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## **The Cult of Tree in the Culture of the Turkic Peoples**

### **Abstract**

*Myths, legends, and traditions convey ancient mythological ideas and showcase the artistic creativity of our ancestors. The Turkic peoples held trees in high esteem and considered them as sacred objects. They believe that trees were the center of the inhabited space, symbolizing the world's structure. The reverence towards trees was not only due to their economic value but also because they were regarded as the abode of gods. Trees were believed to be animated beings carrying sacred power, and ancestors revered them for this reason. The cult of the tree is a symbol of the past and the world of ancestors that humans are closely connected to. The trunk and crown of the tree represent the abundance and fertility of the real world. The tree is a personification of the life structure of the Turks within the larger context of the world. The aim of the research is to study the imagination of the ancient Turkic peoples with a rich mythological heritage expressed in symbols.*

**Keywords:** Turkic culture, cult of tree, Turkic peoples, mythological genres, beliefs of Turks

## **Türk Halklarının Kültüründe Ağaç Kültü**

### **Öz**

*Mitler, efsaneler ve gelenekler eski mitolojik fikirleri aktarır ve atalarımızın sanatsal yaratıcılığını sergiler. Türk halkları ağaçlara büyük saygı duymuş ve onları kutsal nesneler olarak görmüştür. Ağaçların, dünyanın yapısını simgeleyen, yaşanılan alanın merkezi olduğuna inanırlardı.*



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*Ağaçlara duyulan saygı sadece ekonomik değerlerinden değil, aynı zamanda tanrıların meskeni olarak görülmelerinden de kaynaklanıyordu. Ağaçların kutsal güç taşıyan canlı varlıklar olduğuna inanılır ve atalar bu nedenle onlara saygı gösterirdi. Ağaç kültü, insanların yakından bağlı olduğu geçmişin ve atalar dünyasının bir sembolüdür. Ağacın gövdesi ve tacı gerçek dünyanın bolluk ve bereketini temsil eder. Ağaç, dünyanın daha geniş bağlamı içinde Türklerin yaşam yapısının kişileştirilmesidir. Araştırmanın amacı, sembollerle ifade edilen zengin bir mitolojik mirasa sahip eski Türk halklarının hayal gücünü incelemektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türk kültürü, ağaç kültü, Türk halkları, mitolojik türler, Türklerin inançları

## **Introduction**

Turkic culture originated in ancient times and has had a diverse impact on Eurasian and world cultures. The history and culture of the Turkic people are relevant and are being discussed at various levels. The integrative role of Turkic culture throughout the world is being substantiated. The analysis and collection of material for mythological genres is a crucial issue in modern ethnography. A special, elevated attitude towards words gave rise to various traditions in the culture of the Turkic peoples. Thus, in the early period, mythological consciousness identified words and objects, the name of a thing and its essence, fetishized the names of gods and ritual formulas. Language, traditions, historically formed values, spiritual ideas and beliefs accepted by society form a conscious internal layer of culture, which is relatively stable. Today cultural globalization creates unique opportunities for changing and enriching the traditional values, ideas, and life attitudes of the peoples of the world. The origins of Turkic folklore go back to hoary antiquity. However, its collection and study began relatively recently.

Field materials, ethnographic records, folklore texts of researchers indicate that at present there is enough knowledge about the generic nature of tree veneration. Knowledge is preserved in ethnogenetic legends, which tell us that under difficult circumstances, one or another type of tree helped save the life of a person from a certain genus. Ideological universals are determined by the natural and historical experience of peoples, which allows them to experience, evaluate and comprehend the world in the same way, but each ethnic group forms its own image of the world, expressing its own picture of the world

### **1. Trees as objects of veneration of the Turkic peoples**

Trees themselves were objects of veneration. In the minds of the ancient Turks, the tree was considered the sacred center of the inhabited space, embodying the structure of the world. The cult of the tree remains relevant in Turkic and world folklore. Azerbaijani researchers M. Seyidov, S. Rzasoy, R. Gafarli, F. Bayat, J. Beydili, R. Aliyev, M. Jafarli, A. Hajiyeu, Turkish

scholars Maharram Ergin, Harun Gungor, Abdulkadir Inan, Bahaddin Ogel, Parvin Argun, Russian scientists V. N. Toporov, V. V. Evsyukov and others touched upon various aspects of the mythological image of the tree. M. Seyidov wrote about the belief of the Turkic-speaking Huns living in Azerbaijan in the birch tree and noted that this belief is reflected in toponymic names (Seyidov, 1989). These research allow us to conduct a comparative study of the image of the “World Tree”. The veneration of trees by the Siberian Tatars was studied by F.T. Valeev and N. A. Tomilov. The role of trees in tradition medicine of the Siberian Tatars is well analyzed by L. M. Kadyarova and G. I. Zinnatullina.

The cult of “aghash” (“trees”) is a symbol of the World Axis, united in a ternary system: upper, middle, lower. The special attitude towards trees is explained not only by their economic value, but also by the fact that they were revered by their ancestors as the place of residence of the gods, as animate beings carrying sacred power. In the steppe, the cult of trees is associated with the ancient Tengrian ideas of the Turks, who held collective prayers near trees, performed ritual actions (embraced the crown of a tree to receive life-giving energy, tied scraps of fabric to the branches with their innermost wishes). The special attitude towards the tree, manifested in these rituals, is explained by the fact that the tree acts as an intermediary link between the universe and man, and is the place of their interaction. The image of the tree influenced the views of the Turks on the world, on the search for their place in society and nature. In the mythological ritual, the personification of the World Tree could be a lonely tree that gave life and transmitted sacred properties to people (Kamalov, 2006, p. 34). The Turkic model of the world is most fully reconstructed from cosmogonic concepts that describe the current state of the Universe. Thus, the vertical structure of the world, which presupposes the presence of a top, middle and bottom, is most fully reflected in the image of a world tree, the components of which are correlated with various phenomena, objects of nature and social structure. “The top is the crown of a tree, the sky, the luminaries, the top of a mountain, the source of a river, a bird, the upper world. Bottom - tree roots, cave, gorge, water, animals living in burrows and horned animals, the lower world. Middle – tree trunk, valley, man, animals with “warm breath” (Tradisionnoye mirovozreniye, 2005, p. 263). In the genealogy of ancestors, the tree symbol expresses the sacred thread of the ancestral tree model and is presented as follows: ancestors - the current generation - descendants. Thus, the World Tree corresponds to the structure of the Universe, where the vertical and horizontal planes express the category of time. The ancient Turks deeply believed that the roots of the World Tree are represented by the world of the ancestors, the owner of which is the god Erlik and his wife Tengri-Umai. Thanks to Erlik, the entire necessary process of life in the world takes

place. The Turkic World Tree connects the Upper, Middle, and Lower worlds, where the Upper world is inhabited by deities, the Middle by people, and the Lower by evil spirits. Its branches are depicted in half-arcs, directed towards the world of deities. The World Tree acts as a symbol of the well-being of the family. According to ancient beliefs, people and trees are closely related, as they are born of the same Mother Goddess. One of the investigators of Turkic mythology writes that the Turks called the Tree of Life “Baiterek”, the roots of which were in the underground world, the trunk personified the earthly world, and the crown represented the heavenly world. The image of the World Tree in Turkic culture has a common origin, it is the center of the universe, a sacred image for humans, the concentration of the forces of nature, its power and superiority. The World Tree embodies the life cycle, the circulation of the soul in the space of the worlds, reflects ideas about life and death, rebirth, and transmigration of souls (Bəydili, 2003). The cult of the tree symbolizes the past, the world of ancestors, with which man is inextricably linked; its trunk and crown mean the abundance and fertility of the human, real world. On the branches of the Tree grow fruits that bestow hidden wisdom, strength, and immortality.

The tree acted as a heavenly sacred world, unapproachable, inspiring awe, deciding destinies, and governing life. Legends telling about the origin of the Turkic tribes from the Tree are widely known. In *Oghuz-name*, a boy, the ancestor of the Kipchaks, is born in a hollow tree. A hollow represents the Tree of Life in cosmogonic representation. The tree was the same ancestor of man among the ancient Turks, like mountains. It was considered a bad omen to see a falling tree in a dream, which meant the death of someone close to you. Cutting down young trees could lead to the death of children (Sagalayev, 1990). According to the ideas of the ancient Turks, the tree symbolizes a ladder, with the help of which a person can contact the deity Ulgen (Holopina, 1978). One of the panels found during archaeological excavations depicts a shaman holding a flowering branch in his hands as a symbol of the sacred tree of life. In the applied art of the ancient Turks, the motif of the world tree is associated with the model of the universe and is perceived as a sacred amulet that protects the home from evil spirits.

The tree symbol personifies the life structure of the Turks in the overall picture of the world. The “World Tree” is closely intertwined with mythological ideas of “death,” the “world of the Aruakhs,” the “soul,” and “space and time.” According to the ideas of the ancient Turks, is an intermediary between man and the deity Tengri, who lives in Heaven. According to the mythology of the Turkic people, the world tree created by God had nine

branches. God created man from the root of each branch, and each of them became the great-grandfather of the clan and tribe (Əlizadə, 2008, p. 39). In the life of the Turkic peoples, the tree also acts as a breadwinner for children, symbolizing the guarantee of the well-being of society. The ancient Turks revered and gave special honor to the spruce, calling it the “Holy Tree of Ergene”. The spruce was personified as a sacred road to the deity Tengri. The evergreen tree was seen as a symbol of the path to heaven. It was believed that only after our time on earth is over, can we continue our lives in a new form. The word “yol”-zhul in Turkish, which means “road”, may have gained new significance due to this belief. For over four thousand years, people have celebrated the “spruce” tree, honoring its importance in their culture. It has been noted that there are rock paintings in the Tarbagatai mountains which depict sacred fir trees surrounded by people performing a ritual round dance. The people in the area considered the worship of Ergene, who was believed to be the patron saint of bright and good spirits, to be sacred. To receive blessings from the patron Ergene, people would place his favorite spruce tree in their homes and tie colorful threads and ribbons to it while expressing words of gratitude. It is noteworthy that the representatives of the Turkic peoples have still retained the custom of tying ribbons to sacred trees and making wishes. This custom has a deep meaning, and the ritual of ancestor worship is associated with it. In the Almaty region, 280 km from Almaty, there is the sacred willow “*əylie aghash*”, which has been growing since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The 700-year-old willow has its own origin story. According to one legend, there was a wealthy man called Baibosyn who traveled with caravans along the Great Silk Road. During one of his overnight stays, he struck the ground with his staff, and a young sapling grew in that very spot. This location has since become a sacred place of worship, and people still visit it to this day (Sakralnaya geografiya, 2017). It is important to note that the ritual sacred “staff” as an attribute of the priestly function (priests, shamans, saints, preachers, Sufis) is a sacred symbol of wisdom and secret knowledge. Thus, “ancient myths”, “earth”, “zhul”, “sacralization of power” and “trees” have always been considered the highest value as sacred space and time among the ancient Turks.

The Tatars held individual trees in high regard, especially those that stood alone or had unique features such as an unusual shape or great height. These trees were believed to possess spirits called *iya*, and it was thought that good spirits lived around them, which would help hunters to have a successful hunt and eliminate diseases (Valeev, 2002, p. 188). Such trees include a lonely birch growing on the right bank of the Irtysh. Different peoples had different types of sacred trees. The Turkic peoples revered the birch tree. “In the spring, after the river was cleared of ice, the Shors gathered in a sacred birch grove to perform a ritual of treating

the spirits. At the beginning of the holiday, men approach the oldest birch tree and each, bowing, says: “Hello! We came to visit you to see your treat.” After that, they climb and hang ribbons on the birch tree.” Among the Volga Tatars, birch is often sung in songs. However, the Siberian Tatars showed a special attitude towards birch. Old-timers say that “*Kaen kaigy kitya*” “birch brings grief” and warn people against planting this tree near their houses. Perhaps this attitude towards birch reflects the myth of the “white-eyed miracle”, which left when white birch began to grow in its lands. The prediction said that after the white birch tree, white people with the king would come and establish their own order. To avoid this, the local inhabitants dug holes, erected pillars, covered them with roofs, and poured earth and stones on top of the roofs. After that, they cut down the pillars and buried themselves alive along with their treasures.

## **2.Belief in the mighty power of the tree**

The ancient Turks left a rich mythological heritage, which in some cases appears in the form of symbols. The Turks saw their ancestors in the trees. The great Huns sacrificed to the tree, sprinkling its leaves with the blood of the victim, hanging its branches with its skin (Sagalayev, 1992, p. 87). The oak tree was considered the mother of all other trees. They worshiped oak because they saw it as a saving, life-giving and blessing-giving power. For ancient man, a tree was a receptacle for spirits. It possessed mighty power. The ancients believed in its power. They carefully guarded such centers of sacredness. That's why there are bans on cutting down certain types of trees, entire groves. Pomegranate, weeping willow, oak, beech, etc. were considered sacred trees throughout the Caucasus. The ban on cutting down trees and disrespectful treatment of them was widespread everywhere, where people cultivated these trees and worshiped them.

The cult of trees is one of the most widespread types of beliefs of the pre-Islamic period in Azerbaijan. Those very *ocags*, *pirs*, as they are usually called, are the traces of this cult, which is rooted in the deep historical past. There are a large number of such *ocags* with sacred trees. They can be found throughout Azerbaijan (Taptigov, 2010, p. 38). In the Geokchay region, near the village of Shehadet, there has long been a sacred place, where there was a round hole on a tree at a height of one meter from the ground. On the last Tuesday of the outgoing year, on the eve of Novruz holiday, childless women visited this place, and immobile children were also brought to the sacred place. Cooking was also a tradition. There is a belief in the healing power of trees. The above-mentioned example of hanging sacred trees with multi-colored rags also indicates the widespread belief in the liberating and healing

power of this object of worship from various diseases. This custom, which exists not only among the Turks, is associated with the belief that rags left on a tree carry human diseases. These are a kind of offerings from people hoping for recovery.

The epic "The Book of Dede Korkut" contains a lot of interesting data on the beliefs of the Turkic peoples. One of the heroes of this story, Uruz, captured by enemies and brought to hang on a tree, turns to him with a plea for help, glorifying the power of the tree (Ögəl, 2006). In the book "Kitabi Dede-Korkud", one of the main characters named Basat expresses his deep reverence for a tree. Basat emphasizes that his father is Gaba tree and his spiritual father is Tengri (Kitabi - Dədə Qorqud, 1939). This statement shows that ancient Turks deified the tree. The ancients imagined the universe as a tree. This is a kind of model of the world, a model according to which everything around was organized after the victory of order over chaos. According to the ideas of the ancients, the crown of a tree represents the Heavenly World (Upper World), the trunk represents the Earthly World (Middle World, inhabited by the living people), and the roots represent the Underworld (Lower World). The world tree connects all three worlds, thereby representing the entire universe (Tradisionnoye mirovozreniye, 2005, p. 263). According to the ideas of the ancients, the cosmos was organized vertically. Horizontally, it unites all four cardinal directions (north, south, west, east). This tree, called the world tree, is a symbol of the universe in many cultures around the world.

Azerbaijani carpet patterns can provide us with valuable insights. The patterns frequently feature trees with birds, goats, and other animals on either side. This tree is known as the Tree of the World, which our ancestors believed was the foundation of the world around us. It was the source of life, blessings, and the focus of healing powers and wisdom. The prevalence of decorations featuring a world tree along with animals and birds on either side, depicted using geometric figures, on both carpets and pottery found in different parts of Azerbaijan suggests that this episode was widely popular in folk art.

A certain number of clay products were discovered on the territory of Khanlar, which depict the World Tree surrounded by swastikas or goats (swastikas, like goats, in many cases symbolize the sun). Similar images of the World Tree were found, for example, on the territory of Mingachevir, where peacocks are depicted on either side of it, also symbolizing the sun (Ahundov, 1986). The Tree of World embodied the highest ideals and meant immortality and eternal life for the population of ancient Azerbaijan.

Many people may recall the Tree of Resurrection (Dirilik ağacı) from Azerbaijani folk tales, where the hero embarks on a journey to another world to obtain healing apples for the

sick, similar to the rejuvenating apples found in Russian fairy tales. This is connected to the concept of the Tree of Life, which promises healing for the ill and resurrection for the dying. The veneration of trees is a crucial part of our culture, historical memory, identity, and connection with the global cultural heritage.

### Conclusion

The study of the archaic layer of ethnography is of great scientific importance for a number of reasons: these are the origins of artistic creativity, which determined not only the peculiarities of the genesis of folk genres of poetics, but also largely influenced the further course of their evolution; from them one can determine the typology of the genesis and evolution of archaic folklore, as well as the phenomena of interrelations; they contain invaluable, and in many cases simply the only information about the originality of the artistic thinking of ancient man and his beliefs. The belief system of the Turkish people cannot be imagined without a tree. Even in fairy tales and epics, beliefs about the tree are mentioned, many types of trees are considered sacred, it can be concluded that the Turkic peoples have a common culture.

Myths, legends, traditions are distinguished by national specifics and peculiarities of thinking. They tell about the ancient mythological ideas of their ancestors in a colorful poetic form and provide an opportunity to feel the beauty of the artistic creativity of the people. The creation of mythological images endowed them with features characteristic of ancient folk art. Turkic-speaking peoples' graphic proximity and mutual contacts contributed to the emergence of many communities in their mythology.

Numerous *pırs* and *ocags* associated with this cult, as well as objects of oral folk art and applied art, indicate that the ancient Turks had a developed system of mythological thinking, a mythological worldview, which has both specific features and features that are universal for many cultures. Despite numerous invasions throughout history, Turkic peoples have preserved their culture and spiritual wealth through the centuries.

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