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## Corvids in the Buryat Traditional Worldview

*Using a structural-semiotic approach together with a comparative historical one, and based on ethnographic, lexical, and folklore sources, this study focuses on the raven and the crow as characters in Buryat mythology. Buryat terms for these birds are of Mongolian origin. Folk beliefs concerning the raven are more elaborate than those concerning the crow. The image of the raven is ambiguous, whereas the crow is an unambiguously negative character. The analysis of vocabulary and of the minor genres of folklore shows that Buryats paid attention to the various zoological features of these birds: plumage color and voice in the crow; plumage color, size, beak, flight duration, collectivism, emotionality in expressing joy and greed in the raven. The essence of both birds of prey was believed to be impure. The raven symbolized heaven, spring, vigilance, war, masculinity, and rancor. Being intelligent and independent, the raven was the Buddhist deity's aide. Unlike the crow, the raven was patronized by evil spirits and other demonic characters. The crow was a feminine character, a symbol of sky, winter, water, bloodlust, and rumor. Both birds were associated with shape-shifting. The Buryat views, then, combined specifically ethnic and universal ideas about corvids.*

**Keywords:** *Buryats, traditional worldview, shamanism, Buddhism, ravens and crows, folklore.*

### Introduction

Corvids play a special role among ornithomorphic imagery in the mythology of the peoples of the world. Ravens and crows have been associated with a wide range of functions, different habitation realms, celestial bodies, and deep meanings (Mify..., 1980: 202, 839). The image of the raven is the most distinctive. Among some ethnic groups (several Paleo-Asian peoples of Northeast Asia and North American Indians), this bird was revered as a totem and acted as a demiurge or cultural hero.

Both *Corvidae* species are a part of the Buryat gallery of zoomorphic images, but these have not yet been discussed in Buryat ethnography. This article analyzes images of ravens and crows in the traditional beliefs, of the Buryats with to establish their symbolism and meanings in a comparative context.

### Origins of the Buryat names for crows and ravens

The wild fauna of the Baikal region includes ravens, primarily common ravens (*Corvus corax subcorax*). In addition, this region is inhabited by black crows (*Corvus corone*), which also belong to this biological genus. In Buryat vocabulary, the raven is designated as *khiree*, and the crow as *turlaag*.

Before starting our discussion, the origin of the Buryat names for the corvids should be established. The Mongols call the raven *kheree(n)* (Bolshoy akademicheskiy mongolsko-russkiy slovar..., 2001–2002: 1474). The Kalmyks call this bird *kire* (Russko-kalmytskiy slovar, 1964: 80), and the Khamnigans call it *kiree* (Khamnigansko-russkiy slovar, 2015: 173). These names for the bird originated from the language

of the medieval Mongols: cf. *qong kerī'ē* 'raven' (Poppe, 1938: 302). Identical name appears among the modern Khorchits: *khon kheree* 'raven' (Bolshoy akademicheskii mongolsko-russkii slovar..., 2001–2002: 1474). The phrase *khon khiree* occurs in Buryat shamanic poetry. In the Buryat language, the word *khon* has two main meanings: 'sonorous (sound)' and 'dead' (Buryaad-oroḱ toli..., 2010: Vol. II, 441). While the first meaning may well indicate the specific cry of this bird, the second may imply that the Buryats perceive the raven as a representative of the other world.

Notably, the medieval Mongols had the same name for both the crow and the raven: *kerī'ē*, *keriyē* 'crow' (Poppe, 1938: 21). This tradition has been lost in the modern Mongolian languages. To denote a crow, the Buryats use the word *turlag*. The Kalmyks use *turlag*, *shaazkha* (Kalmytsko-russkii slovar, 1977: 518), and the Khamnigans the words *turlaaki*, *turlaag* (Khamniganskii slovar, 2015: 280). In the Mongolian language, the word *turliakh*, consonant with these names, has a different meaning of *jackdaw* (Bolshoy akademicheskii mongolsko-russkii slovar..., 2001–2002: 992), while ethnic variants of the above-mentioned Kalmyk nomination of *shaazha* in Mongolian languages usually denote magpie.

The Mongolian dictionary of Muqaddimat Al-Adab gives another name for the raven – *quzyun* (Poppe, 1938: 302). Most likely, this has Turkic roots and does not appear in the languages of the modern Mongolian peoples. Indeed, the Old Turkic people had the word *quzyun* 'raven' (Drevnetyurkskii slovar, 1969: 475), which has survived in the vocabulary of some Turkic ethnic groups: Bashkir *kožon*, Kyrgyz *kuzgun*, Turkish *kuzgun*, Khakass *khushkhun*. Meanwhile, some Turkic peoples use other designations for raven: Altaians – *kargan*, Kazakhs – *karga*, Kirghiz – *karga*, Chuvashes – *čăhan*, and Yakuts – *suor*. Significantly, in the Old Turkic glossary, the word *qarya* (Ibid.: 426) (whose derivatives are ethnic variations of the word *karga*) defines the representatives of close biological species—raven and crow. In the latter meaning, it is used by some modern Turkic peoples: Uzbek. *qarg'a* 'crow'; Khakass *kharga* 'crow'.

Hence, the Buryat designations of raven and crow clearly have their origins in the Mongolian language.

### Description of ravens and crows based on vocabulary and small genres of folklore

According to the Buryat vocabulary and folklore, the image of a raven shows typical features of that bird in the wild. First, the Buryats noted its external zoological features. For example, its dark, blue-black (in the Buryat language, the phrase *khah khara* 'blackest black' is used to denote this color) plumage is reflected in the phrase: *khara*

*khiree* 'black raven'. The Buryats, like other Turkic-Mongolian peoples, were prejudiced against birds with black feathers, which were considered the messengers of the Lower World. In addition, the size of the raven was taken into account (it is one of the largest representatives of the *Passeriformes* order): *turag khiree shuvuun* lit. 'huge bird raven, raven'.

In small genres of Buryat folklore, specific features of the crow, such as its cry and plumage color, were emphasized:

*Khaar-khaar duutai,*  
*Khara togon degel'tey* (Onhon ugenud..., 1956: 22).

With the song "Kar-kar",  
With the robe made of black silk (crow) (translation by the author – A.B.).

In the riddle about the raven, both its black plumage and the strength of its large beak were emphasized:

*Khara torgon degelee*  
*Khaishalaagui umdebeb,*  
*Khara bulad hukhee*  
*Khataalgaagui baribab* (Ibid.: 22).

I put on black, silk,  
Uncut robe,  
I took untempered  
Black steel axe (raven) (translation by the author – A.B.).

People associated the long flights typical of ravens and other birds of prey with their ability to cover very long distances: *Khireegeyshie khurekhegui gazar* 'Where the raven did not carry bones' (Ibid.). The expression among the Mongols, in which this bird was called *turag shuvuu* 'big bird': *turag shuvuu nisch khurehgui, tuurait mor davkhizh khurekhegui gazar tsetsen* 'a place where neither a raven can fly to, nor a good horse can hop to' (Bolshoy akademicheskii mongolsko-russkii slovar..., 2001–2002: 992), has the same meaning.

Among their behavioral features, the Buryats noted the manifestation of a collective principle in ravens, although it is known that these birds only occasionally gather in flocks: *Khiree khireegei nyude tonshokhogui* 'A raven would not peck out another raven's eye' (Buryaad-oroḱ toli..., 2010: Vol. II, 427). Note that the proverb has a negative connotation: it is usually used to describe people with generally bad inclinations. It was probably borrowed by the Buryats through the Russians from the European culture, since this saying belonged to the Ancient Romans: *Cornix cornici nunquam confodit oculum* 'A raven would not peck out another raven's eye'.

The Buryats associated the manifestations of some feelings and vicious inclinations by a person with images of raven and crow. For example, when someone shows great joy, people usually say: *Bayarlahan khiree barkhirba* 'A delighted raven cawed'. Such saying probably emerged from observations of emotional behavior of this bird.

In Buryat beliefs, the image of a raven is associated with greed. Criticizing such a bad trait in a person, the people would say: *Khentei khun khiree mete* ‘A greedy person is like a raven’.

The Buryats considered the crow and raven as unclean birds. According to an 18th-century source, there was a ban on eating their meat (Miller, 2009: 256). This ban probably took into account the omnivorous nature of birds, which could also eat carrion.

Noteworthy is the color symbolism that is consistent with the color of these birds. For example, the expression *khiree khara* ‘black raven’ implies that the Buryats considered raven as a vile bird.

Both the raven’s eating of carrion and its habit of pecking out the eyes of living but weakened livestock, especially during *dzut* (lack of fodder), triggered beliefs about its unclean nature.

This may be consistent with a popular belief about the miraculous healing properties of a raven’s tears in treatment of eye diseases: “(the raven) is revered as a doctor of eye diseases and blindness in people. The Buryats often catch a raven and prick it in the eye as if making it cry; they anoint the eyes with the flowing liquid or inject it in drops. They claim that this makes the blind see” (Smolev, 1901: 107). According to Buryat popular beliefs, this bird is a symbol of vigilance. This prejudice is probably based on the assertion that human and animal eyes are supposedly the focus of vital energy: by eating the eyes of its victims, the bird receives vital energy, and in turn, the person gets this energy and becomes cured of blindness through the tears of raven.

In the vocabulary of popular botany, the mature fruits of Dahurian asparagus *Asparagus davuricus* Fisch ex Link are associated with black and shiny raven eyes. The Buryats call this medicinal plant, listed in the Red Book, *Khiree nyuden* ‘Raven eye’ (Buryaad-orod toli..., 2010: Vol. II, 427), and the Mongols, *Khereeniy nud* ‘botanical: Dahurian asparagus, raven eye’ (Bolshoy akademicheskii mongolsko-russkii slovar..., 2001–2002: 1474).

A negative attitude towards ravens (which acts as a kind of harbinger of misfortune) can be seen, for example, in the following saying:

*Bookhoin urda khiree,*  
*Boroogoi urda khalkhin* (Onhon ugenud..., 1956: 13).

(There is) a raven before (appearance of) lice,  
(There is) wind before the rain (translation by the author – A.B.).

According to traditional Buryat beliefs, the crow is a symbol of natural rhythms, specifically, of winter. According to popular observations, after migration of birds to the south, crows, along with magpies, stay to spend the winter. This is how this observation is conveyed in a riddle:

*Khaanay ukher*

*Khamagaaraa* (correctly, *khamta garaa*) (remark by the author – A.B.) *belshebe*,

*Kharagshan ereegshen*

*Khoeryn gazaa ulebe* (Ibid.: 23).

Khan’s cows

All went to graze together.

Black and spotted,

Two have stayed (crow and magpie) (translation by the author – A.B.).

It is curious that the qualities attributed to the raven and crow among the Buryats, reveal some parallels in the language of the Old Turkic peoples. This is no coincidence, because the presence of a Turkic ethnic component among the Buryat ancestors is known. The Old Turkic people also associated the crow with the cold season of the year: *Bir qarya birla qis kelmas* ‘Winter does not come with one crow’ (Drevnetyurkskiy slovar, 1969: 426). The image of raven evoked negative connotations for them. This can be observed in the opposition of raven and swan, which is based on color contrast and, accordingly, on the different symbolism of these birds: *Qara quzyun erdim quyu qildi čal* ‘I was a black raven, he made (me) a white swan’ (Ibid.: 475). In this regard, we should recall that white swan is considered a sacred bird and totemic ancestor of the Turkic peoples. For the Old Turkic people, one of the indicators that the raven belonged to unclean birds was its sharp cry: *Quzyun qoburya ulati javlaq belgölüg qorqinčiy ünliüg quslar* ‘Ravens, owls, and other birds pointing to bad omens with terrible voices’ (Ibid.).

The importance of ravens and crows in the traditional consciousness of the Buryats is confirmed, for example, by the Buryat surnames derived from nicknames, “Kheree” and “Turlaag” (Mitroshkina, 1987: 82).

### Images of ravens in Buryat mythological beliefs

Unlike the crow, which was considered a sign of winter, the Buryats perceived the raven as a symbol of spring:

*Saibad gekhede – ubel,*  
*Shalshad gekhede – zun,*  
*Khara khireegei khaahirkhada – khabar* (Menyelte mergen, 1984: 42).

(When) it turns white – it is winter,  
(When) it starts to rustle – it is summer,  
When the raven caws – it is spring... (translation by the author – A.B.).

The crow possessed the symbolism of water, because it was considered a harbinger of rain. According to popular beliefs, if a black crow cries, it will rain. This idea has ancient origins; it has been found among

different peoples, such as Vepsians (Vinokurova, 2007: 104), Chuvashes (Chuvashskaya mifologiya, 2018: 134), Mongols, etc. It also reminds us of the Ancient Roman poet Ovid, who is credited with the idea that this bird was a sign of rain (de Vries, 1976: 275). Incidentally, in the Slavic culture, the image of a raven, which signified spring, was associated with spring rain, and thus was also endowed with symbolism of water.

The Buryats, like some other peoples of Eurasia, e.g. the Khakass people (Burnakov, 2010a: 348), believe that the raven is connected to the sacramental drink—the water of eternity (*munkhuin khara uha*) (Burchina, 2007: 229)—the equivalent of the living and dead water mentioned in Slavic fairy tales. Using this life-giving drink, the cultural hero resurrects the deceased mighty warrior.

In Buryat folklore, the image of the raven is ambivalent. In a Buryat fairy tale, the raven is a respected character, independent, capable of acting contrary to the authorities. The Buryats believed that he was “a free bird who does not pay tribute (to the king of birds)” (Smolev, 1901: 107).

The raven is endowed with an ability to speak human language and to give wise advice. Obviously, this is a reflection of a popular perception of this bird as intelligent creature. Incidentally, ornithologists consider the raven one of the most intelligent birds. This is illustrated by the following fragment of the legend:

Nogodoy raised her eyes,  
And looked up through the smoke hole,  
And the hole is closed  
By the wings of a raven bird.  
Now the raven came down below  
To the nice maiden Nogodoy  
And he said in human language,  
Only bluntly, in a sharp tone... (Namsaraev, 1990: 25).

The crow is a symbol of the spread of rumors, through which the cultural hero learns about the hidden cause of illness, the location of treasure, etc.

In the traditional Buryat worldview, the raven, like any flying bird, is a symbol of the sky. It is no coincidence that the Buryat mythology endowed this bird with the role of a messenger from higher powers, mainly black celestials (Khangalov, 1960: 74). Moreover, in the epics of the Buryats, one of celestial beings, Som Sagan Noyon—a mediator between the opposing light and dark sides of the sky—turns into a raven. He takes the form of a black raven before light deities, and the form of a white raven before dark deities.

In folklore, the image of the raven is associated with assistance to Buddhist servants and deities. For example, in the legend *Nogoon Dari ekhe* ‘Green Tara Mother’, the wise raven helps this *dākinī* and her son, and as a reward receives longevity and sharp eyesight (Smolev, 1901: 105). In another legend, Green Tara thanked the raven by “giving it the ability to see a piece of meat

only the size of a thumb beyond sixty rivers and to fly without fear of frost under the sky above the clouds” (Potanin, 1883: 297). It may be assumed that this motif was borrowed by the Buryats through the Mongols from Tibetan Buddhism. Among the Mongols, the Green Tara Mother was considered a celestial patroness, and the legend “Nogoon Dara ekhiyn tuuzh” (“The Tale of the Green Tara”) became famous among them. The above-mentioned zoological features of ravens (ability to fly high and visual acuity) are emphasized in various epics and fairy tales of the Buryats and many other Eurasian peoples.

An example of a negative attitude towards the raven appears in the fairy tale “The Angry Raven”. This bird is presented as a vengeful and cunning creature. It achieves its goal, but cannot survive the joy of its success (Buryatskiye narodniye skazki..., 2000: 95).

The image of the raven, as mentioned above, is associated with the other world. Like the yellow fox, the raven is linked to the ensuing chaos. In Buryat folklore, the violation of the former order is conveyed by the following lexical expression: “(only) the black raven screams and the yellow fox barks” (Khangalov, 1960: 274). The Buryats also considered the fox a representative of the underworld (Badmaev, 2021b: 39). Notably, in the mythology of the peoples of Eurasia, birds such as ravens appear as guides or intermediaries between the worlds (for the example of the Indians, see (Krishna, 2010: 93)).

The Buryat epics reflects the symbiosis of raven and wolf, which manifests itself in the nature in their joint procurement of meat. We have discussed this issue and have demonstrated the chthonic nature of the wolf (Badmaev, 2021a: 97). In the mythology of many other peoples of Eurasia, these wild animals are considered companions of the other world. Moreover, in the traditional thinking of the Buryats, like other Turkic-Mongolian peoples, raven and wolf were associated with bloodthirstiness and war. This is shown in the Buryat epics, which thus portray the culmination of a brutal battle as a bloody feast organized by the corvids:

Unfinished battle  
Boils with renewed vigor.  
Rivers of blood, mountains of meat  
Feed black ravens.  
White-sided magpies  
Are also here, rummaging and chirping (Namsaraev, 1990: 122).

In the traditional Buryat worldview, the raven has an *ezhin*—a mythical master and lord. Out of fear of angering him, there is a ban on killing this bird. Crows were not believed to receive such protection, but they have been kept out of the way, too. It was supposed that raven’s *ezhins* were individual powerful dark master-spirits. In



shamanic poetry, these are, for example, Azhirai-bukhe, the Master of the Black Horse and helper of the ruler of the Lower World. His son is a black raven, and his daughter is a yellow raven (Khangalov, 1958: 360). Yellow ravens, of course, do not exist in nature; in this case, the color of the bird's plumage acts as a sex marker: black symbolizes masculinity and yellow, femininity.

It seems natural that ravens are called the children of Azhirai-bukhe, since ancient military cult is associated with this mythical character among the Buryats. In the Buryat epics, ravens often turn out to be the warriors of dark lords. For instance, in the epic "Geser", the devil Lobsogoldoy addresses them as follows:

You, my winged warriors,  
You, my four pillars,  
My black, watchful ravens (1986: 172).

In the mythopoetics of the Turkic peoples, warriors are also associated with ravens. For example, in the Altai epic "Maadai-kara", one of the offspring of evil is described as follows:

His people are like thick smoke,  
His troops are like a flock of ravens,  
Zaisans are like evil wolves (1979: 25).

In the same epics, flying ravens are described as a formidable army:

And in the brightened skies,  
Striking terror, spreading fear,  
Black, clawed, and gloomy,  
A horde of ravens can be seen.  
It croaks and caws.  
The ravens fly like a thunderstorm,  
Their eyes furrow the earth; their breath  
And the flapping of their wings  
Are like a hurricane (Ibid.: 67).

In the mythological views of the Altaians, the arrow, which usually personifies the masculine principle in the traditional cultures of the Turkic-Mongolian peoples, is likened to a raven:

And clouds of arrows fly at her,  
Like a mad flock of ravens... (Altaiskiyе geroicheskiye skazaniya, 1983: 212).

Thus, it can be argued that the Buryats and Southern Siberian Turkic peoples had a common view on the masculine nature of raven's image.

According to the traditional beliefs of the Buryats, this bird of prey is a spy for evil spirits. For example, in "Geser", the spying raven fulfills the will of the earthly offspring of Atai Ulaan, the head of the black celestials (1986: 207). In the same epic, the crow is associated with a demonological character, serving him as a formidable guard or transportation:

And the crows surround her,  
Threaten Geser's wife  
By sharp points of iron claws.  
Suddenly, riding on a gray crow,  
A man flies up to her (Ibid.: 67).

Another aspect of the raven is being the messenger of death and misfortune. Its cry was considered ominous. People would say: "When the raven cries... there will be misfortune. If a raven lands on someone's house and screams, this is a bad omen" (Khangalov, 1960: 74). The same sign was associated with a crow: "If a crow croaks – it is a bad luck" (Osokin, 1906: 223). Note that the characteristics of corvids are similar among many peoples of Eurasia (Burnakov, 2010a: 348; Gura, 1997: 537; Tresidder, 1999: 50; Chuvashskaya mifologiya, 2018: 134; and others).

The Buryats gave attention to variety of sounds made by ravens: "If (the raven) screams with a different sound, it promises wealth" (Smolev, 1900: 28). The connection between this image and the precious treasure stored in the ground testifies to the chthonic nature of this bird. The same idea can be seen in the traditional views of some other peoples (Slavs (Gura, 1997: 532), Khakass people (Burnakov, 2010b: 120), etc.), which emphasizes its universal nature.

In Buryat shamanic poetics, the raven is associated with the motif of shape-shifting. It was believed that the shaman could turn into raven:

Gray hare is our run,  
Gray wolf is our carrier,  
Raven *khoṇ* is our shape-shifting,  
Eagle *khoto* is our messenger! (Khangalov, 1958: 177).

Interestingly, in Buryat legends, a woman who was supposedly beautiful and dissolute during her lifetime, after death, turns into a crow (essentially, a demonic character – *muu shubuu(n)* 'bad bird'); taking the form of an evil shape-shifting bird, she kills lonely male travelers (Zhamtsarano, 2001: 104). Given this, it can be assumed that in the traditional beliefs of the Buryats, the image of the crow was linked to the female principle.

There are no legends wherein a raven would appear as a mythical ancestor or patron of any Buryat family clan. This means that for the Buryats, this bird of prey was not a totem.

As far as the Mongolian superethnos is concerned, the issue of the raven as a totemic ancestor is not so clear-cut. Among the medieval Mongols, one can distinguish the tribe of the Kereits (*khreed* 'ravens'), whose ethnic name was associated with this bird. In the late 12th to early 13th centuries, they formed the separate khanate of Van Khan. Among the Mongols of that time, their power elite stood out as belonging to the Nestorian Christians. Indirect evidence of reverence for ravens by some of the Mongols of Genghis Khan is probably one of their battle

cries (traditionally containing an indication of the totemic animal)—“kkhu-kkhu”, which resembles the caw of this bird: at the sight of the victim, the raven utters a loud, guttural “kuukh-kuukh”. This is a direct association of an attacking steppe warrior on the horseback with a raven who discovered the carrion. The custom of Buryat hunters who imitate the caw of a raven after killing a bear can be viewed in the same context.

The above facts can be explained by the Turkic origin of both the Kereits and some other tribes that became a part of the Mongol state of Genghis Khan. The raven was revered as an ancestor among some ethnic groups of the Siberian Turkic people (Yakuts, Teleuts, etc.) (Burnakov, 2010b: 116).

### Conclusions

The study of Buryat popular beliefs about ravens reveals the richness of the image of the raven, while the image of the crow appears to be more fragmentary. At the same time, the image of the raven is ambivalent and polysemantic, while that of the crow has a clear negative connotation.

Analysis of vocabulary and small genres of folklore indicates that the Buryats gave attention to the external zoological features of corvids: color of plumage and cry in crows, and color of plumage, size, prominent beak, and flight duration in ravens. They also noticed behavioral features of the birds. Ravens were distinguished by their collective nature, emotional expression of joy, and greed. The Buryats associated both birds with unclean natures and therefore did not eat their meat; they perceived their black plumage as a sign of belonging to the Lower World, etc.

According to the mythological beliefs of the Buryats, the raven was a symbol of the sky, spring, vigilance, war, masculinity, and vengeance. As a messenger of the black celestial beings and their spy, he was associated with underground treasure and acted as assistant to the Buddhist deity Green Tara. It was distinguished by intellectual capacities and independence. Unlike the crow, the raven was believed to have patrons—dark master spirits and other demonic characters.

In the traditional worldview of the Buryats, the crow was a symbol of the sky, winter, water, bloodthirstiness, and spreading rumors, and had a feminine nature.

Both birds of prey were associated with the idea of shape-shifting, although of different kinds. A demonic creature was believed to turn into a crow, while shamans of some clans turned into ravens during their mystical journeys and fights with other shamans.

Individual traditional beliefs of the Buryats about corvids find parallels in the cultures of different peoples of Eurasia, which may be explained by the universal nature

of these views, as well as ethnic and cultural contacts (for example, with the Turkic peoples of Siberia and Central Asia) in different historical periods.

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