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Chapter 9

Some Ideas on the Principles of Sacral Shaped Areas of the Mohe: Toward the Reconstruction of Cosmography in Ethnological Methodology

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1. Introduction

It is necessary to combine many different sources, such as archaeological, historical and ethnographical data, to reconstruct the cultures of ancient societies. Unfortunately, however, each cultural unity does not offer a full range of sources. It is therefore important to adopt a methodology that allows us to make up for the inevitable deficiencies. The methodology of semiotic interpretation is based on a combination of the hypotheses proposed by two advanced schools of social anthropology: the “Chicago school” of contemporary mythology developed by Bruce Lincoln and others (Lincoln 1999), and the school of interpretative anthropology founded by Clifford Girtz. In Russian ethnography the tradition of the interpretation of symbols as an encoding system of ethnic cultures was founded by Natalia Zhukovskaya (Zhukovskaya 1988). Recently this method of semiotic interpretation and reconstruction has been successfully developed in the archaeology of Russia and the Ukraine (SSIA 2002, 2005).

This methodology is based on the following two general concepts.

- Ethnic culture can be compared to a semantic sphere, in which all the components of the culture (such as material and spiritual) coexist as a semantic unity.
- There are universal phenomena of cultures that are produced by universal human reactions in response to external reality.

Spiritual aspects of culture, such as world-conception, self-awareness, and ethnic identity, can be reconstructed only through interdisciplinary investigation. For example, even if the whole complex of material that is the main subject of archaeology remains, this by itself is not enough to draw any conclusions about the ethnicity of its creators. This is because ethnicity is defined and marked by self-awareness and self-denotation, and because it is understandable only on the level of world-conception, which is a part of spiritual culture. Of course material remains also give us good information with which to reconstruct non-material aspects of culture, but they should be supplemented by corresponding materials from historical documents or ethnographies of societies in the same or other similar areas. This correspondence is the reason why it is important to study recent people who have been living in the area of excavation. Similar cultural features in their societies will have developed on the basis of the same natural environment as a means of ecological adaptation.

The theory of the subsistence culture of an ethnic group emphasizes three factors of adaptation: food, clothing, and dwellings. These factors of physical adaptation have been projected in the consciousness that is a main part of people's world-conception. Factors of subsistence culture do not always comprise principles of ethnicity, but they are often recognised as signs or symbols of ethnic and social identity. In other words, they symbolize a unique ethnic unity. Ethnic food culture, costume, and architecture are represented in their food, clothing, and dwellings.

A great number of archaeological materials can be classified as belonging to one of two categories: remains and relics from settlements, and those from funerals. In other words, fields of excavation represent two realms of cosmos and two kinds of human beings: "this world" and "the other world," profane and sacred, historical and mythical, or temporal and eternal. I agree that the cosmos is a total spiritual organism of mytho-poetical awareness that bears symbolic representation of the things of daily life. In this sense, for example, a dwelling should be recognized as a factor in the symbolic representation of daily life.

The history of every species is one of the occupation and familiarization of living space. But human beings have done this not only biologically, like other species, but also by using systems of symbols. Biologically and physiologically there are few differences between human beings and animals living in a cave. But as they adapted themselves to this natural space, human beings recognized it as the representation of a macrocosm and drew images and signs on the cave walls. They also adapted themselves to the landscape, thinking of natural rocks as examples of rock-art. Humans left not only relics of their living activities in their spaces, but also the marks of their opinions about them. Researchers are interested in how people lived, but even more interested in what they thought about it. Information about such thinking was often encoded and displayed as symbolic signs and marks in their living spaces, especially their dwellings. The principles of the encoding of information and composition of the symbolic space are fixed stereotypes of consciousness and are passed on from generation to generation. This is the mechanism whereby some features of ethnic culture are conserved through history.

2. Archaeology in Interpretation

The construction of the settlements and dwellings of the Mohe people¹⁾ includes some traits common among the peoples of northeast Asia, including recent indigenous peoples such as the Nanai, Ulchi, Nivh, and Ainu. Some ethnographers assume that dwelling traits both are important subsistence elements of cultural unity and, at the same time, speak of the history of cultural contacts between neighboring peoples (Sokolova 1998). In other words, how living space is structured is a kind of representation of cultural unity, and neighbors often pay attention to how others build their houses. When the authors of the ancient Chinese chronicles described the Mohe, they always mentioned their dugout dwellings.

The *Wen xian tong kao* (文献通考) states, "They mound up earth (soil) like a dam, dig a pit (hollow) as a living room. They open a hole on the top of the dwelling, and come in and get out with a ladder." The *Jian han shu* (前漢書) states, "Mohe from Blackriver are

living without any houses or cabins. They carry trunks of trees from hills, dig hollows, cover them with trunks and make big mounds.” The *Hou han shu* (後漢書) states, “All the time they were living in pits. The higher the status of the people was, the deeper their pit. At the pits of big families nine (9) ladders were used to rise from floor (bottom) to exit” (Kuner 1992: 32-33).

The *Jiu Tang shu* (旧唐書) also includes some information about their buildings and lifestyle.

Above a dug-out hollow they make beams (joists) in a construction like a trestle and cover it with soil. This is arched, and from a distance it is look like a Chinese mound. In the summer season they leave these dwellings and go wandering around the area, depending on the conditions of water and grass. With the beginning of winter they come back to the settlements again. (Shavkunov 1968: 34-35)

A number of archaeological excavations have shown that these descriptions were correct. The excavation conducted by Dr. Sergei Nesterov on the Bureya River, near the workers' settlement named Talakan, in summer 1995 is one (Nesterov, 1998). Nesterov had been engaged in archaeological research in this region for ten years. His excavation was one of the archaeological research projects in the Amur basin managed by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The project was sponsored by the Ministry of Hydro-Electric Energy with the aim of investigating and exploring the historical objects around the area that would be inundated after the construction of a hydro-electric power station on the Bureya River.

The objects excavated were quite ordinary. Some pottery and the badly preserved remains of wooden constructions of the Mohe type were dug out. Though all the materials are unique, I am particularly interested in the topographic orientation of dwellings in the landscape, or, in other words (in mythological terms), the cosmography of settlements that represents humanity's sphere in the cosmic structure. My idea of analyzing the correlation between structures of the Mohe's microcosm, represented by the settlement, and their macrocosm represented by the landscape, is stimulated by the work of Toichi Mabuchi, who did this for settlements in the Ryukyu Islands. He analyzed the structure of Ryukyu dwellings in his studies of their myth and rituals, and demonstrated a constant correlation between the orientation of dwellings and classification of living spaces and the general cosmological conception (Mabuchi 1968).

Such correspondence is an important factor for harmonizing common consciousness and self-awareness in the whole ethnic world-conception. This is fixed by custom and creates the tradition. However, basic paradigms of space orientation exist at the level of the unconscious, or within the conscious at a deep level (or at the level of archetype). Examples are spatial categories such as up and down, left and right, center and border, and inside and outside (as well as aesthetic categories such as the “golden ratio” formulated by Leonardo da Vinci). These paradigms of space are often dug up from the deep and unconscious level to the social level. In this case, originally topographic words are used as characterizations of the socium: “center” = “central person” (leader); “outside” = “outsider” (marginal

person); “right” as side = “right” as truth, and so on.

As was underlined by Kim Tegon, an ethnic consciousness may comprise archetypes that are represented in ethnic myth-ritual systems. He proposed that the western term “archetype” be translated into Japanese as *genpon* (原本), as this is more advantageous to the eastern mentality (Kim 1990).

However, it is obvious that archetypes also have a universal position. They appear in cultural phenomena and are represented in spatial structures. One universal archetype is the concept of “life essence.” As a result of my comparative and semiotic research dealing with the spiritual beliefs of ethnic groups practicing shamanism in different unconnected areas of the world, I insist that the concept of “life essence” forms a general category mobilizing human consciousness (Bannikov 1997). This is what focuses consciousness into a world-conception, converting the mass of humanity into structured groups in the cultural, mental, social, and political senses. I propose “life essence” as the general term for the central phenomenon of a spiritual conception of the world. For original aboriginal societies with a spiritual conception, this idea is clearly represented by the native concepts of the Polynesian *mana* and the Japanese *munai* (Miyako dialect in Ryukyu Islands) (Nevsky 1994). It was developed within the cosmological conception of shamanism. In the traditional shamanistic world-conception, the cosmos is an eternal, spiritual organism that exists in a balance of both life and death, light and dark. The life essence as well as harm and illness are circulating in the cosmos and are distributed within its various zones (Mabuchi 1968; Lebra 1985; Kreiner 1968; Beardsley 1959).

It is therefore very important that a dwelling occupy a good place and be correctly oriented, in order to be closed to harm and illness but open to the life essence. As was shown by Mabuchi, in the Ryukyu Islands harm and the life essence are believed to circulate along the trajectory of light/warmth and darkness/coldness, i.e., from the southeast to the northwest. This orientation is implicit in the cosmography of the inhabitants and provides their main principle for the construction of houses and settlements as well as graves and ritual places for post-human beings.

3. From Life Essence to Spatial Structure

The topography of the settlement excavated on the Bureya River clearly shows us its residents’ cosmography. A number of houses were constructed in a U-shape, the open side of which was oriented exactly due east, just in front of the river under the hill. They were usually built in places in which it might be inconvenient to live. Some sand strata show us that the houses were often wiped out by floods. In this place the river makes a 180-degree turn. It starts out curving to the north, gradually turns back on itself, and eventually flows south again. I believe that the northern direction of the stream in front of the rising sun was what drew the residents to this place, because when a person stands on the river bank facing eastward he or she sees the river flowing from right to left. North, west and left are the directions for leaving the realm of reality. Left-handness, as well as semi-blindness, and lameness are the signs of charismatic persons being connected with another world and handling mystic powers. Examples are the Greek Gefest, the Roman Mutsii Scevola, and

the Viking Odin, gods and heroes who showed mystic power over fire and iron (Lincoln 1986).

A fireplace for a forge was located in the northern part of the excavated site, i.e., at a site downstream from the settlement (Nesterov, 1998). The heads of all the skeletons in Mohe graves excavated in the Amur area were oriented precisely toward the north. Might this be enough for us to conclude that the world of death was located somewhere in the north in Mohe cosmography? It is difficult to say. In any case, there are some similarities with the funeral rites of the Nanai and Ulchi whom a number of researchers identify as the recent successors of the Mohe. These paradigms of space are often dug up from the deep and unconscious fact that the world of death was placed somewhere to the north not only in Mohe cosmography. It might be regarded as universal, at least for the large region of East Asia from Okinawa to the Amur River region, as suggested by Mabuchi (1968).

It is interesting to trace similar features of the structure of living spaces in other regions of the world. The Kazakhs who migrated from eastern Kazakhstan to the Russian Altai in the nineteenth century, changing in the process from a nomadic to a semi-nomadic lifestyle, often build wooden houses instead of *yurta* (traditional felt tents). The orientation of their new houses and their principles for dividing living space between people of different social strata have become quite similar to those seen in Okinawa. We may also wonder about the similarities in architecture of all megalithic constructions, from Sannai Maruyama (Japan) to Stonehenge (United Kingdom). Of course, it is impossible that there was any physical connection between such separate regions and times. There is only one conceivable realm of connection: the universal structure of human consciousness, which might be embodied in architectural structures across time and place.

Just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of the people of the Russian Federation faced the issue of finding a new basis for their self-identity (like the Japanese during the Meiji Restoration). It was a time of the revitalization of folk beliefs for all indigenous peoples. In the course of this process, the Nanai and Ulchi emphasized particular aspects of their historical awareness. For example, several residents of the Nanai and Ulchi regions told me at the beginning of 1990 that they were descended from a union of seven large and powerful ancient tribes who had battled with the Tang dynasty in China and Koguryo in Korea. This was their explanation as to why wooden sculptures of local deities have seven sticks on their heads. It might represent a sample of a new national self-awareness that interweaves historical facts with mythology. Among their deities are the so-called “Gods of Seven Standards” who are worshipped as national guardian spirits.

The cultural phenomenon is generally represented at two levels of world-conception and consciousness: sacred and profane, which are bound by the spiritual fluid of life-essence. As was remarked by Haruki Yamamoto, “It is difficult to pick up a central idea from a number of folk beliefs and myth-ritual systems, but it is true that each one is bound in spiritual unity by general cult of nature as an eternity. ... The main principle of cultural history is found in the idea of keeping the life essence of nations” (Kageyama 1973: 71). Certainly folk-history may be understandable in terms of the orientation of the population toward self-conservation. Among the means and aims of such conservation, the social mobility of the community should be emphasized as its historical self-awareness in terms of

length of time and ethnic identity in the actual contemporary territory of the population. The phenomenon of tradition as the impulse of self-representation in history appears to be a natural cycle.

Principles of self-representation traceable in rituals can be used to reconstruct the ancient form of an ethnic culture. In this way, elements already forgotten and useless in present-day life are remembered in sacred terms. For instance, peoples in the Amur region have built their houses for more than 700 years in the way they did in Manchuria and Russia, but at a ritual moment they open an entrance on the roof, as if they wanted to display their historical memory.

The marking and enclosing of a sacred space is one of the main principles of temple construction. It develops in folk-culture as a principle of the development of harmony between the socium and other communal zones. Even ordinary dwellings were often built according to the same structure as that used for a shrine or altar in traditional societies that held a totally spiritual world-conception, and possessed a degree of sacredness. However, since the beginning of civilization deities have left the human world. As a result, temples were recreated to develop the worship industry as an institution, resulting in a conflict between sacred and profane that was termed by Karl Jaspers the “axis epoch,” the epoch of the creation of the great world religions.

In Mohe society, the traditional and myth-poetical world-conceptions were still alive, and such conflict seemed to be unknown. Their houses were therefore built to be open to the light and life-essence coming from the east.

Notes

- 1) In Russian archaeology, “Mohe” generally denotes a cultural complex that was seen in the northern part of present-day northeast China and the southern part of the Russian Far East. This complex is positioned between the Iron Age and the establishment of the Jurchen culture. Though the people of these regions in these times were represented in the Chinese chronicles by different names and characters, such as Yi-lou 挹婁, Su-zhen 肅真, Mu-ji 勿吉, and Mo-he 靺鞨, they shared some common cultural traits in their dwellings, clothing, and food.

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