



# CONCEPTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CULT OF NATURE IN THE BELIEF SYSTEMS OF THE UZBEK PEOPLE

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**Abstract:** The Uzbek people are among the peoples with a complex ethnic structure. They have practiced various customs and rituals for many years due to the integration of the cultures of the Turkic peoples, which was formed as a result of the interaction of historical processes. The article highlights the views of the Uzbek people regarding cults in their religious beliefs.

**Keywords:** Plant-like (Islamic), zoomorphic (animal-shaped), Sayrab plane tree, Khojasaat village, ancient Turan and Iranian peoples.

Since ancient times, all peoples, including the Uzbek people, have had the understanding that a person is not an unnatural being opposed to nature or some supernatural force, but rather, on the contrary, a person feels themselves to be an integral part of nature.

In the complex system of relationships between humans and nature, our ancestors have long had a clear understanding of the role they played. That is, traditional worldviews, expressed through the harmony of polytheism and animism, perceived humans and nature as inseparable, and were also characterized by a sharp contrast between good and evil. Additionally, traces of totemism and the signs of our ancestors' reverence for the forces of nature are distinct. These include the eternal green sacred trees, symbols of the moon, sun, water, plants, animals, and birds, as well as zoomorphic patterns, and so on.

In particular, the Tree of Life, depicted in the mythology of world literature, is created for the happiness of every person living on Earth, symbolizing the center of the world. The cult of the Tree of Life, which embodies the universal concept of the world, is one of the most widespread themes in the mythologies of the world's peoples. It expresses ideas of primal energy and struggle, cosmogonic concepts as a necessary condition for changing the world, and legendary views related to the birth of life through the symbol of the Tree of Life as a symbol of vitality.<sup>1</sup>

The mythogram of the World Tree has semantic and mythological roots in primitive art. Information about the legendary Tree of Life has led to beliefs and rituals related to real trees in the everyday life of Indo-European peoples.

In the hymns of the Ukrainian, Belarusian, Serbian, and Croatian peoples, there are depictions of the plane tree or elm tree, and similar combinations of descriptions of marvelous trees are found in Russian spells as well. That is, there are verses that describe the magnificent tree.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Саввинова-Отова Г. Е. Вестник Северо-Восточного федерального университета имени М. К. Аммосова: Серия Эпосоведение, № 3 (03) 2016 49 УДК 398.224(=512.157) <file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/kult-prirody-v-olonho-kak-otrazhenie-natsionalnogo-mirovozzreniya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Саввинова-Отова Г. Е. Вестник Северо-Восточного федерального университета имени М. К. Аммосова: Серия Эпосоведение, № 3 (03) 2016 49 УДК 398.224(=512.157) <file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/kult-prirody-v-olonho-kak-otrazhenie-natsionalnogo-mirovozzreniya.pdf>



The tradition of venerating sacred trees is also related to the specific beliefs of the Uzbek people. In particular, items made from the juniper tree, such as amulets, evil-eye beads, pepper, and "chakirtikon," were used as tools to fight against evil forces.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the favorable nature, climate, and geographical location of the Surkhandarya region, natural monuments related to nature worship, such as ancient and colossal trees, stones and water sources, vast caves nestled in towering mountains, and miraculous springs with fresh water, form an extraordinary natural complex.

The plant world and trees are symbols of life. The plane tree and juniper are long-living trees. In the Boysun district, a religious-ecological belief system has formed regarding the Sayrob plane tree, where the local population treats it with great reverence. Near the Sayrob plane tree, there is a sacred spring where fish swim freely. No one fishes there; instead, visitors feed the fish.<sup>4</sup>

Another characteristic feature of pilgrimage sites is the presence of an ancient tree or spring within their vicinity. For example, in the village of Khojasoat, located on the outskirts of Oltinsoy district, the Qurbon Soat pilgrimage site is home to a centuries-old, massive juniper tree. In the Sariosiyo district, the Mozori Toq pilgrimage site is situated on the left side of the road leading to the village of Khonjiza, far from the settlement, where a mulberry tree grows around the site. Above the village of Khojai Asmin in the Khonjiza collective farm, at the foot of the Ko'yi safet (White Mountain), the Kirq qiz (Chil duxtaron) pilgrimage site is located. The mountain is called this because it appears white and is covered in snow year-round.<sup>5</sup> In the midst of the mountain, there are forty juniper trees. When focusing on the cult of trees, it is evident that there is a connection with the pilgrimage sites.

Additionally, due to their durability and the strength of their wood, trees such as walnut, linden, and zarang were used for a long time to make various household items. These products passed down from generation to generation, serving many families. In particular, a cradle made from eternal wood is considered the most precious heirloom of a family, as it symbolizes the continuation of life, with descendants growing up in the cradles of their ancestors.<sup>6</sup>

The name of the Bedakota village in the Sherobod district is derived from the name of a spring near which a linden tree grows, reflecting its morphemic structure. To sanctify the spring, the word "ota" (father) was added. In this case, the cult of water and trees plays a primary role. According to the ethnographic analysis of scholar I. Umarov, Bedakota means "sacred," while Bedak refers to the spring. The village name is linked to the Tajik word *bed*, meaning "linden," so Bedak is interpreted as "a spring where a linden tree grows." Many springs in the mountain villages near Bedak have had linden trees planted at their sources. For instance, the spring coming from the upper part of the Khojanqon village is called Tolbuloq (Linden Spring).<sup>7</sup>

Among ancient Turks, majestic trees were revered as symbols of perfection, nobility, and holiness. Their roots were believed to extend to the underworld, while their tops reached

<sup>3</sup> Дала ёзувлари. Сурхондарё вилояти Бойсун тумани Хомкон, Хатак, Хўжанқо, Эгарчи қишлоқлари. 2020 йил.

<sup>4</sup> Дала ёзувлари. Бойсун тумани, Сайроб қишлоғи. 2022 йил.

<sup>5</sup> Дала ёзувлари. Олтинсой тумани, Хўжасоат қишлоғи. 2022 йил.

<sup>6</sup> Дала ёзувлари. Сариосиё тумани, Хонжиза қишлоғи. 2022 йил.

<sup>7</sup> Дала ёзувлари. Сариосиё тумани, Хонжиза қишлоғи. 2022 йил.



the sky, transforming them into support pillars. The people firmly believed that nature was their sole protector and provider.

It should also be noted that the patterns depicted in the practical decorative arts of the Uzbek people are not merely shapes, but rather significant ethnographic sources. These patterns are directly related to the people's religious conceptions and beliefs, as noted by the renowned ethnographer S. Davlatova.<sup>8</sup>

These patterns are classified according to their characteristics into geometric (mathematical), plant-like (Islamic), zoomorphic (animal-shaped), and anthropomorphic (human-shaped) designs.<sup>9</sup> In the applied art of nomadic peoples, ornithomorphic (bird-related) themes are also widespread.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in plant-like patterns, the surrounding environment and the world of nature are often hidden, reflecting the perceptions of the world we live in.<sup>11</sup> In handwoven carpets, zoomorphic motifs such as horses, birds, and flowers are depicted, symbolizing happiness, prosperity, kinship, and blessings. In the art of embroidery of the Karakalpak people, special emphasis is placed on cosmogonic, plant-like, anthropomorphic, and particularly zoomorphic designs.<sup>12</sup> In particular, zoomorphic representations often feature real or imaginary animals.

The concept of belief in nature, based on the daily lives and behaviors of people, is reflected in the handwoven carpets of the Central Asian peoples, where patterns are primarily inspired by human imagination. These include plant-like, zoomorphic, object-based, and symbolical motifs. For example, motifs such as the footprints of a camel and tiger, a dog's tail, apple blossoms, vine tendrils, scorpions, camel collars, and medicinal plants are depicted.<sup>13</sup> All of these patterns express the transition period during the disintegration of the communal-tribal system, representing the visible aspects of that historical period.

Among the patterns, the most commonly used is the horn symbol, which is linked to the tradition of depicting animals in the culture of nomadic Turkic peoples.<sup>14</sup> The ram-horn motif can be traced back to the sheep cult. Scientific literature supports the idea that the ram, considered one of the sacred animals in Turkic cultures, has long been seen as a protective symbol against misfortune and calamities.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Дала ёзувлари. Сурхондарё вилояти Бойсун тумани Хомкон, Хатак, Хўжанко, Эгарчи қишлоқлари. 2020 йил.

<sup>9</sup> Турсунов С. ва бошқ. Шеробод тарихидан лавҳалар -Т.: “Yangi nashr”, 2014. – Б. 85.

<sup>10</sup> Давлатова С. Ўзбек анъанавий хунармандчилиги тарихий жараёнлар контекстида (Ўзбекистоннинг жанубий ҳудудлари мисолида). Тарихий-этнологик тадқиқот. – Т.: – “Yangi nashr”, 2018. – Б. 260-261.

<sup>11</sup> Гюль Э. Диалог культур в искусстве Узбекистана. – Т. 2005. - С. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Богословская И. Қорақалпоқ нақш санъатида зооморф унсурлар // San'at. 2009. № 2. 16 бет.

<sup>13</sup> Андреев М.С. Орнамент горных таджиков верховьев Амударьи и Памира. – Ташкент, 1928.

<sup>14</sup> Богословская И. Қорақалпоқ нақш санъатида зооморф унсурлар // San'at. 2009. № 2. 16 бет.

<sup>15</sup> Давлатова С. Ўзбек анъанавий хунармандчилиги тарихий жараёнлар контекстида (Ўзбекистоннинг жанубий ҳудудлари мисолида). Тарихий-этнологик тадқиқот. – Т.: – “Yangi nashr”, 2018. – Б. 262.



In Zoroastrianism, the ram was also seen as a divine deity responsible for safeguarding the health of household members. Among the ancient peoples of Turan and Iran, the ram symbolized victory and martial prowess, embodying the god of triumph and warriors.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, the special reverence for the ram and its symbolic role as a protector among the animals has led to the widespread use of ram-horn patterns in the felt, carpets, and embroidery of the peoples of Central Asia. The image of the ram's horn, serving as a protective symbol against "evil" forces, is commonly found in the carpets and felt of the livestock-raising communities in the Dehkanabad district of the Kashkadarya region.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the people of the southern regions of Uzbekistan would create amulets with horn motifs from wood and sew them onto the headgear of young children and girls. The image of the ram's horn was also depicted on the surface of tandyr (traditional clay ovens). This demonstrates that it was not the animal itself, but rather a specific part of its body, namely the horn, that served as a protective symbol.<sup>18</sup>

Since ancient times, people have regarded animals as household protectors and possessors of divine power that brings blessings and prosperity. Animals such as horses, cows, dogs, oxen, rams, and camels were seen as sacred and even considered to be linked to celestial powers, with sheep and goats being viewed as divine creatures.<sup>19</sup> According to ancient beliefs in Uzbek households, the skull of a ram was considered a protector against the "evil eye," and there was a custom of hanging it on a tree or above a doorway. In Zoroastrianism, the ram symbol was associated with the Farn deity, representing abundance, health, and protection from evil forces. Unlike other animals, rams did not have amulets attached to them, as they were considered protectors against various threats and the evil eye.<sup>20</sup>

In the Kashkadarya region, decorative ram's horn patterns are also placed on *sozanalar* (traditional rugs) or hung in the homes of newlyweds, serving as symbols of protection. The intention behind this practice is to protect the young couple from evil forces using the symbol of a sacred animal. This tradition, associated with prosperity, has been preserved among the pastoral communities of the region to this day. Even in Surkhandarya, in folk applied arts, ram's horn symbols like "Qo'chqorak" flowers are not only decorative elements but are also used as protective charms against misfortune, evil eyes, and negative influences.<sup>21</sup>

In Uzbek culture, the depiction of a ram's head pattern, resembling a man with his arms lowered and brought together in a semi-circle, symbolizes male origin and is considered a representation of masculinity.<sup>22</sup> The ram's horn motif also signifies fertility and the continuity of generations. In the Kashkadarya region, the ram's skull is viewed as a protective and

<sup>16</sup> Мошкова В. Ковры народов Средней Азии. Конца XIX – начала XX вв. - Ташкент. 1970. - С. 265.

<sup>17</sup> Низомов А., Низомова М. Гидам жилоси // Мозийдан садо. 2003. № 3-4. - Б. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Фахретдинова Д.А. Ювильерное искусство Узбекистана. - Ташкент, 1988. - С. 99-100.

<sup>19</sup> Давлатова С. Ўзбек анъанавий хунармандчилиги тарихий жараёнлар контекстида (Ўзбекистоннинг жанубий худудлари мисолида). Тарихий-этнологик тадқиқот. – Т.: – “Yangi nashr”, 2018. – Б. 263.

<sup>20</sup> История материальной культуры народов Узбекистана. - Ташкент, 1961. - С. 87.

<sup>21</sup> Снесарев Г.П. Реликты домусульманских верований в обрядах у узбеков Хорезма. - М.: Наука, 1969. - С. 315.

<sup>22</sup> Дала ёзувлари. Сурхондарё вилояти Бойсун тумани Хомкон маҳалласи. 2020 йил.

purifying force. Before the harvest, it is hung on a stake in the middle of the field, symbolizing the safeguarding and purification of the crops, ensuring a bountiful and prosperous harvest.<sup>23</sup>

As it is mentioned, since ancient times, our ancestors have closely linked the natural world with the sacred. Natural phenomena, trees, animals, and other plants were valued not only for their physical characteristics but also for their spiritual and religious significance. These beliefs represent the deep connection between humans and nature, emphasizing the importance of living in harmony with the natural world. Understanding the universe as a unified living organism, where all its elements are interconnected in a beautiful, orderly system, reflects an ancient worldview. In this way, people did not merely perceive nature as an external environment, but they experienced its sacredness and deeper meaning as an integral part of life.

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