

## Traditional usage of the fir species: Fir as a Christmas tree from Middle Asia to Europe

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### Abstract

During the meeting of Council Nicea (325 AC) it was decided that December 25 th (by protestant church December 24 th) the well-known pagan holiday dedicated to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Germans used first Christmas tree in Christmas in 16th Century. Today Christmas is celebrating worldwide with Christ tree. As Christ Church accepted, Christmas celebration is originated by Pagan celebration, which is very similar with Turkish “Nardugan”. This Shamanism tradition Nardugan (wintry solstice holiday) has to be celebrating by Turkish communities for about 3200 years. Most important part of the celebration is decorating of tree “Akçam” (White pine), which is also called “life tree” according to shamanism tradition in Altay region. Although this tree is called as white pine, all historical sources and traditional illustrations, designate to be a fir. In the light of foregoing; if geographical distribution of the boreal tree species is considered this white pine could be *Abies sibirica* with high probability. This result could expound also why today *Abies spp.* are used as Christ tree worldwide.

**Keywords:** Christmas celebration, Christ tree, Pagan tradition, Nardugan, *Abies sibirica*

### Introduction

Christmas is one of the most important accessions for the people round the world, and millions of trees are decorated worldwide in order households to sense the Christmas spirit. Cultivation of tree varieties especially for the decoration at Christmas time can be a profitable crop for its producer (Kamanideu et al., 2010).

This is a project of high economic importance for those who depend on the forestry, and there are many surveys and studies in this field. However, this study mainly deals with the background of the tradition of Christmas Tree Decoration, and the species and types of trees used for this purpose, and such other aspects as why the *Abies* species are preferable Christmas trees today.

Jesus Christ, the Christian Prophet, was born in Bethlehem which walls within the boundaries of Israel, and the Christianity rose from the Jerusalem. However, there is now no tradition of celebrating the New Year or Christmas in the early era. It was the Nicea Council that took decision on the Christmas celebration in 325 AC. As a Pagan Tradition that has no relation with the Christianity, it was adopted to celebrate the Christmas on December 25, as it is assumed to be the date of birth of Jesus Christ (Stevenson, 2011; Çiğ, 2007). One may reach very interesting results when it is searched what the origin of this Pagan tradition, and who celebrates it.

A number of common surveys and studies carried out by the scientists from the Turkish communities have revealed that the winter fest

“Nardugan” celebrated for some 3200 years by the Turkish communities resembles to a great extent the Christmas of the Christian world (Çiğ, 2007; Nadirov, 1991; Zaripova, 2004). Nardugan is also called the “Pine Feast”, where the celebrations take place around an ornamental tree called “Bull Pine”. The name of this tree, also called the “Hayat” (Life) Tree or “Ülgen” Tree, reveals that is a conifer. However, there is a need to elaborate if it really belong to the pine or *Abies* family. If it is an *Abies*, it is most probably the *Abies sibirica* that is an important tree forming forests in the entire Siberia, and the Region of Altay, where there is a considerable Turkish population. Hence, such a finding makes it possible to attribute the high preference of *Abies* species in the today Christmas celebrations to the natural uniformity of *Abies* species, and the tradition of the Turks to use *Abies* species in the Nardugan celebrations.

To clarify and enlighten the above matters, the second chapter of this study would describe all the concepts and terms, on which this study is based. The third chapter includes a number of decisive discussions, and is followed by the fourth chapter to present the conclusions reached upon the studies carried out.

### Present Situations

#### Description and Distribution of *Abies sibirica* and *Pinus sibirica*

The Genus *Abies*, *Pinus*, *Picea*, and *Larix*, grows widely in the North Temperate Zone around the world (s. Figure 1), reaching from the Arctic Circle (*Abies sibirica*) to the Tropical

Zone, at degrees North Latitude (*Abies guatemalensis*) in central America (Warren & Johnson, 1998).

*Abies sibirica* is a coniferous evergreen tree native to the taiga (Conifer Specialist Group, 1998). The range of *Abise sibirica* (Siberian Fir) lies between 400 and 1400 east longitude, from Moscow almost the sea of Okhotsk, the most extensive in the genus *Abies* (Arnold Arboretum). Siberian fir is one of the forest-forming tree species of Siberia. The optimal conditions for its growth are mountains of southern Siberia where more than 90 % of forest with is domination is concentrated (s. Figure 2). In Altai Sayan mountain land this tree species forms the unique forest formation of Siberia – the chern forests with *Abies sibirica* (Kvitko *et. al.*, 2011). Although paleo-botanical data on Siberian fir are scarce in the glacial period, this species was absent in the most parts of the present- day area (Semerikova and Semerikov, 2006).

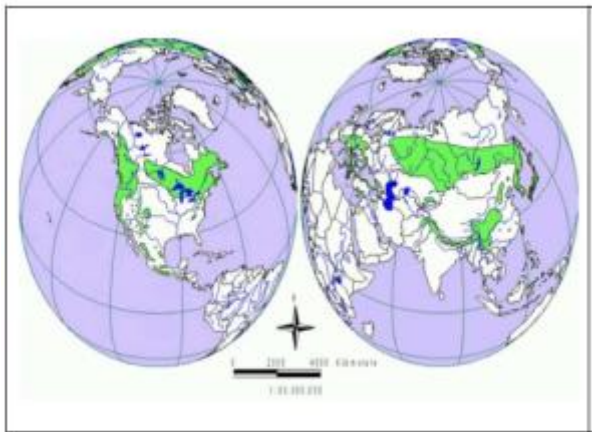


Figure 1. A view from Distribution of the fir in the World (Agro Atlas, 2009)



Figure 2. Distribution of the *Abies sibirica* in Sibiria (Agro Atlas, 2009)

Genus *Abies* habitaded erect narrow pyramidal. *Abies sibirica* grows 30-35 m tall with a trunk diameter of 0,6-1 m and a conical crown (Conifer Specialist Group) The leader is seem upright and rigid against the sky. The tree lives in the cold boreal climate on moist soils in mountains or river basins at elevations of 1900 - 2400 m. It is very shade tolerant, frost resistant, and hardy, surviving temperatures down to -50 0C (IUCN, 2006).



Figure 3. A view of *Pinus sibirica*

The **Siberian Pine**, (*Pinus sibirica*), in the family *Pinaceae* is a species of pine tree that occurs in Siberia from 58°E in the Ural Mountains east to 126°E in the Stanovoy Range in southern Sakha Republic, and from Igarka at 68°N in the lower Yenisei valley, south to 45°N in central Mongolia.

Siberian Pine is a popular ornamental tree in parks and large gardens where the climate is cold, such as central Canada, giving steady though not fast growth on a wide range of sites. It is very tolerant of severe winter cold, hardy down to at least -60 °C, and also of wind exposure. The seeds are also harvested and sold as pine nuts (Debreczy and Racz, 2011).

### Ancient Turkic People and Turkic culture/mythology

#### Short History

The first traces of the Turkish communities are found in the Siberian Taigas. There were, like today, magnificent and vast forests of coned pines extending to the sky, and these forests were covered by snow for months (Reux, 2000). On the other hand, it is thought that the Shamanism, a Pagan religion, which has today extended all over the world, first appeared in the

Siberian forests where the silence and loneliness are dominant, and some invisible powers wander, and then ruled over the entire Asian continent (Reux, 2000). After the Siberian Taigas, the Altai (Karasuk) region has intensive traces of the Turkish communities. In the subsequent years (BC 700-300), it is possible to see the rare findings of the Turkish communities

at the south of the Altai region (Reux, 2000). It is understood that the shamanist Turks of the Siberian Taigas continuously moved southwards, towards the steppes. In conclusion, the Turks intensively lived in, and spread over the world from the Altai Mountains and around the Baikal Lake (see Figure 3).



Figure 4. The Central Asian region where the Turkish communities intensively lived, and their routes of migration

The westward migration of the Turkish communities was launched by the Huns. Beginning from 209 BC, the migrations reached the Black Sea coasts by 350 BC (Chzegledy, 1983). The centuries, 6th to 11th, marked the migration of Turkic people from most of central Asia into Europe and the Middle East. After the decline of the Uyghur State, the Karahanid State was founded in MS 840 by Turkish tribes such as the Karluks Çiğils and Arguls. The reign of the Karahanids considered to be a turning point in Turkish history, because İslam was accepted as the official religion (Reux, 2000).

#### **Ancient Turkic Culture and Mythology**

The Turks have been extremely affected by the Shamanism, their religion before adoption of the Islam. The same effect survives the Islamic adoption. It is today possible to encounter the traditions brought by the Turks from the Central Asia. The Shamanism is a system of beliefs that assumes the entire nature, including forests, lakes, rocks etc., to be a place of ritual shows or worship, and affecting and affected by all the known religious and philosophical systems over the world (Bayat, 2010).

Even though it is known that the Turkish mythology and culture were mostly affected by the Tengri and the sun, Zaripova (2004) claims that the seasonal traditions bear the signs and traces of all the beliefs and actual religions of the Turkish communities. The Turks believed that the seasons were formed and managed by the sun, for which they organized a number of seasonal celebrations and common activities, including Nowruz (New Day), Kardelen (Snowdrop) Festival, Çift Sürme (Plowing) Festival, Kayın (Beech) Festival, and Nadurgan Celebrations (Zapirova, 2004). This study has been designed to give some information on “Nardugan”, a winter feast, and the “life tree” that is a very important mythological object.

#### **Life Tree Figure**

Being a Pagan belief, the “Life Tree” is an Asian origin belief and cultural object. The holy pine tree is very important for the Turks, as it is straight and charmingly beautiful as the arrows in the Altaic region. It is so important that many feasts are attributed to its name for 3.200 years as per the known history (Çiğ, 2007). The Turks are used to get artworks inspired by their life and traditions. One can see the life tree in the



designs and themes of the handwoven carpets among their renowned artworks (s. Figure 5).



Figure 5. A Carpet motif designed by Asian Turks

On the other hand, the life tree figure is represented by various figures on all the Asian artworks. Indeed, the life tree figure is seen to be used even by the North American Indians who are claimed to have been originated from the Yakut Turks, so that the Asian Shaman traditions go on with them (s. Figure 6).

It is observed that the holy life tree has always become an important symbol since the ancient times. As a matter of fact, one may see the Life Tree Figure in the Alacahüyük reliefs of the Hittites (s. Figure 7/1), a civilization and culture of Anatolian origin (2000 BC)<sup>1</sup> (Alp, 2002).

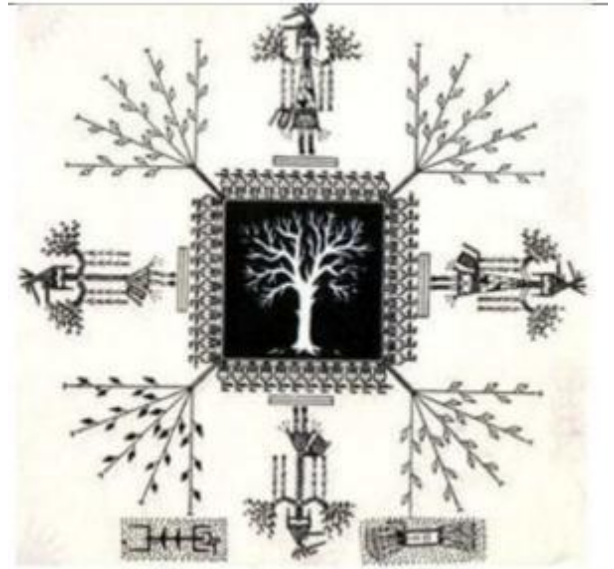


Figure 6. A view of life tree of Navajo Indians



Figure 7. Life trees in Anatolian Culture

<sup>1</sup> Hittite relief of two bull-man shows the tree of life. Is the winged sun symbol on bass. Was also indicated in the relief drawing.

The twin minaret relief, a Seljukian work (1100 BC) in Erzurum includes the Life Tree (s. Figure 7/2) as well (Ögel, 1994). Another interesting example is a life tree figure (s. Figure 7/3) remaining from the Urartians that ruled in the Eastern Anatolia Region (Sevin, 2003).

The life tree in two other figures are ordinary forest trees, while the Urartian Life Tree is a fruit<sup>2</sup>, and most probably a pomegranate tree. The pomegranate is today called the life tree that is deemed to be holy, as it is believed to bring wealth and abundance in such countries as Uzbekistan and Iran.

### **Nardugan**

Nardugan is one of the winter feasts celebrated by the Turkish communities. Tatarian Scientist Ilbaris Nadirov (1991) reports that this name is the compound of the Mongolian words “nar” (sun) and “dugan” (born). Hence, it means the New Sun, and the Birthday of the New Year. The solar movements are very important for the Turks. They believe that the night fights with the day on December 22 (December 25 in some sources) when the night and day becomes longer and shorter respectively. At the end of this night, the sun would have defeated the night after a long war, so that it would be empowered to reign for a longer time in a day. This natural event is called the “Pine Feast” by the Turks, and the new-year feast in some sources. It is called the pine tree, as a tree called “Akçam” (White Pine that is the same Life Tree or Ülgen Tree) by the Turks, and decorated to pray for the God Ülgen (Çığ, 2007; Zaripova, 2004; Cırlar, 1976). While the celebration is very similar to the Christmas Feast celebrated today, there are a number of differences.

The most important difference is that this belief is based on the figures of Erlik (Manliness) and Ülgen. Ülgen represent the goodness and Erlik badness. Erlik is bad, but the bad may be good and generous in the Pine Feast. Therefore, Erlik is believed to bring gifts in a bag during this feast. Erlik changes his dresses, and wears the ancient Turkish garments in this night: caftan, hat, belt, leather boots. The ancient Turks wore all such dresses. And the archeologists have already proven this fact (Aci, 2001).

At the day when the daylight beat the night, Akçam, the Life/Ülgen Tree was decorated with

the prayer wishes hanged on its branches, and it was believed that Ülgen absolutely accepted all the wishes. Before the feasts, the houses were cleaned, and some special meals were cooked for all the family to eat and drink together, dance and sing around Akçam. Some gifts were put under the pine tree for the prayers to reach the God Ülgen (ACI (2002), ÇIG (2007)).

R. G. Ahmetyanov (1981), the Tatar Dialect Specialist, reports that the term “**Nardugan**” is found in all the Central Idil and Ural communities. Besides the Turkish communities, the Nardugan celebrations are also seen in the Iranian communities, Bessarabia Armenians and Komi People (Nadirov, 1991). Many years elapsed, and Ülgen took a different name, i.e. “Ayaz-Ata”, but the clothes did not change. Today, the Nardugan Feast still effectively survive with the Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvash and Karacay-Malkar People. In Turkey, Nardugan is regularly organized and celebrated on December 22 in Bodrum.

### **Christianity and Noel Ceremony**

The celebration of the Christmas holiday on December 25th was not established by Christ's Apostles. It is not biblical. It was not practiced by the church born at Pentecost. It was started by Constantine, who Emperor Constantine collates together the Council of Nicea which was in essence the first council of the Roman Catholic church in 325 AC at that Council Meeting, it was decided that December 25<sup>3</sup> th, the well-known pagan holiday dedicated to Mithras the Persian Sun – God, would be re-dedicated to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. First Christmas tree was decorated by Germans in 1605. Today, Christmas is celebrated worldwide with Christ tree (Stevenson, 2011; Çığ, 2007).

### **Discussion**

It has been adopted even by the Christian Church that the Christmas celebration is a Pagan tradition that is not so much related with the Christianity, so that it would be meaningless to elaborate it in details too. However, the Historians may argue the attribution of this tradition to the Iranians. In this context, it is useful to point out that some historians claim that the European people knew the Nardugan tradition with the Hun Turks who first came to

<sup>2</sup> Belief in a future life in Eastern Anatolia of Urartian culture developed a fruit tree that collects seen two people.

<sup>3</sup> This historic feast is celebrated by Catholic Church December 25 th. And by Protestant Church December 24th.

Europe (Çiğ, 2007). It was around 350 AC when the Hun masses migrated to Europe. And the Christmas was adopted by the Council of Nikea in 325 AC. However, it is an established tradition of the Turks to send vanguards for surveillance before any military campaign. On the other hand, the Turks made numerous attacks over the Eastern Europe for the last centuries of the first 5 centuries AC (Reux, 2000). Thus it can not be excluded European people having adopted the Turkish Nardugan tradition after all such interactions.

Stevenson (2001) admits that the Christmas tree was first used by the German in the 16th Century, so that it may not be attributed to the traditions before the Christianity. He attributes this fact to the Roman and Egyptian traditions and the use of both the all season green laurels and flowers for ornamental and decorative purposes. However, he could not explain why the fir tree is particularly used as the Christmas Tree.

It has been scientifically proven that the Turkish community celebrated a winter feast called “Nardugan” that was very similar to the today Christmas celebrations (Kvitkova, 2011). This is not however a matter that should be discussed in details. On the other hand, it is arguable if the tree is pine or fir used in the “White Pine” decoration, the most important step of the Nardugan celebration.

In the prehistoric eras of the Turks, the native tree species were *Pinus*, *Larix*, *Picea* and *Abies* observed first in the northern Siberian Taigas, and then (some 3.200 years ago) in the Ural-Altaic and southern Siberian regions. However, *Abies sibirica* is the most important tree that have grown up to the forests in the entire Siberian region (Semerkova, 2006). The same is *Abies sibirica* that is now dominant for 90% in the southern Siberia (Kvitko et. al., 2001). Indeed, the palynological studies reveal that *Abies sibirica* is one of the tree species, which were dominant even 8500 years ago (Bezrukova et. al., 2011). Under the light of all such facts, it is understood that the “White Pine” called for in the historical documentation is a conifer, yet it seems less possible for it to be a pine. The most frequently observed regional tree is *Larix decidua* after *Abies sibirica*. By the way, *Pinus sibirica* is also found in some places. *Larix* is a coniferous tree, but not suitable for the celebrations as it pours leaves in winter. The historical documentation mentions a coniferous tree extending upright to the sky. This

description does not so much suit the pine habitude (s. Figure 7). Likewise, the Turkish “ak” prefix means white in English, so that Akçam (White Pine) should be a white tree. And, *Pinus sibirica* has a whitish appearance. In this context, *Abies sibirica* has a whitish green color. Considering the Turkish carpets that bear the life tree figure (s. Figure 5), one may claim that the said tree is an *Abies*. On the other hand, *Pinus sibirica* has edible nuts. Even though the Turkish historical literature points out how the said region was rich (Reux, 2000), the region does not have so rich variety of foods. Therefore, the forest pine nut is an important food source. If the life tree was *Pinus sibirica*, it should have, even occasionally, taken place on the life tree figures.

Based on the common experience of the forest engineers working in Turkey today, it may be claimed that some 90% of the Turkish people living in Turkey calls “pine” for all the coniferous trees. It is thought that this is not a learnt habit, but rather a tradition, like many other ones which were brought to Anatolia from the Central Asia. The people however have attributed a high respect to the “pine” tree, and hence they expect for the pine tree to be used in all celebrations.

### Conclusions

A Pagan tradition was first adopted as the “Christmas” celebration on December 25, as it is assumed to be the date of birth of Jesus Christ. However, the Christmas celebration mode is very similar to the “Nardugan” Feast that is a winter and newyear feast celebrated by the Turkish communities. The “white pine” decoration is the most important ritual of the celebrations. In consideration of the geographical region where the Nardugan feast is celebrated, and of the traditional findings, it is thought that this tree may be a fir, and even an *Abies sibirica*. Such a conclusion shows that the common selection of *Abies* for the Christmas celebration today is not only its esthetic value, but an applied way of the Pagan tradition.

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