

classified according to their habitat. Supernatural animals are a long-standing part of the natural universe and are treated together with real living beings. Strange animals are gleaned from a limited number of literary sources. In most cases, their names in Altaic languages are translations of descriptions given in Chinese sources.

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Sacred Elements of Nature in the Faith of the Altai Turks

Figen Güner Dilek

Earth, mother earth, is not evil. It is people that are evil, that are evil, and that are us. Even if the earth is infertile and desert, it is our mother earth, even if no people live there; there are other living things and their youths. To blame the earth will offend Altay Kudai. The more you protect nature, the more it will pay back. For this reason, when an Altai man goes hunting in the mountains, he does not do more than needed even if he could hunt more.

Ayabas Kündüçin, Cabagan village,
Gorno-Altaysk, September 1995

Owing to the richness of the topic it would go beyond the scope of this paper to mention all the natural elements regarded as holy by Altai Turks. For this reason, the discussion will be limited to those most frequently encountered in the daily life of the Altai Turks, based on compilations of notes I took between 1995 and 1998.

The spiritual world of the Altai Turks is guided by Buddhism, Lamaism, and belief systems called Altai Can, which can be traced back to Shamanism and Altai mythology. During my field studies, I personally witnessed that the beliefs, traditions, customs, and holy elements recorded in the epics of the Altai Turks still prevail in their daily lives. In other words, it would not be an exaggeration to speak of a fusion of mythological times and the present. The sacredness of numerous natural elements is the essence of the beliefs mentioned. In fact, it is said that already the ancient Turks regarded water and forests as holy.¹ The beliefs of the Altai Turks are based on a deep respect for, or even fear of the element regarded as holy as well as on loyalty and the wish to protect it. The Altai regard nature as an entity, encompassing the mountains, water, grasslands, trees, rivers, and animals. Almost all their beliefs are guided by the desire to keep this unity intact. Nature is possessed, including the rivers and mountains, and those who worship them, ask them for help and express their gratitude towards them are deemed to lead a good life.²

1 Roux, Jean-Paul: *Orta Asya'da Kutsal Bitkiler ve Hayvanlar*. İstanbul 2005, p. 33.

2 Bidinov, K. A.: *Altayın Baylagan Çüm-cañdar*. Gorno-Altaysk 1996, p. 21.

It is said that the Altai people have believed in the sacredness of natural elements since ancient times, attributing great value to them. In the language of the Altai Turks the terms employed to refer to sacred elements are *bay*, *ıyık*, *kutuk* (water), which mean "holy" or "forbidden". Altai Turks are thought to worship the natural elements, because they regard them as holy, but this is not true. It is also stated that the Altai people were created by Kurbustan Ülker God, *i.e.*, that all the people in the world have one unique God.

According to Altay Can, Altay-Kudai and Erlik-Biy created the Altai mountains, including nature and all living beings. Everything is based on the contrast of white and black, good and evil, with all the contrasts being related to one another. Altay-Kudai created lands and plains, whereas Erlik-Biy created mountains, moors, and swamps. Altay-Kudai created "warm-breath" animals (*i.e.*, horses, sheep, etc.), and birds.³ Altay-Kudai created plants to be eaten by living beings and trees like the pine, the beech, and the hybrid tree; the eternal breath of Altay-Kudai pervades in the pine, the beech, and the juniper tree.⁴ On the other hand, Erlik-Biy created "cold-breath" animals (*i.e.*, cows, goats) and birds, animals nesting underground, bushes, poisonous plants, firs, spruces, and poplar trees.⁵ According to Mariya Ayanova, whom I met during my field studies, no house is built of poplar (*aspak*), for it is the tree that accommodates the devil and was created by Erlik; a house made from it would make its inhabitants restless and unhappy.

Holy waters

The Altai people consider water to be holy and use various terms for it: *aru-kutuk*, *arjan suu*, *kara suu*, *toñmok suu*, *tındu suu*, *tını çok suu*. The sacralization of an element entails a set of taboos and restrictions. Water is to be fetched in the evening, it is not to be polluted with waste, and the owner of the water is considered as potentially harmful. These rules apply to fountain water and rivers. A snake in a river is not to be killed, for it is believed to be the owner of the water in disguise, and hence it is the snake that brings the water. It is essential that both *arjan* and *toñmok* water are kept clean. Blossoming flowers near a spring are not to be picked, trees are not to be cut, and the environs of the spring

3 Муйтуева В. А. — Чочкина, М. П.: Доминанты мировоззрения алтайцев в структуре алтайской литературы. Novosibirsk 1996, pp. 6–7.

4 *Op.cit.*, p. 8.

5 *Op.cit.*, pp. 6–7.

are to be kept clean and free of evil objects.⁶ In Altai epics rivers and water of this kind have the power to heal the wounds and resurrect the dead.⁷

Kutuk Tındu suu: It is said that those who see holy water and bathe in it or drink it will not find the water in its place when they mention it or return to it, because it will have disappeared. It is emphasized that *kutuk suu* has a milky colour, and while drinking it one should make a wish. Failing to do so will lead to an endless life full of suffering.⁸

There are also Altai Turk practices related to *arjan suu* and *arjan*. *Arjan-suu* is believed to be health-giving. Altai people regard this water as holy and euphemistically refer to it as *talay*, in the belief that it will help them to get rid of diseases and illnesses in a kind of purification ritual. It is essential to visit *arjan* at the beginning of spring or fall when nature is adorned with green or yellow leaves. A person going to *arjan* should be clean in every respect, and if someone from the home village or a close relative has died, the visit is to be postponed for a year. Visitors are to take *talkan* and *bishtak* ('dried butter and tea') along with them. All food is to be prepared in advance, but not tasted. In addition they are to bring pieces of cloth with them (4 to 8 cm wide and not shorter than a hand span), called *kıyra/calama*, and the branches of a beech tree need to be prepared.⁹ *Arjan suu* is generally located in remote places. Although it is possible to go there on foot, it is more common to travel on horseback, and the journey can take seven to nine days.¹⁰

Animals

According to the beliefs of the Altai people, all animals were once human beings and some of them are regarded as totems by certain tribes and therefore as holy. For example, for the *Komdosh* it is the bear, for the *Tölös* the deer, for the *Jüs* the snake, and for the *Mungus* the bull/cow.¹¹

Altai Turks believe that in nature both animals and human beings have certain rights. As in the past, they live on hunting. While hunting, they refrain from using animal names, resorting to euphemisms instead. The underlying rationale

6 Yamayeva, E. E. — İ. B. Şincin: *Altay Kep-Kuuçındar*. Gorno-Altaysk 1994, pp. 314–315.

7 Dilek, İbrahim: *Altay Masalları*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Gazi Üniversitesi, Ankara 2002, p. 355.

8 Муйтуева, В. А. — Чочкина, М. П.: Доминанты мировоззрения алтайцев в структуре алтайской литературы, pp. 42–43.

9 *Op.cit.*, pp. 42–43; Bidinov, K. A.: *Altayın Baylagan Çüm-cañdar*, pp. 13–14.

10 Güner Dilek, Figen: *Altay Türkçesi Ağızları*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Gazi Üniversitesi, Ankara 2005, TL 2, 35–36.

11 Яимова, Н. А.: Табуированная лексика и эвфемизмы в алтайском языке. Gorno-Altaysk 1990, p. 89.

is not to anger the animal by letting it feel one's intention in order to avoid being haunted by it after its death.

In the Altai language, there is a variety of euphemisms for most animals, as for the bear, whose name is regarded as taboo.¹²

The bear: According to Altai belief its thumb and part of its brain were taken away by Altay-Kudai and given to the human being in order to prevent the bear from ruling the earth and being superior to mankind. With this in mind, the Altai people regard the bear as a holy animal. Out of respect and in order not to scare, anger, or surprise a bear, they employ euphemisms whenever referring to it, such as *abaay* or *caan karındaş* ('elder brother'), *taay* ('uncle'), *taay öböğön* or *öböön* ('uncle'), *taagak* ('grandfather'), *karındaş* ('brother'), *aba* ('elder relative'), *arsıl aba* ('wild elder relative'), *ulda* ('grandfather', 'father of the father'), *akabıs* ('our elder brother'), *örökön* ('senior woman or man'), *abişka/ apşıyak/apçıyak/apşak* ('grandfather'), *ulu kiji* ('elder person') as well as *mogıs/ mogus/mongus/mongıs/moos* ('powerful'/'giant'/'parasite'/'skilful'), *Kayrakan* ('sky'), *Altaydıñ eezi* ('the owner of Altai'), *cerdiñ eezi* ('owner of the earth'), *amaalday/amalday* ('huge'/'big'/'powerful'), and they never kill one.¹³ If someone does have to kill a bear, he will ask the animal to say that it has died by falling off a rock, since it is believed that the respective person will be strictly questioned by Erlik in the other world.¹⁴

The dog: Altay-Kudai and Erlik created mankind in a joint effort with the intention of making it eternal, and therefore wanted human beings to stay away from evil in their search for eternity. The dog was created by Altay-Kudai. Erlik-Biy asked the dog to give life to human beings and promised to give life-long food and never-worn pants. The dog carried out the will of Erlik-Biy and gave its breath to humans. Erlik gave his breath to humans through his abdomen and prayed that the dog would live with human beings and take food from their hands. After Altay-Kudai brought eternal breath, he saw human beings alive and became angry. He cursed the dog saying that it would always walk around the door of human beings, being fed and loved by them.¹⁵

Holy mountains and moorlands

Altai people consider some mountains, high mountain crossings (*aju*), moorlands (*ıyık cer*, *ıyık taiga*), and mountains with forests as holy places. Altai village people generally have a holy mountain and a moorland for their religious rituals. As I have witnessed myself, Altai Turks introduce themselves with both

¹² *Op.cit.*, p. 13.

¹³ *Op.cit.*, pp. 102–103.

¹⁴ Муйтуева, В. А. — Чочкина, М. П.: Доминанты мировоззрения алтайцев в структуре алтайской литературы, pp. 7–8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

their name and family name, and nearly all the middle-aged and elderly people know in which village their relatives live and in which moorland they pray.

The reason why moorlands are regarded as holy is that in ancient times, when there were floods, people believed that they could cross them on rafts. Religious rituals were carried out at the very top of these moorlands and in the mountains. A construction called *ükpek* was made from wood, and the inside was carved and paved with stones. Women were not supposed to walk on the stone. Regarding the religious practices in the holy mountains, Nina Toloyeva narrates:

"The mountain in which we pray is the mountain *Ak Duru*, the biggest around here. It is also called 'the mountain with a holy forest'. It is the mountain which is always respected by the Altai people. There is always snow on top of it – for this reason it is called *Ak Duru* ("White Pure") – and there is also a thick layer of ice. Famous climbers go up there, not people of our folk. It is not suitable for us to climb there. Our women do not climb there, either."¹⁶

Holy forests

Pine, beech, hybrid, fir, and spruce trees play an important part in the daily lives and beliefs of Altai Turks. Among these, the beech tree is the one used most in religious rituals and practices. The branches of a beech tree, and especially its leaves, are burnt to get rid of the evil spirits in a house. Therefore, beech can be considered as a link between human beings and God. Certain types of cloth named *kıyıra* or *calama* are tied to this tree.

Although the spruce tree is one of the trees created by *Erlik* and regarded as evil, it is referred to as *bay terek* ('holy spruce tree') in oral literature, particularly in epics. The epic hero rests and sleeps under this tree. Dreams relevant to the plot of an epic usually occur while the hero is sleeping under this tree, and important events take place nearby.

In summary, when people live in a natural surrounding with trees stretching up into the skies, creating the impression that the stars are within reach, and where every area of life, ranging from nutrition to shelter, depends on nature, the latter is bound to be considered as holy.

¹⁶ See: Güner Dilek, Figen: *Altay Türkçesi Ağızları*. TL 9, 30–38.

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The View of the Environment as Seen through the Altaic Languages in China

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Based on the language materials of Altaic groups in China, this paper analyzes their attitude towards nature, natural environment, and people, and it tries to explore its background. This paper consists of four parts: first, a retrospective on the line of thought of European linguistic humanism; second, an exploration of the mentioned peoples' attitude towards nature by analyzing materials from their languages concerned with natural environment and the ecological relationship between humans and nature; third, an analysis of Altaic groups' outlook of natural human ecology and the roots of such an outlook; fourth, a brief conclusion.

I

In the history of linguistics, there existed some nonconformist scholars, whose visual points of view were unique and whose observations of problems were insightful. They were sensitive enough to notice the problems usually ignored by the mainstream. Among these great scholars is Wilhelm von Humboldt, who, in search of the "essence of human nature", put forward the theory of the "spiritual world of language" and studied human languages from the point of view of human culture, paying great attention to humanity and cultural essence of languages. Hence he initiated the theoretical approach of *linguistic humanism*, as well as a research school in this field. Since then, Humboldt's concept has become very popular. It kept receiving attention of academia and attracted more and more followers as time went by. In modern times, more and more linguists realize Humboldt's profound ideas and they come to a common understanding: if linguistic research is restricted to the symbolic systems of languages, and only describes and analyzes phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar, without considering their social and cultural contexts, then linguistics will never be able to truly explain the complicated linguistic phenomena. In the circles of international linguistics, many linguists relate linguistics with sociology, anthropology, social psychology, popular media, and so on, studying the actual language phenomena in social environment from a trans-subject view. They also describe and explain the internal structure of language changes from the angle of linguistics, which led to the emergence of many different schools of theories in different regions

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