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# RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND TRADITIONAL WORLDVIEW OF EURASIAN NOMADIC COMMUNITIES HISTORIOGRAPHY

**Zere Maidanali<sup>\*</sup>, Kuralay Dandibaevna Arystanbekova,  
Ainagul Nurgalievna Saginayeva and  
Aknur Orazgalievna Koshymova**

*Al Farabi Kazakh National University, Al-Farabi Avenue, 71-050040, Almaty, Kazakhstan*

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## **Abstract**

This article deals with the religious beliefs and traditional worldview of Eurasian nomadic communities and focuses on the historiographical notion of the given problem. The development of historical science shows the very need to define criteria for evaluating and classifying the written and oral sources related to the concept of the religious beliefs and traditional worldview of Eurasian nomadic communities.

*Keywords:* beliefs, traditional, worldview, nomadic, community

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## **1. Introduction**

The current state of historical science requires an expanded and in-depth study of the interaction of world religious traditions based on new methodological approaches from the position of knowledge accumulated by historical science and consonant with theories of the historical process. The gradual strengthening and synthesis of social, political, and spiritual-cultural spheres of nomadic formations and sedentary agricultural territories contributed to the consolidation of ties and the interpenetration of various religious and ideological elements. The intercultural dialogue of various religious traditions on the territory of Eurasia was necessitated by the interaction of diverse forms and multifunctional systems, not only political and social, but also spiritual-cultural ones. An analytical study of the conceptual provisions of historical research shows that the content of spiritual and religious culture includes such components as religious and philosophical ideas, ideals and teachings, cosmogonic knowledge, cults, customs, rituals, art, writing, etc. A comprehensive study of the problems of the development and spread of religious

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<sup>\*</sup> E-mail: [autumntenderbluesky@gmail.com](mailto:autumntenderbluesky@gmail.com), Fax: +77784719082

traditions as an integral part of Eurasian civilization is a modern and promising approach to the study of a historical epoch.

## **2. Theoretical background of the question**

Currently, attempts are being made for an expanded and in-depth definition of the historical prospects for the development of intercultural dialogue in medieval Eurasia. Each researcher proceeds from their own evaluative nuances and level of research preparation, which makes it possible to consider the evolution of historical views and ideas on the development of religious and spiritual views [1-3]. The projected trend in studying the problem of the interaction of the world religious traditions of medieval Eurasia was the definition of a range of questions about the formation and functioning of the ideological systems of nomadic communities and sedentary agricultural oases. The vastness of the source base (linguistic sources, genealogical legends, folklore) together with the use of new analysis methods allow a comprehensive study of the problem of spiritual life, religious traditions and the system of interaction between the nomadic community and the sedentary population. As emphasized by A. Kadyrbayev, “the history of the Great Steppe and Kazakhstan as its integral part was associated with the nomadic tribes of the Turks from the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD. [...] the ancient Turks first joined the world religions - Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and mastered the achievements of other civilizations - Arabian, Byzantine, Iranian, Indian, and Chinese.” [4] Along with domestic beliefs, other religious systems spread across Central Asia from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. V.V. Barthold in his work “On Christianity in Turkestan in the Pre-Mongol Period” notes that Manichaean and Christian (Nestorian and Jacobite) communities existed in the city of Argu Talas (Taraz) and four other Semirechye cities in the 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries [5]. Part of the Sogdian population of Taraz preserved the Zoroastrian religion, as evidenced by the Zoroastrian cemetery in Taraz studied by Kazakh archaeologists.

Religious syncretism was a characteristic feature of the early medieval cities of Semirechye. While only a brief Syriac inscription was preserved from the 7<sup>th</sup> century Christian community, the more powerful Manichaean community had its own monasteries in Taraz. The 8<sup>th</sup> century Manichean script called ‘The Sacred Book of Two Foundations’, written “to awaken faith in the country of ten arrows” (the Western Turkic Khaganate), mentioned the “Golden City of Argu-Talas” (i.e. Taraz) and four other Semirechye cities with Manichaean monasteries [6]. The Manichaean community occupied a dominant position in Central Asia for a while, but was unable to hold it due to an internal crisis. The underlying reasons for the adoption of Buddhism and Manichaeism in Kazakhstan were the cultural proximity of the urban culture of Southern Kazakhstan and the urban civilization of the Near East.

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

It is known that the Turkic nomadic tribes preserved ancient beliefs, sometimes along with the accepted religion, as well as customs and traditions associated with them. An example of the manifestation of faith in magic and enchantment preventing the undesirable outcome of some events was the Naimans doing magic during the crusade against Temujin in 1201, described by Rashid ad-Din. "They (the Naimans) performed a ritual to bring snow on and unleash a snowstorm. The meaning of magic is that they cast spells and put stones of different varieties into the water, to produce heavy rain. That snow and snowstorm backfired; they wanted to go back and get out of those hills. They stopped at a place called Quiten. It is known that at that place Buyruq, the Khan of the Naimans, and the Mongol tribes, who were in alliance with him, lost their hands and legs from frost-bite: the snowstorm and gloom were so severe that a lot of people and quadrupeds slid from heights and perished." [7]

The nomads always had a unique strategy of mastering the world and their own system of views on the world and on man in this world, which were expressed in the specific value-based attitude of man to the world. The interrelation of man and the world is expressed in numerous and diverse forms of the material and spiritual culture of the nomads. They contain general cultural and universal laws. The traditional cults of Tengri continued to be the main tendencies of the development of culture and religious beliefs. They were still monotheized in the early Turkic state formations due to the processes of power centralization that were going on in Turkic society.

An interesting methodological approach was presented by J. Fletcher, who believed that the nomads' ideological device for strengthening a khan's control was "belief in Tengri, the universal victory-granting sky god, which – like horse nomadism, fire worship, exposure of the dead, the etymologies (perhaps) of all the Turco-Mongolian terms for chiefs and rulers, and [...] the concept of universal dominion and also monotheism itself - came from the early Aryans, some of whom eventually migrated into Iran and India and some of whom remained in the steppes". According to the researcher, the idea of a universal supreme god contains "the potentiality of a single universal realm on earth and the potentiality that the supreme god may destine a single ruler to establish his dominion over that entire universal realm" [8].

The religious and cultural situation in the Turkic tribes in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries has distinguished by diversity and plurality. Along with traditional views, the Turks also professed Manichaeism and Nestorianism, which in some Turkic states became part of the state system. Here we should consider the peculiarities of the perception of these religions by the Turks. As noted by modern scholars, the temporary nature of the Turks' perception of these religious movements was grounded on the desire to preserve their originality, both from the dominant China and the created Islamic civilization. The Karakhanid state became the first Turkic state with Islam as its state religion. At the same time, it should be noted that this state formation did not turn into a

theocratic one, which indicated the preservation of the strong traditions of tribal society characteristic of Turkic statehood. The Karakhanid Khaganate played an important role and became a link between the nomadic environment and sedentary agricultural oases.

After the adoption of a new religious system (Islam), the relations between the nomads and the sedentary population continued to develop in the context of traditional relations. As mentioned above, the adoption of a new religious doctrine was accompanied by the preservation of traditional beliefs. The initial stage was characterized by a contrast between the communities of the Turkic tribes and the world of Islam. Such contrasts can be illustrated by the attempts to spread Islam throughout the Turkic steppes, as described in Arab sources. In this regard, V.V. Barthold's statement is of interest: "The 10<sup>th</sup> century Arabian geographers describe the Turks as a people completely alien to Islam and in enmity with the Muslims" [9]. However, it is in the 10<sup>th</sup> century when drastic changes occurred. One of the Arabian geographers of that time, Ibn Khaukal, reported on the acceptance of Islam by thousands of Turkic families who roamed between Ispijab and Shash, in a mountain-steppe region adjacent to the Syr Darya middle course. However, the biggest event of this kind occurred in 960, when somewhere in the inner regions of the Karakhanid state, most likely in Semirechye, 200 thousand tents of the Turks accepted Islam [9].

Caught in the zone of the powerful impact of a sedentary civilization, the Turkic tribes found themselves embroiled in a new system of economic and social relations and became part of this system. The external expression of this integration, at least in its ideological aspect, was the relatively rapid Islamization of the Turkic tribes in the Karakhanid and Seljuq states, which subsequently created the prerequisites for political acceptance of the new dynasties in the world of the absolute dominance of the Muslim religion. Later, the strong influence of Islam on public life became typical for the era of the Karakhanids. This is evidenced by the religious mores of the Karakhanid rulers. V.V. Barthold noted an interesting feature characteristic of the Turkic peoples who converted to Islam: "In the eyes of the Karakhanids, religion was not only a tool for maintaining their rule; the rules of religion were recognized as binding for rulers, too" [9].

Among modern studies on the correlation between religious beliefs and traditional worldview in the process of the formation of the Eurasian nomadic communities, those dedicated to the problem of mythologizing public consciousness occupy a special place. Mythologization to one degree or another occurs when an adaptation of new worldview structures takes place at the socio-historical level or when there is a change in the habitual conditions of existence of a certain ethnic and territorial group. The importance of this kind of research lies in discovering new principles and properties of mythologizing thinking, which synthesizes existing ideas about the world. Mythology turns into a worldview that expresses the existential aspirations of man in search of integrity. The tendency to mythologize history is becoming more and more distinct today.

For this reason, the aspects of the ‘mythologization’ of history and its role in ethno-political processes can be attributed to one of the directions of modern research practices. F. Schwartz notes: “When a historical fact becomes a symbol or a legend, one can say that it enters the mythical space of history. Then it informs us about the people to whom it is related, how these people perceive the world, and what their values and ultimate goals are. Studying a historical event, man always mythologizes it, and, as a result, mythologization takes precedence over historical facts.” [10]

The general role of myth in the formation of ethnicity and in the construction of a nation was discussed in the works of D. Horowitz, E. Roosens, and G. Hosking [11-13], who showed that a sense of devotion is achieved by arousing a sense of community through the manipulation of history, culture and symbolism. Analysing the current state of science, A.Y. Gurevich, in his article ‘On the Crisis of Modern Historical Science’, writes: “Historical reconstruction is the construction of a historian; he erects it from a complex mix of sources and his own ideas about the historical process, which absorbed the experience of science and the modern worldview... The research and creative activity of a historian is not limited to ‘reflection’, to registering ‘data’; the problem posed by him enables him to establish contact with the past and entails the ‘creation’... of both historical sources and historical facts.” [14]

A.A. Galiyev, a representative of the Kazakh historical school, in his research work examines some theoretical problems of the mythologization of history [15]. He determines that the ethno-genetic myths were created at the early stages of Turkic history. They were intended to substantiate the emerging ethno-political communities and the accession to power of certain dynasties and groups associated with them. According to the researcher, contemporary historical studies prove that the ethno-genetic traditions that have come down to us carry information about some important events that took place in the ancient and early medieval periods of Central Asian history. The ancient worldview was based on the model of the socio-cosmos revealed by means of myth, which explained the emergence of all things, including ethnos and its constituent components. During this period, a number of historical myths were created, explaining the origin of ethnos. There was a ‘struggle of myths’, which reflected the real historical events. The basic myth in the Turkic time was the myth about Oghuz Khagan. At the early stages of development, the mythologized history of the Turks, like that of other ethnic groups, manifested itself in the form of the ethno-genetic myths. They simultaneously reflected ethno-political processes and legitimized their results. As A.A. Galiyev summarizes, “a manifestation of mythologized history is an ethno-stereotype” [15]. In his monograph, A.M. Khazanov pays attention to the formation and purpose of a negative stereotype about the nomads and their culture [16].

G.E. Markov puts forward the conceptual position that in traditional society the fictitious idea of the ‘unity of origin’ acts as an ideological form of awareness of the actual military-political, economic, ethnic, and other ties [17]. The modern Russian researcher A.I. Selitsky believes that all the community

members were linked by a secret military cult, a system of sacred knowledge, strict organization, and initiation rites, which ‘turned’ them into ‘warrior beasts’. It is interesting that, on the one hand, these military communities went against the principles of tribal organization, often violated peace treaties, robbed neighbouring tribes, and their leaders could become rivals to local tribal authorities. But, on the other hand, when the community leaders became the war chiefs of the tribes or alliances of the tribes and their communities turned into the core of the tribal army, these contradictions were removed [18].

In turn, one of the distinctive features of L.N. Gumilyov’s research paradigms was to determine the significance of the Turkic socio-political organization (‘eternal *el*’) for other nomadic peoples [19]. He saw the continuity of some traditions in the Xiongnu state, dominated by tribal institutions, which he defined as a ‘tribal empire’. Regarding the Turkic Khaganate, he highlighted the coherence of a political organization under the rule of the Ashina. The Turkic Khaganate, according to L.N. Gumilyov, was formed through the aggressive policy of the khans of the Ashina clan, as a result of which almost all the steppe peoples of Eurasia and the adjacent territories were united with the sedentary agricultural population. In order to effectively control these peoples, the ancient Turks created their own state community called *el*. However, the process of class formation in the Turkic Khaganate was not complete, which is why the growing contradictions between the Turkic military democracy and the conquered tribes that had a clan system led to the disintegration and collapse of the state.

The Western researcher P. Golden proposed a classification of transferred traditions, dividing them into religious (coronation ceremony, ideas about the sacred bonds of the khagan and the entire ruling clan with celestial powers, concepts of the sacred centre of the state), political and social (titulary; division of the state into two parts-wings, with eastern being superior; possession of domanial lands along the Orkhon and Selenga rivers) [20]. The chieftaincy, where administrative duties were beginning to be consolidated and, finally, were affirmed to a certain part of the community, was characterized by the crystallization and complication of the emerging ‘poles’ of power. The military nobles (leaders and senior guardsmen) included the military and administrative spheres; the ideological powers of authorities were attributed to shamanism (priesthood) formed from the guardians of clan religions.

When the nomadic states collapsed, the tribes and clans that were part of them just regrouped, sometimes under the guidance of clans that originated from the ‘charismatic’ ruling house, or under the leadership of new clans, but more often not as a state. They returned to a certain point in the continuum between statelessness and statehood in anticipation of a new catalyst that could again push them towards the formation of the state. As noted by one of the best methodologists of historical science, I.N. Ionov, “To reinforce the values of civilization, they resorted to the mythological models of culture, while creating utopias, at first strong, like those of Plato, Xenophon, T. More, and F. Bacon, and then more and more weak ones...” [21].

Continuing this research line, M. Khazanov also draws parallels between the existing concept of power in the Mongolian empire and the ideological 'Heaven-sanctioned' component, which apparently underwent some development [22]. As determined by the researcher, "in previous nomadic states Heaven first sanctioned the *qaghans'* power over their own people; in the Mongol empire it gave them power over the whole world. [...] The Turkic *qaghans*, and apparently their Hsiung-nu predecessors, propagated an idea of the celestial origin of their power, their heavenly sanctioned right to rule their own people and their realm; but a belief in the Mandate of Heaven to rule the whole world never appears explicitly in their claims. Although the Turkic *qaghans* often mentioned that they had subjugated 'all the peoples living in the four quarters of the world', they had in mind only the nomads of the Eurasian steppes and in this case preferred to stress their own merit." [22] M. Khazanov believes that Jenghiz Khan was "not only a political innovator but to some extent a religious innovator as well. During his reign and the reign of his immediate successors, the concept of the Heavenly Divinity so characteristic of the religions of the Altaic-speaking nomads and of the Altaic peoples in general was elaborated as a result of their political achievements and the encounter with different religions of the sedentary peoples, both the monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, and the religions of China." [22]

This characteristic gave the nomadic communities an ephemeral and motley look. Modern researchers believe that the most sophisticated were the strategies of de-historization, through which the image of 'barbarians' was contrasted with the ideal of 'civilization'.

As asserted by C. Halperin, the Mongols behaved differently in each of the *uluses* [23]. The conquered peoples also differently perceived them. In China, they fit into the classical pattern of changing dynasties due to the violation of the Mandate of Heaven by the previous emperor. As a result, the Mongol Ulus was reborn into the Yuan dynasty. In Iran and Central Asia, there were good pastures adjacent to the oases of rural and urban life. As a result, the Mongols occupied a niche of the preceding Turkic-Arabian local ruling elite and were perceived by Islamic philosophy through the cyclical paradigm of the emergence and downfall of nomadic statehood. "Two important and time-honored devices were available to the builder of a great steppe empire that would help him bind his nation's tribes to his will and incorporate within his realm the other peoples of the steppes. One was structural and the other ideological." [8] As A. Zhukova notes, "Any national culture 'remembers' itself in the form of historical tradition, which is based on a certain cultural myth. In one form or another, the myth is present in social and individual consciousness, creating a holistic image - a picture of human existence in the world of history and eternity." [24]

#### 4. Conclusions

The development of historical science based on a comprehensive analysis of historical sources and research paradigms shows the need to define criteria for evaluating and classifying the material, written and oral sources that reveal the essence of a complex and multifaceted process. The effectiveness of theoretical and methodological constructs sets the task for researchers to study the ideological institutions of nomadic formations and sedentary agricultural oases. The new quality of scientific knowledge requires their reconstruction as a complex set of different types and systems of religious beliefs combined into a single structure of the worldview model. In general, this might be treated as the tendency and scientific problem of ‘mythologization’ that is immediate if speaking about synergization of traditional worldview and religious beliefs on the level of ethnical communities.

This paper considered only some problems of the ‘mythologization’ of history, and in order to contribute to a theoretical breakthrough in historical science, first one should develop fundamentally new research approaches. Many factors are needed, including above all the development of interdisciplinary dialogue as a background for the development of progressive research methods. The development of modern scientific knowledge has shown that progress is impossible without taking into account the scientific methodology, and the goal of historical science is to dispel all sorts of myths and create a critical, organic history.

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