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## **Ecological Aspects of the Burial Rites Performed by Siberian Ethnic Groups: Sacral Topography of the Burial Sites of Narym Paleo-Selkups “Shieshgula”**

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*This study is meant to be the start to a series of discussions relating to the complex subject of the “Ecological aspects in the burial rites performed by Siberian ethnic groups”. Taking into account that for aboriginals of Taiga, the symbolic or sacral attributes of living space had the same, if not greater, importance than its practical aspects, the first publication in the series focuses on the symbolism in the location of burial sites, that are specific in Selkup culture – one of the largest ethnoses in the Samoyedic language group – residing in the northern part of Western Siberia.*

*The study is based on the materials relating to the 16th-17th centuries, however the actual time frame of the research is much wider: with modern Selkups at the top of the chronological scale and the Rjolkinskaya culture (VI-X centuries), linguistically related to the Samoyeds, at the bottom. The latter was formed as a result of the arrival of nomadic Turkic cultures from the south and their consequential influence on the Proto Samoyedic Kulaj cultural group that occupied the territories of Western Siberia in the early Iron Age (5 century B.C. – 5 century A.D.). It was therefore determined, that Selkup traditions were formed on the basis of a complex cultural and ethnical conglomerate, comprising of the materials, linguistics and religious elements belonging to the aboriginals of Taiga and many other ethnic groups from neighboring territories present since the II century B.C. This study has therefore engaged mainly in the materials relating to the most archaeologically studied local dialectic group, that of the “Shieshgula”. The members of this group usually chose landscape elevations near river forks, oxbow lakes or ravines as their burial sites.*

*Keywords: the Tomsk-Narym area near the Ob river, the Ob river itself, Chaya, Kjongga, Samoyedic groups, Selkup local-dialect groups “Shieshgula”, river fork, corner as the entrance to the underworld, burial rites, mourning rites.*

*Research area: history.*

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## Introduction

### Geographical location of Narym Selkup burial grounds (necropoli)

The first archaeological, as well as ethnographical studies of Selkup medieval graveyards were initiated by P.I. Kutaf'ev, the director of the Narym Regional Museum. Among the topics of traditional ceremonies, the researcher studied the specifics of burial ground locations – and their relation to the natural landscape. Systematization and summarizing of the materials obtained during excavations at four of the largest tributaries of the Ob river, located in the Narym Region, allowed the researcher to form his own theory on the subject [1]. Further studies of Narym Selkup were undertaken by a group of scientists from the Tomsk State University and the Tomsk Pedagogical Institute in the 1950<sup>s</sup>. Said studies, have been continued up until the present day. The material accumulated, with close to 60 years of research, was published at the start of the 1990<sup>s</sup> in two volumes under the title of “Archaeological maps of the Tomsk Region” [2, 3].

Analysis of materials excavated and collected signify that a long-standing principal of symbolic and pragmatic interpretations relating to their natural habitat determined the location of burial grounds chosen by the Selkups and their medieval ancestors. This tradition is typical of mythical thinking cultures.

The practical side to this burial site arrangement, was studied using examples of the most researched local dialect groups of the Paleo-Selkups, known as the “shieshgula”, as well as by analyzing the materials related to other groups of the 12<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Studies revealed, that while choosing locations for their graveyards, medieval Selkups preferred elevations near the banks of the larger rivers and tributaries. Part of the necropolises is located on the right bank, reaching ten meters in height (Ostjak Mountain I, II, Pachanga, Prorvinskij). Some burial sites

were located at lower terraces of 3-8 meters in height (Kustovo, Suhaja Rechka, Tiskino). There are also cases of burial sites located at rather low levels of the floodplains (Barklaj) [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Some burial sites were set up in the same area, but on different layers of the terrace: the first burial was at the top; the second one was at the lower layer (Ostjak Mountain) [7].

Despite differences in the location of the burial sites, it is obvious that the Selkups and their ancestors preferred to bury their dead at elevations that wouldn't be flooded during the spring. However, this was not the only, nor the most important reason for the location of burial sites. There were other reasons we find, as mentioned in traditional Siberian mythology, for this arrangement.

According to ethnological studies, the Selkups had two models of the universe, with two corresponding underworld locations. The first was organized horizontally and symbolized by a river. The world of the dead, in this model, was located at the creek, to which the deceased were delivered by the water, and where souls started their journey to the “down world” [8].

The second model was organized vertically, and was based on the idea that souls were moving from the “middle world”, of the living, to the “upper world”, or the “underworld” depending. The World Tree was both symbolic as well as an active part in the infrastructure pertaining to this model. According to Selkup belief, the souls of the deceased traveled to the roots of the tree, from there (in the form of a spider *mezgir'*) they traveled up to the sky, along the tree trunk and through the branches. After achieving elevation, they then had the chance to begin other lives, each being fully ready to start over again by relocating to the body of a newborn child. According to legend, every morning, Celestial Mother the Life Giver (*glynda kota*) sent the souls (on the tips of the sun's rays) down to the people. In mythology

these souls are represented by little birds. In the Selkup language the word *il'sat* "ray" also means "soul" [9, 10].

Similar beliefs were shared by a number of ethnic groups. For instance, the Evenks, believed that the top of the World Tree hosted the souls of unborn children [11, 12], while the Khanty believed, that the ability to have babies depended on the will of the sacred trees. [13]. Peculiar to this, is that, in contrast to the first model, where souls of the deceased are sent to the world of the dead via a river, the second model emphasizes the soul's journey up into the sky. In this case high trees serve as ladders, and in order to speed up the trip, it was believed to be better to start this trip from the upper point thereof. The large majority of Siberian ethnic groups worshiped birches, while other ethnicities believed in the sacral powers of larches. The sacred nature, in the case of the birch can be supported by the fact that the Selkup shaman used the wood of birch to make their tambourines and mallets. According to legend, wood was given to them by the Celestial Mother [14]. The idea of the World Tree is universal and present in many cultures. In Chinese mythology there is the *jianmu* tree, which "was reaching the sky", Nigerian folklore tells us about the female hypostasis of the World Tree. Despite of its local variants, the tree in archaic belief often represents an axis of the universe, axis mundi, which organizes the space. [7, 8, 14-20].

International scientific circles have recognized traditional systems of orientation as a part of the mythical worldview in archaic societies. Therefore it has been established that ancient rituals and rules regulated by activities relating to natural surroundings, include that of the arrangement of burial sites. This being unbelievably stable in its ideological and ritual pragmatism [21]. Due to the conservative nature of mythical thinkers, both models involved in

the choice of a burial site, gradually became similar, steady, universal and widespread, and havetherefore coexisted for a long period of time [7]. Due to the merging of these two ideas, that of both, river and tree became absolute as well as equivocal symbols of the universal structure. Moreover they became mutually replaceable [22]. The syncretic blend of these two universal models has solidified in Selkup myth pertaining to the introduction of the World Tree. It states that the tree is growing at the beginning of the world, in the upper reaches of the World River "at the crossing point of the Kedrovka and Orjol rivers, near the foremother's house" (the "rivers" are as synonym to that of the World River). This tree is birch, that is called "to the sky and to the earth, name (or life) giving sacrificial tree". An eagle and a nutcracker sit atop the branches, as well as the sun and moon which hang from there [13, 23].

Despite of all scientifically acknowledged arguments, this study shows that they can not always, nor fully explain all the questions that arise – neither do they allow us to construct the only possible paradigm of Selkup burial traditions. It seems, that in order to have the final interpretation we need to undertake more detailed studies concerning the formal and symbolic contexts of burial ritual, because the explanation that we have currently, is sometimes inappropriate, without considering the semantic context. Let's analyze some of the current material we have to our disposal.

In regard to the horizontal model of the universe, P.I. Kutaf'ev wrote that the Selkups took their deceased to graveyards located 300km away from their villages [1], which shows us that the burial sites were set up far from settlements. However there are many obstacles in burying the deceased at the lower reaches of the river. Transporting the body from the lower reaches of such rivers as Ob, Yenisey, Lena, etc. to that of the shores of the Arctic Ocean would

require a lot of effort. Whereas sending the deceased to the “main” river via its tributaries would lose sacred meaning, since one river would conflux with another and hence the trip would remain unfinished, and it would therefore become unclear as to where the end would be.

Hypothetically assuming that locating a burial site at the lower reaches of the rivers was compulsory, we would expect formation of large-scale necropolises at the creeks after several centuries of burial practice. Local population and, hence, researchers would therefore be familiar with them. However the real situation is quite different: burial complexes with small numbers of graves are located along the whole length of rivers [1, 2]. Paleo-Selkup burial sites of the late Middle Age (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> c.) were discovered at every 30-60 km at the banks of the Kjongra river, which in total are 300 km long. Five burial complexes were located within a 60 km space at the middle course of the Chaja River, the distance between four of them did not exceed 15 km (Chainskij, Prorvinskij, Barklaj, Chazhemtovskij) [2, 4, 24]. Most of the burial complexes are connected with settlements located nearby. For instance, the Prorvinskij burial site at the Chaja River was located near village Prorva. There are three settlements near the Kustovo burial site at the Kjongra River, and two – near the Suhaya Rechka burial site [25]. The Tym River has settlements every 20-100 km [26]. As a rule, there are old graveyards next to all of the mentioned settlements. For instance, there are several graveyards abandoned long time ago near the Napas village, which served as a cult center for a large area in the middle course of the Tym River. Similar situations were found at the other main tributaries of the Ob river in the Tomsk region: Ket, Parabel, Vasjugan and Tom.<sup>2</sup> [2, 3]. No doubt, there are burial sites at the lower reaches of the rivers, however this is not the only type of the location. It is undeniable, that the deceased were transported to the lower reaches

of the rivers, in the direction of “the world of the dead” according to the horizontal model of the universe. But how far down the burial ceremony would travel and what the places were that people found suitable for arranging a burial site are the questions that yet need to be answered. This means that the theory regarding the locations of burial sites, at the lower reaches of the rivers, being imperative for the Selkups is at least doubtful.

The vertical model of the universe is much more attractive in terms of its variability. Let us consider this in more detail. According to the theory, all burial sites should be located at some point of elevation. However, according to the archaeological studies, there are some contradictions to this theory. There are indeed many burial complexes<sup>3</sup> found at landscape elevations, but at the same time, there are many exceptions. Peculiar to this, is that at places where landscape permits a burial arrangement based on the vertical model of the universe, there would be none of this kind. For instance, synchronous (XVI-XVII) burial sites Prorvinskij and Barklaj are situated within 5 km of each other at opposite banks of the Chaja river, but they are arranged in completely different ways: the first being located at the high natural terrace of the right bank, the second at the floodplain on the left bank, but there is nothing that stops it from being placed at the same high terrace of the right bank. Thus, the main factor in locating Selkup burial sites remains unclear.

The study has shown that the place of a burial site in the household system of the Selkup is based on their emotional comprehension and esthetics: high, clean, spacious, beautiful, secluded [27]. For instance, the Ket people have a fairy tale “about the son of a dead man”, which describes a father’s grave at the top of the high mountain [28]. That’s why it won’t be surprising to view this location through the prism of an

ancient tradition, mentioned in the Vedic text the Shatapatha Brahmana (the first third of 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C.), which states: “Let him make it (grave – auth.) in a pleasant (spot), in order that there should be pleasure for him; and in a peaceful (spot), in order that there should be peace for him. He must not make it either on a path, or in an open space, lest he should make his (the deceased's) sin manifest”; “Let him not make it where it would be visible from here (village – translator), for assuredly it is beckoning, and another of these (members of his family) quickly follows (the deceased) in death”; “Let there be beautiful objects (this means that the site of the grave should be so chosen that there are at the back (or west) of it, either woods of various kinds, or ground diversified by woods, hills, temples – translator) at the back, -for beautiful objects mean offspring: beautiful objects, offspring, will thus accrue to him. If there be no beautiful objects, let there be water either at the back or on the left (north) side, for water is indeed a beautiful object; and beautiful objects, offspring, will indeed accrue to him.” (29).<sup>4</sup>что отметили ведийские тексты.

These Vedic texts are very important in a study of this sort, because by providing recommendations for arranging a burial site, they reveal deep sacral meaning behind usual phrases and actions. The choice of a nice and peaceful place for a grave implies the creation of a symbolic atmosphere for the deceased in attaining a comfortable afterlife. At the same time the text has an exorcism motif. Despite the allegorical style of the narration, its purpose to warn is quite obvious as well. In order to protect the living from the “calling” of the dead, graveyards should be removed from the village to a distance from which the deceased “can not see”. In order to stop the dead (their souls) from “coming” to the living, it was necessary to obstruct their vision, to prevent them from finding the way. At the same

time the necropolis was supposed to be available for the living, and the distance should not be burdensome for their ritual communication with the dead [27].

The information provided by the Vedic texts and Siberian mythology reassures us that the everyday decisions and wishes of the people were based on metaphysical concepts of a real and ideal life. Application of a semantic perspective to interpreting the information related to Selkup burial site locations, as well as studying their geographical coordinates, allow us to reveal aspects, which, in our view, constitutes the basis for choosing such locations of their necropolises, in the tradition of the Taiga aboriginals. According to multiple resources, the major parts of the burial complexes are located at the crossing of two bodies of water (rivers, river branches, oxbow lakes<sup>5</sup> etc.) After combining archaeological, ethnographical and cartographic materials it becomes clear that the information is in agreement. Most ancient and modern Selkup graveyards are indeed located at river crossings<sup>6</sup>. However formal analysis regarding the reasoning behind such locations, offers little result.

The answer is hidden in semantic interpretation. Some researches even pointed out that the place for a grave was chosen in accordance with random signs and omens [50]. In other words the decision was based on metaphysical perception of the natural surroundings. A remark in this regard was once made by M. Eliade, who citing Van der Leeuw's study wrote “in reality a person never “chooses” a place, he “discovers” it, in other words the sacred place reveals itself to him.” [51, 52], and in doing so, allows him to make the right choice.

#### **Symbolic location of Selkup necropolises**

In our expressed opinion, the reason for burial sites to be located along the river banks and not at the lower reaches of the rivers is not connected to the pragmatic necessity, but rather

to the symbolic context. The Selkup beliefs relating to water reservoirs, trees and river forks explain this circumstance. However the key role belongs to river forks, which equally symbolized unanimated objects and people – as well as the different signs associated in representing them.

According to Selkup beliefs, the river is a symbol of a great female deity, that was often addressed in an attempt to prolong one's own life [12], and was personified in anthropomorphic female form. The Selkups stated 'Ob is probably a woman, maybe a grandmother'. Even now among the Samoyeds rivers are seen as female beings, they are supposed to be "chastised" after the melting of the ice in spring, in much the same way as a woman once giving a birth would [20]. Peculiar is that the roots of these beliefs can be found in the Rigveda, where rivers are almost always represented by female deities [8].

In most cultures of the world trees<sup>7</sup> were seen as female creatures, with the crown for a head, the trunk for a body and the roots for legs. According to Selkup legend, the first people came from the tree fork in a birch люди [9, 22], Evenk legends tell that the souls of unborn children live in the crown of the World Tree, which stands at the crossing of two World Rivers [13]. The south Siberian ethnic groups have legends as well as the north Siberians. Comparisons of a man with a tree and a tree fork with the human body can be clearly seen in the mythology of the Siberian Turkic peoples [23]. Some Khakas *tjosi*<sup>8</sup> were associated with an old woman or a young girl, who unexpectedly had a baby. In some cases, tree forks symbolized twins, and each end was named after a newborn baby [23]. Cultural studies show that this motif is much more common. For instance, the nest at the top of the Tree of Life became an emblem of souls and heavenly messengers in European culture [53]. According to K. Jung, the legendary origin of human beings is directly connected to trees. However, trees are also associated with death, in

German language there is a word *Togesbaum* – "the tree of death" [54]. L. Sternberg explained the dual interpretation of trees. On the basis of studying Siberian and many other materials, he pointed out that there might be good spirits as well as bad spirits in the trees [55].

Russian mythology demonstrates the idea of an "evil" place in a legend about a hero who makes a decision at the fork of three roads. One of the roads leads to the eventual death (going to your left – will "find the death"), because this road leads to the underworld. Same ideas were common in Asia: N. Przhhevsky noticed, that for people in East Turkestan a crossroad was a place where road spirits lived [56].

Taking into account these beliefs, it becomes clear that a crossroad (a fork in the road) represents a place which is used by spirits to enter and exit this world. In traditional Russian and generally Slavic beliefs a fork in the road or a crossroad, is associated with evil spirits, and, to be exact, with the place where they appear in the real world [25]. In this context, a tradition that was pointed out by J. Frazer is quite interesting. He noticed that Czech youths had a tradition of gathering in the evening at a fork in the road outside the village and struck the air with whips [26]. This is a typical purgation ritual, that means to clean the road and the adjacent territories from demons: by using the whips the participants are herding the demons and sending them back to the underworld through the entrance symbolized by the fork.

Following the same logic, there was an opposite ritual, where the purpose was to stop the demons from entering this world from the underworld. народы. The Russian hero, mentioned above, makes his choice near a rock, which not only serves as a direction post, but also has apotropaic functions: it protects people from the residents of the other world. A similar way of protection was used by Chinese colonists in Western Mongolia. Монголии. There is a rock

brought “from Shandong province” at a crossing of the streets in Kobdo. The inscription on the rock says: “rock from Taishan mountains resists” (meaning protects from demons) [27]. In this example, the crossing of the streets represents the same fork, but structurally more complex. In order to prevent evil spirits from entering the city through the crossing the Chinese placed the magic rock there, which according to the inscription can do so <sup>9</sup>.

Universality of this belief and its variations is demonstrated by the mythology of Siberian ethnic groups. For instance, it is well known, that any fork shape, be it a tree fork or river fork, was considered by the Selkups to be the place where different worlds interact [22, 57, 58, 59]. There is a Selkup myth about a hero named *Yompa* who returned back from the underwater world through two rivers crossing [60]. Peculiar, is that vedic text *Shatapatha Brahmana* points out that a grave should be set up near still water, possibly a deep end [29]. It reminds us of the Russian proverb: “there are demons in a quite deep waters”, which in English means “Still waters run deep”<sup>10</sup>.

A fork in the road not only represents a crossing of the real roads but also of the roads that connect different worlds. This idea was the reason for placing a tree fork on the graves of Yenisey Ket people [61] and of Selkup shamans [22]. The Selkups “*Shieshgula*” dug the poles with thick branches – forks in the top of their burial mounds [25]. Similar poles were placed on the graves of Finno-Ugric Mordva residing near Ural area [62]. The Mongols set the poles with tree branches at the altar *ovoo*, dedicated to the spirit-hosts of the place [63]. By placing the poles and the stick-forks, people, probably, marked the places of metaphysical passages and equipped them with special tools, for facilitating the soul journey to another world and for presenting sacrifices for the spirits. The Koryaks worshiped such poles with forks as protectors and mediators

between people and spiritual forces [64, 65]. Their presence itself indicates the places entrances into other dimensions. Poles with branches placed at the graveyards are especially interesting in this regard.

The problem of anthropomorphic interpretations of unanimated objects has a special place in mythopoeic studies. As it was already mentioned, trees and rivers are associated with female beings, which are symbolized by the shape of a fork (cross) equal in its meaning to a corner. Visual diapason of this shape in its female symbolic projection is quite wide and versatile. First of all, it is represented by the objects of nature and infrastructure (trees, rivers, roads). According to the hermeneutic studies of European runic symbols, “when a fork points up, the symbol is associated with the German rune *man* – a man with his hands raised in adoration. In the opposite position, the symbol with the fork pointed down is read as *yr* – the symbol of femininity, what’s more important, of its evil side (a witch), and at the same time it is associated with the idea of *tys* (the sacral tree of Germanic tribes)” [66]. This belief correlates with the German metaphor of death and it is close to interpretation of tree forks as dangerous females who eat male’s souls, which is definitely based on the association with *vagina dentate*<sup>11</sup>.

In conclusion of the episode about demons and their association with crossroads, it is necessary to mention one of the oldest evidence of this concept reflected in a special Vedic hymn “To affliction” where “turning of paths” means crossroads or a fork in the road:

From thee, from thee who fliest not from us,  
O Misery, we fly.

Then at the turning of the paths let Misery  
fall on someone else [79].

Ethnographic materials clearly demonstrate that for the Selkups the conjugation of the real and *irréel* worlds was located and therefore signified by

any fork shape, be it a tree, a river or a road [22, 26, 27]. What's more important, as mentioned above, the fork shape was also associated with female reproductive organ ("feminine or earthly opening"), a place of transition from one dimension to another. The idea of the fork, inevitably brings us back to the exact definition of a corner, and its cult, which plays a significant role in world ethnography. Its modified form is present in modern society as well. In the context of mythological beliefs a corner is identical to a fork and also serves as a metaphysical portal to the *irréel* world.

Plenty of beliefs connected to corners are present in the mythology of the Ob-Ugric people and the Samoyeds. A. Golovnev wrote 'The Ugric house starts with a corner', many legends tell about heroes hiding in corners, looking for something magical there, even forests are depicted with seven corners [80]. According to Ob-Ugric and Selkup beliefs, a house is divided into two areas – male and female. In the sacral male area (in "male" corners) lives the host of the house, at the top corner shelves live ancestral spirits who represent the esoteric side of family life [80, 81, 82]. The possession of a sacral corner means the possession of a house, in other words – "having your own corner", means having your own dwelling.

On the contrary, bottom corners next to the exit are believed to be "impure" (female) and are associated with the demon's world. The Nenets as well as the Khanty believe that the corner next to the door is impure: this is the place where women keep their belongings, the dolls of *Granny Earth* and the dolls of the dead. The *Granny* is believed to be impure and is always put in the corner separately from the house spirits *khekhe* [81]. "Impure corner" in Selkup houses is "where woman's pots are standing" [83]. A pot is associated with female reproductive organ [84], thus the place it's standing at, is the female corner,

equals groin. In "impure" (female) half of the house the corners are associated with the place where demons reside, and it is believed to be necessary to isolate them. For this purpose reliable apotropaic items are put there: weapons, pots, ax [80]. I. Gemuev pointed out that these beliefs are common for all Ugric people [82]. Therefore there are sacral "pure" male and symbolically "dirty" female corners in the house. Other corners were seen as potentially dangerous and were subjected to magical purification, especially after funerals. In this regard, Khanty ritual of spreading blood in the corners of the house [85] and looking for demonic powers in the corners [86]<sup>12</sup> after taking a dead body outside the house is quite symbolic. The examples of the fight with evil spirits can be found in other areas of Asia: the Shors shot arrows in the corners of a dead man's house [10]; Chinese people shot arrows in the corners of the house of a just married couple on their first night [91]; the Buryats expelled house demon from the corners with the help of sharp objects [92]; "Turkestan people" put candles in the corners of ritual buildings, Tajik people put a lamp between a sick<sup>13</sup> woman's legs to cure her [56]. Old Russian residents of Siberia believed that a corner formed by the west and the north walls of a building were "blind", "dead" or "rotten corners" [89], in other words it was impure and connected to evil powers. In order to prevent the transit of evil spirits Polish and Russian people marked the corners of their houses and barns with crosses, put nettle, burdock, blackthorn or rose branches there. In order to protect crops they stuck sharp objects in the corner of the field. To protect the livestock they urinated in the corners of the homestead. In order to have a peaceful sleep people said a prayer "all evil creatures run from the corners" [71, 90].

Metaphysics of the corner as a symbol of the vulva is greatly reflected in the ornaments of Siberian ethnic groups. The research of the Yenisej



Ket people done by V. Anuchin gives a lot of evidence for it. In his work on Ket shamanism he wrote “The Yenisey people represent the female reproductive organ in the form of a two-legged fork (young girl) and three-legged fork (woman) [61]. Similar interpretation of the female organ is found in Ob-Ugric mythology. The legend about the hero Poi-lipetta tells that a woman conceived a child and “one day *the corner of her womb* became ready to give birth to a girl, to give birth to a son” [87]. Mythological text doesn’t leave room to doubt the “geometrical” interpretation of the female reproductive organ. There is an interesting remark about esoteric geometry of the body made by C. Lévi-Strauss who said that “people with big features represent a magic projection of a diamond shape in a woman’s body” [88]. Gender issue had been permanently present in the long process of formation of traditional ornamental art in Siberia. Female association with a corner (fork) shape or a triangle had always been a considerable part of the art. Esoteric nature of these shapes is represented by them being a symbol of a “female opening”, which was associated with the “opening-womb” of Mother-Earth, that gives birth to both life and death. [11, 22, 68, 80, 22].

Ancient traditional art preserved the sacral segment of the archaic sign system for the period from the Upper Paleolithic and the Bronze Age [93] until the early modern period. But with time the knowledge was lost and the signs in the ornaments became decorative elements, rather than information units [94]. This is why modern hermeneutics of the archaic symbolic systems are so important in understanding different processes which took place in spiritual and, closely connected to it, material life in the past. The principles of interpreting natural surroundings were established in ancient times and were preserved until the present day in their implicit form. They still underline many aspects

of our life. The pattern of burial site arrangement used by the aboriginals of West Siberia that we discussed in the study, serves as evidence for this concept.

### Conclusion

In the conclusion, it is necessary to establish several factors in the worldview of the Paleo Selkups, which became crucial for choosing a location of a burial site<sup>14</sup>.

Location of the most medieval burial complexes is connected to topographic objects shaped as a fork, or in geometrical terms – a corner, that in mythological perception preserves a negative context of a spiritually “impure” place. The formation of such context happened within the framework of collective unconscious, which established a universal system based on the principle of identity between the objects of nature (tree, river, road) and female body, more precisely woman’s legs position. The system laid a foundation for the metaphysical identity of the fork shape and the corner, with the symbolic womb of the Mother-Earth and that of a woman’s vulva. The idea of connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead through the vulva (the womb of the Mother-Earth) became the final stage for the establishment of the Selkup’s metaphysical perception. The identity between the natural and metaphysical, eventually underlined the whole structure of Selkup worldview.

Seeing such places as metaphysical portals at the crossing point between different dimensions, through which the souls of the dead were traveling from one world to another, became crucial for the population of Eurasia. Proximity to the underworld became the main reason for establishing special infrastructure at the portals, which were used ritually, while simultaneously sending the deceased to the other world. This is how burial and mourning sites, which nowadays are called graveyards, appeared.

The mythological tree represented another way of transferring souls through the portals. Specifics in the rituals made it necessary to stylize the tree into the form of a post with forks. What's interesting is that establishment of ritual portals merged the vertical and horizontal models of the universe into a single construction. It is possible that the unification wasn't an accident and had the purpose to create a multi-purpose model. Two previous mythologems were adjusted to become main elements of the new universal model: 1. The creek (lower reaches) of the river (a fork shape = a corner = vulva = the womb of the Great Mother = a grave (the word of dead)); 2. The World Tree axis mundi (a woman = a pole with branches = a portal for transferring into another world) grows at the elevation near a crossroad.

According to this scheme, burial sites were arranged at the highest spots next to natural forks, and sacrificial poles were placed at the top of the graves or burial mounds. Metaphorical interpretations of this scheme were preserved in the Vedic texts and burial-mourning rituals.

The distance between this world and the other world is measured not in metric but in magic terms. Their reminiscence is reflected in the materials related to the settlements of the Vedic period (II millennia B.C.). Scientists have

discovered the evidence of burial ceremonies in the corners of many household constructions built at that time in Central Asia and Siberia, which demonstrate the tradition of arranging portals that provided symbolical connection with the other world [95]. Obviously, since a grave was seen as a house of the dead<sup>15</sup>, its construction was copied from the house of the living. This was reflected in mythology in the form of traditional wishes and recommendations.

Hieratic texts of Indo-Aryan people allow researchers not only to establish direct connections with archaeological materials, but also with ethnographical studies of Siberian ethnic groups.

In retrospect, the histories of the mentioned traditions are much longer than the period discussed in this study. We also need to take into account that some burial sites mentioned above were established between the XII and XIV centuries, but similar burial arrangements can be seen at much earlier periods. The evidence for this can be found in Vedic texts and among archaeological materials. Therefore, similar explanations would be valid for a number of objects found for other chronological periods, territories and ethnic groups.

<sup>1</sup> A lake, formed as a result of a meander of the main river being cut off. Auth.

<sup>2</sup> There were more villages at the lower reaches of the rivers. The reason for this was natural fish stock location. Lower reaches of the rivers always had more local fish, as well as the one that came from the main river [26]. This circumstance was of course taken into account by the local population whose main food during the whole year was fish. Fish were stored in large quantities in autumn in anticipation of a long winter and spring which was scarce in food. Except for boiling, frying (*chapsy*) and eating it raw the fish was sun dried. Part of the catch was stored unaltered, another part was ground into a powder *porsa*, which was served not only for people, but also for hunting dogs. If there was salt, the fish was sautéed in bark barrels and eaten pickled. In winter the fish was frozen, which helped to preserve it for a long time. Auth.

<sup>3</sup> Taiga villages were also established at elevations [9], where they couldn't be flooded and attacked by bloodsucking insects (the wind was strong at the elevations). Auth.

<sup>4</sup> We refer to the Vedic texts due to the specifics of the genetical history of the Ob Ugric people and the Samoyeds, inherited the elements of the worldview from the Andronov archaeological culture, which in its turn was reflected in the Vedas. In II millennia B.C. the nomadic Andronov cultural groups from the steppes of the eastern Eurasia simultaneously moved southwards and northwards. [30, 31]. Part of them, later named the Aryans, after invading North-West India (modern Panjab) through the mountain passes of the Hindu Kush, established a kingdom and narrated their ideas of man and universe, moral and ethic values, believes and esoteric ceremonies of their time in the texts of the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda and the Atharvaveda. [32, 33]. Other groups moved north and spread up until the southern outskirts of Taiga and created new archaeological cultures based on Vedic worldviews. [34, 35]. This is how the Vedic believes reached the ancestors of the modern ethnic groups of the North-West Siberia. The linguists were the first who noticed the signs of this intrusion. In XVII century G. Leibniz distinguished the Finno-Ugric language family and its six branches. Accumulation

of the knowledge in XVIII-XIX centuries lead to distinguishing the connection between Indo European and Finno-Ugric languages in XX century. The accomplishment belongs first of all to the European scientists J. Anderson [36], who pointed out this issue, and to B. Munkácsi [31], who distinguished Indo-Iranian loanwords [31]. At the same time it was established, that the split into the western and the eastern (Ugric) groups happened at the turn of II-I millennium B.C. [37]. In Russian scientific circles the study of V.N. Toporov become crucial in this field. The researcher established Iranian roots of Ob-Ugric culture [38]. The evince of material and mythopoeic influence on the Taiga cultures was discovered in the middle of XX century by archaeologist V.N. Chernecov. [39]. E.E. Kuz'mina made a tremendous contribution to summarizing of the materials and the proving Andronov origins of Indoarian history [31]. Ethnographers discovered Vedic motifs in sacral part of the ritual and daily life [ Ivanov listed the "oriental" motifs in Ugric ornaments, I.N. Gemuev, A.M. Sagalaeв, and A.V. Baulo distinguished Vedic motifs in sacral constructions and cult objects. [40, 41, 42], N.V. Lukina, E.G. Fedorova and A.A. Bogordaeva established Vedic motifs in Khanty belts ornamentation [43, 44, 45], N.F. Prytkova found the motifs in the clothes. [46], Z.P. Sokolova distinguished Iranian and Indian loanwords among ethnonyms [47], G.I. Pelih pointed out southern subculture in Selkup culture [48]. Y.I Ozheredov demonstrated similarities in placing burial vessels into the graves [49].

- <sup>5</sup> A lake, formed as a result of a meander of the main river being cut off. Auth.
- <sup>6</sup> There several types of the bank, that differs in shape, but similar in the way of. Judging by the structure of the landscape all such places were once filled with water, but nowadays represent: 1. Two rivers confluence (Pachanga) [2, 7]; 2. Joining a river and a ravine (Kustovskij, Suhaja Rechka, Chainskij, Ostjackij I, II); 3. Joining of two ravines (Barklaj) [5, 7, 24]. Except for the Selkups, the Tomsk Tatars (Eushta) also set their graveyards at the cross of the rivers (a burial site at the influx of the Malaja Kirgizka river into the Tom river ) [3].
- <sup>7</sup> Birches and larches were sacred for Siberian ethnic groups, cedars were considered to be tree of the dead, hence all the sarcophagus were made of cedar. Auth.
- <sup>8</sup> House idols – sculptures which symbolised ancestors. Were made out of branch forks. Auth.
- <sup>9</sup> With the same purpose people in South Siberia and Mongolia placed phallic sculptures at the mountain ravines and in front of the caves which in traditional worldview symbolised female genitals (vulva). Classic Chinese text Tao Te Ching mentions a universal female, whose bosom is a mountain valley (cave). Cave is one of the most ancient symbols of womb, birth giving and life [53].
- <sup>10</sup> The proverb means that it's the quite people that you should be careful with. In metaphorical form it refers to the place where demons from the underworld enters this world. Auth.
- <sup>11</sup> Symbolically the fork shape is connected to the shape of woman's body specifically with vulva (myth. – «female opening») that can be met in nature, : with the body of the Mother Earth (in form of a cave or a crack in the ground), with a tree (in form of hollow), with a river (in the form of a crack in shore). [67, 68, 69]. The Selkups interpreted tree forks or split trunks as women legs, birth giving bosom and at the same time with a beast jaws, swallowing a catch [57, 58, 22 ]. This understanding associates vulva with a mouth [69, 70], biting, eating and, as a result, with death [70]. Slavic [71, 72] and Siberian mythology has stories about witches with *vaginadentate*. [73]. The Selkups, the Kets, the Evenks and the Nganasans stories about «a forest woman» who forced huters to marry her has the same motif [11, 74, 61]. The motif is universal and even known to the people of the Hindu Kush [75]. In ancient Indian charm a bride's vulva is called: «You are the mouth of gandharva Vishvasu » [76]. The Kayapo people of Ecuador believe that during a sexual intercourse a vulva «devoures» a penis [77], the Ob-Ugric people believe that «without feeding female reproductive organs there is no reproduction of the tribe» [78]. C. Jung documented a case about a female patient who described her reproductive organs «as if it is something down there that is eating and drinking» [54]. The Siberians saw it as a danger for hunters, who didn't want to get in contact with «forest women». Since mythological events have no time and space framework, the dangers they portray are irreal, biting off (devouring of the organ) represents a symbolical death, caused by the loss of the male's strength or soul (the Khanty believe the fifth, specifically male, soul is located in penis) [78]
- <sup>12</sup> Culturological definition of «impure corner» has definitely surpassed the frames of the ethnic model of aboriginal perception and has lost its generic affiliation. However the tradition of it's negative interpretation turned out to be so strong that it is common even in nowadays society to put naughty kids in the corner, in order to give them a fright as a punishment. Auth.
- <sup>13</sup> In mythological thinking a disease is personificated in the form of an evil spirit [84]. Fire helps to protect from it and exorcise it. Auth.
- <sup>14</sup> The Ob-Ugric people, residig in the neighboring territories of Taiga, had similar worldview. Auth.
- <sup>15</sup> A coffin is called in Russian *domovina*. This word has the same root with the word *dom* which means «house, home». Auth.
- <sup>16</sup> Старица – озеро вытянутой формы, возникшее в результате изменения (спрямления) русла реки. Авт.

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## **Экология погребального обряда сибирских аборигенов: сакральная топография могильников нарымских палеоселькупов «шиешгула»**

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*Настоящая работа открывает круг сюжетов в рамках глобальной темы «Экология погребального обряда народов Сибири». Учитывая тот факт, что символическая или сакральная сторона ойкумены коренных обитателей тайги имела не менее, а, как правило, даже более существенное значение в их жизни, в данной публикации рассматривается символический аспект размещения могильников одного из крупных народов самодийской языковой группы Севера Западной Сибири – селькупов. В основу исследования положены материалы XVI-XVII вв., но в культурологическом контексте временные рамки темы исследования много шире: вверх по времени к современным селькупам, а вниз к населению самодийской рёлкинской культуре раннего Средневековья (VI-X вв.), сложившейся на основе протосамодийской кулайской культурной общности раннего железного века (V в.до н.э.–*

*У н.э.) при участии пришлых тюрков. В работе использованы преимущественно данные по наиболее изученной локально-диалектной группе «шиешгула», носители которой при выборе места для кладбищ предпочтение отдавали возвышенностям у развилок рек, озер старичного происхождения<sup>16</sup> и оврагов.*

*Ключевые слова: Томско-Нарымское Приобье, реки Обь, Чая, Кёнга, самодийцы селькупы локально-диалектной группы «шиешгула», развилка, угол как пункт перехода из реального в потусторонний мир, погребальный, поминальный обряды.*

*Научная специальность: 07.00.00 – исторические науки.*

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