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# **YURT AND ITS ROLE IN THE CULTURE OF THE PEOPLE OF CENTRAL ASIA**

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## **Abstract**

The article is concerned with studying the role of yurt and yurt-shaped architecture in the culture and art of the Central Asia's people. The yurt is symbolical. The deep semantic bases are presented in its form, location, colour, décor. The origin, formation and evolution of yurt-shaped architecture represent the world view which demonstrates rich ethnic and cultural traditions of the nomadic people. The features of yurt-shaped architecture of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are considered in this work and we have made an attempt to find general, stylistic and semantic characteristics of the Turkic architecture.

*Keywords:* intellectual culture, religious practices, space, Buddhism, Lamaism

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## **1. Introduction**

The intellectual culture of people in Central Asia has its roots in high antiquity and is characterized by the long history of development. Various factors influenced its formation, including the geographical location in the Eurasian steppe, nomadic type, cross-cultural communications with neighbouring ethnic groups, sociocultural context, religious views, etc. The relevance of the research subject is confirmed by the fact that development and integration of western and eastern cultures is the study object of both foreign [1, 2] and Russian scientists [3, 4]. Based on these regularities, the architecture of a special yurt-shaped type was developed. The most important aspects of world view, art heritage, and traditional techniques were reflected in its origin and evolution.

## **2. Methods**

The research is based on a complex approach, modern culturological and fine art concepts that have caused a complex technique assuming the use of

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historicism, collation, comparison, bibliographic method and stylistic analysis. We also used special methods of historical and architectural research and typology. The method of contextual analysis was applied to the survey of semantics of the nomadic peoples' culture.

### **3. Results and discussion**

An important role in the formation and development of the architecture in Central Asia was played by a special type of culture – nomadic (steppe). The liveability of nomadism is proved by centuries-old approbation. This type of culture is especially widespread in the Central Asian highlands, the so-called 'Great Steppe'. It is the territory of large Central Asian states of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The development of public relations, production forces, way of life was steady in the nomadic culture of these people. The living and household space created by nomads became universal for similar conditions. Thus, everything that fitted into the world of nomadism and dwelling, in particular, got forms, styles and functions corresponding to a mobile way of life.

Steppe with its boundless space became a basic concept of explaining the formation of a special yurt-shaped architectural type. The steppe landscape is not differentiated, and there is no accurate differentiation of cardinal directions. Therefore, a nomad's dwelling is round. Sounds in steppe can be heard from far away, it means that hearing becomes the centre of attention and there are no windows (eyes), in a yurt since they are irrational. People mainly sit on the floor to distinctly hear the land's vibrations caused by riding horses. The nomadic world outlook is connected with the concept of boundless steppe. The notion of space prevails in this concept as compared to the notion of time for settled farmers.

Religion is an important factor for the formation and development of architecture. In the ancient time pagan religion worshiping heavenly Powers was widespread among many people of Central Asia (the Mongols, the Kyrgyz, and the Kazakhs). This system of beliefs and cults is known under the name 'Tengriism'. The spiritualizing and idolization of nature and natural phenomena as well as transcendental influence of the Sky and Sky Gods was the cornerstone of this religious form. Shamanism is also based on these primary religious views. Ideas of surrounding space, holistic view of the world and the place of the person in this world were reflected in the Turkic religious culture. The very first religious practices created special semantic context which gave rise to a special type of yurt-shaped architecture.

In the Turkic archaic religious views a mountain was of particular importance since it acted as a mediator between various beginnings (the person and the nature, the sky and the Earth, etc.). The cult of mountains is one of the most widespread in Mongolia. Thus, ancient people believed that mountains have improbable force. To save themselves from their disgrace, people never said their name aloud. To entreat the spirits of mountains, people brought them gifts that subsequently established the tradition of ovoo's construction (Figure 1). The cult

of ovoos was a part of religious practices of Mongols. As a rule, their ceremonies were held at the foot of mountains. Ovoos were not only the place where gods or spirits lived, but also the religious centre. Therefore, this construction can be regarded as the first temple form. The plan of an ovoos represents a circle. Hence, the circle formed the basis of the first dwelling and the first temple. Nowadays ovoos are widespread in Mongolia and as many centuries ago people also believe that having left a stone or a thing in one place, it is possible to attract good luck. Mongols and tourists coming to Mongolia circle around and make wishes, thereby carrying on the tradition of honouring mountain forces.



**Figure 1.** Ovoos, Mongolia.



**Figure 2.** Yurts, Mongolia.

### 3.1. Mongolian dwelling

A circular plan and a hemispherical form laid the basis of a national Mongolian dwelling – a yurt ('ger' – Mongol), which was built only of natural materials, including wood and felt. The yurt was the most popular and universal dwelling for both Mongolian peasants and noblemen. It is not for nothing that Mongolia is called 'the country of felt dwellings'. This country reflects main aspects of world-view and world perception of its ethnic community. The composition of yurts, their forms and basic elements had been mastered over the centuries and formed the basis of many cult Mongolian constructions. A special yurt was developed for chapels ('khorlo-ger'). As spatial decisions and cult tasks were growing, they gave rise to a unique phenomenon – nomadic monasteries consisting of dozens of transported yurts. Thus, the Mongolian architecture became directly connected with the evolution of yurts. The work 'Features of the Mongolian yurt (ger) design: genesis, typology, frame, modular technologies and their transformation' by S.O. Nikiforov, B.S. Nikiforov, V.N. Mikhaylov traces the genesis of yurts [5]. It is noted that the form and design evolution from a conic tent construction resulted in a perfect type of a nomadic dwelling – a lattice-like yurt (ger). As an open web (khan) can be squeezed and stretched as concertina, it is possible to change its height and width (khan) in certain limits and compactly fold a yurt during migrating. At the same time the hinged design of a khan provides the seismic resistance of a yurt. With the creation of felt products (more than three thousand years ago), this material began to be used for covering a *ger* on the top, as well as at the sides, forming a felt *ger* and reliably protecting a person both from summer heat and from winter frost.

Features of the national aesthetics were shown in the stylistics of *ger* lines, which also revealed the understanding of beauty, universality and philosophical sense. The semantics of a yurt represents the model of the Universe. The plan – a *rotunda* (from Latin *rotundus* - round) – means infinity, the embodiment of the first principle of the Eternal Blue Sky (Mongol - Khukhe Munkhe Tengeri). The yurt framework consists of wooden open webs established around. The wood laths *Uni* which form a cone-shaped roof are attached to them from above. The number of *Uni* (60) corresponds to the number of years in the lunar calendar cycle which has been used by Mongols since the ancient times. A *toono* – a hole for smokestack – is arranged in the roof centre. It is the second circle which represents the Sun. The top and bottom of a yurt are joined together with a story post. It is not just a stay pole, it also a symbol of a magical connection between generations and times. Using the binary opposition method, the ethnographer-researcher N. Zhukovskaya highlights the connection of the Mongolian culture and Mongolian yurt, in particular, with a cultural binary code [6]. Thus, the yurt construction is well established, with the top-the bottom being identical to the sky-Earth opposition (Figure 2).

A special focus is laid on the yurt placement. It represents the centre of space and concentrates the life of some community. N.L. Zhukovskaya allocates a concentric way in spatial reasoning of Mongols. The concentric principle works

while a yurt is in one place, and “a certain zone of domestication formed” around it [7]. The role of colours in the yurt semantics is undoubted. As a rule, a yurt is white, and Mongols call the white colour ‘the Mother of colours’ because when combined with other colours it gives new tones which are called ‘colours – sons’. It means happiness, purity and wellbeing [8]. Red is the colour of joy, wealth, and prosperity, so it prevails in the interior. It is also the colour of fire, warmth, hearth and cosiness. Blue symbolizes the sky, and it is used by Mongols to paint objects in the interior, alongside with yellow which is the colour of the Earth. All these colours are an embodiment of five primary elements giving rise to the Universe. Mongols had adopted this doctrine from China and applied it to their own cult practices.

It is the form of yurts and their semantics that formed the basis of the first nomadic temples. The latter differed from living dwellings by the fact that a toono was topped with a *ganjir* – a symbolical completion of a temple in the form of a bulb made of gold-plated copper. In the northern part of the interior an icon case with Buddha idols (images of Buddhist deities) was set [9]. Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries the Mongolian masters had been solving difficult engineering tasks to build temples following the principles of traditional dwellings. They created unique items of the cult architecture, the pattern of which had not been repeated anywhere else. The first *erts* (temples) was the yurt of Abatay-khan which received the name Barunorgo (the Western palace). The ensemble of yurt-shaped temples forms Dashchoyling monastery. The yurt-shaped temples of the 19<sup>th</sup> century survived to this day.

With the increase of wandering monasteries and monastic communities, a normal small yurt-shaped temple could not accommodate all worshippers. It was necessary to increase a yurt, but it had certain limits caused by constructive opportunities. The first attempts were to simply connect two yurts with a wooden passage. Accompanied by the need to build large settled monasteries, new methods and materials began to be used in the construction of yurt-shaped temples. A fundamental change was the construction transformation of the supporting wall, which had to be strengthened and at the same time to preserve all its main qualities. Tsultem notes that “the Mongolian architects solved this problem, having applied a frame or filled the wall consisting of balusters, ledgers and braces. This construction enables to facilitate a wall due to the transmission of vertical and horizontal loads to the frame.” [9, p. 57]

Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries the sizes of round yurt-shaped buildings had been continuously increasing. In this regard, the sections of framework elements within in filled walls also increased. Its solid filling was made of boards that gave it higher rigidity. For large yurt-shaped buildings additional supports were made not only for a toono, but also for roof coating. Thus, additional ranks of columns appeared in the interior of yurt-shaped temples. Trying to preserve a round form of temples, the Mongolian masters produced the surroundings of in filled walls in the form of arch beams. This work required a lot of time, and the Mongolian architects began to make constructions with a ledger of straight beams to give yurt-shaped buildings a polygon form. Hex- and dodecagonal temples

with the roof in the form of a multifaceted frustum were important achievements of the Mongolian dismountable architecture. These temples are also convenient for the needs of a lamasery cult which connects each side of the temple with certain religious ceremonies. The number six in Buddhism - Lamaism has sacral meaning. Six worlds (Tibetan - rigs drug gi skye gnas), also 'six lokas', 'six realities', 'six ways' in Buddhism stand for six possible regenerations in samsara.

The cone-shaped roof became a kind of a dome or tent made of roof tiles, wood and iron. In fact, the Mongolian patterns were inoculated with the Tibetan and Chinese ones, giving rise to a new style transformed on the basis of local conceptions and tastes. Developing from national dwellings, yurts-temples built with boards or beams preserved simple and steady forms, as well as colour combinations.

### **3.2. *The yurt in Kazakhstan***

The yurt in Kazakhstan is an important traditional component of the national culture. Its stylistics and semantic context are reflected in an internally coordinated spatial and complete system of a nomad's dwelling. Kazakhs have been developing architectural principles for centuries satisfying the idea of development and 'taming' the boundless space of the Great steppe. The cosmogonic, aesthetic and deep pragmatic meaning of camping ground was embodied in the Kazakh yurt. Z.K. Karakozova and M.S. Khasanov in their research 'Cosmos of the Kazakh culture' emphasize that a semicircle of the steppe horizon is mainly a symbol of unification of visible and invisible for Kazakhs [10]. This symbol built up their world-view and world perception. The Sun's circle in the sky and the firmament semicircle over steppe became the basis of mythological perception of Cosmos and life. Laws of circular movement formed the basis of the nomads' first ideas of the world. As nomadics also participated in this movement, they made themselves avatars of this Wheel of Life. The movement of three Cosmoses coincided in a complete turn, passing one into another and forming the never-ending movement eight which is an infinity symbol. People thought of themselves united with the Universe and cosmic rhythms. Time was perceived as cyclic. The world centre was always at the location of the Kazakh yurt.

The ternary cycle of yurt erection and dismantling was symbolical for Kazakhs. A lattice-like framework (kherga) - the Earth, scaffold poles (uyk) - the Sun's rays, and round rood-shaped cover of yurt (shangyrak) - the Sun were established one after another. The division into three was preserved in the external design of yurts. The felt covering consists of three parts, three types of cloths of different sizes and forms. It is externally covered with tuyryk (dense felt covering of the Yurt) at the bottom, with tunduk (thin felt covering of the Yurt) at the top of shangyrak, they are also connected with uzik (covering the Yurt from the top of the walls to shangyrak). The interior is divided into three parts: a circum-door, middle and torus, the highest point in a yurt. Therefore, the triple architectonics of yurt models reminds of a vertical three-storeyed structure of the Universe (the so-

called higher, middle and lower worlds). Its top is a pavilion of Heaven, the edges of circle represent the horizon. The lower, middle and higher worlds are often described in the Kazakh folklore.

The internal space of a yurt is designated by conceptual borders. The territory around a door is called a bosaga (sill plate) – a sacral boundary between the house and outside world. The centre – an otau, hearth, dastarkhan – is a symbol of family happiness and is honoured by Kazakhs as a hallowed spot of their dwelling. Opposite to an entrance behind the hearth there is a place for guests, honoured people, the elders of family – a tor. A tor represents glory and wealth. The internal space is also divided into semantic segments from the right to the left. To the right of entrance a thalamus (a female part of the house) is located. To the left of the sill plate – bosaga – an andron (male part of the house) is located which is manly symbol. To the right of the door between the place for guests and the sill plate there is a special place for old men and children. From the entrance to the right, closer to the place for guest there is a place for newlyweds if they have not separated from their parents.

A.S. Sapiev believes the Kazakh yurts are the centre of their cultural community. “Rather small space in a yurt was accurately organized, like in the Mongolian dwelling a ‘return axis’ and ‘floor axis’ were allocated, the place and way of sitting of its inhabitants was marked depending on sex, age, social status. A human life began in the right part of a yurt, a worldly half, and came to an end there finishing a vital circle. Thus, the main stages of a human life cycle were marked in a yurt.” [11]

The Kazakh yurt interior is semantic. All the things inside are in a plain view, and each of them, besides pragmatic essence, performs decorative and aesthetic functions. These items are decorated with national ornaments, mainly zoomorphic, floral, geometrical and stylized images of household objects, heavenly bodies and phenomena of the surrounding nature.

The Kazakh yurt as a national archetype reflects the features of world outlook of the people and embodies the idea of order and integrity of the Universe. Through the semantics of a yurt the link with antique traditions can be traced, key components of the Kazakh philosophy are also brought to light.

### ***3.3. The Kirghiz yurt***

The Kirghiz yurt has passed its own way of development from a simple conic booth. This booth (kosh) consisted of poles connected at the top and covered with animal skins. This proto-yurt had an entrance and an opening for a smokestack above. In the middle the heat was turned up in the hearth.

A more elaborate type of the Kyrgyz booth is known under the name ablaycha. A Kyrgyz legend attributes its emergence to khan Ablay [12]. This construction consists of poles which are established obliquely. From above, the poles are inserted into a special circle – a shangyrak. The dwelling is entirely covered with felted cloth (felt), and only the opening for a smokestack is left free. Nowadays an ablaycha is used as a camp yurt.

A lattice-like yurt came to the Kyrgyz culture from the Mongolian lattice-like Gypsy van. In the course of its evolution two types of yurts were allocated: 'Kalmyk' – a simpler one, the style of which is close to that of an ablaycha put on a lattice; and 'Kyrgyz' – a more complicated and skilful one in respect of its equipment. Thus, the Kyrgyz lattice-like yurt received the dome-shaped top at the expense of curved poles that created a structure with softer and harmonious outlines. The Kyrgyz call the basis of this yurt – a kherga (as well as Kazakhs). This part is made of purple willow growing on the coast of steppe rivers. The process of material preparation is controlled by a master – a uycha. As a result, curved details are made for a lattice-like frame. Then the Kyrgyz drill them out in the places of crossing and pass throughout the openings listels, with their ends tied tight. By their connection a separate module is obtained which is called in Kyrgyz – a rope. From these lattices the yurt foundation is formed. Further to the lattice poles – uk (ok) - are attached which top end is direct and lower end is bent and tied to the frame. The top part of a uk is inserted into a circle – a shangyrak. In the yurt centre a strong pole – a bokan - is erected for greater stability and durability. Further the yurt is covered with felted cloth, and of course chiy, a firm floor mat pleached out of grass. Furthermore, the Kyrgyz yurt should have a baskur – a woollen belt with a rich bright pattern which pulls together the top part of the framework. The yurt covered with white felt is considered to be the most beautiful and rich.

The yurt furniture has traditional features typical of dwellings in Central Asia. In the centre there is a hearth, complemented with a three-legged stand which legs have to be opposite to the door. Opposite to the door boxes are fixed by a semicircle – a sandyk used for storing things. Opposite to the door there is a place for guest (ter) which is taken by an honorary guest. G.D. Gachev reveals that the monolithic interior of yurts is universal and indivisible [13]. It is used to make a strong impression. It cannot grow inside and up within a certain limit. This yurt is a coherent idea.

A yurt is pride of the Kyrgyz. The richer the man is, the more decorated he has a yurt. It is acknowledged that the Kyrgyz yurt is the most beautiful one. The felt of high quality is utilized to decorate the yurt framework. Woollen carpets entirely cover the interior. One more feature of the Kyrgyz tradition is to lodge by big patrimonial groups, therefore a camping ground can contain more than hundred yurts.

On the basis of the nomad's universal dwelling (yurt) other yurt-shaped architectural types were later built. Thus, N. Kharuzin distinguishes a chuchelas (or shoshala). This structure comes from a form of a simple lattice-like yurt and is made of dogwood or a double wattle fence which is also covered with soil and manure. A chuchela can also enter into a yurt ensemble and serve as the kitchen or the room for housing workers. There are chuchelas which are constructed of baulks, in this case it is made octagonal [12, p. 69].

The yurt-shaped architecture of Kyrgyzstan continues its existence nowadays. Technologies of its creation are modernized, designs and materials are improved, but, despite these transformations a yurt remains a widespread type of



dwelling on broad lands of this country. In the Asian countries a technocratic component relies on traditions, ethnocultural experience and national art values [14]. It can be proved by the yurt evolution.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Due to global changes in life of the nomadic people, the nomadic yurt-shaped architecture became obsolete giving way to stationary constructions. The modern situation of social development is characterized by the bigger role of integration processes which are not assuming the lower value of culture and art within national components [15]. Therefore, a yurt as a traditional dwelling has survived to the present day. The image of yurts has become a socio-historical, moral and philosophical symbol of people living in Central Asia.

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