-140). These terms also represent the receptacle for the sacred substance of the solar nature of an ancestor who is revived during the *Axis Mundi* ritual, through which the ritual participants communicate their wishes and accept gifts.

The difference between the western and eastern traditions on the territory of the Altaic linguistic family is found in the Turkic kaganates as well. In most of the ancient Turkic monuments in Mongolia (in the eastern part of the ancient Turkic world) Heaven and Earth-Water (*Tengri* and *Yer-sub*) are identified as a divine duality. *Umai* (the third component of the supreme pantheon) is common among Western Turks. In the early stages the theonym *Umai* indicated a female sun deity, which goes back to the South-West Asian (Indo-Iranian) tradition.

I argue that the meaning of *Umai* has been preserved in the Western Buryat tradition, and is reflected in wedding folklore, including *ekhîn altan umai* (golden mother's womb), and *esegîn mungen serge* (father's silver post), whose union leads to the emergence of the people. The color code clearly indicates celestial symbolism: golden = sun and silver = moon. The action code doubles this effect. *Ekhîn altan umai* moves towards the sun, while *esegîn mungen serge* moves in the opposite direction, towards the moon. We can also talk about the horns of the moon in folklore. The moon's horns are phallic symbols, which correlate with its name *esegîn mungen serge*, where *serge* (tethering post) also represents the phallus. Finally, in the Buryat numeric code, even numbers signify female and odd numbers signify male. We conclude that in the early archetype the Buryats perceived the sun as female and the moon as male because they called them "eight-legged Mother-Sun, and nine-legged Father-Moon."³

³ It is important to pay attention to the meaning of Sun in the Iranian languages: "...*khotan-saks urmaysde*... 'sun'; possibly also *vakhan (y)ir* 'sun', as well as the *dard yor* 'sun'" (Toporov 1981, p. 45). *Khotan-saks urmaysde* might have influenced the theonym *Umai*, while the other

Evidence for the two Mongolian cultural types can also be found within the personage code of the traditional culture. The divinities triad (center-right-left) in the western part of Southern Siberia and Central Asia coincides with the Indo-Iranian tradition and can be identified as South-West Asian. The dual (Heaven-Earth) organization of the pantheon in the east can be identified as an East Asian tradition, originating in China. The same principle is preserved in the social organization of the society: the dyad (leader-community members) in the east, the triad (leader-priest-community members) in the west. In the East Asian tradition rites are performed by a secular leader — the head of a tribe, kin, or elder, and in later times by a prince or emperor. This role was determined by his status as a son of Heaven and coincided with the Heaven-Earth duality. The Southwest Asian tradition is characterized by the division of ritual and administrative functions, and by the existence of a priest (white shaman). This is related to the division of the celestial divinities into right/good and left/evil, where the main central deity (Sun) is closer to the good.

The complexity of studying traditional culture, a subject to which modern anthropology devotes substantial resources, comes from the fact that the boundaries separating such terms as culture, traditional culture, and shamanism are not clearly delineated. I have identified these two different types of traditional culture among Mongol-speaking peoples by analyzing different "codes of culture," only some of which I have discussed here. In the personage code the focus is on the pantheon of divinities for whom the rituals are performed; in the agency code we observe those who perform the ritual; using the action code we analyze actions; through the locative code we can discern the direction or territory central to the ritual; in the subjective code we examine the subjects used in the ritual; and with the temporal code the focus is on the timing of the ritual (Vinogradova and Tolstaia 1995: 166-167). This system allows observation of the heterogeneity of culture even within the boundaries of the same ethnos.

Iranian name for Sun, *yir/yor*, could have influenced its meaning in Central Asia: *Yar* — in the name of the Tibetan dynasty of Yarlung ("the country of Sun"), which is consistent with the Slavic *Yar (yaryi, Yarila)*, or *Yuur* in *Ekhe-Yuuren* (Mother-Sun), the Goddess of the Western Buryat pantheon.

The suggested typology is typical for the majority of peoples of Southern Siberia and Central Asia, and possibly, for Eurasia as a whole. The debatable character of the assumptions of the suggested hypothesis comes from the lack of detailed descriptive studies of traditional culture, so I hope my work will lead to further discussion.

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