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## Chthonic Animals in the Traditional Buryat Culture

*This study, based on archival, literary, and field data collected by the author, discusses the role of the snake, the frog, and the mouse in the Buryat mythology, folklore, and ritual. The article describes the Buryat lexemes tied with the snake, frog, and mouse. Classes and groups of these animals in the folk ethno-zoological classification are described and are shown to be overlapping. The meaning of the principal zoonyms—mogoy, khorkhoy, bakha, and khulgana—is assessed. In traditional beliefs, “snake-like animals”, “amphibians”, and “mouse-like rodents” have a mostly negative connotation. The relationship to the snake, however, is ambivalent, but with a positive attitude predominating. Chthonic animals in general have ambivalent symbolism, like the elements of water and earth. Their symbolism is related to the ideas of life energy, fertility, wealth, but also to illness and death.*

**Keywords:** *Buryats, worldview, ritual, symbolism, chthonic animals.*

### Introduction

Folk beliefs about animals are an important part of the traditional worldview of a culture. Russian researchers of zoolatry S.A. Tokarev, Z.P. Sokolova, A.V. Gura, I.Y. Vinokurova, and other scholars have reconstructed the “zoological” cultural code of a number of peoples living in Russia (Tokarev, 1990; Gura, 1997; Sokolova, 1998; Vinokurova, 2007). They have studied the notions of animals from the aquatic and subterranean world, among which the snake, frog, and mouse are considered to be the most important representatives. The studies of these specialists have proved the universality of beliefs associated with the snake, frog, and mouse. Unfortunately, the complex of beliefs relating to these animals has not yet been given due consideration in Buryat ethnology. The goal of this study is to analyze the images of the snake, frog, and mouse in the traditional culture of the Buryats.

Written sources (archival materials and data from the literature) and the author’s field materials constitute the basis of this study. Linguistic information was taken

from the *Buryat-Russian Dictionary* (Buryatsko-russkiy slovar, 1973), which contains the names of the animals under consideration, names of their organs and habits, as well as proverbs, phraseological units, etc. This research also used folklore materials collected by M.N. Khangalov, P.P. Batorov, T.Z. Zhamtsarano, and other scholars. The archival data were taken from the collections of the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA) and the Center for Oriental Manuscripts and Xylographs at the Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist, and Tibetan Studies of the SB RAS.

### Buryat linguistic evidence on the snake, frog, and mouse

The Buryats have a popular classification of the animal world (*amitanai aimag*), in which the representatives of the local fauna are morphologically divided into classes and groups, including such classes as *gar neeguurten* (*dalitan*) ‘birds and bats’, and *gazar uhanai amitad*

‘amphibians (animals of water-land)’. There is also the group of *mulkhigshed* ‘reptiles’, belonging to the class of *mogoy khorkhoy* ‘creeping animals (or snake-like animals)’, combining snakes, lizards, and “worms”. According to the popular beliefs of the Buryats, the main morphological feature of the animals belonging to this class is a long and thin body.

Four species of snakes (*mogoy*) belong to the herpetofauna of Southeastern Siberia. The poisonous species include the common viper (*Vipera berus*) and Siberian pit viper (*Gloydius halys*); non-poisonous species are represented by the grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) and Dione’s ratsnake (*Elaphe dione*). The zoonyms, such as *khoro to mogoy* ‘viper’, and *tarshaganadag mogoy* ‘rattlesnake (pit viper)’ (derived from *tarshaganadakha* ‘to rattle’) are present in the Buryat vocabulary.

The Buryat names of reptiles contain color definitions like *khara mogoy* ‘black (non-poisonous) snake’, and *shara mogoy* ‘yellow (poisonous) snake’. It is clear that such definitions reflect the opposition of characters common for the folklore tradition of the Buryats. Thus, the fairy tale “Seven Hunters” presents evil as a yellow winged snake, which fights a serpent king who has the appearance of a black snake; after its death, the evil snake exudes poison destroying all living beings around (Buryatskiye volshebnye skazki, 1993: 80–83).

The Buryat vocabulary contains words that describe the movement of snakes: *godilzokho* ‘wriggle’ and *mulkhikhe* ‘crawl’ (hence the collective zoonym *mulkhigshed*); synonyms of the latter word include *gulgiraad garashakha* ‘crawl’, *holzhorzho yabakha* ‘slither, crawl’. In this regard, we should mention that the Cis-Baikal Buryat dialectal word *guldaraasha* ‘snake’ is derived from the verb *gulgirkha* ‘to crawl’ (Buryatsko-russkiy slovar, 1973: 158). The name of another representative of the “snake-like” animals—lizards (*gulbere/gulbir/gurbel*)—shares a common root with it. The above-mentioned variants of this zoonym were also formed on the basis of words denoting the motor function of a reptile: *gurbaekhe* ‘to squirm’, ‘to make wave-like movements’. The specific feature of a running lizard is conveyed by the word *gulbir* ‘waddle (about the manner of walking)’ (Ibid.: 159). All this indicates that the Buryats noticed a similarity in the movement of the snake and lizard, and these animals were assigned to the same class on the basis of this observation.

The main features of the animals from the group of “reptiles” are reflected in popular vocabulary: *tugshuuritei* ‘suffocating, hypnotizing (about the eyes of the snake)’, *asa kheltei* ‘with a forked tongue’, *mogoy khadkhuur* ‘snake’s stinger’, *mogoy zuliadaha(n)* ‘shed skin of a snake’, *zulgaralga* ‘shedding of reptiles’. Notably, in the folklore of the Buryats, the snake as a fictional creature (big snake, winged snake, serpent chief (king)) was endowed with demonic features. Emphasizing the fantastic nature of the fairy-tale snake,

researchers of zoolatry attribute it to demonological characters (Gura, 1997: 278).

In fairy tales, the snake appears as a chthonic creature, less often as a water creature, and the settings remotely resemble the habitats of reptiles in the wild nature of Southeastern Siberia (depending on the snake type, they are found in mountainous and steppe regions; their nests are located in the burrows of rodents, crevices, ravines, etc.). Popular imagination envisioned snakes’ habitats in a hypertrophied form: the depth of the sea, huge pit, etc. Thus, some of the mountain peaks of the Cis-Baikal region—Tamiri-Ulan, Baitak, Kapsal, and others—are mentioned as the dwelling places of the mythical lords and patrons of snakes (Khangelov, 1958: 329; Khandagurova, 2008: 99).

The name of the leech (*Hirudinea*) belonging to segmented worms—*mogoy zharaakhai* ‘small-size snake, snake-little fish’—is semantically close to the lexeme of *mogoy* (Buryatsko-russkiy slovar, 1973: 297). Leeches in wild nature live in fresh water and naturally, in the traditional Buryat beliefs, they are associated with the aquatic environment.

Animals conditionally defined as *khorkhoy* or *uge(n)* ‘worm’ were considered to be inhabitants of the underworld. These are, for example, the gastropod mollusk slug (*nyusegen khorkhoy* ‘naked slug’) or the earthworm (*ulaan khorkhoy*) (Ibid.: 591). Other “worms” lived in the aquatic world: *uhan khorkhoy* ‘fish’, ‘water worm’, *dun khorkhoy* ‘mollusk’, *shanaga khorkhoy* ‘tadpole’, and *khilinsete khorkhoy* ‘crayfish’ (Ibid.).

In the views of the Buryats, “worms” were close to “insects” (*khorkhoy shabkhai*) and “amphibians”. The appearance of such concepts can be associated with a desire for explaining the evolution of some animals in the absence of experience of observing their development. This is also demonstrated by the examples of how the Buryats explained the stadial development undergone by butterflies and frogs: their larvae, which have a snake-like shape, were classified as belonging to the “snake” class, and the adult specimens to winged insects and “amphibians”, respectively.

In the region’s fauna, tailless amphibians (Class Amphibia) are represented by the Mongolian toad (*Pseudepidalea raddei*), Siberian wood frog (*Rana amurensis*), moor frog (*Rana arvalis*), and Japanese tree frog (*Hyla japonica*). One of the meanings of the Buryat word *bakha* is “frog”. In the vocabulary of the Buryats, there is only one zoonym associated with this class—*namag nugyn bakha* ‘moor frog’ (Ibid.: 320). Vocabulary that conveys the method of frogs’ movement—*soborgkho* ‘to jump (about frogs)’, as well as reproduction by laying eggs—*bakhyn tyrh’en* ‘frog’s eggs’—has been recorded.

The phrase *ghazar uhanai amitad* most precisely designates the habitat of the “amphibians”—land and water. In Southeastern Siberia, the tailless amphibians

inhabit a wide variety of ecological niches: alpine meadows, steppes, swamps, forest edges, etc. It should be noted that in the Buryat ethnozoological classification, the classes (“snake-like” and “amphibious” animals, and “insects”) and groups (“reptiles”, “worms”) were not clearly demarcated, and their boundaries were determined conditionally.

Rodents living in Southeastern Siberia, of the “mouse-like” class, include the field mouse (*Apodemus agrarius*), Olkhon vole (*Alticola olchonensis*), Korean field mouse (*Apodemus peninsulae*), shrew (*Sorex*), brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), and Altai mole (*Talpa altaica*). The Buryat language has no differentiated names of mice; only various names of the field mouse are known, including *morin khulgana*, *orog zuha*, *urgenshe*, and *kheeryn khulgana*. The lexical analysis makes it possible to identify other “mouse-like” animals, such as *ataakhai khulgana* ‘shrew’, *ukher khulgana*, *ambaarai khulgana* ‘rat’, or *algansha khulgana* ‘mole’ (Ibid.: 600). Notably, the biological proximity of these rodents is rendered by the word *khulgana* ‘mouse’, which is present in all the names mentioned above.

External features of the representatives of this class have practically not been reflected in popular vocabulary. There is only one expression among the Buryats: *Khulganaan uitakhan nyudetei* ‘With narrow mouse eyes’ (Ibid.), describing people with close-set small eyes. There are several words for a mouse hole, which emphasize its function as a food store: *nookhoy* ‘mouse nest, rags’, *uurgene* ‘nest (of the mouse)’, *uuta sookhono* ‘mouse barn’, *urgen* ‘stock of food for winter in holes of field mice’, and *khulganai khadhag* ‘food stock made for the winter by field mice’. Such lexical diversity is associated with the Buryat tradition of taking bulbs of the martagon lily and edible roots from mouse stocks to replenish family food supplies. One of the authors living in the second half of the 18th century wrote the following about this: “...in the spring they feed on the martagon lily (or the root of the lily flower). It is called sweet root, which is either boiled together with meat or by itself; some procure the root in the holes of field mice, which have a large stock of martagon lily roots because the mice make up to ten holes. And they would stock up roots for the winter and place on top the root called ‘muzhin’ in their language, which is bitter... and when the holes of mice were destroyed together with their autumn stocks, many will testify, both the Buryats and Russians, that those mice would choke themselves, sticking their neck between forked trees” (RGADA. F. 24, D. 70, fol. 14, 15). The emotional ending, in which the act of deliberate suicide of mice facing the threat of starvation somewhat humanizes their image, is notable in the above quote.

On the basis of the Buryat vocabulary, one can derive a semantically unambiguous image of the snake: *Zosoom mogoy muu bolood baina* ‘My gut has become

bad like a snake’, *Mogoyrkho* ‘To behave like a snake (about a cunning and sly person)’, *Mogoy khorotoy, daisan kharatai* ‘The snake is poisonous, and the enemy is cunning’ (Buryatsko-russkiy slovar, 1973: 297). This reptile was endowed with purely negative human qualities—insidiousness and wiliness.

The semantics of the word *khorkhoy* ‘worm’ can be illustrated with the phrase: *Khorkhoy khydelkhe* ‘To make someone desire something, to lead someone into temptation’ (Ibid.: 591). This lexeme testifies to the negative meaning of the image of the worm and its link with base human passions.

The word *bakha* has two meanings: “frog” and “desire or lust” (Ibid.: 92). In the second meaning, it is close to the word *khorkhoy* and reveals a negative connotation embedded in it. This can be confirmed by the name *Bakha*, which became a household name. The Buryats gave that name to the Boyar son Ivan Pokhabov, who took advantage of his power and became notorious for his sexual crimes against Buryat and Russian women and children. The lexeme of *khulgana* has the meaning of ‘scammer, scoundrel’ (Ibid.: 600), reflecting a negative attitude towards the mouse and probably towards mouse-like animals as a whole.

Thus, the analysis of the semantics behind the main zoonyms suggests a negative attitude of the Buryats towards “snake-like” (snake, worm), “amphibian”, and “mouse-like” animals.

### Images of the snake, frog, and mouse in the mythology, folk studies, and rituals of the Buryats

The folklore of the Buryats has the subject of the struggle between the giant sea serpent and the Garuda bird, common in the folklore of many Asian peoples. The serpent (the embodiment of evil) ruins the nest of the fairy-tale bird made on the World Tree, and eats the bird’s nestlings. But a hero kills the monster, and this action symbolizes the struggle between good and evil, and the triumph of the good. The parallel between this plot and the story mentioned above (the struggle of the serpent king with the yellow winged snake) from the fairy tale “Seven Hunters”, in which the fairytale hero also stands up for the good is obvious. In Buryat fairy tales, the snake is often represented as having many heads, which can be viewed as an imitation of the tradition of Oriental peoples, in whose folklore the images of the snake and dragon are often mixed together.

As opposed to the lexical evidence, folklore is ambivalent towards the image of the snake, with a positive note prevailing. In the fairy tale “Seven Hunters”, the grateful serpent king rewards the protagonist with the ability to understand the snake’s language (Buryatskiye

volshebnye skazki, 1993: 80–83). In the fairy tale “Mother and Son”, the spirit-lord of the land gives the protagonist the knowledge of animal languages for helping the snake—his daughter (Ibid.: 96–98). In fairy tales, the snake sometimes appears as a wise adviser, and is endowed with positive human qualities, for example, magnanimity. As shown above, the Buryat fairy-tale prose contains a story about snakes personifying the opposite forces; therefore, the connotation of the snake’s image can both be positive and negative.

A number of Buryat riddles involve chthonic animals from the water and underground world. The riddles about the snake prohibit touching and even more so killing it. The snake is allegorically described as *mungen tashuur* ‘silver lash’, and *altan gadaha(n)* ‘golden stake’ (Zhamtsarano, 2006: 54, 57–58), emphasizing the morphological features of the animal and of its flexible and long body. The physical features of the animal are also emphasized in the riddles about the frog, which use the following epithets: *demnei sookhor* ‘agile and dappled’, *mayaa sookhor* ‘bow-legged and dappled’, and *solbon nyudetei* ‘with darting eyes’ (Ibid.: 62), etc.

The cult of the snake with the accompanying rituals and attributes became widespread among a part of the Cis-Baikal Buryats. This was for the first time reported by M.N. Khangalov (1958: 328–329). The materials gathered by M.V. Khandagurova (2008) testify to the present-day existence of this cult. According to these scholars, the annual ritual of honoring the mythical rulers and patrons of snakes (formerly, they were the royal couple *Altan-toli* ‘Golden mirror’, and *Altasha-khatun* ‘Golden Lady’; currently, it is *Mogoy Khan* ‘The Serpent Ruler’) involves sacrificing sheep with fleece of variegated color. Sacrificial meat is laid out in the form of a snake; it is wrapped with a four-color ribbon vaguely reminiscent of the pattern on the back of the viper.

Traditional beliefs hold that power among the snakes belongs to the khan (the king)—taishi, chief, or elder (Khangalov, 1958: 329). The names of the serpent king (*Altan-toli*) and queen (*Altasha-khotun*) imply solar symbolism, since gold is directly associated with the sun in the culture of various peoples. According to Khandagurova, *Abarga Mogoy* ‘Giant snake (boa)’, who could act in the guise of a dragon, was the chief among the snakes (2008: 99). It was believed that the serpent lord *Mogoy Khan* was at the same time the lord of the underworld; snakes would wake up and crawl out into the light according to his decree in the spring (Ibid.). According to the tradition, the snake cult emerged after a person who killed a snake during haymaking died in terrible pain; the Buryats perceived this as a punishment imposed by the serpent king (Khangalov, 1958: 329).

The *nugan-ezhenuud* ‘spirit-ladies of the meadow’ were considered to be the patrons of snakes, as well as frogs and livestock (Ibid.: 346). Rituals of offering

treats to them were performed before the beginning of bringing cattle to summer pasture. The spirit-lord of the land could also be one of the patrons of the reptiles. This is mentioned in the fairy-tale “Mother and Son” (Buryatskiye volshebnye skazki, 1993: 96–98). It should be noted that the Buryats did not identify patrons of mice.

Representations of reptiles on shamanist rock paintings and cultic objects testify to the cult of the snake. The snake is shown with ambivalent symbolism. Khangalov came to the conclusion that the snake was considered to have a solar nature (1958: 311). Its images found on the *ongons* of Uhan-khat ‘the lord of the waters’, Nugan-ezhenuud, and Zuragtan (from *zurag* ‘drawing’ (Buryatsko-russkiy slovar, 1973: 262)), which are dedicated to lord-spirits associated with the water element, indicate the aquatic nature of the snake.

The Buryats did not have a developed mythological and ritual complex associated with the frog and mouse. These animals appear in shamanist rituals solely as the *khubilgaan* ‘shapeshifter’ (Ibid.: 596), that is, the mythical assistant of a shaman or a blacksmith, into whom, according to traditional beliefs, a shaman and blacksmith could turn. For this reason, frogs and mice were depicted on some *ongons*. The frog’s figure appears in the Nugan-ezhenuud, Uhan-khat, Zuragtan, and blacksmith *ongons*. During the ritual of “offering treats” to *ongon* Zuragtan, people would say the following wish: *Nurar duren bakha, nugar duren mogoy* ‘The lake is full of frogs, the meadow is full of snakes’ (Shamanskiye poveriya..., 1890: 9). The semantics of this expression shows that the images of the snake and frog symbolize the fertility of nature.

According to the beliefs of the Buryats, *anakhai* (one of the representatives of the lowest level of demonology) might take the form of the rat. This spirit tormented little children, and it was difficult to get rid of it. It was believed that if a rat is a long-liver, it will definitely become an *anakhai*.

There was a common belief in *ama sagaan khulgana*, ‘the mouse with white mouth’, which was considered to be a vampire sucking the blood of children. The Buryat epics narrate about the hero Geser Khan, who was reborn as a man and accomplished his first feat by killing the enemy—a black mouse with the size of a three-year-old bull (if we take into consideration that *ukher khulgana* ‘rat’ is literally translated as ‘vow (bull) mouse’, it is preferable to see the rat as the mythical mouse). Notably, in the traditional worldview of the Buryats, the image of the rat was barely distinguishable from the image of the mouse. The image of the frog had also negative meaning. The traditional beliefs include that of the reincarnation of the *anakhai* as an amphibian (Ibid.: 3).

The idea of shapeshifting is also associated with the snake. In fairy tales, a snake can take the form of a young man, girl, or sage (the fairy tale “Brave Zhebzhenei” (Buryatskiye volshebnye skazki, 1993: 88–90)). The



Buryats believed that during a “spiritual” struggle, opposing shamans could turn into snakes (Center for Oriental Manuscripts and Xylographs at the Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist, and Tibetan Studies of the SB RAS. F. 6, Inv. 1, D. 28, fol. 29). The idea of shapeshifting is also reflected in a shaman’s cult paraphernalia. For example, the figures of not only snakes, but also of 27 shamans, who could transform into various creatures, including the snake, are depicted on *ongon* Zuragtan (Khangalov, 1958: 345–346).

According to folk tradition, the appearance of a snake in the courtyard and in the yurt foreshadowed misfortune. It was forbidden to step over a snake because of fear of bringing disease or death to someone in the family. It was considered a bad omen if a mouse gnawed on someone’s personal things (boots, clothes, etc.). And yet, tradition strictly forbade killing the snake, although there was a belief that the stone *zendemeni*, which brings luck and material goods, is hidden in the head of the white snake (which does not inhabit the region!). In this case, killing of such a snake could have a beneficial effect on the fate of the killer (Field materials of the author). The snake was associated with wealth, just like the frog, according to the Buryat Buddhist beliefs (Zhamtsarano, 2001: 346). Incidentally, the subject of the miraculous (or precious) stone as an attribute of the snake (the serpent king) is common among the Slavic peoples; they also have the idea of the white snake, which is supposedly a serpent king (Gura, 1997). The popularity of such views among the population inhabiting territories so geographically distant from each other indicates their archaic nature.

The Buryats associated some diseases with the animals under consideration. Thus, the Buryats associated the nail disease known as *mogoyñ nyuden* ‘snake eyes, agnail’ (Buryatsko-russkiy slovar, 1973: 297) with the snake. The appearance of an abscess on the leg was explained by the appearance of a worm in the center of inflammation (Shamanskiye poveriya..., 1890: 16). There was a belief that there could be a frog in a boil (Khandagurova, 2008: 160). This shows that the images of “snake-like” animals and “amphibians” often coincided in the traditional worldview of the Buryats. In addition, there was reputed to be a “mouse disease”: the disease *khulgana ubshen* ‘tuberculosis of the submandibular glands’, as well as *bakhalzuurai khulgana unshen* ‘toxic diffuse goiter’ (Ibid.: 600). According to T.Z. Zhamtsarano, this autoimmune disease was very common among the Cis-Baikal Buryats (2001: 82). Thus, images of chthonic animals were the symbols of illness and even death.

According to the traditional beliefs, diseases result from the malicious works of individual spirits and have their own host spirits. It was also believed that this was the retribution to a person who did not make the prescribed sacrifices, including those to the serpent

king (Khandagurova, 2008: 100). In order to get well, the patients would create special *ongons*, to which they dedicated the shamanic ritual of “offering treats”. Thus, the *ongon* Zuragtan was organized by people with sick eyes, arms, or legs (Shamanskiye poveriya..., 1890: 9).

Buryat anthroponymics includes names homonymous with the names of the mouse and frog—Khulgan and Bakh (Mitroshkina, 1987: 83). These names were given to protect the life of the newborn from evil spirits. “Snake” names have not been found among the Buryats, which suggests a ban on their use.

It was forbidden to eat the meat of the animals under consideration and kill them. This was first reported by S.P. Krashenninnikov, “They are allowed to eat any animal, both dead and alive, except for the snake, mouse, and frog” (1966: 140). This tradition should be associated not with the preservation of the vestiges of totemism among the Buryats, but with the beliefs about these animals as a part of the water and underground world, and, wider, the lower world.

Physical features of the snake, unlike the frog and mouse, were always taken into account when creating amulets. According to the authors of the 18th century, this was manifested in the shaman’s outfit among the Buryats of the Cis-Baikal clans: the shaman’s cloak was decorated with cord-“snakes” and sewn-on “snake heads” (cowrie shells), and the shaman’s headdress was decorated with band-“snakes”. All these adornments symbolized the serpent-helpers of the shaman in his journey to the lower world.

The tamga *mogoy tamga* ‘the sign of the snake’, resembling the Latin letter “S” had a protective function (Mikhailov, 1993: 9). It designated not only that cattle and horses belonged to a certain family, but also that they were protected by the serpent king from wild animals. The presence of *tamgas* in the form of the frog or mouse has not been observed among the Buryats.

## Conclusion

The Buryats had a set of beliefs about the snake, mouse, and frog. Although these chthonic animals belong to the water and underground world, they were ambivalent symbols, just like the elements of water and earth. On the one hand, they were associated with life energy, fertility, and wealth, and, on the other hand with disease and death. Judging by the Buryat vocabulary, the attitude towards these animals was unequivocally negative. However, an ambivalent attitude was reflected in mythology, folklore, and rituals, with a predominance of negative interpretation of the images of the snake, mouse, and frog. It has been established that local worship of the snake had place in the tradition of the Buryats.

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