

Foreword

journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Reports
volume	101
page range	1-4
year	2012-03-15
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10502/00008607

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Altai Uriankhains are one of the ethnic groups which inhabit the western part of Mongolia. They are distributed over Mongolian *Altai* from the upper-streams of Khovd River to the upper-streams of Bulgan River and occupy territories of Duut and Munkh-Khairkhan Soums of Khovd Aimag, and Buyant, Bulgan, Sagsai, and Altantsogts soums, and partly Deluun and Tolbo Soums of Bayan-Ulgii Aimag. In addition, the other Mongolian-speaking ethnicities such as Zakhchins, Torghuts, Myangats, and Uulds reside to the south off them, Durbets, Bayids, and Khalkas - to the northeast off them, and the Turkish speaking ethnicities such as *Kazakhs*, *Altains* and *Tuvans*- to the west and northwest off them.

At present time, *Altai Uriankhains* counted to be consist of about 25.5 thousand people, the figure was likely has included *Khuvsgul Uriankhains* who till now have not been ethnographically studied, but it was known that the figure did in fact include part of Tuvans and Todjins. Mostly, the latter ethnic groups are erroneously called as *Uriankhains*, although they would never call themselves as being as such (Ralidin 1968: 31).

Altai Uriankhains, as the other ethnicities of Western Mongolia, speak Oirat dialect of Mongolian language. As noted by investigators, the foundations of Oirat dialect are based on Durbet dialect and these are significantly different from modern khalkha dialect. The khalkha dialect is the foundation of modern literary Mongolian, and it is spoken by the vast majority (more 90%) of population in Mongolia. The difference between oirat and khalkha dialects basically deals with their phonetical systems and also, into some extent, with their morphological as well as lexical specifics.

Process of formation of modern ethnic composition in Mongolia was prolonged process and has passed a number of historical stages. The Oirats became more independent at the beginning of XY century. Probably, starting from that period Mongols were divided into two branches: eastern and western. The western branch characterized a certain unity in culture and livelihood although each group had somewhat definitive ethnographic originality.

This work presents an investigation of the traditional culture of the *Altai Uriankhains*. Since the XVI century, their encampments are located in the western and the north-western parts of Mongolia. However, it might be assumed that the formation of their traditional culture was a complex and has proceeded not only in their present areas of settlements, but it has been taking place in the broader historical as well as the geographical space. Appearance of the traditional culture

of the *Altai Uriankhains* in a number of traits and characteristics reflect the way through which this nation has been evolved in the different periods of its historical development.

Altai Uriankhains are among those ethnics who have been poorly studied and sparsely reflected in historical and ethnographic literature. The first scholars who have written about them were the famous Russian investigators – travelers such as A.M. Pozdneev, G.N. Potanin, G.E. Grumm-Grzhimailo, and M.V. Pevtsov.

Since middle of the XIX century, they had periodically visited khoshuns of *Altai Uriankhains* that allowed them to personally observe the image of their life, traditions and customs, etc. Their travel notes had left to us the valuable information on place of residence, life, material and spiritual culture of *Altai Uriankhains*. Information, contained in their work, revealed that *Altai Uriankhains* wandered between Rivers of Chingil and Bulgun in the summers while approaching *Altai* in winter at times when these travelers visited their khoshuns.

They also wrote that khoshuns of *Altai Uriankhains* were headed by Governors-Amban Noyons, who obeyed rulers – Meirins-zangis of khoshuns that consisted of soums and arbans. Lamaism and shamanism were described quite in details in their writings, associated with them rituals and religious ceremonies. There are data about the wedding, funeral and other rituals, national sports, and folklore. Insignificant place in their work is devoted to aspects of material culture: housing, different types of foods, particularly, of dairy foods and tea, and methods of their preparation, description of male and female clothing, hats, etc. Interesting materials were provided regarding the ethnic composition of *Altai Uriankhains*. Russian traveler M.V. Pevtsov, who in 1878–1879 visited khoshuns of *Altai Uriankhains*, wrote that “... *Uriankhains* are divided into two very different groups: one occupies 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 in the southern *Altai*. *Altai Uriankhains* do also speak with Mongolian dialect, and moreover, they differ from those the Yenisei by specifics of life and religion: *Altai Uriankhains* are Buddhists but the Yenisei ones are mostly pagans” (Pevtsov 1951: 108). In paper of G. N. Potanin is possible to find such a statement: “... tribe that speaks the Turkic-Tatar language in the north-western Mongolia, called *Uriankhains* and this tribe occupies a narrow strip along side with our border from the tops of River Khovd at the west up to Kosogol and beyond... Title *Uriankhain* are given this people by Mongolians, but they call themselves Tuba or Tuva ... also they call themselves as Kukchuluuts” (Potanin 1881: 7). Thus, he correctly pointed out that should not be confused Tuvans, who never considered themselves as *Uriankhains*, with those of *Altai Uriankhains*. Kukchuluuts were one of ethnical clans of genus of Tuvans; sometimes they are called themselves also as monchagami.

Academician Maisky, who worked in Mongolia in early XX century, wrote: "... for the complete ethnographic picture that I had seen in Mongolia, it is useful to mention the so-called *Uriankhains*. *Altai Uriankhains*, roamed the Mongolian *Altai*, from the upper-streams of Khovd River to upper-streams of Bulgun, they consisted of seven khoshuns, all spoke Mongolian" (Maisky 1921: 34). Opinion of these investigators later were supported by Buryat scholar Ts. Zhamtsarano, who wrote that "... by specifics of language, lifestyles, forms of traditional culture the *Altai Uriankhains* undoubtedly might be considered as Mongol-speaking tribes of the Western Mongolia." (Zhamtsarano 1934: 128).

It should be noted that in many cases, observations of Russian travelers are quite bit fragmentary because they were obtained from uninformed respondents.

Starting from 1960's of XX century, to the study of history and traditional culture of nomadic tribes of western Mongolia, including *Altai Uriankhains*, got involved scientific institutions of Mongolia: Institute of History of Mongolia, Institute of Linguistics and Literature both of Academy of Sciences of Mongolia, etc.

Employees of these scientific organizations have been engaged in the collection and study of materials relating to economy, life and traditional culture of *Altai Uriankhains*.

They have gathered materials on the lifestyle, materialistic and spiritual cultures, including religious beliefs, customs, habits, about burial rites and maternity, as well as literature, folk art, and handicrafts, etc. Despite of the extensive work done in those years with respect to the collection of information on the history and traditional culture of *Altai Uriankhains*, we should recognize that hitherto these materials are still not sufficiently exposed to in-depth analyses and scientific interpretation.

The first work of Mongolian writers, dedicated to the traditional culture of *Altai Uriankhains*, appeared in 1960. Then Mongolian ethnographer S. Badamhatan published in Russian a short article entitled as "On wedding customs of *Altai Uriankhains*." In 1992 published a book by Mongolian ethnographer Kh. Nyambu entitled as "Introduction to ethnography of Mongolia", wherein there is a section called as "Oirat" into which were incorporated *Altai Uriankhains*.

A collective monograph called as "Ethnography of Mongolia" was published in Mongolian in 1996, wherein there is a chapter named as "Altai Uriankhains". In 2000, the Mongolian historian Ts. Gantulga published a historical article "Altai Uriankhains". This quite small number of papers, in fact, is limited to the literature on them, to some extent, reflects the life of *Altai Uriankhains* in the late XIX - early XX centuries. Based on their full capacity, it is difficult to completely understand the economy, family and social life, materialistic as well as spiritual cultures of the *Altai Uriankhains*. These works, in deed, did not concern with

many problems such as household contacts and cultural interaction, the relationship of *Altai Uriankhains* with their neighbors.

The author of the study aims to recreate the possibly more or less accurate pictures of the traditional culture of the *Altai Uriankhains*, highlighting the problems of their economic structure, material and spiritual culture, family and social life. This work deals with all particulars, which are typical for the historical and ethnographic investigations of any culture, including the economics, material culture, shelter, food, clothing, utensils, religion, family and social life. These constitute a concept of “traditional culture”. Researchers have noted that traditional culture has been created during the pre-industrial era and was based on unwritten sources, i.e., verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, and bears the clear signs of local and ethnic specificity. The chronological framework of the work covers mainly the end of XIX – the early XX centuries, but it also sometimes does excursion into more of earlier periods.

In a certain extent, this is the first monographic study on the *Altai Uriankhains*, and it will complement the renovation of the cultural heritage of the classical Central Asian nomads contributed by Mongolian ethnographers during the past two decades of XX century in a format of a fundamental three-volume work named as “the Ethnography of Mongolia,” which was published in Ulan Bator in Mongolian language. By ethnicity, lifestyle, forms of traditional culture, especially, language, the *Altai Uriankhains* might be undoubtedly ranked as one of the Mongolian tribes of Western Mongolia.

The paper is based on field data collected by the author in the late 80’s of last century during the ethnographic expeditions of the Institute of History, Academy of Sciences of Mongolia as well as during the visits of later periods to various districts of *Altai Uriankhains* where it was possible to record the memories of old people who knew and remembered those features of culture and life which are largely lost today among them.

The description of the material culture has used museum collections of Khovd and Bayan-Ulgii aimags as well as some collections of the State Museum of History and Ethnography and historical documents of the State Archives of Mongolia. In addition to archival and museum materials, works of Russian authors have been utilized as the bases of the investigation.