

Cultural Metaphor in Oboo Worship: A Religious Anthropological Study Based on Mongolian Nationality

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Abstract: This paper explores the cultural and spiritual significance of Mongolian Oboo sacrifices from an anthropological perspective. Oboo, traditional cairns or shrines assembled from stones and wooden materials, often located on hilltops or mountain peaks, serve as media of spiritual communication and ceremonial offerings. The practices reinforce communal bonds and tradition continuance and carry several symbolic meanings related to both natural and spiritual realms. The study explores the form and content of Oboo sacrifices, demonstrating how they embody Mongolians' religious ideologies and symbolize the interconnection between humans and the natural world. Furthermore, the paper studies how the rituals form collective memory and a sense of group identity for Mongolians. Through this investigation, the research illuminates the enduring resilience and sophistication of Mongolian traditional customs, underscoring their cultural significance.

Keywords: Oboo Sacrifice, Mongolian Nationality, Cultural Metaphor

1. Introduction

The massive Mongolian landscape is a vivid base of cultural depth and diversity. On the grasslands, an ancient practice intertwines nature, culture, and spirituality in profound symbolism: worshipping Oboo. It stands as an enduring testament to the preservation of Mongolian religious beliefs. The local people, guided by a powerful bond with their land, have carried this tradition through generations. This essay seeks to provide an anthropological investigation into the rich cultural background of Oboo worship to delve into its unique characteristics, spiritual essence, and contributions to forming group identity. It creates an enduring significance until contemporary Mongolian religious life.

The first section will introduce the form of Oboo worship, focusing on the role and meaning of the ceremony, offerings, and symbolism that define this phenomenon. Although seemingly humble, the structure and content of the Oboo carry resonances of the Mongolian experiences of landscape, spirituality, and interrelation with the natural environment. This symbolic construction, standing as a testament to the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, varies according to its specific purpose. Through a deeper examination of these traditional stone cairns, people can experience the rich cultural narratives woven into Oboo's creation and move beyond their apparent physical traits to uncover stories of respect, communion, and survival. From contemplating its history and symbolic meanings to exploring its physical manifestation and the ceremony surrounding it, studying the Mongolian Oboo opens a window into the profound world of cultural expression and anthropological richness.

Next, this paper will explore the religious background of Oboo worship, dissecting the spiritual elements. The religious and historical background of the Oboo is richly layered, tracing back to when the Mongolians followed a shamanistic belief system deeply connected with nature. Herein, the Oboo found its rudimentary form, serving as a material symbol of spiritual dialogue and exchange. The subsequent advent of Buddhism introduced a new religious paradigm, yet managed to amalgamate with preexisting beliefs without displacing the prominence of the traditional Oboo. In considering the religious background of Mongolian Oboo, this study will delve into the historical evolution of Oboo's shamanistic roots through their Buddhist influences, their intertwined relationship with the pastoral nomad lifestyle, and their enduring impact as cultural and spiritual landmarks. This exploration will shed light on the broader tapestry of Mongolian religious practices and underscore how they collectively cultivate deep ties between the people, their ancestry, their faiths, and the land they inhabit.

Finally, this study will explore the crucial role of Oboo worship in constructing a sense of group identity through the Mongolian participants' collective memory. Oboo remains deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the Mongolians, allowing it to endure the test of time and place as an irreplaceable symbol of religious tradition. Functioning beyond just a religious symbol, the Oboo is deeply woven into the communal life of Mongolians, its rituals fostering unity, reinforcing shared cultural memory, and anchoring individuals within their social landscape. The paper will introduce how shared experiences of this ancient ritual fortify the bonds between Mongolian people, fostering a strong sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

2. Form and Content of Oboo Worship

2.1. Ceremony

The Oboo Worship Ceremony is a distinct and fascinating cultural tradition in Mongolia. It has spiritual significance and reaffirms humans' ties with the supernatural and natural worlds. The ceremony is typically conducted in high-altitude spots or crossroads and exhibits reverence for ancient spirits and celestial entities and appeals for blessings and protection. Participants partake in various rituals, such as circulating the Oboo, offering food, milk, vodka, or even money, while venerating the piled stones or woods, often adorned with silk scarves [1]. The Oboo Worship Ceremony is not just a mere religious rite; it is a gateway to the unique traditions of Mongolia, providing profound insights into the intricate mingling of human life, nature, and spirituality.

An Oboo features a distinctive appearance that seems to encapsulate its spiritual significance. It is an ancient shrine constructed from a heap of stones or wood, sometimes intertwined with larch branches, assembled traditionally at high locations such as hilltops, mountain peaks, or passageways for maximum visibility. The pile often grows over time as passersby add rocks or twigs, paying their respects to the spirits. Colorful silk scarves are commonly tied around or hung from the Oboo, usually in shades of blue to symbolize the sky [2].

The locations where Oboo is constructed and the setting for the sacrifices hold significant importance in Mongolian culture. Typically, Oboo is erected on high areas, such as mountain tops and hills. High places are believed to be the dwellings of local gods, thus symbolizing closeness to spiritual entities [3]. Besides, Oboo is often placed at crossroads, thresholds, and borders where boundaries are marked, and passers-by can pay their respects. This location choice signifies the belief that spirits inhabit these places and provide a natural space for humans and fairies to interact. Furthermore, Oboo can often be found near settlements as they strengthen the community's spiritual ties, operating as an interface between the human sociocultural world and the spiritual world. Their prominence in the landscape is also a testament to the enduring influence of nature in Mongolian traditions and the profound spiritual significance attached to the natural world.

The ceremony of the Oboo worship is characterized by an established sequence of rituals designed to evoke a sense of connection with the natural and spiritual worlds. The Gods Mongolians worship are not “explicit” but are “master spirits” or local deities that take over a specific role for the entire region [4]. Therefore, they worship gods of mountains and gods of waters. The foundational ritual begins with the purification of the participants, who clean themselves physically and spiritually by cleansing smoke and purifying chants. The ritual space, typically outdoors and surrounding a sacred stone, is also cleansed to create an atmosphere for divine interaction. Accompanied by the sound of rhythmic instruments, such as drums and bells, participants engage in a series of prayers. These supplications, conducted in a language with symbolic meaning, are directed toward the spirits associated with nature and ancestors. The leader of the ceremony, often possessing immense spiritual knowledge, serves as the intermediary between the participants and the sacred world.

2.2. Offerings

Central to the form and content of the Oboo worship is the tradition of presenting a diverse array of offerings, which signify the respect and devotion of participants towards the supernatural realm. These offerings, chosen according to ritual prescription or local custom, typically comprise food, libations, clothes, prayer flags, and smoke. First, staples such as butter, milk, cheese, and pastries are offered to represent sustenance and generosity. Then, representing nourishment and spiritual growth, beverages like milk and tea are poured onto sacred stones. Moreover, colorfully decorated pieces of cloth or intricate prayer flags called khadags are fastened to the Oboo or arranged nearby. Offered to the spirits, the different colors of khadags represent various elements of life, with blue symbolizing the eternal blue sky and white signifying purity and peace. By tying khadags, followers believe that the prayers of the participants ascend to heaven. Also, burning juniper branches, as a purifying and protective element, creates a sacred atmosphere. Each of the participants’ offerings embodies a specific spiritual concept, representing the diverse facets of the human experience and environment.

2.3. Symbolism

Embedded within the form and content of the Oboo worship are symbols and critical concepts that transcend cultural boundaries and strengthen the connection between humans and the spiritual world [5]. For instance, the Oboo, typically a stone cairn, represents the sacred and mundane meeting point. It is also believed to house local spirits of the land or the sky – known as Tenggeri or Ugaalga – marking the sanctity and protective powers of the area. By engaging in rituals of supplication around the Oboo, participants forge links with their ancestors, deities, and nature. Moreover, the Oboo sacrifice embodies a cyclical understanding of life and the cosmos. People will walk around the Oboo in a clockwise direction during rituals, which mirrors the celestial bodies' movement and symbolizes life's cyclic nature. Additionally, rituals are performed seasonally or annually to coincide with events like the movement of heavenly bodies, animal migrations, or important agricultural cycles. For example, during the summer, people worship the Oboo to symbolize reproduction as the newborn appears at that time. During the sacrifice, they “acquire the blessing of the mountain spirit” to use the land for further reproduction [6]. This congruity with nature embodies harmony, reinforcing the belief in the interconnection of all life.

3. Religious Culture Behind Oboo's Collective Thinking

The Oboo is a physical representation of Mongolian cultural and religious beliefs. Its values are meshed in the fabric of the Mongol societies, reflecting the unique interplay of religion and culture dating back to ancient times. Each stone placed is a testament to their religious inclinations, a sacrifice symbolizing prayers or petitions to the heavens. The Oboo often marks significant locations, like

mountain passes, river sources, or other places of perceived spiritual importance, embodying the people's respect and reverence for the environment and the divine forces they believe to inhabit it.

The religious roots behind the Oboo worship are found within the traditional shamanistic beliefs and Buddhist practices of the Mongolian peoples that have evolved together for centuries. Shamanism, an ancient spiritual tradition, perceives reality as imbued with spiritual significance. It was a religion that nomadic people adopted naturally to respond to nature [7]. The belief posits that the natural world, including its geographical features, is inhabited by spirits and entities with which the shaman can interact. This belief is evident in the Oboo worship, with the stone piles often marking specific natural locations such as rivers, mountains, and crossroads, as they are believed to be places of spiritual solid energy or influence. Adding a stone to the Oboo is akin to leaving an offering or a prayer to these spirits, invoking their protection or asking for their blessings.

At the core of the Oboo worship is the belief in 'Tenger,' often translated to mean 'heaven' or 'sky' in English, symbolizing the highest spiritual power or god in ancient Mongolian shamanism. [8] The blue scarves often tied around the Oboo represent the eternal blue sky, a direct homage to Tenger, underlining the religious sentiment of praying to the sky god for safety, guidance, and prosperity.

Besides, Buddhism, which started integrating into Mongolian culture around the 16th century, influenced the Oboo worship. When the Buddhist missionaries arrived, they only assimilated the previous Shamanistic practices but did not change them. In Dorji Banzarov's work "The Black Faith, or Shamanism among the Mongols," he claimed that all religious change is corruption since it disrespects the ancestors. The Mongols had distorted their fire worship down Iranian influences [9]. When only replacing old rituals with new ones of duplicate functions, Buddhism successfully blended into the local culture compared to other expanding religions. Oboo sacrifices often contain elements like prayer flags, incense, and Buddhist imagery, indicating the confluence of shamanistic and Buddhist traditions. The ceremonial act of walking around the Oboo three times in a clockwise direction draws its roots from Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

Interestingly, nomadic life has contributed significantly to the religious connotations of the Oboo sacrifice, as the nomads often take long, arduous journeys and seek spiritual protection. Furthermore, the necessity of surviving in harsh, changeable climates has strengthened their belief in higher powers that govern their lives, contributing to the religious significance of their practices like the Oboo sacrifice.

4. How does the Collective Memory of Sacrifice Construct Group Identity

At the heart of the Oboo worship lies the principle of collective participation. Members of the community each contribute a stone, and in doing so, they reinforce their communal bonds and express their collective spiritual devotion. Adding a rock to the Oboo is performed ritualistically, often at the beginning of a journey to invoke divine protection or during holidays to celebrate shared beliefs. This collective act of sacrifice is an important ritual, bridging the realms of the physical and spiritual, individual and communal, thereby reinforcing the interconnection of life as perceived in their worldview.

This shared ritual is pivotal in preserving Mongolians' collective memory – connecting the present with the past, weaving together history, legend, and spirituality threads. First, the placement of an Oboo often marks a significant location, whether of historical, spiritual, or communal importance. It thus serves as a physical record of shared experiences, places, events, and traditions that tie the group together.

Also, stories and legends associated with each Oboo are handed down from generation to generation, extending the community's communal memory and fortifying the collective identity. These shared narratives bridge the gap between past and present, turning the Oboo into a living memorial, a token of remembrance linking ancestors with their descendants. To commemorate the

ancestors is a way for ethnic groups to gain legitimacy in history and link themselves back to a whole local community identity [10]. Every group member recognizes the Oboo's significance, and this shared knowledge fosters a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. Similarly, it reinforces collective memory by fortifying standard cultural norms and practices intrinsic to the group.

In parallel, the Oboo worship shapes cultural resilience, serving as a bulwark against the encroachment of rapid modernization and the erosion of traditional values. As the stones of the Oboo continue to be heaped, so does the persistence and continuity of their culture and beliefs – the sacrifice signifies prayers and a communal oath to keep their unique cultural identity alive. Hence, the Oboo is a monument of stone and living memorials of cultural memory and identity.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the complex and profound practice of Mongolian Oboo worship, shedding light on its unique rituals, the intricate symbiotic relationship between humankind and the natural world, and its rich religious basis. Through Oboo sacrifices, Mongolians express their respect and humility before the spirits they believe to inhabit the earth and reinforce communal bonds between each other.

However, the understanding of this vibrant cultural practice would be incomplete without recognizing the deficiencies and potential influences of external factors that may impact its continuity and strength. Future research should explore the impacts of rapid urbanization, increasing globalization, and possible shifts in Mongolian Oboo worship, which might instigate changes in these old rituals. Moreover, while this study delves into the tangible and intangible facets of Mongolia's Oboo culture, it falls short of comprehensively analyzing the differing interpretations and roles these sacrifices play among various demographic parts in Mongolia, including gender, age, and socioeconomic status.

Despite these shortcomings, a broader, more inclusive understanding of Mongolian Oboo worship remains vital. It enriches people's multicultural appreciation and empowers them to safeguard the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of worldwide human civilization. The Oboo tradition echoes an ongoing dialogue between the past, present, and future and is worth continued academic exploration, recognition, and preservation.

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