
RELIGIOUS-ETHICAL VALUES IN THE CONTEXT OF ‘THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS’

Saira Shamakhay^{*}, Manifa Sarkulova and Garifolla Yessim

L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Satpayev St. 2, Astana, 010008, Kazakhstan

(Received 18 December 2018, revised 3 April 2019)

Abstract

‘The Secret History of the Mongols’ is a remarkable artefact of culture of nomadic Mongols, which narrates about the ancestors of Genghis Khan, starting from the middle of the 6th century until the middle of the 13th century, as well as about the formation and development of the Khanate. This ancient manuscript is an invaluable source about the history of creation of Genghis Khan’s Empire, politics, customs, traditions, religious and political consciousness, the world outlook in general, the spiritual life of the Mongols. The purpose of the article is the cultural and philosophical analysis of axiological roots of the traditional social life of nomads, the spiritual values of the people in the context of ‘The Secret History of the Mongols’, humanistic rules, religious-ethical rules formed during the reign of Genghis Khan. The continuity of certain ideological, religious-ethical and plot lines dating back to the time of the existence of the ancient Turkic empires, a religious-cultural reform initiated by Genghis Khan, and a new direction based on the ancient traditions and religious beliefs followed by Genghis Khan have been determined in the study of the topic. Along with it, on the basis of numerous historical works and studies of many scientists, such values as unity, harmony, stability, persistence, religious toleration, tolerance, as well as the conception ‘Tengri – in the sky, Khagan – on the Earth’, exalted by Genghis Khan, have been analysed. In this conception, the two concepts ‘Tengri’ and ‘Khagan’ form two main components of the Higher Freedom in the world.

Keywords: Genghis Khan, Turks, ethics, religion, values

1. Introduction

The 13th century was the period when the nomadic Mongol tribes, having united and created a single state, could conquer many new lands and began to openly dictate their will to other states. The epoch of Genghis Khan, in addition to the fact that it gave new impetus to the development of culture and art, could preserve its history, literary writing system and lineage for subsequent generations.

The first text of the ‘History’ (Chinese: ‘*Yuan Chao Bi Shi*’, 元朝秘史; pinyin: Yuáncháo mìshǐ) ‘*Chin-kisi kakhan – nu-kuzhaur*’ (The Sacred History of the Yuan State, Khagan Genghis Khan’s dynasty) consists of these two lines

^{*}E-mail: sh.saira@mail.ru

[1]. Subsequently, the title ‘The Sacred History’ was changed to ‘The Secret History of the Mongols’.

In the Harvard Journal of Asian Studies, a researcher William Hang wrote about a change in the title of the work: “In the variant retranslated from Chinese the title ‘The Secret History of the Mongols’ is lost. This transformation could be a result of damage to the original source.” [2]

In ‘The Secret History of the Mongols’, Genghis Khan’s genealogical tree begins with a man named Borte-Chino. Perhaps, this character goes back to the mythological hero Bori Ashina, widely used in Turkic legends, since the word ‘Ashin’ means ‘wolf’ in Chinese and the word ‘Chino’ also means ‘wolf’ in Mongolian. Part 1 of the ‘Secret History’ states: “Borte-Chino, favoured by Tengri, and his wife Goa-Maral crossed the ocean together, settled at the head of the Onon River on the Burkhan Khaldun Mount and gave birth to the son Batshagan” [3]. In other words, according to the evidence from the ‘Secret History’, this man, having crossed the oceans and mountains, appeared on the Mongolian peninsula from afar and from foreign lands. Genghis Khan was the twenty-second descendant of this man.

Views of researchers vary on whether the ancestors Borte-Chino and Goa-Maral, mentioned in the ‘Secret History’, were people or totems. Western scholars, who read the ‘Secret History’ of P. Kafarov’s variant, tend to the totemic version.

The 21st paragraph of the ‘Secret History’ refers to the connection of Genghis Khan’s ancestor with Tengri and his divine origin. One of the foremothers Alan-Gua explained her pregnancy with three children by the fact that a glittering blond man visited her every night and stroked her belly [3, p. 28]. Considering that it is a myth about the miraculous birth of the new, the Hunnic roots of the origin of the myth become evident. Worship of the totemic images was also widespread in the pre-Turkic period. In the world history, the birth of gods and great people is often associated with their descent from the radiant Sun.

2. Methods and research novelty

The results of the study of the ‘Secret History’ by scientists are taken as a methodological basis. The interrelation of the unity of the historical and the logical, the general-to-specific method, historical-comparative and hermeneutical methods, which are widely used in humanitarian and philosophical knowledge, have been used in the study of the topic.

The article analyses the continuity of some religious-ethical plots, dating from the reign of Genghis Khan to the ancient Turkic empires, religious tolerance and the conception ‘Tengri – in the sky, Khagan – on the Earth’.

3. Historical continuity of religious-ethical values

The concept of ethics (in Greek: ‘manner, custom’), ‘ethos’ in Greek philosophy, means a social category denoting a tradition. Morals and morality are subjects for the study in Ethics. This category, which concerns the world outlook of each people, beliefs, customs, traditions, and is manifested in everyday practice, is the main force of socialization. Traditional ethics aims to regulate people’s lives through a system of prohibitions, rules and attitudes. The mentality and character of people are formed largely due to ethics and this system of symbols. Recognizing the standardization of ethical rules, the German philosopher F. Nietzsche wrote: “Where there is no ethics, there is no humanity” [F. Nietzsche, *Morning Dawn*, 2017, <https://mybook.ru/author/fridrih-nicshe/utrennyaya-zarya/read/?page=3/>, accessed on March 20, 2018].

According to Taoism, ‘a person must obey rules and traditions. If these attitudes are violated, the danger of indifference and carelessness in society is great’. The Korean philosopher Khua So wrote: “Ethics is common to all, the most wonderful and perfect, miraculous, an eternally pure origin bringing good to people...” [4]

Ethics arises at a certain time and is recognized by all. Some ethical rules may change over time or even disappear, while time-tested truths and moral values that give energy to traditional culture are passed down for generations through verbal art, proverbs and sayings, songs, legends, myths and tales.

The Mongolian scholar S. Bira wrote about the continuation of the ancient Turkic spiritual values and attitudes that were formed during the reign of Genghis Khan: “It must be assumed that runic texts, which are currently known in science, are only part of the historical works created by the ancient Turks. It is no coincidence that new runic manuscripts are found all the time in the territory of the Mongolian People’s Republic. As we have already noted, at the present level of development of our knowledge it is difficult to trace how exactly the historiographical achievements of the Turks were transferred to the Mongols. It is unlikely that the Mongols became familiar with them, when reading runic inscriptions, although the Kul Tigin monument was well known in Mongolia during the reign of Kublai Khagan (1260-1294). However, it is much more likely that these achievements reached other nomadic tribes and peoples, including the Mongols, in a verbal form.” [5]

The Tengrian religion came from the Sumerian era; later on in the period of Heavenly Turks it turned into a monotheistic belief of the Turks and the Mongols. But the Tengrian religion reached its peak during the Great Mongol Empire in the era of worship of the ‘Eternal Sky’. Since ancient times, the Mongols used the expressions ‘to experience Tengri’s disgrace’, ‘to be endangered by harmful evil spirits’, ‘bad signs’ for fear of adversity and misfortune, since in Tengrianism there were no concepts of ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’. Nevertheless, the striving of the Mongols to be compassionate and perform good deeds was primarily due to the faith in Tengri. Saint Chang Chun, invited by

Genghis Khan, called on the Mongols “to perform virtuous actions and be out of mischief” [6].

In the Empire of Genghis Khan, a body of laws ‘Yassa’ was approved, based on the systems of traditional attitudes and prohibitions, dating back to ancient sources and based on the faith in Tengri. Despite the fact that both parts of ‘Yassa’ have not survived until today in full, they are mentioned in such historical works as ‘The Secret History of the Mongols’ (§78-268); ‘Jami al-tawarikh’ by Rashid-ad-Din, ‘Golden Summary’ (‘Altan Tobchi’) by Luvsandanzan, ‘Bolor Erike’ by Rashpuntsag.

A part ‘Qualities and Traditions of Genghis Khan’ about the benefits of Genghis Khan’s precepts, included in the collection ‘Jami al-tawarikh’ written at the beginning of the 14th century, states the following: “Only military leaders (commanders of minghans and tumens), annually at the end or at the beginning of the year, listening to the authorities’ instructions and prescriptions, letting these wise words through their minds, can exercise the leadership of their soldiers. While the noyons, sitting at home and not listening to the authorities, are likened to stones thrown into the water and sunk into oblivion. These people cannot be real noyons, rulers.” [7]

In other words, Genghis Khan’s ‘Yassa’ was a body of laws compulsory for his descendants and peoples under his power, while ‘Commandments of Power’ could be regarded as a code of laws regulating the attitude towards criminals. Subsequently, Turkic-Mongolian tribes began to use the legal regulations and rules of ‘Yassa’ as customary rules without the need for other documents [8].

In the ‘Secret History’, a concept of unity as a spiritual value originates from the precepts of Genghis Khan’s foremother Alan-Gua. Paragraph 19 states that the foremother Alan-Gua, having noticed a discord arising among her five sons, gave each of them one twig and ordered to break it. The sons immediately broke the twigs. Then the mother tied together five branches and gave them to the children. None of them could break the tied twigs. Then the mother told them the following wise words: “If you are on your own, it will be easy to break you, like a thin twig. If you are together and friendly with each other, nobody will take you apart.” [3, p. 28] As evidence that unity and harmony make it possible to successfully rule the people, Paragraph 39 states that five sons of the foremother Alan-Gua united and could conquer the whole village of the Uriankhai. In fact, this principle of unity and harmony could have arisen in the era of Xiongnu [9].

The precept of the foremother Alan-Gua was passed down for generations and sacredly preserved by her descendants. Paragraph 76 of the ‘Secret History’ states that after many years Genghis Khan’s mother Hoelun repeated Alan-Gua’s precept to her squabbling children, encouraging them to unite as the five sons of the mother Alan-Gua.

Genghis Khan grew up with the knowledge that unity and harmony in the state guaranteed a long and successful reign and he could put these ethical principles into action.

Genghis Khan established a system of just government. Marco Polo wrote: “In ‘Yassa’ justice was fundamental, the Mongolian people were rewarded with mercy, good deeds, intercession, and many other nations later voluntary joined them” [10].

4. Sustainability and religious tolerance

Genghis Khan conducted a number of relevant and cultural-legal reforms leading to the civilizational path in order to preserve peace and stability in the state:

Firstly, he introduced the writing culture in the state. Paragraph 124 ‘Yuan Shi’ of Chinese sources tells a legend, according to which Genghis Khan gave a honourable place on his right to a fugitive Naiman vizier Tata-tonga, presented him a tamga (state seal) and ordered to teach Uighur writing to princes and noblemen [11].

Genghis Khan realized that his dream of a single nation would not come true if people were illiterate. He admitted that it would be impossible. He could realize the complexity of the problem and for its solution he attracted a more knowledgeable, more educated person, not a Mongolian. The Uighur writing system prepared by Tata-tonga was used in creating the ‘Secret History’ and Genghis Khan’s signs. All this testifies to the true greatness and genius of Genghis Khan, which allowed him to go down in history [12].

Secondly, Genghis Khan adopted legal rules, which were essentially religious-liberal. For example, there was an indication of equality and respect for all religions, with emphasis on the fact that no religion could be given priority. Based on the stories of the ‘Secret History’ and the legends about Genghis Khan, we can conclude that Genghis Khan’s Empire showed genuine tolerance to all religions, were it Islam, Christianity or Buddhism.

The Persian historian and statesman Juvayni wrote in his essay: “Genghis Khan was never a religious fanatic. He deeply respected the leaders of different religions and considered it a direct road to Paradise. His children and descendants voluntarily converted to various religions, and some of them continued to adhere to beliefs of their ancestors. But they did not fall into religious fanaticism. Genghis Khan in his ‘Yassa’ postulated the equality of all religions.” [13, 14]

This principle was preserved even after Genghis Khan’s death; it was passed down to his descendants according to the laws of succession. In particular, this rule was fervently observed by Sorghaghtani Beki, a wife of Genghis Khan’s youngest son Tolui, as she made it the principle of all her life.

The Persian historian of the 13th century Juvayni wrote as follows in his three-volume work ‘Tarikh-i Jahangushay’ (‘Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror’) dedicated to the Mongolian history: “No city in the Muslim world can compare with Bukhara. Currently there are 2 marvellous buildings erected by Sorghaghtani, with surpassing beauty of architecture. These are Madrasa-yi-Khani and Masgut Madrasah. In these buildings every day

thousands of students are engaged in good research. Their mentors are outstanding scientists, sages of the era.” [14, p. 74]

Sorghaghtani brought up her 4 sons in full accordance with the precepts of Genghis Khan, with all strictness and exactingness, demonstrating all her outstanding intelligence and wisdom. That is why their names (Möngke, Kublai, Arik Böke, Hulagu) became known all over the world and their descendants ruled nations for 400 years, becoming truly great khans (golden seed).

One more example of tolerance of Chingissids can be cited. The French ambassador Rubrouck at the khan’s headquarters in Karakorum left an interesting message about the tolerance of Möngke Khan to all religions. He wrote that the Khan collected all religious figures and arranged a dispute over their teachings. Rubrouck wrote: “After questioning about my religion, Möngke Khan concluded: ‘God has given you a sacred book you must follow. God gave us shamans and kams and we follow their instructions, therefore we grow up and prosper’” [15] When many worshipers gathered in Möngke’s horde, the Khan took care of them and fed them. Rubrouck did not like it, because he recognized only his religion [15]. In his letter to the French King, Möngke Khan wrote: “We wish cooperation in the entire world and among all religions and send you priests and ambassadors Moals (as Rubrouck called the Mongols)” [15].

Since in all religions (Buddhism, Christianity and Islam) the idea of man’s self-worth is affirmed, Genghis Khan respectfully treated all religions. The release of all religious worship institutions from state taxes is a clear example of this.

Thirdly, treating all religions with due respect, Genghis Khan introduced certain changes in Tengrianism. Tengrianism, dating back to the era of the Sumerians, which became a state religion and official ideology in the Hun Empire and later in the era of Kok Turik (Heavenly Turks) – a religion of the Blue Sky (Kok Tengri), is a special religious doctrine that accompanied nomads for millennia. And yet Tengrianism developed into the religion of the Eternal Sky in the era of the great Mongolian state. In the ‘Secret History’, Genghis Khan says: “Only the Eternal Sky knows!”, “Since Badai and Kushilik helped me, they received gratitude from the Eternal Sky and we, having won, reached the heights”, “Only the Eternal Sky knows who will win the campaign!” [3, p. 147]. All these examples show that Genghis Khan, relying on the power and might of the Eternal Sky, was a deeply religious person. Worshiping the Eternal Sky, he adhered to shamanism. The academician S. Bira wrote as follows: “Genghis Khan could finely use the faith in Tengri to unite previously dispersed Mongolian tribes and for subsequent imperial policy. He left shamanism as a traditional religious belief of the Mongols at the state level.” [16]

Despite the fact that in ancient times Tengrianism was of the pronounced pantheistic nature, in the era of the great Mongol Empire Genghis Khan, having constructed the concept of ‘Eternal Sky’, has transformed the ancient dogma.

In the ‘Secret History of the Mongols’ the idea of Tengri’s protection is repeated very often. Especially it concerns the cases when Genghis Khan avoided all sorts of difficulties, numerous victories over enemies that would

have been impossible without Tengri’s help. The phrase ‘Thanks to the protection of the Eternal Sky’ is also found in the decrees of Genghis Khan’s heirs. “By the power of the Eternal Sky, by mercy of the wise Khan” – this is how Genghis Khan’s messages begin, addressed to the peoples of Asia and Europe [17]. For example, in 1845, near Dnieper, a silver amulet was found, which used to be worn on the neck by ambassadors. There is an inscription on this amulet: ‘Under the protection of the Eternal Sky and blessed with Khagan’s wisdom’. Currently, this amulet is kept in the Museum of Peter the Great in St. Petersburg. In this inscription, the conception ‘Tengri – in the sky, Khagan – on the Earth’ can be traced. Tengri and Khagan form two bases of the world.

Genghis Khan can be considered a person, who laid the foundations of modern globalization. The academician S. Bira wrote: “Genghis Khan, having conquered the whole world, having created the great empire, could unite various nations under his authority. Due to cultural and trade relations among different ethnic groups, there was interaction and mutual influence of different views, knowledge, religions. From the historical point of view, Mongolian Tengrianism can be compared with modern globalization and multiculturalism.” [18]

According to shamanism, the faith in Tengri is a doctrine originating from distant nomadic ancestors. Genghis Khan, having added an epithet ‘Eternal’ to this concept, thereby gave this religion a profound philosophical and religious meaning, raised it to a high theoretical level.

5. Conclusions

The ‘Secret History’ showed that the main reason for great achievements and victories of the Mongol Empire was that it could take on everything new for itself, while preserving the formed system of spiritual values and ancient traditions passed down for generations.

The main character of the ‘History’ Genghis Khan, relying on Tengrianism and shamanism, raised the idea of the Eternal Sky. His conception ‘Tengri – in the sky, Khagan – on the Earth’ meant that if there is a single god in Heaven, then there must be a single sovereign on Earth.

Having formed the worldview theory of a heavenly ruler Tengri, Genghis Khan could achieve considerable results by subjugating all the peoples living under the Eternal Sky, conquered the world from east to west and received the proud name of ‘The Stunner of the Universe’. That is why, starting from the 13th century, the religious views of the Mongols reached their peak and a monotheistic doctrine was created – the faith in the Eternal Sky. ‘Eternal Sky’ is an inseparable unity of matter and spirit.

In the empire created by Genghis Khan, new examples of cultural development, religious-ethical values were formed, namely, religious wisdom, religious toleration and tolerance, which were later carefully preserved by successors and heirs of the great Khagan.

References

- [1] T.E. Tynybaiyn, *Shynyna kesh tarikh! Shyngyskhan kim? 'Kupiya shezhirenin kupiyasy'*, Nurly Elem, Almaty, 2010, 5.
- [2] H. William, Harvard J. Asiat. Stud., **14(3-4)** (1951) 440.
- [3] T. Damdinuren, *Mongoliin nuuts tovchoo*, Ulaanbaatar, Ulan-Bator, 1990, 25.
- [4] R. Darihuu, *Jean Sam Hion. 'Ya Ri' onol tuunii uzel sanaa. Philosophy, erhiin sudjal (Jean Sam Hion. Theory 'Ya Ri' and his view. Philosophy, jurisprudence)*, vol. XX, UHG, Ulaanbaatar, 2006, 26.
- [5] S. Bira, *Mongolian historiography of XIII-XVII centuries*, Nauka, Moscow, 1978, 320.
- [6] T. Ganbaatar, *Chanchun' bombyn erne etgeeeded zorchson temdegglel*, Ulaanbaatar, Ulan-Bator, 2010, 105.
- [7] A.D. Rashid, *Sudryn chuulgan*, vol. I, UB Shuvuun saaral, Ulaanbaatar, 2002, 76.
- [8] A. Kuntoleuly, *Shyngys khan*, Deuir, Almaty, 2006, 375-377.
- [9] Y.V. Popkova and Z. Amarsany, *Mongolian World: between East and West*, Autograph, Novosibirsk, 2014, 351.
- [10] Marco Polo, *Ayalal. Angli khelnees orchuulsan Burenhargal O*, Ulaanbaatar, Ulan-Bator, 2012, 147.
- [11] V.Y. Vladimirtsov, *Comparative grammar of the Mongolian written language and the Khalkha dialect*, Book on Demand, Moscow, 2012, 443.
- [12] M. Dzhon, *Shyngys khannyn koshbasshylyk kupiyasy*, VOX POPULI, Almaty, 2010, 272.
- [13] A.M. Juvayni, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, Russian translation, Magistr-Press, Moscow, 2004, 5.
- [14] A. Juvaini, *Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*, English translation, Manchester University Press UNESCO Publishing UK, Manchester, 1997, 108.
- [15] G. Rubruck, *Mongolyn ezent gurend zorchson n'*: 1253-1255, Ulaanbaatar, Ulan-Bator, 2000, 114-119.
- [16] S. Bira, 'Ikh Mongol ulsyn tuukh, uzel surtlyn zarim ontslog asuuudluud' ('Mongolyn tengeriin uzel ba tengerchlel'), Ulaanbaatar, Ulan Bator, 2006, 61.
- [17] S. Choimaa, *Temujin hovguunees tengerleg ezend* (From Temujin boy to heavenly owner), HG Soyombo press, Ulan-Bator, 2015, 146.
- [18] S. Bira, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland, **14(1)** (2004) 3-12.