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Altaic Uriankhan Clothing of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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The clothing of the Altai Uriankhians exhibits clear similarities with the clothing of neighboring peoples, revealing the common historical, ethnographic, and natural-economic background of the region's peoples. The national costume of the Altai Uriankhians is thus a combination of traditional and regional elements that serves not only as a sign system or symbol of identity but also as an indicator of the degree to which the Altai Uriankhians have adapted to their specific ethnic, historical, and cultural environment. Long residence side by side with other nations has of course had a significant impact on their clothing.

Key words: Clothes, identity, social status, ethnic community, aesthetic ideals

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1. Introduction

The Altai Uriankhians are one of the ethnic groups inhabiting the western part of Mongolia. They are distributed across the Mongolian Altai from the upper streams of the Khovd River to the upper streams of the Bulgan River, occupying Duut and Munkh-Khairkhan soums in Khovd Aimag and Buyant, Bulgan, Sagsai, and Altantsogts soums as well as parts of Deluun and Tolbo soums in Bayan-Ulgii Aimag. Other Mongolian-speaking ethnicities such as the Zakhchins, Torghts, Myangats, and Uulds reside to their south; the Durbets, Bayids, and Khalkas live to their northeast, while and Turkish-speaking ethnicities such as Kazakhs, Altains, and Tuvans live to their west and northwest.

The 2000 census counted 25,500 Altai Uriankhians, a figure that likely includes Khuvsgul Uriankhians, who have not yet been studied ethnographically. It is also known that the number includes some Tuvans and Todjins, ethnic groups that are erroneously considered

Uriankhians but would never count themselves as such (Ralidin 1968: 31).

The Altai Uriankhians, like others in Western Mongolia, speak an Oirat dialect of the Mongolian language. As noted by investigators, the Oirat dialect is based on the Durbet one, which is significantly different from the modern Khalkha dialect. The latter is the foundation of modern literary Mongolian and is spoken by the vast majority (more than 90%) of the Mongolian population. The difference between the Oirat and Khalkha dialects is chiefly in their phonetic systems and, to some extent, in their morphological and lexical specifics.

The modern ethnic composition of Mongolia developed over time in a number of historical stages. The Oirats became more independent at the beginning of the 15th century, at which time the Mongols divided into eastern and western branches.

The western branch was characterized by a certain unity in culture and livelihood, although each group had unique ethnographic characteristics.

2. History of the study of the Altai *Uriankhians*

The Altai *Uriankhians* are among the ethnic groups who have been poorly studied and sparsely represented in the historical and ethnographic literature. The first scholars who wrote about them were famous Russian travelers such as A. M. Pozdneev, G. N. Potanin, G. E. Grumm-Grzhimailo, and M. V. Pevtsov.

Starting in the mid-19th century, they periodically visited the *khoshuns* of the Altai *Uriankhians*, who allowed the Russians to observe local lifestyles, traditions, and customs. Their travel notes left us valuable information on the residences, lives, and material and spiritual cultures of the Altai *Uriankhians*. Their work revealed that the Altai *Uriankhians* wandered between the rivers of *Chingil* and *Bulgun* in the summer, traveling to Altai in the winter to visit their *khoshuns*.

The same sources also explain that the *khoshuns* of the Altai *Uriankhians* were headed by Governors—*Amban Noyons*—who obeyed their rulers, the *Meirins-zangis* of the *khoshuns*, in *soums* and *arbans*. The Russians describe lamaism and shamanism in detail, along with associated rituals and religious ceremonies. There are also data on weddings, funerals, other rituals, national sports, and folklore. Only an insignificant portion of their work is devoted to aspects of material culture, including housing, food (particularly dairy foods and tea and their methods of preparation), and male and female dress and headgear. Interesting data are provided regarding the ethnic composition of the Altai *Uriankhians*.

Russian traveler M. V. Pevtsov, who visited the *khoshuns* of the *Altai Uriankhians* in 1878 and 1879, wrote that “the *Uriankhians* are divided into two very different groups: one occupies the basin of the upper Yenisei River, passing even a little south of the Mountain Ridge *Tannu-ol*, and the other one occupies the high-altitude area of the southern Altai. *Altai Uriankhians* also speak in a Mongolian dialect; moreover, they differ from the Yenisei in the specifics of life and religion: Altai *Uriankhians* are Buddhists, but the Yenisei are mostly pagans” (Pevtsov 1951: 108). A paper by G. N. Potanin explains, “[there is a] tribe that speaks the Turkic-Tatar language in northwestern Mongolia called the *Uriankhians*, and this tribe occupies a narrow strip alongside our border from the top of the River Khovd in the west up to Kosogol and beyond ... the name ‘Uriankhian’ was given this people by the Mongolians,



Photo 1 Oirats women in traditional clothing in the late 19th century. Photo from still library of Russian geographical society.

but they call themselves ‘Tuba’ or ‘Tuva’ ... they also call themselves *Kukchuluuts*” (Potanin 1881: 7). In other words, one should not confuse Tuvans, who never considered themselves *Uriankhians*, with the *Altaic Uriankhians*. The *Kukchuluuts* were one ethnic clan within the Tuvan genus and sometimes called themselves *monchagami*.

The academician Maisky, who worked in Mongolia in the early 20th century, wrote, “for a complete ethnographic picture of what I saw in Mongolia, it is useful to mention the so-called *Uriankhians*. The *Altai Uriankhians* roamed the Mongolian Altai from the upper streams of the Khovd River to the upper streams of the Bulgun; they consisted of seven *khoshuns*, and all spoke Mongolian” (Maisky 1921: 34). The opinions of these investigators were later supported by Buryat scholar Ts. Jamtsarano, who wrote that “in the specifics of their language, lifestyles, and forms of traditional culture, the *Altai Uriankhians* might undoubtedly be considered as Mongol-speaking tribes of Western Mongolia” (Jamtsarano 1934: 128).

It should be noted that the observations of Russian travelers are often fragmentary because they were obtained from uninformed respondents.

Starting in the 1960, scientific institutions in Mongolia—for example, the Institute of History of Mongolia, the Institute of Linguistics and Literature, and the Academy of Sciences of Mongolia—began studying the history and traditional culture of the nomadic tribes of western Mongolia, including the *Altai Uriankhians*.

Employees of these scientific organizations have collected and studied materials relating

to the economy, life, and traditional culture of the Altai *Uriankhians*.

They have gathered data on lifestyles and on material and spiritual cultures (including religious beliefs, customs, habits, and burial and maternity rites) as well as on literature, folk art, and handicrafts. Though a great number of artifacts were collected during that time, they have not yet been subjected to much in-depth analysis.

The first Mongolian work dedicated to traditional Altai *Uriankhian* culture appeared in 1960, when Mongolian ethnographer S. Badamhatan published a short article in Russian entitled “On the Wedding Customs of the Altai *Uriankhians*.” In 1992, Mongolian ethnographer Kh. Nyambuu published a book entitled *Introduction to the Ethnography of Mongolia*; one of its sections, “Oirat,” discusses the Altai *Uriankhians*.

The collection of monographs *Ethnography of Mongolia* was published in Mongolian in 1996 and has a chapter called “Altai *Uriankhians*.” In 2000, the Mongolian historian Ts. Gantulga published the historical article “Altai *Uriankhians*.” These few papers represent the extent of the literature on the lives of Altai *Uriankhians* during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They do not paint a comprehensive picture of the Altai *Uriankhians*’ economy, family and social life, or material and spiritual cultures, and they do not address issues such as household contacts, cultural interaction, and relationships with neighboring peoples.

3. Historical information on the *Uriankhians*

The *Uriankhian* tribe is one of the most ancient and powerful tribes directly involved in the history of the Mongols. They are mentioned for the first time in a legend called “Ergene-Kune,” cited by Rashid ad-Din in his famous *Compendium of Chronicles*.

According to this text, among the tribes who had the general name *darligin*, there was one tribe named *uriankhad*. This *darligin* tribal alliance had famously managed to leave difficult terrain due to a lack of living space there.¹⁾

Thereafter, traces of the *Uriankhian* tribe disappear and then reappear. The Mongolian historical and literary source *Secret History* includes some information on the *Uriankhian* tribe: it says that the *Horilartay-Mergen* of the *Hori-Tumet* tribe migrated from their homeland *Arik-Usun* due to quarrels about the use of fertile hunting grounds under the patronage of *Shinch-bayan-urianhian*, the master of Mount *Burhan Haldun-Ula*.²⁾ Then in the 10th century, according to historians, the famous Mongolian tribe the *borjigin* arose. This was the tribe of Genghis Khan, founder of the centralized Mongol state in the 13th century, and had a kinship relation with the *Uriankhian* tribe.

On this topic, the *Secret History* says, “going head-on, *Bodochir* grabbed a half pregnant woman. ‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘I am from the *Chjarchiut* tribe, by the name of *Adankhan-Urianhaizhina*,’ she said ... Being halfway through a pregnancy, that woman came in to *Bodochir* and delivered a son ... This is the origin of the genus *Chadran*. This woman gave birth to another son, who was already from *Bodonchira* ... *Bodonchir* became the founder of the *Borjigin* tribe”.³⁾

The court of Genghis Khan included a number of famous military leaders from the *Uriankhian* genus, such as the hero-generals *Zelme*, *Subeetay*, and *Udachi*. After the establishment of a centralized Mongolian state in 1206, Genghis Khan appointed all these generals



Photo 2 The winter *oobuz* headdress for men. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

chiefs—*Noyons of Tumen*; these became the base of the newly established Mongolian empire.

Uriankhian Tumen, the leader of which was *Udachi* by right of inheritance, were the security guards of the *Ikh Khorig* area, where there was a burial site of the ancestral genus of Genghis Khan, *Altan Urag*; they were called the *darkhads* (the protected).

By order of Genghis Khan, they were released from all other service to the Khan, including military service.

All *Uriankhian Tumen* were first under *Tuluya*, youngest son of Genghis Khan, and then *Eljigidey Noyon*, the son of *Khachiun* (brother of Genghis Khan).

One part of the Uriankhian genus then came under the rule of *Arik Bukha*, the fifth son of *Tuluya*. Historical events proceeded to divide the Uriankhian tribes into several segments and scatter them across the west, east, and central parts of Mongolia.

The death of Genghis Khan prompted a struggle for his throne. In the competition between *Arik Buch* and *Khublai*, *Arik Buch* relied on the Oirat, among whom was the Uriankhian genus (Gantulga 2000: 42).

During the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368), Mongolia ceased to be the political center of the Great Mongolian Empire. The founder of the Yuan dynasty, *Khublai Khan* (1223–1293), subjugated Mongolia under his fourth son, *Nomkhon*, and when the latter died in 1294, he was succeeded by *Khublai's* grandson—the son of his second son, *Chingim*—*Gamalag*.



Photo 3 Headdress with silvery ornaments (*chikhteï toortsog*) for women. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.



Photo 4 Headdress with coral ornaments (*shurtei toortsog*) for unmarried girls. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

At the time of *Khublai Khan*, some of the *Uriankhians* (about 30,000, according to some estimates) settled along the Great Wall of China. Some Mongolian historians suggest that *Khublai* himself relocated the *Uriankhians* there from the *Ikh Khorig* area, where they had kept watch over the graves of the Great Khans of Mongolia. When the Yuan Empire fell, these *Uriankhians* began to play an important role in the struggle to restore Mongol rule in China.



Photo 5 Men's shoes (*maaga gos*). Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

By the end of the 14th century, the *Uriankhians* had left the stage of history for a time. They reappeared in historical records in the 16th century, in connection with the turbulent political events of that period. As *Batmunh Dayan Khan* (1466–1517) temporarily suspended the separatist trend that began in Mongolia after the fall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368, he often relied on the *Uriankhian Tumen* during his numerous military campaigns to suppress the separatists. Under him, Mongolia was divided into 10 *Tumen*: 4 were *Oirat*, and the remaining 6 were eastern Mongolians. The latter were considered the mainstay of the *Dayan Khan* and divided into the Three Left and Three Right *Tumens*. According to sources, among the Three Left *Tumens* was the *Uriankhian Tumen*.

The *Batmunh Dayan Khan* himself had been associated with the *Uriankhians* through family ties. By the end of his reign and under his orders, however, the *Uriankhian* genus was denied the right to have their own *Tumen* and divided into smaller parts.

With these events, the *Uriankhians* finally lost their former power. According to Mongolian sources, some were subjugated under *Dayan Khan*'s younger son, *Gersenze* (1513–1549), who owned a vast territory spanning from the *Khyangan* Mountain Range in the east to the *Altai* Mountains in the west and down to the *Gobi* Desert in the south. In his realm, he installed a new administrative system, the smallest unit of which was the *khoshun*, though the borders of the newly created *khoshuns* remained undefined until the end. Seven *khoshuns* were created, which sources refer to as the “seven *khoshuns* north” or the “seven *khoshuns Khalkha*.” The *Uriankhian* tribes were included in two *khoshuns*, which sources sometimes



Photo 6 Winter shoes (*tooku gos*). Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

call the “two *Uriankhians*” or “*Khalkha Uriankhians*.” When *Gersenze* died, his widow divided his possessions among his sons, who lived with their possessions on both sides of the Khangai mountains.

At the end of the 17th century, a great number of *Uriankhians* became active in the so-called “Alliance of the Four *Oirats*,” the eventual basis of the *Junggar Khanate* (1635–1758). They gradually became involved in the lengthy struggle for hegemony between the *Khalkha* and the *Oirat* Union.

In 1587 (the lunar calendar Year of the Pig), a major clash between the military forces of the *Khalkha* and the *Oirat* Union ended in complete defeat for the *Khalkha*’s military forces (Zlatkin 1964: 112–114). The *Khalkha* army was led by *Sholoi-Ubashi-Khuntaiji* (1567–1627), the great-grandson of *Gersenze* known in history as the first *Altyn Khan* and a warlord allied with the *Uriankhian Sain Madjig*.

The *Uriankhians* took an active part in the high-profile military and political developments in the *Dzhungarian Khanate* of the *Galdan Boshigtu Khan* era (1644–1697). Historian *C. Buyanchuluun* writes that “*Galdan Boshigt Khan* is gradually gaining momentum. In his command, there were 11 tribes from *Tumen Ulet*, *Khalkha*, and *Uriankhain*” (*Buyanchuluun* 1937: 92).

After that time, the Altai became the permanent residence of most *Uriankhians*, who as a community were then called *Altaic Uriankhian*. Of them it was said: “in all thirteen slopes of



Photo 7 Silver jewelry (*buguivch, Belzeg*) for women. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

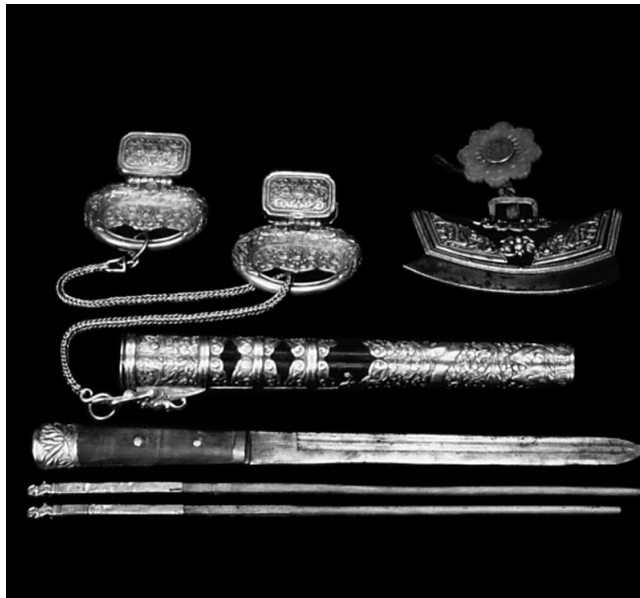


Photo 8 Silver steel jewelry (*khet, bel*) for men. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

the greater Altai, *Uriankhians* live; they live there still, as *ovoo* (piled stones) on the mountain, and as a stone statue in the desert.”

Southern Mongolia in 1636 and northern Mongolia in 1691 submitted as vassals to the Qing empire, leaving only the *Dzhungarian Khanate* independent; the latter lasted more than a century. *Galdantseren Khan* died in September of 1745, and a struggle for power began in

the *Dzhungarian Khanate*, greatly weakening its position in the face of the Qing. At this time, the *Uriankhians* were in a very strategic location in the event of open warfare between the Qing and the *Oirats*. One of the Qing Emperor's decrees states, "If the *Uriankhians* remain there, where they live now, they can cause serious obstacles to the advance of our troops. They can transmit information to *Oirats* on the location of our troops, or they can strike our troops. Therefore, this has to be addressed before the big war".⁴⁾ By 1758, the *Dzhungarian Khanate* had ceased to exist.

The *Uriankhians* participated actively in the fight against the Qing (1755–1758) under the leadership of Amarsanaa and Chingunzhava.

4. Altaic Uriankhan clothing: Winter and summer, men and women

Clothing has united and divided ethnic communities for centuries. As with any aspect of material culture, clothing has played a significant role in preserving and strengthening ethnic identity (Porshnev 1974: 4). Clothing has also signified the ethnic, gender, age, identity, and social status of men (Hagen-Torn 1933: 122).

Clothes are a wonderful example of how people combine domestic utility with the creation of images through unique combinations of materials, cuts, and decorations. These elements of culture can reveal a lot about the origins of a nation and its identity (Tishkov 2003: 86).

Traditional clothing reflects the aesthetic ideals of a people according to specific natural, geographical, climatic, and historical factors. The clothing of the Altai Uriankhians exhibits clear similarities to the clothing of neighboring peoples, indicating a shared historical, ethnographic, and natural-economic background among the nation's peoples. The national costume of the Altai Uriankhians is thus a combination of traditional and regional forms, serving not only as a sign system or symbol of identity but also as an indicator of the degree to which the Altai Uriankhians have adapted to their specific ethnic, historical, and cultural environment. Long residence side by side with other nations has had, of course, a significant impact on their clothes.

Despite alien ethnic influences, however, the traditional costume of the Altai Uriankhians was and remains the external expression of their ethnic identity, a persistent ethnic identifier helping to distinguish "us" from "them," tribesmen from strangers, and relatives from aliens.

Traditional Uriankhan clothing is very simple, economical, expedient, and distinctive in its utility and lack of extraneous elements. The first materials used for clothing by Altaic Uriankhians were skin (*ars*) and wool both of domestic animals and of wild animals caught during the hunt. These materials were processed in the traditional way (Badamkhatan 1996: 296).

For winter clothing, Altaic Uriankhians usually use various types of sheepskins. Sheepskins have served as the main lining material for all kinds of winter clothing and are usually stained with natural dyes using smoke (*utakh*). For warmer times of the year, there is suede (*eleg*), a thin, very finely crafted leather. Their winter outerwear, like the Mongols', is often covered with cotton or silk cloth from China. Summer clothing is sewn from conventional cotton. Silk cloth and velvet are used for festive clothing, which is trimmed with complex embroidery or appliqué.



Photo 9 Summer bathrobes (*devel*) for unmarried girls. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

Sewing is done mainly with wool or tendon threads. Woolen yarn is made from sheep and camel wool. There are also traditional methods of twisting threads. The wool is first moistened in cold water, then dried. The dried wool is twisted into threads (*utas*) of differing thicknesses with a spindle (*eeruul*). All kinds of outer- and inner clothing are sewn with thin threads of wool. Thick thread made of camel hair is usually used to sew the soles of shoes, felt stockings, the felt part of the yurt, and felt mats. Tendon threads are used mostly to sew shoes and some ranching equipment.

Our field studies show that the sewing of garments is done mainly by women and adolescent girls, who manufacture and repair all types of clothing by hand. Sewing among the Altai Uriankhians is a special kind of art. Dressmakers require much knowledge, experience, and ability: they must be artists and embroiderers, able to glue and quilt, make ornaments, and strictly maintain exact colors. Every woman's workplace contains supplies such as needles (*zuu*), homemade tendon and woolen yarn, a leather thimble (*huruuvch*), scissors (*khaiche*), and an iron (*ihuur*).



Photo 10 Summer bathrobes (*terlig*) for men. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

These are usually kept in a special bag, the *uilmii uut*. Needles and thread are sometimes kept in a felt bed mattress (*gudus*). Women often use a stick with a burnt end to apply designs on skin.

The Altai Uriankhians use different types of stitches for different materials (*e.g.*, leather, felt, fabric). During our fieldwork, we found that a seam for basting is made with *shidekh*, fur garments are sewn with *khuburdekh*, fabrics require the *khavakh*, and products made of fabric and fur are sewn with *khuberdekh*.

Virtually every woman has learned and used all types of stitches. A number of particularly skilled workers are given extra work—doing the sewing for the Lamaist clergy.

Traditional men's and women's clothing (*devel*) consists of upper (*urd khormoi*) and lower skirts (*dotood khormoi*), back (*ar tal*), front (*urd tal*), board (*enger*), sleeve (*khantsui*), cuff (*nudarga*), and collar (*zakh*).

The clothes are made this way: first, the woman takes the measurements of the man who brought her the material; then, she does the cutting. She takes the measurements by hand. When sewing children's clothes, pre-measurements must be taken carefully.

Altai Uriankhians dress strictly according to the seasons. In winter, men generally wear



Photo 11 Winter coat (*uch*) for men. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

a sheepskin coat (*uch*). They have several types of fur coat. One is made of bare sheepskins (*ustey uch*); another is also made of sheepskin, but its top is covered with cloth (*gadartay devel*); and yet another is made of clipped (*segsuurge* or *azargan*) sheepskins.

The manufacture of sheepskin coats for women begins with the measurements; then a boundary edge is traced, and finally the cut is made with scissors or a knife.

It should be noted that the traditional clothing of the Altai Uriankhians is not only the outward expression of their ethnic consciousness but also the material embodiment of their archaic ideas about the world.



Photo 12 The clothes of a shaman. Photo by T. Sugiyama. 1997.

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