

THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD IN ANCIENT TURKIC CULTURE: CATEGORIES OF SPACE AND TIME

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Abstract

The article analyzes the worldview concepts of space and time in ancient Turkic culture. It particularly examines cosmogonic and ethnogonic myths regarding the creation of the world, as well as mythical and demonological figures found in folklore and folk tales.

A comparative analysis is conducted between the legends of two sages: Korkyt-Ata and Asan-Kaigy. Korkyt-Ata, a gifted musician and philosopher, embodies the struggle against death, while Asan-Kaigy represents the sage-wanderer in pursuit of the Promised or Sacred Land. Together, their narratives illustrate the timeless journey of self-discovery, emphasizing the intertwined relationship between personal identity and the broader context of space and time.

The exploration of the sacralization of space reveals profound insights, illustrated by notable examples like Zher-Uyyk and Barsa-Kelmes. This study delves into ancient belief systems, such as totemism, fetishism, shamanism, and animism. Furthermore, it considers various cults, including the cult of the sun, the sky, and the veneration of ancestral spirits.

Keywords: *Ancient Turkic culture, ancient cults, categories of space and time, cosmogonic and ethnogonic myths*

ESKİ TÜRK KÜLTÜRÜNDE DÜNYA İMAJI: UZAY VE ZAMAN KATEGORİSİ

Özet

Makalede eski Türk kültüründe mekân ve zaman dünya görüşü kavramları analiz edilecektir. Bilhassa dünyanın yaratılışına ilişkin kosmogonik ve etnohonik mitler ile folklor ve halk hikayelerinde yer alan mitolojik ve demonolojik figürler incelenecektir.

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Korkyt-Ata and Asan-Kaigy gibi iki bilgeni efsaneleri arasında karşılaştırılmalı bir analiz yürütülecektir. Yetenekli bir müzisyen ve filozof olan Korkyt Ata ölüme karşı mücadeleyi temsil ederken, Asan Kaygy ise vaat edilmiş veya kutsal toprakların peşinde koşan bir gezgini temsiz etmektedir. Mekânın kutsallaştırılmasının incelenmesi, Zher Uyyuk ve Barsa Kelmes gibi önemli örneklerle gösterdiği gibi derin görüşleri ileri sürmektedir.

Bu çalışmada totemizm, fetişizm, şamanizm ve animizm gibi kadim inanç sistemleri incelenecektir.

Anahtar kelime: *Eski Türk kültürü, eski kültler, uzay ve zaman kategorisi, kozmogonik ve etnogonik mitler.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, in Kazakhstan, there has been a growing interest in mythology, particularly cosmogonic and ethnological myths about the creation of the world. Notable myths include those of Tengri, Umai, Zher—Su, Ot—Ana, and others. This interest is reflected in creation of the visual representation of these mythological characters in both classical and modern national productions, such as in dramatic and musical operas, ballet theater performances, and films in Kazakhstan. Among these mythological characters a special place is occupied by the images of sage wanderers. Often, this is the image of an ancient storyteller - abyz, the mythical character - Korkyt—Ata—the philosopher *Baksy*, who played the kobyzy, and the image of the sage wanderer - Asan Kaygy, who was in search for the *Promised or Sacred Land* — *Zher Uyyuk*. Additionally, there is an image of saint Kydyr—ata who is believed to bring prosperity and happiness to people.

Yuan et al. (2006, p. 1) eloquently emphasize that “Space and time, are fundamental yet complex subjects that have stimulated fascinating debates among philosophers, physicists, geographers, historians, and scholars across various disciplines.” The scholarly examination of space and time reveals their profound impact on traditions, identity, material culture, such as architecture, and non-material culture. Popescu (2006, p. 189) compellingly argues that: “Time brings a perspectival understanding of tradition, transforming history into a major referent. Space exalts the values of appropriateness and adequacy to the site, perceived as a matrix that shapes the characteristics and artifacts of its inhabitants.” In the realm of Kazakh culture, important insights into the categories of space and time as depicted in Kazakh arts, culture, and folklore can

be found in the works of Samuratova et al. (2015), Zhakupov et al. (2020), and Zhangaliyeva et al. (2024). However, there remains a significant gap in research concerning the depiction of space and time within cosmogonic and ethnogonic myths. This study aims to fill that gap by offering an original comparison of the legends of two prominent sages: Korkyt-Ata and Asan-Kaigy. These narratives not only depict a timeless journey of self-discovery but also highlight the profound intertwining of personal identity with the broader contexts of space and time.

1. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article applies a comparative analysis including comparison, analogy, juxtaposition, dialogue, and parallelism. It employs a cross-cultural intertemporal analysis, allowing for an exploration of temporal dynamics and dimensions. Additionally, the article incorporates logical-historical and axiological methodologies to deepen its analysis. It also employs systems analysis and hermeneutics. The study draws on works not only from philosophy, history, and culture but also from various other fields such as mythology, folklore, aesthetics, and ethnography. It thoroughly examines a range of factors through the lens of cultural and philosophical analysis. The focus is on essential categories that form the foundational elements of traditional cultures, including beliefs about creation, mythological thinking, concepts of life and death, perceptions of space and time, aesthetic appreciation of the world, moral principles, and artistic as well as aesthetic determinants. These concepts reveal the underlying framework of traditional thinking upon which the texts of traditional cultures are built.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The traditional culture of each nation represents a profound layer of mankind's historical memory, covering various eras from ancient times to the present. Any traditional culture is developed layer by layer. Archaic beliefs, such as fetishism, animism, totemism, and shamanism, play an important role in shaping its worldview, as do mythological, religious, philosophical, and aesthetic representations of any ethnic group. The formation of a category of space and time in the Turkic culture should be sought in pre-Islamic beliefs. The traditional culture of the Kazakhs is syncretic in nature, where some elements of shamanism, Tengri, and Zoroastrianism are combined with Islam. Animistic beliefs were expressed in ceremonies and rituals associated with

the worship to *aruakhs* spirits of the ancestors, shamanic ritual practice, and its elements, and are now preserved in religious practices and traditional medicine.

The Kazakh scientist, and ethnographer Shokan Valikhanov wrote about the origins of Islam in Kazakhstan, that the Kazakhs believed in Allah, and at the same time honored the *aruakhs* - spirits of the ancestors: *They sacrificed on the tombs of Muslim saints, believed in the shaman and respected the Mohammedan Hodges. They worshipped the fire, and shamans were called along with the onions of the Muslim angels and praised Allah. Such contradictions did not interfere with each other, and the Kyrgyz (Kazakhs) believed in all this together. That is why the name, the words were changed, and not the thought. Ongon began to be called arvakh, kuk tengri - Allah or Thursday, the spirit of the earth - peri, divana, and gin, and the idea remained shamanic* [Valikhanov, 1985: 49].

Among the pagan characters included in the Muslim saints, the Kazakhs most clearly preserved their pre-Muslim features in Korkut (Khorkhyt) - the mythical first shaman, musician, and singer, creator of the *kobyz* bow instrument. The grave attributed to him was located on the bank of Syrdarya. Kazakhs' veneration of Korkut was closely connected with shamanism. He was considered the patron of shamans (*baksy*) who often called him to help in their shamanistic rituals. Many *baksy* performed *kyuy* composed by Korkyt himself' [Harner, 2007:65].

The category of space and time in the Turkic culture is clearly revealed in two ancient Turkic myths and legends associated with the images of wise wanderers. The first of them is dedicated to shaman - *baksy* Korkyt - Ata, who escaped from death, and the second tells about Asan - Kaygy, who was looking for *Zher – Uyyk – The Promised or Sacred Land*. The legend of Korkyt-Ata, which tells about him as a legendary Turkic songwriter and composer of the IX century, was depicted in the written epic monument of the Turkic people *Kitabi Dede Korkyt* (The Book of Korkyt Ancestor).

The legend states that from his youth Korkyt could not reconcile with the idea of human life's transience, therefore, he decided to confront the inevitability of death. He crafted and began to play the instrument called *kobyz*, using his music to express his thoughts on existence. Through his dedication to artistry, he discovered a way to achieve immortality, leaving a legacy

that transcends time. Based on materials from archaeological excavations one of the ancient types of kobyz was found and recreated. *In 2014 an expedition from the Institute of Archeology named after A. Margulan under the leadership of Zeinolla Samashev found in the upper reaches of the Karakaba river, in the East Kazakhstan region the burial place at Kimak Kypchak warrior dating back to the 6th - 7th centuries. In 2015 mound № 12 was excavated at the Karakaba I burial ground where a unique artifact was discovered a musical stringed instrument [Irzhanov, 2021].*

In another ancient legend about Asan-Kaygy (translated as Sad Asan), the wise man spent all his life unsuccessfully looking for the Zher-Uyyk – the Promised or Sacred Land. Asan-Kaygy, sitting on the Zhelmaya camel, went to four sides of the world. He believed that there is a wonderful place on earth such as – *Zher – Uyyk*, where there is no hunger and people live up to a hundred years, and are not threatened by enemy raids. It is a place where people live in peace and prosperity. According to the description, in this heavenly place, there were many lakes and rivers, many pastures with thick grass, and livestock gave birth to young animals twice a year. He dreamed of finding this place and relocating his people there, so they would not know sorrow and need. An image of a lark that nests on the back of a sheep became a symbol that personifies happiness, and peace.

Years went by, but he had never found the Zher-Uyyk – the Sacred Land. Asan-Kaygy, who dreamed of giving happiness to the people, returns with sadness to Ulytau Mountain and dies on its top. According to another version: Asan-Kaygy found the Promised Land, but people could not stand the hardships during this path and failed to get to Zher-Uyyk. It should be added that in Kazakh folklore there were legends not only about the Promised, Heavenly Lands, such as Zher-Uyyk, but also myths about ungrateful lands, like Barsa-Kelmes. *Barsa-Kelmes* is translated as *go and not come back*, i.e. a place where one should not go, as this area has a special mystical aura. While conducting a comparative analysis of the philosophical content of these two legends about Korkyt-Ata and Asan-Kaygy, we can see that they clearly express an idea of a person trying to find a place in space and time.

The imagery of Asan-Kaygy, who sought but failed to find the Promised Land, alongside Korkyt-Ata, who could not evade death, profoundly illustrates the essential truth of our existence: space and time are intertwined. No matter where we might find ourselves or the time we live in, the journey of life unfolds inevitably; both its beginning and end are predetermined. Both legends tell the story of two individuals who journeyed around the world in search of a better life—one where humanity could exist without fear and need, and where death could be avoided. Through their journeys, the legends reveal the interconnectedness of life and death, as well as the integrity of the universe. A key element in both stories is the theme of seeking truth by overcoming various difficulties along the way. The *Zhol* (the path) concept has here not only an image of wandering, but the idea of finding the right path on the life journey in a broad philosophical meaning. According to the Kazakh culturologist Kanat Nurlanova *The Path is a mission, as an alternative between good and evil or the personification of some ultimate practical goal, or as a blessing* [Nurlanova, 1987: 172].

Kazakhs often use the phrases *zholyn ashik bolsyn* (let the road be open to you), and *ak zhol* (white way – a bright path to you), which mean both wishing a good journey as well as every happiness throughout the whole life journey. Nomadic culture has always been associated with movement and dynamics. As wrote Alfred Weber: *invasion of nomadic peoples from Central Asia, that reached China, India, Western countries (the great cultures of antiquity borrowed a use of horse from them, it had ... similar consequences in all three areas... They conquered the States of the great cultures of antiquity. Dangerous activities and catastrophes helped them to understand the fragility of life; they brought to the world a heroic and tragic consciousness which is reflected in the epos, and therefore history turns into a struggle between these two forces - the culture of matriarchy being ancient, stable, connected, not awakened, and the culture of nomadic peoples which is a new dynamic, liberating, conscious in its trends* [Jaspers, 1994:58].

In this regard, the nomads developed a cult of the horse among the many totems. As a result of research on the barrows, the burials with a large number of remains of horses are registered in Eurasia. The existence of the horse cult is evidenced by the results of research on

Berel burial mounds, where more than 50 remains of horses were recorded. At the same time, a horse had always been a favorite character of the ancient Turkic epics, seen as a friend and companion of the nomad. The horse helped its owner to travel long distances on steppes, carried him from the battle fields or rescued him from the captivity (Khamytay and his Horse tale), where horses became popular together with their owners and were winning the best prizes at the Bayga races (such as in *Tepen Kok* tale, *Chubar-At* legend, and in many others).

In fairy tales, a winged horse helps a hero to overcome many obstacles. Therefore, the nomad inspired, and poeticized the horse, worshiping the horse such as the sun. For instance, Herodotus, describing a custom of the Massagets, says: *Of the gods, only the sun is honored to which the horses are sacrificed. The meaning of this sacrifice is that the fastest animal gets to the fastest of all gods* [Herodotus, 1987:172].

The concept of the vertical axis in building the world places the spheres of sky, earth, and the underworld above each other. In this framework, the underground, earth and heaven worlds exist here, in parallel, and are almost not correlated with one another. Based on Kazakh folk tales, it is possible to enter another space-time with the help of a miracle: a horse or a bird known as a *samruk*. By riding these mythical creatures, the hero can traverse enormous distances and arrive at a different location in just a matter of minutes. This journey represents the idea of crossing of both space and time. Spirits, as well as many animals and birds in the Kazakh folklore, were endowed with an ability to travel the worlds, namely the ability to visit the *upper* and *lower* worlds. In many epic stories, the hero finds himself in another world in a state of unconsciousness. Going on a journey, the heroic horse can disappear instantly. Here is an example from the Kazakh folk tale *Yer-Tostik: Yer-Tostik and his noble horse, Shalkuyryk, plunged through the earth's crust, descending for what felt like an eternity. At last, they came to a halt in an unfamiliar realm. To Yer-Tostik's astonishment, Shalkuyryk stood firm on four legs and spoke with a clear human voice: - We are in the underworld* [Kazakh fairy tales, 1958: 23].

The hero's path comes to the crossing of the border between the worlds. The path itself is in most cases described as complex. Thus, in fairy tales the heroes' journeys are not in a specific time and space but transiting from one-time and space dimension to another. This is expressed in

the instant *crossing* to other worlds. In archaic representations, there was also the sacralization of space, expressed in a cult of sacred places, and localities which were considered to be energetically pure places. On the contrary, abandoned places for example, near water bodies were considered undesirable places to visit, because of the fear of demonological water creature *Su peri* who is believed to live there.

The influence of these spirits was closely associated with a specific area, and beyond its borders, their influence did not spread. This was the reason for the sacralization of space. The degree of their unity with a specific natural object confirms the concept of purity and dirtiness.

Polytheism was a characteristic feature in the system of beliefs of spirits in the archaic culture of the Kazakhs. According to the ancient Kazakh beliefs, it was also believed that there are many spirits. There was a kind of prayer calling for the help of good and pure spirits *gayip yeren kyryk shilten*. There is a quantity of spirits, numbering forty. The epic notes: *Forty invisible saints patronize the kid* (Gayip-yearn, kyryk shilten, balany koldap demedi).

Aruakhs are the spirits of deceased ancestors who protect people, warn against dangers, and inspire good thoughts. They serve as guardians of happiness and well-being, not just for individual families or clans, but for the entire community. This belief system is known as henotheism, and it is characterized by what can be called a *genotypic religious system*. This system reflects the intrinsic views of the tribal community, including the veneration of ancestors, which is considered a decisive force in all aspects of public life. The central figure in this genotypic faith is the aruakh, or spirit of the ancestor. [Gabitov et al., 2000:341]. According to shamanistic beliefs, the soul can transcend the boundaries of worlds after death and assist its descendants. Among the living, only a shaman (referred to as a *baksy*) can directly contact these spirits, whether through ritual or trance, seeking help from powerful deities.

The tradition of tying trees is a rite shared among all Turkic peoples. This practice is reflected in the ritual of adorning the sacred tree, referred to by the Kazakhs as *aulie agash* (holy tree), with vibrant ribbons or strips of fabric often taken from clothing. This ritual highlights the deep-rooted belief that trees act as a vital link between the earth and the heavens.

The mountains, trees, and stones are believed to serve as connecting forces between different worlds, space, and time. Many legends have been created in honor of the mountains, including one about Kelinshektau, a mountain in the ancient Karatau mountain range. Legend says that a father prepared for a daughter who was going to get married an unprecedented rich dowry, with a large caravan of values. When the caravan moved on, the father asked his daughter if she was satisfied with the dowry, and she replied with a question: *Why are my dog's dishes not of gold?* The angry father cursed his daughter with words: *Then become a black stone.* The caravan immediately turned into a mountain whose shape resembled a girl leading a long caravan.

According to ancient Kazakh beliefs, the mythical mountain Koykap-Tau (the Kaf mountains) was viewed as the dwelling place of ghosts. In the Kazakh proto-culture, mountains were considered the abode of divine spirits. They were seen as a manifestation of heaven on earth, where it was possible to establish contact with the spiritual realm. A tree, with roots extending deep into the ground and its crown reaching towards the sky, symbolized a connection between all three realms: the underground, the earth, and the heavens—essentially representing the entire Universe. This concept of the World Tree has its origins in mythology. Next, it is possible to consider astral and solar cults which are among oldest cults providing insights to the categories of space and time. In the ancient Turkic culture of Kazakhstan, a cult of the sky was clearly observed, the ancient Turkic kagans called themselves *heavenly rulers*.

An inscription in honor of commander Kul-Tegin, a monument found in the valley of Orkhon River, testifies of worshiping the sky, of sending the ruler by heaven itself. The inscription created in 731 reads as follows: *Then Heaven, which, so that the name and glory of the Turkic people did not disappear, raised my father, the kagan, and my mother, the Katun. The Heaven, bestowing of the state (to the khans), has taught me, that it is necessary to think, as kagan so that the name and glory of the Turkic people would not disappear. Her Majesty, my mother Katun, like Umay, my younger brother got a heroic name Kul-Tegin (became known as a man, hero). Umay – teg yegem katun kutyna inim kyul-tegin yer at boldy* [Malov, 1951:87].

These inscriptions clearly show the cult of the heaven, the worship of Tengri, and the rulers - kagans were granted by the heaven and were messengers of the heaven. Also, in the text, there are often notes about the will of the heaven, such as *may the heaven be favorable to me, as the heaven bestowed upon them strength, when the heaven above did not press* and others. Kazakhs use today such idioms as *bir Tanir kuya – my witness is the Deity of Heaven, Tanir zharylkasyn – may Heaven reward you*. The shape and structure of the Issyk kurgan can help to understand how the ancient people who lived in Kazakhstan imagined the structure of the Universe. A crypt, which housed the sarcophagus with the body of an emperor, was covered with several layers of ground and loosened rock rubble. These underground multi-level vaults symbolized the cosmic spheres surrounding the earth.

CONCLUSION

The external form of the kurgan was like a world mountain. There were ring ditches around the kurgan, filled with rainwater, as well as circular facing from river boulders and gravel that served as *world waters*. Therefore, every detail of his clothes, and all the things that surrounded him, brought a certain message and were symbols that reflected people's ideas about the structure of the world. The shape of a headdress of the *Issyk emperor* is a symbolic image of the *world mountain*. The worship of the sun in the ancient cult of the Kazakhs is evident in the petroglyphs found on the Tamgaly rock formations from the Bronze Age. This sun cult was demonstrated by a sanctuary that functioned during this era in the Tamgaly tract, dedicated to the worship of the Sun Deity, featuring an altar made of large rock blocks. Among the various figures depicted, the solar symbols are considered the earliest representations. Imaging the sun-headed deities is a tradition to depict the sun as an anthropomorphic image of God, which has developed in ancient times. [Maksimova, 1985:23].

The cult of the Sun was the oldest cult of many nations, which appeared as a cult of fire, as mythology in archaic cultures was closely associated with the belief in the power of nature, such as fire, air, water, earth, etc. Fire was often endowed with supernatural qualities, and, above all, the ability to purify a person. Attributes of the solar cult were widespread throughout Kazakhstan. The importance of the cult of the sun in the life of the Turkic peoples is also

evidenced by the annual celebration of the spring equinox on March 21 - 22, called *Nauryz*. In the traditions of the Turkic people, this day was considered the onset of the New Year. In addition to special rituals, it was considered correct to meet and greet the first rays of the rising sun in *Nauryz*. Non-intrusion into the laws of existence, and sensitivity to nature helped a person to feel his involvement in the natural rhythm of nature, and its subtlest nuances. In traditional Kazakh culture, people thrived in harmony with their environment, seamlessly coordinating their lives with the biorhythms of nature. Unlike the linear perception of time found in many cultures, nomadic societies view time as cyclical, understanding life as a series of recurring cycles. This perspective is vividly illustrated through the changing seasons and the continuity of human generations. Summarizing the above facts, it can be stated that the human awareness of space and time in the Turkic culture was multidimensional and multilevel.

EXTENDED SUMMARY

Based on the philosophical analysis of space and time, it is possible to draw several conclusions about ancient Turkic culture where time is viewed as cyclical rather than linear. This perspective is rooted in the understanding of life's constant, repeating circular movement, which is reflected in the interpretation of existence as a cycle of changing seasons or human generations. In addition to a three-level vertical structure of the world—consisting of the heavens, the earth, and the underworld—there are beliefs about mythical "promised" fertile lands. Legends, such as those surrounding *Zher-Uyyk*, honor these lands. A notable aspect of the mythological worldview is the belief in a person's ability to freely transition between different dimensions. When examining the fundamental aspects of aesthetic perception in Kazakh traditional culture, it is important to recognize that the aesthetic understanding of the world is based on the philosophical and anthropological principle of harmony between humans and nature. In this context, the ecosophical nature of the culture is evident. Human life is intricately linked to the biorhythms of nature, which is reflected in the organization of life in accordance with the characteristics of the seasons.

The Turkic worldview is deeply rooted in the sacralization of space, where certain locations are imbued with spiritual significance. Sacred places, such as *Zher-Uyyk* and *Barsa-*

Kelmes, reflect the duality of space as both a source of hope and a realm of danger. The concept of sacred geography is further emphasized through rituals involving trees, mountains, and other natural elements, which are seen as bridges between the earthly and spiritual realms. The vertical axis of the Turkic cosmology divides the universe into three levels: the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. This structure is mirrored in myths and folklore, where heroes traverse these realms with the help of mythical creatures like winged horses or birds. Such narratives highlight the fluidity of space and time in Turkic culture, where transitions between dimensions are possible through spiritual or mythical means. Unlike the linear perception of time in many cultures, the Turkic understanding of time is cyclical, reflecting the rhythms of nature and the continuity of life. This cyclical view is evident in the celebration of Nauryz, the spring equinox, which marks the renewal of life and the beginning of a new year. The nomadic lifestyle of the Turkic peoples, characterized by constant movement and adaptation, reinforces this cyclical perspective. The concept of "The Path" (Zhol) in Turkic culture symbolizes both a physical journey and a philosophical quest for truth and self-discovery. This duality is evident in the legends of Korkyt-Ata and Asan-Kaigy, where the journey becomes a metaphor for the human experience of navigating the complexities of space and time.

The Turkic worldview is shaped by a syncretic blend of pre-Islamic beliefs, including shamanism, animism, and totemism, alongside Islamic influences. Rituals and practices, such as the veneration of ancestral spirits (aruakhs) and the worship of natural elements like the sun and fire, reflect the deep connection between humans and the natural world. The cult of the horse, a central motif in Turkic epics, underscores the importance of animals as companions and symbols of freedom in nomadic life. Astral and solar cults also play a significant role in Turkic culture, as evidenced by petroglyphs and archaeological findings. The worship of the sun and the heavens is linked to the Turkic rulers' claim of divine authority, as seen in inscriptions from the Orkhon Valley. These practices highlight the integration of cosmological beliefs into the social and political structures of ancient Turkic societies.

The study concludes that the Turkic perception of space and time is multidimensional, encompassing both physical and metaphysical realms. The cyclical nature of time, the

sacralization of space, and the integration of mythological and spiritual elements into daily life reflect a holistic worldview that emphasizes harmony between humans and nature. By exploring these themes, the research provides valuable insights into the philosophical and cultural foundations of ancient Turkic civilization. This extended abstract captures the essence of the study, offering a comprehensive overview of its key findings and contributions to the understanding of ancient Turkic culture.

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