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V.A. Burnakov[1] and A.A. Burnakov[2]
[1]Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography,
Siberian Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences,
Pr. Akademika Lavrentieva 17, Novosibirsk, 630090, Russia
E-mail: venariy@ngs.ru
[2]Khakas Research Institute of Language, Literature and History,
Shchetinkina 23, Abakan, 655017, Russia
E-mail: artas_burnakov@mail.ru

Remnants of the Snake Cult Among the Khakas (Late 19th to Mid 20th Century)

On the basis of folklore and ethnographic data, some of which are introduced in this article, the Khakas mytho-ritual complex relating to the snake is reconstructed. It is demonstrated that these beliefs were central to the traditional Khakas worldview, and that the snake was endowed with elaborate symbolic meanings. It was a sacred animal, associated with ideas of life and death. It played a key role in mystical initiation practices, including those related to shamanism, and it was perceived as a guardian spirit. Among the Khakas' traditional beliefs was the idea that the elect could marry snakes, which turned into beautiful girls. Such a union, short-lived as it was, brought wealth and luck. The snake was also associated with elements and landscape features, such as water and mountains, linked to the ideas of a sacred center, fertility, and the ancestor cult, which were central to the Khakas worldview. This reptile was often believed to be a mountain spirit, a mystical patron, and a donator of magical capacities. Thus, beliefs about snakes were part of Khakas folk medicine and domestic magic.

Keywords: *Khakas, folk culture, religion, folklore, mythology, ritual, symbolism, image, snake.*

Introduction

The snake (Khakas 'chylan') is one of the most famous representatives of the fauna that inhabits the entire territory of Khakassia. In the early 20th century, while describing the animal world of this region, A.V. Adrianov emphasized that "among the reptiles, various species of lizards, snakes, toads, frogs, tritons, etc. abundantly occur" (1904: 16). The multiplicity of snakes, as well as their peculiar appearance, contributed to the fact that snake played a special role in the traditional worldview of the Khakas. The image of the snake has always been surrounded by a mystical aura. Many ethnographic and folklore materials indicate that in the past, the cult of snake was widespread in the spiritual culture of this people.

For the first time, this article reconstructs the set of Khakas beliefs associated with the snake and based on a wide range of folklore and ethnographic sources, including those which have been previously unknown. The purpose of this study is to describe the snake cult in the traditional worldview of the Khakas.

Folklore and ethnographic evidence, some of which is published for the first time, constitute the source of this study. Folklore evidence include myths, fairy tales, and legends in the Khakas and Russian languages. This work cites published and unpublished texts that were found in the National Archives of

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the Republic of Khakassia (NARKh. F. 558, Inv. 1, D. 115). Field materials of the authors collected during the expeditions to Khakassia in 2002–2005 and to the Altai in 2002 serve as ethnographic sources. The ethnographic materials of the local historian S.E. Karachakov (2004) and the historian-archaeologist Y.I. Sunchugashev (1991), published in the Khakas language and containing the records of informants about traditional ritual practices associated with the snake, were also used in this study. These materials are published for the first time in our translation.

The chronological framework of this study covers the late 19th to mid 20th century. The choice of these chronological boundaries is primarily determined by the state of the sources associated with this research topic. Notably, field ethnographic materials were collected by us in the early 2000s, but the information recorded reflects events and phenomena relating to the mid 20th century.

This study is based on historical and ethnographic research methods. The relic method, relying on the remnants of the past surviving in myths and rituals, allows a conclusion to be drawn about the situation in the society at an earlier historical stage; while semantic analysis makes it possible to uncover the deeper meaning of a specific mythological image and ritual activities associated with it in the culture of the people under study.

Mystical marriage of man and snake, and the cult of mountain

The presence of the snake cult among the Khakas was observed by some scholars of the 19th century (Kastren, 1999: 221; Latkin, 1892: 148). Individual Khakas *seouk* clans perceived the snake as their totemic animal. According to specialists, this reptile suborder was the symbol of the Yzyr *seouk* (Butanaev, Torbostaev, 2007: 27). The motif of kinship and marital relationship between people and snakes became widespread in the Khakas folklore (Katanov, 1907: 515–521; and others). We should note that the issue of interaction between man and nature was manifested in a veiled form. This can be explained by its certain esotericism, as well as the rethinking and even playing down of certain mythological ideas associated with this issue. Nevertheless, the analysis of folklore texts and ethnographic evidence, using the relic method, may allow us to reconstruct the beliefs and rituals associated with the snake.

In the traditional beliefs of the Khakas and other Turkic peoples of Southern Siberia, luck, supernatural abilities, and the shaman's gift among people were attributed to their active interaction with the world of deities and spirits. Marital union between humans and otherworldly beings was a form of such interaction (Dyrenkova, 2012: 340–341; Potapov, 1991: 64–83; Burnakov, 2006: 31–42), and was mentioned in many myths. We have discovered a version of such a myth written in the Khakas language, in the National Archive of the Republic of Khakassia; it is published for the first time in our translation. "Once, three brothers went hunting. [In the taiga, already close to the evening] one of them returned to his *odag* hunting hut earlier than the others, and found that a huge snake had wrapped itself around it. The man did not understand the snake's language [and did not know what to do]. The snake, hissing, crawled closer to him and spat out its saliva [in the form of foam] onto the ground. The hunter swallowed it. After that, he began to understand the language of snakes and other animals. [Then] the snake said to the hunter: 'Tomorrow on that ridge [it showed the ridge] I will fight the Khan of frogs. You have to shoot my enemy. As a reward you will receive a happy life from me'. The next day, closer to noon, a fight between the khans of snakes and frogs began. The hunter took aim and fired – he hit the frog in the forehead [and it fell dead]. After that, the Khan of snakes crawled up to the man and said: 'Now let us go to my dwelling. I want to thank you. I will give you whatever you ask, because you saved my life [literally, *soul*]'. The snake placed him on its back and rushed off swiftly [literally, *ran in a trot*]. They arrived and started to go inside some mountain. Suddenly someone invisible whispered in the ear of the hunter: 'Don't take anything from that which the Khan of snakes will offer you as a reward, just ask for a puppy'. Soon, the Khan of snakes began to offer him various gifts. The hunter flatly refused everything, and only asked for a puppy. The master had to fulfill the guest's wish. Passing the dog into the hands of the man, he warned him: 'Do not offend this puppy. Feed him with whatever you eat'. The hunter fully agreed to fulfill this wish.

After returning home, he began to take care of the puppy exactly as he had promised the Khan of snakes. Once the hunter went to taiga. Having returned home in the evening, he found a lot of varied and delicious food on the table. The man thought, 'What miracles are happening? Where does all this come from?!' He tasted the food. He decided to find out everything. The next time, having pretended to go hunting, he hid and began to watch what was happening in his house. Suddenly, he saw that a beautiful girl appeared in his house and started to do housework. The man immediately hurried into the house. The beautiful woman did not expect to see him, and told him reproachfully, 'You came at a moment when I had not had time to braid my hair completely. Therefore, we are not destined to live

together all our lives'. Yet after that, they still began to live as a married couple. They had two children. However, soon the attitude of the wife to her husband changed. She no longer wanted to associate her destiny with his, and one day she said, 'Can a snake live with a human?!' Then the woman grabbed her two children under her arms and went to the river. Her husband accompanied her. They reached the bank of the Abakan River. The woman said, 'Children born from a human are pitiful'. [It turned out] that one of the children was called *Kizirlen*, and the other *Khazyrgan*. The mother took the two children and threw them into the middle of the river. After that, having turned into a snake, she dived into the waters of the Abakan River. And her husband remained on earth" (NARKh. F. 558, Inv. 1, D. 115, fols. 92–93).

The outstanding Russian folklorist V.Y. Propp, in his study *Historical Roots of the Fairy Tale* (2009), has analyzed the folklore of various peoples of the world, and has shown that many works of oral folklore—in particular, fairy tales—contain information in the relic form about archaic mythological beliefs and rituals, which were determined by social institutions, the way of life, economic structure, stereotypes and norms of behavior, etc. In that study, Propp has also analyzed the image of the snake. In his opinion, this image was directly related to archaic initiation rituals. We believe that the Propp's approach can be applied to Khakas folklore, also. It seems that the above myth in the relic and relatively veiled form also presents information on the archaic initiation/transition ritual, which was most likely shamanistic.

The folklore and ethnographic information makes it possible to suggest the following reconstruction of the Khakas worldview. It is known that the ritual of initiation is inseparable from beliefs concerning death. According to tradition, when young men reached the age of maturity, they were necessarily subjected to testing, including tests associated with their future activities as hunter, warrior, etc. These tests were extremely painful and tormenting, and sometimes took the tested person to the edge of death. However, after the young men successfully overcame them, they became peers and full-fledged members of the clan, military, or some other social structure. Also, any initiation symbolized the death of the individual in his previous status and his birth in the new status. Such a meaning was present in the shaman's initiation, too. During this ritual, the neophyte "died" (often several times), that is, lost the qualities of an ordinary person, and was revived for the society in the form of a shaman—a person endowed with sacred powers. After the ritual of initiation and until the end of his life, he was bound by certain obligations to the otherworld and its inhabitants.

If we consider the above myth in this context, the Khan of snakes may be identified with a guardian spirit. The following detail is notable: full-fledged communication between snake and human happens only after the human swallows snake saliva—a particle of the animal. As Propp noted, "swallowing in these cases is associated with initiation" (Ibid.: 196). This action may also be interpreted as absorption of snake venom and magical partaking of the inner essence of the snake, which inevitably entails the symbolic death of the man as a representative of the profane world. At the same time, this act fully contributes to a "new" birth of the person—his inclusion into the sacred world. The person comes to a kind of insight—he instantly receives the capacity to understand the language of snakes and other living beings.

Then, the person is tested for his capacity to shoot accurately and hit the target. The hero coped with this task, that is, he successfully passed that stage of testing, too. The final stage of his initiation was marriage with a representative of the sacred world—a snake.

The myth in question is interesting not only because it conveys the plot of the marital union between man and snake, but also because it unambiguously denotes the traditional Khakas belief concerning the mystical connection between this reptile and the image of the water element and mountain. In addition, some toponymic data are indicated in this text in a veiled form. The snake acts in the text as a mother (the progenitor of two rivers) the Kizir and Kazyr. We should add that the folk heritage of the Khakas also includes other versions of this myth, in which the toponymic subject is revealed more fully (Katanov, 1907: 515–521; 1909: 282).

Notably, in the above myth, the episode connected with the entry of the man into the mountain where the Khan of snakes lived, is obviously not accidental. The cult of mountains is widespread in the Khakas culture. These natural features are perceived as some sacred fertile centers and continuous sources of life. On the mountains, major collective rituals of sacrifice were performed, such as *tag taiyg* ('sacrifice to the mountain') and *tigir taiyg* ('sacrifice to the sky'). During these rituals, people asked for well-being and happiness, as well as the elimination of all kinds of suffering. They believed that the spirits of mountains could summon future shamans to shamanistic service and determine their attributes, including their shamanistic drums. Cemeteries where ordinary people were buried were most often located in the mountains. Therefore, it was not by chance that almost every Khakas *seouk* clan revered a certain mountain as a holy object.

In the traditional worldview of the Khakas, the spirit-lords of mountains—*tag eeleri* ('mountain lords') or *tag*

kizileri (‘mountain people’)—were perceived as distant ancestors with a significant influence on human life and destiny. The Khakas believed, and still continue to believe, in the possibility of marriage between ordinary people and mountain spirits. It is assumed that the mystical mountain maidens or women are most often the initiators of this relationship. According to the traditional beliefs, for people engaged in hunting, such marital union guarantees success in their professional activities, and the reception of material benefits. At the same time, in the traditional consciousness of the people, mountain spirits could appear both in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic guise. Among the latter, snake-like creatures were the most common.

Mountains, rocks, stones, and caves are favorite habitations for snakes. It is quite natural that in the mythological beliefs of the Khakas, mountain spirit and snake are characters which are difficult to tell apart. Moreover, they often merge into a single image.

In Khakas folklore, the image of the mountain spirit in the form of a snake is widespread. The protagonist of the fairy tale “The Golden Chalice” assisted the Khan of snakes, who was simultaneously the Lord of the Mountain. As a reward, the protagonist received a magic colt and the right to marry the sister of the Khan of snakes. He was granted a dignified and comfortable life (Zolotaya chasha, 1975). In the legend of the mighty woman Payan Khys, the protagonist saw a prophetic dream of her upcoming marriage to the Lord of the Mountain. The groom appears to her in the form of a snake (Payan Khys, 2006). In the tale “Tabanakh Matyr”, the daughter of the Lord of the Mountain Kara-Taskhyl appeared before the protagonist in the form of a viper (Tabanakh matyr, 2014). In the fairy tale recorded by Prince N.A. Kostrov among the Khakas in the 19th century, a character named Taganak-Matyr went to the Snake King to complain about a wolf that bit to death his favorite horse (1884). This plot reflects the traditional beliefs of the Khakas that all wild animals belong to the *tag*/*taigy eezi* (the Lord of Mountain/Taiga) and obey him without question, while he is responsible for them. In accordance with such beliefs, during the ritual of sacrifice to this deity, the believers prayed to him that he would not allow predatory animals to kill their livestock. Therefore, the conclusion of the folklorist P.A. Troyakov that the Khan of snakes is a folklore image that is associated “in its origins with a sacred idea of the Lord of Mountain, who has acquired fabulous qualities” (1991: 316) appears to be quite reasonable.

The analysis of these folklore texts has made it possible to identify and reconstruct the traditional beliefs of the Khakas about the snake not only as a sacred animal, but also as a sacred marriage partner of the elect people, including shamans. In the Khakas culture, the image of this reptile was directly related to social practices of initiation and the shaman’s dedication. In the traditional view, the snake was associated with lord-spirits of water and mountain.

The snake as sacred benefactor, and its wondrous attributes

In the Khakas worldview, individual mountains/rocks with huge caves are the headquarters of *Chylan Khan* (‘the snake king’). The people called these headquarters *chylan ordazy*. It was believed that such sacred places could be recognized by clouds of steam issuing from them (Butanaev, Torbostaev, 2007: 27). In Khakas folklore, the topic of a hunter who gets lost in the taiga owing to bad weather or other circumstances, and accidentally falls into a deep cave in a high mountain or rock, is quite common. In this cave, the snake horde is situated. The snake khan appears before the hunter sometimes in the form of a huge snake, and sometimes of a giant man. He not only does not hurt the hunter and saves his life, but even generously allows him to spend the winter in his cave with the snakes. Moreover, he promises to help the hunter to return home. To avoid dying of hunger, the hunter is offered the chance to lick the white stone *akh tas* or *chylan arbyzy* (‘snake’s fortune’) three times. The man follows this advice, and is miraculously delivered from hunger. In addition, he immediately begins to understand the language of all animals, including snakes. So, he spends the winter in friendly communication with the snakes. In the spring, *Chylan Khan* brings the man on his back to the surface of the earth—to the taiga—but demands a promise that he will not tell anyone about what has happened. The snake king warns the hunter that if he tells anyone, he will die.

Having found himself in the taiga, the man thinks about not returning home empty-handed, and begins to hunt. He becomes extremely surprised that by some miracle the animals start to come into his hands on their own. The hunter shoots many animals and goes home with a good kill. He returns to his home and finds that people are commemorating his death on that day. Seeing the man alive and unharmed, his relatives are very surprised. Delighted, they gave the hunter much araka to drink and begin to ask him about his adventures. In a state of deep drunkenness, the man reveals his secret completely. The next morning, after waking up and realizing what has happened, he decides to go to the taiga to meet with *Chylan Khan*, and takes a large supply of araka with him. Soon the meeting takes place. The khan of snakes is enraged because of the

broken agreement, and at first tries to kill the hunter. The hunter, having deeply and sincerely apologized to *Chylan Khan*, complains that he was drunk and therefore could not control himself. The hunter offers the snake a drink of araka to test its strength. He agrees and drinks everything that the hunter brought him. Having become quite drunk, the snake king suddenly shows his wild temper and begins to smash down the taiga. This lasts for three days. Then *Chylan Khan* gets tired and sleeps for three days. When he awakes, he realizes what happens to a drunk, and forgives the man. After that, the hunter becomes very successful, and always hunts many animals. And he begins to live in prosperity and peace (Okhotnik…, 2006).

In this myth, the traditional conceptual idea of death and rebirth is expressed. Moreover, the acquisition of new status, as can be seen from the text, results exactly from the sacred interaction between man and snake. When the hunter finds himself in a cave (the inside of a mountain), the sacred center where the snake horde is located, he actually enters the otherworldly space. Full participation in that sacred location and change of mythological status occur only when the hunter, along with other inhabitants of this world (snakes) licks, three times, a white stone—the personification of serpentine vitality. Y.V. Chesnov pointed out that images of stone and snake constitute a comprehensive worldly universal: snakes are born from stone, interact with it, and contact with stone is similar to a snake's bite (1993).

Notably, the protagonist, after undergoing the initiation, receives a supernatural gift from the snake: he starts to understand the language of animals, and subsequently becomes a successful hunter. The text emphasizes his status as "deceased" to the profane world. This status is indicated in the episode when the living relatives commemorate the death of the hero. Furthermore, the myth states that the hunter is forbidden to speak about what happened. Semantically, this can be expressed by the phrase, "the dead do not speak".

According to the story, the violation of the ban results from drinking the araka. The image of araka in this narrative is obviously not accidental. It is known that in ordinary consciousness, alcohol is one of those "miraculous" means via which a person sheds many inner inhibitions. In a state of drunkenness, there appear euphoria and the illusion of freedom, which allow the person to violate taboos. In the mythological perception, alcohol acts as a bridge transporting the person closer to the otherworld. The vast majority of the Khakas traditional rituals, including the shamanistic rituals, were performed using alcoholic beverages. In this regard, it would be appropriate to cite the Russian idiom "be so drunk as to see devilkins", which indicates a state of extreme alcoholic intoxication. Meanwhile, in the mythological perception, such a state might have looked like contact with the other world. Because of its special mythological status, araka was believed to have been able to lead the folklore hero beyond the limits of life or death. In our case, araka almost led the man to his death, and likewise it was araka again, which, tried by the snake, saved the hunter from an inevitable tragic fate.

In mythological beliefs, the snake's connection with alcohol and even a certain association with it became reflected in a common idiom of "zelenyi zmiy" ("the demon alcohol", lit. 'the green snake'). This is probably no coincidence. In the traditional worldview, the snake, owing to its natural features, is the embodiment of the mythological concept of death and rebirth. For instance, its regular physiological process of molting (skin-shedding) was perceived in the archaic consciousness as death and rebirth. As a result, it became endowed with certain transcendental features. Such qualities with a certain degree of conditionality are also attributed to alcoholic beverages. This may have contributed to the convergence of their images.

In the folk tradition of the Khakas, there are subjects that reflect the snake's propensity to drink araka. In some Khakas fairy tales, a snake, in order to increase its powers, drinks ten barrels of araka at a time (Katanov, 1907: 400–402). We discovered one such mythologized narrative in the Khakas language in the archive: "Not far from the village of Verkh-Askiz, in the mountains of *Chiti khys* ('Seven maidens'), a shepherd was grazing cattle at night. Suddenly, he noticed that there was something black near him. He came closer and saw that there lay something black and very large. And [suddenly] it spoke: 'I, Chylan Khan, am the King of Snakes. I will come back [here] in three days, and you will bring me araka'. The shepherd fulfilled the wish of the snake. He came to the specified location at the appointed time. Chylan Khan says to him: 'It turned out to be cold on the bank of the Abakan River, and now I am heading along this side [that is, up the Askiz River]'. As a reward for treating it to araka, the snake presented the shepherd with a hat" (NARKh. F. 558, Inv. 1, D. 115, fol. 78).

In the oral folklore of the Khakas, the subject of a man meeting the King of Snakes was very widespread. The appearance of the King of Snakes is usually described extremely concisely, mentioning only his blackness and huge size. Sometimes, there occur very original and specific data regarding the appearance of the King of Snakes. One of such descriptions in the Khakas language was recorded by the local historian S.E. Karachakov. We will give it in our translation: "My uncle Yasa (Vasily Vladimirovich Borgoyakov) since his youth worked as a hired worker. He used to go to various places. One day, he [along with other people]

was walking through unfamiliar terrain, and saw how snakes were crossing the path [near them]. Having seen the people, the snakes wanted to attack them and sting them. At that time, one very large snake, as large as a thill, with a golden cross on its forehead [head], struck the ground several times with its tail [and stopped the snakes]: 'You must not touch [people], you must not' – it seemed to tell them. It was *Chylan Khan*—'the King of Snakes'. The snakes [then] moved to another location" (Karachakov, 2004: 36).

In the traditional beliefs of the Khakas, meetings with snakes of unusual type (for example, white, "with dark fur", etc.) meant happiness and good luck for the person. According to the informants, all the men who encountered snakes on their way returned home from World War II unharmed, without a single scratch. People explained such luck by a meeting with these reptiles and by their mystical benevolence. It was believed that if one caught such a reptile, removed the skin from it, and hid it in his dwelling in a chest or another place, happiness and well-being would surely come to the house (FMA. 2004. Recorded by A.A. Burnakov).

In the Khakas tradition, not only skin removed from reptiles, but also any snakeskin that had been shed (*chylan kibi*) was endowed with sacred properties, including the producing and apotropaic qualities. It was considered great good luck if a person found a shed snakeskin that was oriented with its head to the east. Its mystical power was believed to contribute to a multiple increase in livestock and the overall well-being of people. There were relevant folk signs: if a skin is found intact, then the person who discovered it will live a long life; if a skin is found by a traveler in torn clothes, his life will be of average length. People used to suspend snakeskin sewn into white fabric from a child's cradle and used it as an amulet (Butanaev, Torbostaev, 2007: 28).

The Khakas believed that some snakes had horns (*chylan muuzi*) on their heads, but only a happy person could see them. It was also believed that these horns were endowed with magical qualities; they brought happiness and wealth to their owner, "they paralyze greed in people. If you show mythical snake horns to any miser, he will disburse any of his savings without regret" (Ibid.). The beliefs concerning magical snake horns are also reflected in Khakas folklore, which mentions that these were used in manufacturing deadly weapons—sabers and spears (Devushka…, 1975; Doch starika, 2014).

Red coral *chylan sury* was considered to be a snake's attribute. According to popular beliefs, it was present only in white snakes, and was located under their tongues. There was a belief that if a person managed to procure a *chylan sury* and put it under his own tongue in the same way, he would become invisible (Butanaev, Torbostaev, 2007: 28).

This folklore and ethnographic evidence indicates that the culture of the Khakas manifested widespread ideas about the interaction of people with snakes and their chief *Chylan Khan*. It was believed that the results of such contacts were usually favorable for people. They became the owners of supernatural gifts—started to understand the language of animals, received various material benefits, and their efforts were always successful. However, the positive outcome of this interaction was largely determined by the tradition, mainly by gift-exchange. A person received all sorts of benefits in return for his services, or for sacrificial offerings to the snakes.

The snake in folk medicine

The sacralization of snake contributed to its widespread use in folk medicine. The Khakas believe that there are special snakes in nature, which are mysteriously associated with specific people. If such a person gets sick, they come to his aid and heal him. This is told in the following folk story: "One person became very sick. One summer afternoon, he fell asleep in the forest. At that time, a man was passing by. And he suddenly noticed a white snake crawling out of the sleeping man's mouth. It moved to the grass with flowers and, squirming strongly, began to rub its skin against them. This continued until it had cleaned itself back to its natural black color. [It turned out] that because of the internal mucus [that is, illness] of the person, the snake had absorbed it into itself and turned completely white. In order to clean the insides of the person one more time, the snake again penetrated there through his mouth. [After some time] it crawled out again. It was also whitish, but not as brightly white as the first time. The snake began to clean its skin again, rubbing itself against grass and flowers, until it turned black. When it tried to get inside the sleeper for the third time, the person who was watching all this, scared it away. Then he woke the sleeping person up and asked what dream he was having. He replied that in a dream he drank a lot of cold water. He noted that never [in his life] had he drunk such cold water. The eyewitness told the man what he saw—how the snake crawled twice into his mouth and crawled out of there, having changed its color. As a result, after some time, the person who was directly in contact with the snake was completely healed of his illness" (FMA. 2004. Recorded by A.A. Burnakov).

In the traditional Khakas beliefs, the image of the snake healer was so developed that virtually its entire body, especially the skin, bile, fat, blood, etc., was endowed with miraculous healing properties. People

believed in the magical and healing power of the skin shed by a snake. It was used during attacks of malaria (tied to the neck) and back pain (applied to the relevant area) (Butanaev, Torbostaev, 2007: 28). People believed that snakeskin had sacred properties and helped women in difficult childbirth. "Childbirth happens much more easily if you place across the back or belly a whole snakeskin found in the steppe or mountains" (Katanov, 1899: 394). Notably, for this purpose not only a shed snakeskin was used, but also skin specifically removed from a snake for this purpose. Our informant reported: "When people saw two snakes entwined in intercourse, they killed them. The snakes were skinned, and skins were dried. When a woman gave birth, the skins were placed on her. In this case, delivery was easy and fast" (FMA. 2005. N.T. Borgoyakov, born 1931, the village of Askiz, Republic of Khakassia. Recorded by V.A. Burnakov). In some cases, in the absence of skin of this reptile, it was permissible to use a belt that had once been used for separating the intertwined snakes (Ibid.). Such traditional Khakas beliefs were based on their faith in imitative and contagious magic: just as a snake sheds its old skin without any difficulty, so a woman can deliver a child easily. The birthing mother in this case was identified with the image of a snake. It was believed that to facilitate childbirth, it was enough for a woman to come into contact with snake skin.

Deep faith in the mystical connection between women giving birth and snakes has also been observed among the Northern Altaians. The speed of childbirth for a woman was believed to be directly dependent on the speed with which a man separated two mating and interwoven snakes met on his way (FMA. 2002. E.S. Tagyzova, the village of Kebezen, the Altai Republic. Recorded by V.A. Burnakov).

The ethnographic literature mentions that earlier the Khakas shamans treated eye diseases with the help of snakes (Ivanov, 1955: 213; Potapov, 1991: 194). Unfortunately, the authors did not describe such treatment in detail; so it is unclear what exactly caused the healing—the shamanistic ritual, when the spirit-helper of the shaman in the image of snake achieved the result in a mystical way, or the use by the shamans of specific remedies made of snake skin or snake venom. Neither method can be excluded. We may find a partial answer to these questions in the work by Y.I. Sunchugashev "Kham Seousteri (Shamanic Words)" (1991). As the author noted, the Khakas sincerely believed that eye diseases were sent by specific spirits. At the same time, they used to treat eyes with rather rational medical methods: for example, anointing the diseased organs with snake bile (Ibid.). Detailed data on the use of snake bile for treating various eye diseases in traditional Khakas medicine are presented in the field materials gathered by the local historian S.E. Karachakov. "An old woman named Tokhlakh lived in the aal of Kyzlas. [At some time in her youth] a leukoma appeared in her eyes, and she began to lose her vision. [At that time], her father, in order to heal his daughter, [deliberately] caught a snake. He killed it and took out its gallbladder. He brought this to the sick eyes of his daughter and carefully opened it. Bile began to flow directly into her organs of vision. Soon, her eyes began to itch strongly. She couldn't stand it, and started to rub them. When she did this, [at some moment] a film peeled off from her eyes, resembling a membrane of raw [chicken] egg. In this way, her eyes began to see again" (2004: 38).

In folk medicine, the Khakas also widely used the blood and fat of snakes, usually applying those externally for treating skin and other diseases. In the late 19th century, the Minusinsk Regional Head Prince N.A. Kostrov, referring to this topic, reported that the Khakas "rub warts with snake blood" (1884: 245). Snake blood and fat were used as a remedies for scrofula (a peculiar manifestation of tuberculous infection in children), by anointing sore spots (Karachakov, 2004: 39). For healing scrofula, other methods of "snake treatment" were also used; for example, the dead snake was entirely applied to the afflicted part of the body. Karachakov wrote the following about such "treatment": "I was still young. Even before [World War II], we worked in a team. It was hot in the summer. At that time, I fell ill with scrofula. It was impossible to touch my neck with my hand, [it hurt] as if fire was burning on it. I could not sleep at night because of the terrible pain. I did not know what to do. It was a good thing my older brother helped me out. In the evening, he brought me a snake he had killed. And at night, before going to bed, he put it on my neck, like a bandage. Oh, oh, my! How nice and well I suddenly started to feel! It cools! It chills! As I hadn't managed to sleep the previous nights, I slept like a log, [the feeling was] as if I hadn't even breathed. After that, the heat in my body abruptly subsided (my older brother said that the peak of the disease happened at that time). Then [for a while] he anointed my neck with snake blood. Soon everything went away! Look, not even the scars are visible!" (Ibid.). We should add that "snake treatment" was also widely used in folk veterinary medicine (Ivanov, 1955: 213; Potapov, 1991: 194).

Thus, in the traditional beliefs of the Khakas, the snake is endowed with healing power. People believed that this reptile had a mystical connection with certain people, and could save them from illness. Sacralization of snake has led to the emergence of beliefs about the healing properties of its skin, fat, bile, etc., and their wide use in traditional medicine.

Conclusions

The snake played one of the most important roles in the Khakas culture. Its image occurs widely in popular beliefs and folklore. Diverse symbolism was associated with the snake in the Khakas tradition. This representative of the reptiles was elevated to the ranks of sacred animals; it was associated with ideas of death and rebirth, and mystical initiation, including that of a shaman. The snake was conceptualized as a guardian spirit. The mythological consciousness of the people allowed for the possibility of marriage between some elect humans, and snakes in the form of beautiful maidens. It was believed that such a union brought the man material wealth and success, but usually was short-lived and was not always a source of happiness. All this testifies to the fact that in the traditional worldview, the snake appeared as a being from the other world, and therefore it could not be domesticated and fully subordinated to the humans. Moreover, the snake was consistently identified with some natural elements and features, such as water and mountains. In oral folklore, the images of spirit of the mountain and snake often merged. The snake was often perceived as a mountain spirit. Notably, the cult of the mountain was one of the structural elements of the Khakas worldview. A number of beliefs relating to the idea of sacral center, fertility, and ancestor worship were associated with its image. The snake was included in the circle of these beliefs. It was the embodiment of the idea of life and death, and served as a symbol of fertility.

One of the fundamental principles in the relationship with nature-spirits in the traditional worldview of the Khakas was gift-exchange. Any appeal to nature-spirits was accompanied by sacrifice in various forms. For example, for obtaining material goods, ensuring success in affairs, etc., supernatural beings demanded from a person some services or sacrifices. Such an approach was fully manifested in the relationship between human and snake, which became reflected in folklore.

Folk medicine played a key role in improving the health of people in the traditional Khakas culture. There were both rational and irrational methods of treatment. The most important role in these was played by the snake. Even killing this reptile was allowed in order to treat the patient. Because of the sacralization of its image, everything relating to its body and organs was endowed with magical healing power, and was used in folk treatment of various diseases, etc.

This article has addressed only a few, mainly positive, aspects in the perception of the image of the snake in the Khakas culture. However, in the traditional worldview of the Khakas, the interpretation of this image was ambiguous. Moreover, the snake stands out as having an extremely complex, multifaceted, and contradictory nature as compared to other animals involved in the ritual sphere. According to Propp, "the snake cannot at all be subjected to any single explanation; its meaning is diverse and versatile" (2009: 221). Therefore, the study of the snake image in the Khakas worldview and ritual practice is far from being complete. The present work has barely discussed the questions relating to the image of the snake in shamanistic practices and paraphernalia, its connection with the Lower World and the concept of death, the issue of snake fighting, etc. The study of these issues is a prospect for further research, and will be continued in subsequent works.

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