

# The Interrelation of Nature and Man in the Spiritual Tradition of the Mongols\*

*Elena V. Boykova, Moscow*

Since olden days the Mongols have had a tradition of love and reverence for the Mother Nature, for the flora and fauna of their native land. For centuries the Mongols lived in harmony with the environment and traditionally supported the balance between Nature and Man. The moderate economic needs of the Mongols, boiling down, as a rule, to provide for the subsistence level only, did not conflict with nature.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Mongols created their first game parks in the area of present-day Ulaanbaatar, and in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the rules of interaction of man with nature were included into the basic law of the Mongols, the *Ikh Zasag* (*Yasa*) for the first time.<sup>1</sup> One of the basic demands of that law was respect for the land and caution in dealing with natural resources. There were norms and regulations, according to which Mongolian kins and *aimag* had their own lands and hunted on their own territories, and encroaching on other grounds could lead to mutual quarrels and lawsuits. In the traditional culture of the Mongols the ruler's right of possession of land meant something more than simply joint property, as the patrimonial territory was considered as sacred, belonging not only to the living members of the family, but also to those who had already died, right down to their mythological primogenitor (Drobišev 2004: 468). For the Mongolian nomads pastures and cattle were of primary importance, which explains the respectful attitude towards them. Furthermore, the Mongolian leaders paid close attention to nomadic cattle breeding. Anyone who spoilt pastures by burning them, for instance, was executed. Severe as it may seem, this punishment shows that the Mongols thought of future generations, endeavouring to leave unchanged, fertile lands to them. Cruelty to horses was punished with the same severity.

The Mongols valued water as a source of life, and accordingly, the *Ikh Zasag* laid down serious penalties for the desecration of a river or a well. For example, washing or doing the laundry in a river was forbidden.

Another Mongol custom was not to touch the ground and the water that was associated with the worship of the sky and the earth, the sun and the moon. It was prohibited to drink water from one's cupped hands or to immerse one's

---

\* The research was supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities (project № 06-01-02106a).

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the debate on the *Yasa*, see David Morgan. The "Great Yasa of Chinggis Khan" Revisited. In: Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (eds.): *Mongols, Turks, and Others. Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*. Leiden 2005, 291-308; the citation is on p. 297.

hands in water. There were also strict regulations regarding wild animals. As John of Plano Carpini wrote, it was forbidden to kill them with a spear or to touch birds' eggs and the wounding of animals was to be avoided.<sup>2</sup> Hunting was permitted at the proper time, for certain needs or out of vital necessity. Thus, the correct use of natural resources became one of the most ancient traditions of the Mongols. The banning rules of the *Ikh Zasag* are preserved to this day in the form of established customs: People are not allowed to hunt during the reproduction period of the animals concerned, and they are to refrain from removing a bird's nest. Furthermore, hunting is to begin with an adult barren buck rather than with the first animal encountered.

The underlying idea of all these prohibitions and penalties inflicted for the infringement of the laws regarding land-tenure and the use of natural resources was to prevent crimes against nature and society, to teach people to respect their native soil and to feel responsible for it. Due to the inevitability of punishment various interdictions and regulations regarding man's interaction with nature finally turned into a binding norm of behaviour, beyond simple formality. The laws of the 13<sup>th</sup> century concerning man's attitude to nature and its protection can be compared to modern ecological thinking.

The *Ikh Zasag* deeply penetrated into people's life, and it became a tradition to protect the environment. One of the purposes of the law was harmonization of the relations between nature and man.

Harmony in the relations between nature and man led to harmony in relations among people. Plano Carpini, who visited Mongolia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, paints an idyllic picture:

"Fights, brawls, wounding, murder are never met with among them. Nor are robbers and thieves who steal on a large scale found there; consequently their dwellings and the carts in which they keep their valuables are not secured by bolts and bars. If any animals are lost, whoever comes across them either leaves them alone or takes them to men appointed for this purpose." (Mission to Asia 1966: 14–15)

The Mongols passed on traditions of nomadic civilization in their original form from one generation to the next. The correct use of natural resources is one of the ancient norms and traditions of Mongolian society, fostering love and respect for the native soil and nature.

As the ecological tradition of Mongolia consists in acknowledging the sacrality of the territory, populated it with landscape spirits and creating a system of interdictions for their protection, the Mongols, as well as the peoples of most of the Eastern countries, opted for an adaptive, rather than a destructive attitude to nature (Mission to Asia 1966: 13–14). The focus on nature was dominant in the development of the spiritual culture of the Mongols and their cults. Contacts

<sup>2</sup> "(...) to touch or kill young birds, to strike a horse with a bridle (...)." Cf. Mission to Asia 1966: 11.

with nature and land went beyond plain usage and connected man with the environment spiritually.

The Mongols never challenged the environment, did not place themselves above nature, but felt a special relationship with it, in spite of the fact that it is, perhaps, more hostile than in most places. Due to the harsh climate the natural complexes are highly vulnerable, and the ecological systems are fragile and slow in restoring themselves. In Mongolia, nature can make life very hard, which explains the natives' special character – their unpretentiousness, their ability to quickly adapt themselves to new circumstances, their benevolence, their openness to the world, and their contemplative attitude. This opposition – harsh nature versus human kindness – is characteristic of Mongolia.

In Mongolia nature is an enigma, which has always astonished and does not cease to astonish those who see it for the first time. As a rule, Europeans initially find the natural environment in Mongolia depressing, due to the monotonous scenery, the extreme variation in temperature, the lack of water, etc. The Russian merchant Ivan Kudinov, who travelled to Mongolia, described his first impressions of the country as follows:

“Spring will be over, floods will be over and all water in Mongolia will dry up to the last drop. Frequently the need for a drink of water makes the travellers divert far from the direct way, to find a well... With the disappearance of water Mongolia itself grows dead; juicy grass... burns down under parching beams of the sun; lots of birds, living in Mongolia at the wet period, depart mainly to Siberia and the northern part of China, and only the Mongols, these children of the desert, reconciled with all misfortunes, rocking on the backs of their camels, despite heat and thirst, cross the steppe in various directions, looking for more convenient pastures for their suffering cattle.” (Kudinov 1887: 76–77)

But after a few days of travelling in the countryside he seems to have been enraptured by the landscape and atmosphere, as his complete change of tone shows: “These pensive mountains, these transparent woods, as if made of lace, that cover these mountains, this silence, this air...” (Kudinov 1887: 158–159). As we can see, the magic of the nature in Mongolia exerted its influence not only on the natives, who loved and respected it, but also on foreigners.

For centuries, nature practically did not change in Mongolia, and the mode of life remained the same. It was rather stable and constant up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Mongolia began to be influenced by European culture.

In Mongolia, where cattle-breeders were content with the steppe and semi-deserted pastures, the respectful and reverential attitude of man to the lands that nurtured him and to his natural environment as a whole had become a major principle of life. The traditional balance between man and environment in the region was preserved until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since when considerable changes in the life of the inhabitants took place. Many Mongols now prefer to live in cities, depriving themselves of the possibility of a permanent dialogue with nature. Until recently, the technical and technological development in Mongolia as a whole

was rather slow and did not influence the environment noticeably. However, with the rapid industrial development towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the situation began to change.

Yet even though the traditional ecological balance in Mongolia has suffered, mainly as a result of prospecting and exploitation of minerals, the country remains an example of the successful interaction between man and nature, where man does not thoughtlessly use nature for his purposes, but coexists with it.

To this day, large parts of the territory of Mongolia have more or less been preserved in their original form. As a result, the relations in the system “man – nature” remain harmonious. In modern Mongolia much is done for the preservation of nature. Nature remains a moral landmark for the Mongols, teaching and helping them to live and survive.

Up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the order of priority in the interrelation between man and nature in Mongolia was as follows: first Nature and then Man. Today, it would be more correct to say that Man takes precedence over Nature, even though nature still plays an extremely important role in the spiritual tradition of the Mongols.

### *Bibliography*

- Drobišev, Ju. I. 2004: Ėkologičeskie aspekty tradicionnyj kul'tury mongol'skich narodov. In: *Čelovek i priroda v duchovnoj kul'ture Vostoka*. Moskva.
- Kudinov, I. 1887. *V čužich krajach. Putešestvie po Mongolii i Kitaju*. Moskva.
- Mission to Asia 1966. *Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. Ed. Christopher Dawson. New York.