

## **In search of forgotten religions**

Researchers interviewed locals, leading a traditional life. Comparison between modern people's ideology and descriptions made by ethnographers in the end of the XIXth-beginning of the XXth century, as well as search for presence of ancient common Turkic religious ideas, were of the utmost importance.

It seems that elements of common religion of ancient steppe nomads have been preserved in Kazakhs and Yakuts' world view. Both demonstrate cult of the sky, fire worship, spirits – masters of nature, totemic animals and shamans, the ideas of ambivalent spirits' existence, i.e. dark and light, kind and evil, active and passive, upper and lower.

Beliefs, related to these elements existed at the time of ancient Persians, Scythians and Saka, who had been wandering through the same territory where Turks' ancestors would wander later on.

Analysis of Proto-Turkic layer of Kazakhs and Yakuts' beliefs proves that in the past there was a period when ProtoTurks and Indo-Aryan peoples used to wander together within the same space, and since then traces of their mutual cultural influence in religious sphere have been preserved; this is also proved by southern roots of some modern Sakha peoples' ancestors.

Kazakhs and Yakuts associate cult of the Sky (Celestial Deity) with symbols of eagle and the sun; ancient Persian sky deity Ahura Mazda is associated with same symbols. Ancient sacral symbols' remains – the sun, sky and eagle exist even today, for example they are depicted on Kazakhstan flag.

Ancient Turkic Tengri and Iranian Ahura Mazda were regarded as Gods in almost monostheic sense, but Tengri as well as Ahura Mazda had several emanations or aspects. Modern Buryats and Mongols mention ninety-nine Tengris, this number perfectly matches with ninety-nine names of Allah in Islam. According to Mongols' beliefs, the highest Tengri is Hormista, this name originated from Middle Persian form of the name Ahura Mazda, i.e. Hourmazd. All Tengris are the parts of Tengri Hormista. Same ancient Persian Ahura Mazda/ Hourmazd, a prototype of Mongol-Buryat Tengri Hormista, has seven emanations, i.e. so called Amesha Spenta, which represent his parts. This also matches with Yakut concept of Aiy. Aiy are celestial deities, which are the parts of one light, higher God, called Yurung Aiy Toyon.

Dualism was characteristic of ancient Iranian religion, it was expressed by opposition of upper spirits – Assurs, whose head was Ahura Mazda/Hourmazd, and lower spirits called Devas, whose head was Angra Mainyu/Ahriman. Such opposition is similar to Yakut antagonism between Aiy and dangerous Abaasy spirits. One of the most dreadful Yakut Abaasy, who is believed to be the God of War, is called Ilbis Haan. Ilbis is the name of Satan in Islam.

From aforesaid it may be seen that ancient cultures of the Steppe and Near East used to exert influence on each other, as well as that Sakha culture had relations with other Southern Turkic cultures.

The most significant feast in Yakutia, related to Aiy worship, is Yhyakh. People in Yakutia remember Aiy names very well. Besides Yurung Aiy Toyon they recall names Jesegeya, Aiysyt, Iyehsit.

Bloodless sacrifices are offered to Aiy deities through fire. The main sacrifice is kumys which is considered as Aiy gift that is why Yhyakh is also called Kumys feast; this feast is celebrated by modern Kazakhs as well.

Besides an eagle, there are other white animals which are symbolically associated with Aiy, i.e. white crane and white horse. These animals are held sacred by Yakuts. Reverence of white cranes has been preserved in mythology of Middle Asia related to peri, girls-spirits who sometimes turn into white cranes. Today Sakha revere bear and raven, in ancient times they used to revere the wolf. At present, reverence of wolf is not characteristic of Sakha, but it is characteristic of modern Kazakhs. Wolf, as we know, was a totem ancestor of ancient Turks.

Nevertheless, Yakuts associate carnivorous animals (wolf, bear, and raven) with Abaasy rather than with Aiy. In traditional Sakha religion they were connected with upper deity Abaasy of the Western Sky – Uluu Toyon. These animals were believed to be its children, and sometimes even its incarnations.

Uluu Toyon is a very complicated personality. When Christians encountered Sakha religion, they started associating Abaasy with Satan, devil and demon, as Uluu Toyon was a patron of shamans and even today many Christians believe that shamanism is similar to devil worship.

Inaccuracy and fatuousness of such interpretation of Ulu Toyon cult was proved by V.Seroshevsky. He writes that Uluu Toyon commands the most detrimental forces, but the gist of his power is in controlling and restraining those forces in order to prevent them from annihilating the Earth and everything on it. He loves everything that has a sign of life, and feels sympathy for everything that suffers. He is the only one among the most powerful Sky dwellers who descends on Earth to bring help. He gives people soul “sur”. He gave shamans to people in order to save them from diseases and miseries, and he gave them fire so that they could be protected from cold. We can see that to some extent he resembles wrathful Buddhist Bodhisattva, not devil. A special connection between soul and will, and connection between will (desires and passions) and suffering can be considered as a similarity to Buddhism.

It is quite interesting that in accordance with traditional world views written in Olonho, modern Yakuts, just like their ancestors back in the XIXth century, believe that existence of good and evil (kind and evil spirits) and their eternal fight are essential for Universe harmony and that actually they are of the same origin. These ideas closely resemble Iranian ones related to Zurvanism.

As we know, Zurvanism had been an official religion of Iran over a short period of Parthian king Yazdagared's reign. Having seized power in Middle Asia, Parthians brought a new strong wave of northern and original steppe ideas into Iran, some of them could have been preserved until our days in Sakha culture, especially so in Olonho.

Besides an idea of upper and lower spirits' antagonism, there is a belief in spirits – masters of nature among Kazakh and Yakut beliefs. Spirits – masters of nature can not be attributed to Islam traditions, so reverence of those spirits by Kazakhs is undoubtedly related to the belief's ancient Turkic origin. Yakuts call these spirits Ichchi. Ichchi worship is one of the most frequent rituals of modern Sacha.

Quite often small bloodless sacrifices are offered to Ichchi, especially to spirits of roads, rivers, lakes and forests. For Ichchi sacrifice is more of magical value rather than of religious one. It is believed that a symbolic sacrifice may help to establish good relations with them, which will help you to avoid different problems when you are in the wild.

Fire Spirit is one of the most important Ichchi among others. Bloodless sacrifices are offered to fire; people address their request to fire or talk to Aiy through it. It is believed that fire has enough power to banish evil spirits, cleanse a man, house and stuff. A man and house are cleansed by using either coal taken from fire or smouldering aromatic herbs, mixed with horse manure (horse is symbolically connected to Aiy).

Similar attitude to spirits of nature can be observed among Kazakhs. They also worship spirits – masters of nature. The rite of spirits worship is to be carried out after a prayer to Allah. Kazakhs also believe that fire possesses the power of purification and exorcism. A magic rite of house cleansing with smoke is practiced by KAzakhs, i.e. an owner of the house walks around the house walls, holding smouldering aromatic herb, just like Yakuts do.

It is necessary to mention that all listed facts closely resemble ancient Persian and Middle Asian beliefs. In Zoroastrianism religion Yazats existed alongside with Asuras and Devas. Yazats were spirits – masters of nature and of different human life's elements; they were created by Ahura Mazda. One of the most powerful Yazats was Atar, i.e. fire Yazata. Persians considered Fire as the most perfect and purest creation of Ahura Mazda. They thought that fire possessed purifying power; through fire they used to address Ahura Mazda.

The Old Russian word “yazychestvo” originates from the word “Yazata” and means “reverence of Yazats”.

An ancient Yakut custom to bury the deceased in arangas may be related to Zoroastrianism relicts. There is a hunting custom to hang bones of killed animals upon tree branches; it is curious that according to Zoroastrianism rules, bones were to be stored exactly this way, as the deceased were considered to be evil and dangerous.

On the basis of all these observations we can make a conclusion that Yakuts and Kazakhs' beliefs have many common elements, related to vestiges of ancient steppe religion.

Reciprocal influence of this original religion and such world religions of Near Eastern and Middle Asian origin as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism calls for further researches.

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