



TUVAN FOLK CULTURE

Farkhodjonov Ulug'bek Akbarjon oglu
Faculty of History Ethnography, Ethnology and
2nd Year Master's Degree in Anthropology
National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek,
E-mail: ulugbee777@icloud.com

Abstract

This article analyzes the traditional culture of the Tuvan (Tyva) people, the factors shaping its formation, and its role in social and spiritual life. The study examines the Tuvan way of life, nomadic traditions, and religious beliefs, with particular emphasis on the interaction and synthesis of Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism. It also considers the cultural significance of national music, especially the art of Khoomei throat singing. Based on historical-ethnographic and comparative analysis, the article reveals the distinctive features of Tuvan culture.

Keywords: Tuvan people, Tyva, national culture, nomadic lifestyle, Shamanism, Buddhism, Khoomei, ethnography, national character, traditional society.

Introduction

TUVINSK FOLK CULTURE TUVINSKAYA NARODNA KULTURA

Annotatsiya:

Ushbu maqolada Tuvin (Tyva) xalqining an'anaviy madaniyati, uning shakllanish omillari hamda ijtimoiy va ma'naviy hayotdagi o'rni tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda Tuvin xalqining turmush tarzi, ko'chmanchilik an'analari, diniy qarashlari, xususan, Shamanism va Tibetan Buddhism unsurlarining o'zaro uyg'unlashuvi ilmiy jihatdan yoritiladi. Shuningdek, milliy musiqa, ayniqsa Khoomei throat singing san'atining madaniy ahamiyati ko'rib chiqiladi. Maqolada tarixiy-etnografik va qiyosiy tahlil asosida Tuvin madaniyatining o'ziga xos xususiyatlari ochib beriladi.



Kalit so‘zlar: Tuvин халқи, Тува, миллий маданият, ко‘чманчи турмуш тарзи, шаманизм, буддизм, хоомей, этнография, миллий характер, ан’анавий жамият.

Аннотация:

В данной статье анализируются традиционная культура тувинского (тывинского) народа, факторы её формирования, а также её роль в социальной и духовной жизни. В исследовании рассматриваются образ жизни тувинцев, кочевые традиции и религиозные воззрения, с особым акцентом на взаимодействие и синтез элементов Shamanism и Tibetan Buddhism. Кроме того, изучается культурное значение национальной музыки, в частности искусства Khoomei throat singing. На основе историко-этнографического и сравнительного анализа раскрываются специфические особенности тувинской культуры.

Ключевые слова: тувинский народ, Тыва, национальная культура, кочевой образ жизни, шаманизм, буддизм, хоомей, этнография, национальный характер, традиционное общество.

In contemporary social sciences and the humanities, the issue of national culture and national character is regarded as one of the significant objects of scholarly inquiry. In particular, the study of the lifestyles and cultural systems of ethnic groups formed under diverse historical and climatic conditions makes it possible to identify the distinctive features of their social consciousness and patterns of behaviour. From this perspective, the traditional culture of the Tuvan people is of particular scholarly interest.

The Tuvan people were formed in the region of Southern Siberia, and their culture is largely determined by a nomadic way of life, a close relationship with nature, and a complex system of religious beliefs. Researchers note that the social life and cultural values of the Tuvans developed over a long historical process, in which the natural environment functioned as an important determinant. In particular, when analysing the Tuvan way of life, Sevyan Vainshtein emphasises that their economic activity and social structure were closely connected with nomadism. The large-scale ethno-political processes that took place in Central Asia in the third–second centuries BCE, especially the movement of nomadic



tribes associated with Xiongnu expansion, constituted an important stage in the ethnic and cultural formation of the Tuva region. The pastoral tribes that entered the region during this period differed significantly, both anthropologically and culturally, from the local population of the Scythian period. Their lifestyle was marked by a high degree of mobility, which reflected a developed form of nomadic economy.

The material culture of these tribes is also confirmed by archaeological monuments. In particular, burial complexes associated with the Kokel culture in the territory of Tuva, including Sın Čürek-type funerary structures, provide important evidence concerning the burial rites, social organisation, and religious conceptions of the population of that period. These monuments are regarded as one of the principal sources reflecting the specific characteristics of nomadic culture.

At the next stage, beginning from the second half of the first millennium CE, the active settlement of ancient Turkic tribes is observed in the territory of Tuva. This process was directly connected with the formation and expansion of the Göktürk Khaganate and had a considerable impact on the political and cultural development of the region. From this period onward, archaeological materials reveal the widespread appearance of new types of burial practices, particularly structures associated with rectangular stone enclosures, which indicates the gradual consolidation of ancient Turkic traditions.

The material culture of the Tuvan people, especially their dwellings, also reflects their historical-ethnic connections and their degree of adaptation to the natural environment. The traditional dwellings of the Tuvans were similar to those of other peoples of Southern Siberia, including the Tofalar, Khakas, and Ket peoples, and consisted of one- or two-layered structural forms. Such dwellings were often built on a wooden frame and were distinguished by their suitability for rapid assembly and dismantling, which corresponded to a nomadic way of life.

In addition, framed dwellings constructed from tree branches and young trees were widespread among the Turkic-Mongolian peoples of Northern and Central Asia, as well as among the Evenks, which indicates a broader regional cultural commonality. The fact that such dwellings were called *chadir* among the Tuvans demonstrates a semantic closeness to many terms within the Turkic language family. This term resembles the names for tents or shelters found among the



Uyghurs, Teleuts, Kachins, and other Turkic peoples, thereby confirming the existence of common Turkic cultural roots.

The traditional food system characteristic of Western Tuva was based primarily on the products of nomadic pastoral economy, although in some cases it was supplemented by elements of agriculture. The population of this region, especially relatively wealthy families, gave priority to dairy products in their year-round diet, while meat was consumed in comparatively smaller quantities. Among plant products, barley and, in some cases, wild plants occupied an important place.

Historically, the economic activity of the Tuvans was connected with nomadic pastoralism, in which the breeding of sheep, goats, cattle, horses, and camels played an important role. The pastoral system was organised through seasonal migration, that is, movement between different pastures. This system functioned not only as a form of economic activity but also as a fundamental factor in social organisation.

The traditional economic system of the Tuvan people developed in different forms depending on regional and climatic conditions, and some of these forms emerged as a result of adaptation to the ecological environment. In particular, reindeer herding was not characteristic of all Tuvans but developed as an important economic activity among groups living in the northern taiga zones, especially among the Tozhu Tuvans. This form of economy was adapted to forested taiga conditions, where the reindeer served as a multifunctional animal. It was widely used as a means of transport, especially for movement through dense forest areas. At the same time, reindeer served as a source of milk and meat; their hides were used in the production of clothing and various household items, while their antlers were employed for domestic and craft purposes.

In scholarly literature, reindeer herding is interpreted as a form of ecological adaptation specific to the taiga zone of the Tuvans. This system differs sharply from the traditional pastoralism dominant in the steppe regions, which was based on the breeding of sheep, goats, cattle, and horses. Therefore, reindeer herding was limited to specific regional groups and should be understood not as the main form of the general Tuvan economic system but as a local economic system.

The traditional religious beliefs of the Tuvan people constitute a complex and multilayered system in which ancient beliefs and later religious teachings



coexisted in a syncretic manner. The foundation of this system is shamanism, although, as a result of historical processes, elements of Tibetan Buddhism also began to occupy an important place.

Shamanism is one of the oldest religious layers of Tuvan culture and is based on belief in the powers of nature and the world of spirits. Within this belief system, mountains, rivers, forests, and other natural objects are regarded as sacred, and it is believed that spirits are associated with them. Shamans functioned as intermediaries between human beings and the spirit world, performing healing practices, conducting rituals, and maintaining the spiritual balance of the community.

Researchers emphasise that Tuvan shamanism operated not only as a form of religious belief but also as a social institution. It played an important role in reinforcing moral norms within society, cultivating a careful attitude toward nature, and preserving communal solidarity.

The spread of Buddhism into the Tuvan region mainly dates to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it became established in the form of Tibetan Buddhism. As Buddhism spread, the system of religious rituals became more complex, and monasteries, or datsans, began to function. At the same time, Buddhist clergy, particularly lamas, acquired an important social status within society.

However, the distinctive feature of Tuvan religious life is that Buddhism did not displace shamanism; rather, it developed in interaction with it. As a result, a syncretic religious system emerged, in which shamanic rituals and Buddhist practices continued to exist simultaneously. For example, in some rituals both a shaman and a lama could participate. This situation reflects the religious tolerance and adaptive cultural thinking of the Tuvan people.

The traditional culture of the Tuvan people appears as a complex system formed through the close interrelation of material and intangible elements. These two layers comprehensively reflect the historical experience, way of life, and worldview of the people.

The material culture of the Tuvans is characterised primarily by dwellings adapted to their nomadic lifestyle. Traditional houses were built on a wooden frame and covered with felt or other natural materials. Such dwellings were distinguished by their ability to be quickly assembled and dismantled, making



them suitable for a nomadic life based on pastoralism. Clothing was also mainly made from livestock products, particularly leather and wool, and possessed functional features adapted to cold climatic conditions. Tools connected with hunting and pastoral activity also formed an important part of material culture.

Yet the most distinctive and significant aspect of Tuvan culture is clearly manifested in its intangible heritage. In particular, Khoomei throat singing occupies a special place in Tuvan musical culture. Through this art form, the performer produces several sounds simultaneously, imitating the sounds of wind, water, or animals in nature. This phenomenon is connected with aesthetic and philosophical views that express harmony between human beings and nature.

At the same time, the cultural distinctiveness of the Tuvan people is vividly expressed in their art, especially in their musical traditions. Khoomei throat singing is regarded not merely as an aesthetic phenomenon but as a cultural phenomenon that embodies the harmony between humans and nature. In particular, in terms of its system of sound coordinates, khoomei functions within the same system as musical instruments, and its coherence is manifested primarily in the organisation of sound through a drone and overtone structure. For this reason, interpreting this art form simply as “singing” in the traditional sense is debatable. The term “throat singing” continues to be used mainly because it has become customary and widely accepted.

Unlike conventional vocal performance, khoomei arises through various physiological capacities of the human body and, in this respect, does not fully correspond to ordinary conceptions of singing. From this perspective, it is more appropriate to regard it as a form of instrumental-musical art or as the “art of creating music through the throat.” Although the system for naming its various styles is highly developed in traditional culture, the absence of a single general name is not accidental. This indicates that each style — *sygyt*, *khoomei*, *kargyraa*, and *borbangnadyr* — is culturally interpreted as the sound of a musical instrument occupying a specific register.

The oral tradition of the Tuvans — including myths, legends, and epic narratives — is also an important means of preserving the historical memory and worldview of the people. Through these forms of intangible heritage, social experience, moral values, and attitudes toward nature are transmitted from generation to generation. In Tuvan culture, the idea of harmony with nature occupies a central



position, finding expression not only in religious beliefs but also in everyday life and artistic practice.

The sacralisation of natural objects is widespread among the Tuvans. Mountains, rivers, trees, and specific places are perceived as “sites inhabited by spirits.” Special rituals are performed in such places, including offerings, tying pieces of cloth as gifts, or sprinkling drinks. It is also customary to conduct special rituals before setting out on a journey or beginning an important undertaking. Before travelling, Tuvans may perform small rituals to ask permission from the spirits or to appease them. This practice may be interpreted as a religious-practical belief aimed at ensuring safety and good fortune. Such practices are directed toward maintaining balance between humans and nature.

The intangible culture of the Tuvan people is regarded as one of the principal factors defining their identity. Developing in close connection with material culture, it reflects the historical development of the people as an integrated system.

The study of the traditional culture of the Tuvan people is important not only for revealing their ethnographic characteristics but also for identifying broader cultural-anthropological patterns. Through such research, it becomes possible to gain a deeper understanding of human relationships with nature, the formation of collective consciousness, and the factors that shape national character.

In this regard, the present study is aimed at analysing the cultural system of the Tuvan people through a comprehensive approach, illuminating on a scholarly basis the interconnection of historical-ethnographic, social, and cultural factors.

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