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## THE MOUNT OF YZYKH TAGH WITH RELATION TO THE SACRED SPACE AND RITUAL OF THE KHAKAS (LATE 19TH–20TH CENTURY)\*

*This article examines the notion of sacred space among the Khakas, in particular, the sacred mountain of Yzykh Tagh. Reverence of mountains is one of the striking phenomena associated with many aspects of the spiritual life of the Khakas people. The cultural heritage of the landscape is an integral part of the entire ethnic heritage. Sacred places are important in preserving traditions and ethnic identity. The study is based on the literature, archival sources, and field materials of the authors.*

**Keywords:** *Khakas people, traditional worldview, sacred space, spirits, ritual, sacrifice, worship.*

### Revered places

The most important beliefs and ritual practices in the culture of the Khakas people are associated with sacred space. In the traditional consciousness, sacred space is always related to the uniqueness and mysteriousness of a place. People share the view that unexplained

natural phenomena reveal themselves in such places. It is believed that a person who finds himself in such a place experiences an active influence of some mysterious force which sanctifies and transforms this topos merely by its presence, thereby giving it a special sacred status. As V.L. Ogudin rightly pointed out, “in the religious consciousness of the population they were perceived as ‘places of Power’ since it was believed that the forms of the landscapes inherit the energy of the factors which created them” (2001: 29). Such views have contributed to isolation of a revered place from the surrounding world. In the mythological consciousness, such space is always perceived as borderline, linking the human world and the hidden nature, the natural and the supernatural, as if with invisible threads.

In the archaic worldview, sacred space is usually perceived in two ways. On the one hand, it is an object of worship in itself, and, on the other hand, it acts as a

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locus where believers worship higher powers and perform special rituals. The Khakas people traditionally endow such natural topoi as mountains, rocks, trees, water sources, etc. on with sacral properties. From the earliest times attitudes were based on unwritten ethical standards which in essence were focused on regulating the use of nature and forming environment protection. Such practices certainly contributed to the emergence of distinctive natural reserved territories. When a person found himself there, he needed to be guided by the ecophile principle “do no harm,” which prohibited interfering with the usual course of natural processes. Limitations were imposed on a wide range of actions, including the appropriation of natural resources, strict adherence to the seasonality and the proportionality of their use, etc. In addition, special ethical rules of staying in such a space were elaborated over centuries. It was traditionally forbidden there to speak loudly, argue, sing or dance, manifest negative emotions, etc. The established environmental standards were based on a firm belief in inevitable mystical punishment for their violation during one’s lifetime or after death, and the negative consequences which could befall not only the direct culprit, but also the people close to him (Burnakov, 2009). This mental attitude contributed to the sense of responsibility for thoughts, words, and deeds, as well as for the whole group – family, community, clan, etc.

Reverence for sacral spaces was reflected in the regulated performance of special rituals. This spiritual practice was imprinted in symbolical designations of such places: *ilig ilchen chir* / *sek sek tastachan chir* / *pazyrchan chir* – “worshipped / revered places,” where sacrifices were offered to the local deities. Similar parts of space also included the so-called anomalous spaces: *eelig chirler*, lit. “place of the master-spirit” and *tag kizilernin* / *eelernin chollary*, “the roads of mountain

spirits.” Not all of them are marked in the general natural landscape with particular ritual structures, but all of them are well known to the locals. It is worth noting that it is not the presence of the material altar or its form, which are important for the traditional mentality of the Khakas, but the ethical aspect of a human relationship with nature, and the spiritual perception of the surrounding space. Nevertheless, a considerable portion of particularly revered landscapes are marked with special symbolic objects: ritual hitching posts *sarchyn* / *chechpe* / *tehek*, trees decorated with colored ribbons *chalama*, or piles of stones *obaa* (Fig. 1, 2)\*. In the archaic worldview of the Khakas, such places are predominantly associated with the mythologeme of the road. The path of the traveler can be both easy and happy, and difficult and sometimes even tragic. It is believed that on the way people more often may encounter “the other,” be it an ordinary stranger or a supernatural being from the other world. According to the traditional beliefs, movement occurs not only in the visible geographical space, but also in the sacral space filled with special symbols and secret meanings. In the mythological worldview, traveling through such places determined the idea of transcendence – going beyond the boundaries of strictly human existence and entering the other, eternal, incomprehensible, and potentially dangerous world. The movement of a living person in any space necessarily implies a return; thus, the traditional culture always regulated such a transition-journey by a set of established norms and rules.

Typically, revered places are mountain passes, river crossings, forks and certain parts of roads, etc. The believers in all these places perform a customary simple ritual. Its main purpose is to win the favor and support of the supernatural power which resides in the place. Ritual actions expressing respect for the “masters” of the

area intend to eliminate all kinds of obstacles in the process of crossing over that space. In addition, it is believed that mystical help of those spirits brings people good luck in the business they planned. The ritual consists of a mental and often verbal greeting and addressing (*algys*) the invisible inhabitants of the space; its key phrase is “*Cholym azykh polzyn!*” – “Let my road be open / happy!” Along with the greeting, people usually give offerings in the form of pieces of food, various drinks, coins, tobacco, scraps of fabric, stones, branches, kindling of matches, etc. (Fig. 3–5).



Fig. 1. Ritual hitching post at Mount Uitak, Askiz Region.

\*All illustrations are reproduced from the field data of the authors collected in 2013.

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