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**The Sacred Trees of
Chodži Baror:
Phytolatry and the
Cult of the Female
Deity in Central Asia**

The cult of vegetation occupies a special place among the various systems of pre-Islamic beliefs and rituals still found today in the religious and ceremonial life of Central Asia's Muslims. Whichever aspect of Muslim life one considers (be it ceremonies associated with the life cycle or calendar, festivals associated with work, household magic or traditional healing), signs of phylotary are always present in different forms; from traditional fumigation using the sacred herb rue (invariably a part of every ritual activity) and the tying of votive threads to trees, to a complex sacrificial ritual at the sacred tree. The rich variety of beliefs and rituals explains ethnographers' long interest in this field, and many studies have been devoted to rituals associated with vegetation (*Peshchereva* 1927, *Peshchereva* 1963, *Ershov* 1953, *Khamryaev* 1958, *Snesarev* 1969: 195-206 and others).

Equally, it is precisely because there are so many facets to this phenomenon that many aspects of it are still little studied and even unknown. These include both the tradition of sacralisation and veneration of large trees growing in the wild, which, because so ancient has survived less well than other later forms of phylotary, such as venerating cultivated trees, cereals and other cultivated plants. The rarity of the ancient tradition and its subsequent degeneration can also be explained by natural causes: after all, before a tree can become an object of worship, it has to reach a „venerable“ age. Although local people sometimes plant „mighty“ trees with this specific intent and try, despite the deteriorating ecological environment and acute land shortage, to prevent their destruction as dictated by religious lore, it is often impossible to uphold the traditional taboo on felling age-old trees, whose number diminishes year on year. Many of these objects of worship today have long since become dried-out trees and have usually survived only because they are located „beyond“ people's earthly interests – in cemeteries and places remote from human habitats, unsuited to life and livelihood.

This article will focus on one of the unique sanctuaries of the Fergana Valley – Khodzhi Baror mazar¹, located in Akhunbabayevsky district (near the city of Margilan in Uzbekistan) where the tradition of tree worship has survived in a more ancient form than in other similar places. Based on materials gathered during field research out on a visit to this mazar at the end of 2004, we will attempt to identify the most archaic layer of beliefs associated with the cult of trees, which, although significantly transformed by the influence of other religious belief systems – first and foremost Islam – can still be observed today and therefore deserves of our attention.

Broken tradition

One of the most popular holy places in the Fergana Valley, Khodzhi Baror mazar is located within the territory of an old cemetery and comprises a series of cult objects, which all go under a single name associated with a deity. In addition to the crypt, there are structures built for pilgrim lodgings and worship: living quarters (*mekhmonkhona*), a courtyard with hearths, canopies, utensils and other household items for the preparation of ritual foods and communal meals (*oshkhona*) and a place of prayer (*mechet*). Although the crypt of Khodzhi Baror formally represents the central cult object, the main attraction of this sacred place and the reason for its popularity with pilgrims, are the elm trees.

There is scant information about the figure whose name the shrine bears. In the words of the keeper (*sheikh*) of the mazar, Saint Khodzhi Borar was a fighter for the faith (*gazy*), who converted infidels (*kafiry*) to Islam. Then one day he disappeared and people built a crypt on the site of his disappearance. According to legend, the holy man will one day return, but his followers believe that even in his absence Khodzhi Baror helps the faithful with their problems. Although pilgrims are motivated by a broad spectrum of predicaments when

¹ Mazar – Arabic, literally “a place that is visited”. The term is used in Central Asia to mean “cemetery”, “grave”, but also to denote a holy place.

they turn to the saint for help, most come in the hope of being granted good fortune in some important endeavour. The mazar's particular speciality is reflected in the name of its saint, Khodzhi Baror, which means „Lord Fortune“.

A strange name attached to a person with no clear biography is quite common in the hagiology of Central Asia, and however paradoxical that may seem, it speaks volumes. G. P. Snesarev, who meticulously researched the Central Asian hagiological texts from Khorezm, identified a group of holy men who fall into this particular category, together with three other groups: figures from the Bible and Koran; medieval Sufis and their followers; local rulers and members of their families; local aristocracy and other figures, who „can at a stretch be called saints“ (Snesarev 1969: 277-278; Snesarev 1983: 201-204). His research, like the ethnographic studies of other authors, shows that hidden behind the images of saints with an „indeterminate“ name and life, stand archaic figures, as a rule – pre-Islamic deities, who evolved into Muslim saints through the process of Islamification.

Khodzhi Borar mazar is one of the oldest sacred places in the Fergana Valley, although the central cult site, the saint's crypt, was built quite possibly as recently as 10-20 years ago. It is not known what the structure that previously stood on this site looked like or how or why it disappeared, but one can assume that the old crypt suffered the same fate as many other similar structures, which were deliberately destroyed in the 1950 s-60s. The new crypt is architecturally unremarkable and is made of fired bricks. Apart from the entrance, it is laid out in the form an arch and has no decorative features or objects of cult significance (such as drapes, lamps, or occasional reproductions of views of Mecca, etc.) that would usually make up the interior décor of such shrines. But most surprising of all is that there is no grave here: instead at the centre of the chamber's floor is simply a place marked out for the laying of a prayer mat (*dzhoynamaz*).

At first glance, the absence of a grave may seem perfectly logical since after all, according to legend, the saint did not die but disappeared, and moreover is supposed to return. Nonetheless, this peculiarity is most unusual in shrines such as mazars, as has been shown both by our own research and studies published by other ethnographers.² Frames draped in material and shaped like a tomb are often erected in places where the saint, according to legend, merely visited and „left his footprint“ (*kadamzhoy*). In those instances where a shrine is associated with the name of one or another „disappeared“ saint (*goyib*), an earthen mound or hemispherical brick or clay structure imitating a tomb is always erected at the place where he disappeared. This principle has been well-established for centuries, but the point is not only, and not even, that the way the formal, exterior tradition is observed has now been changed, but more that at their root these changes negatively impact a very important component of pilgrimage (*ziyerat*) – a standard ritual that includes a whole series of different activities around the tomb: circling the tomb (*tavaf*), touching its surface with the palms, ritual lamentations at the headstone, sometimes sweeping the ground around it, application to the face and other parts of the body of dust, limestone or earth collected from the tomb, as well as other magical acts. In other words, it is the grave that is central to the mazar and normally the target of the pilgrim's who set out to visit the shrine. What is the explanation for this departure from a centuries old tradition in such a way as to undermine the customary rituals that pilgrims go there to enact?

² The classic model of saints' cults assumes the presence of the saint's grave, which is ritualised and forms the sacral centre of the shrine (See, for example, Gilchrist 1986: 322; Jeffery 1958: 226).

The keeper of the mazar was unable to give a direct answer to this question, but said that the shrine has powerful patrons who provide funds for its construction and decoration, and they determine what should be built and how. We have come across such situations time and again, when the *sheikh* is dependent on „lofty patrons“. The information we have obtained in the course of our study of various shrines suggests that the role of patron of the mazar is sometimes filled by district administrators, whose aim is to divert the flow of additional funds to their treasury³, and sometimes by wealthy private benefactors, who wish to accomplish a godly deed at the same time as perpetuating their own memory. But most often it is leaders of radicalised Muslim communities, who take into their own hands the custody of shrines with the aim of „reforming“ the spiritual life of Muslims and to cleanse it of traditions alien to Islam. By controlling mazars, the centre of religious life, they have the real possibility of influencing the religious consciousness and behaviour of believers, which is why they resort to a number of measures, including prohibitive sanctions on the performance of certain rituals⁴.

In the case of Khodzhi Baror mazar, the entire ritual is reduced to a „simplified“ version no different from usual Muslim prayer. This break with tradition can be seen as an attempt by spiritual leaders, to all intents and purposes custodians of the shrine and its managers, to „reform“ the ritual sphere, to cleanse it of traditions that are alien to Islam.

Trees as the source of life-giving forces

Although the crypt of Khodzhi Baror is formally the central cult object of the entire complex, it is not in fact the shrine that attracts pilgrims, but a group of elm trees at the entrance to the cemetery in a fenced off area, intended as a place for the consumption of ritual food and meals. Many owls nest in the dense crowns of these trees, and this is seen by pilgrims as an inherent sign of the trees' sacredness.

Every Friday, dozens of believers come from different places to gather together at the mazar. On holy days they come in their hundreds, not only to perform Friday prayers in the mosque here or to make a request to the saint, but mainly to drink the sap from the trees, which they perceive to have miraculous healing properties.

This sap, which the pilgrims drink and apply to sore spots, is dark orange in colour, bitter in taste and has a strong smell of iodine. According to the sheikh it is an effective remedy for various ailments but especially beneficial for female infertility. That is why most of the pilgrims are women, who come for a miracle cure not only on Fridays, but on ordinary days too, when the *sheikhs* use ordinary rubber piping to extract the sap from excisions made in the trunks of the trees.

The Khodzhi Baror mazar is the only cult site of its kind in the Fergana Valley but similar shrines can be found in other districts of the region. These have been recorded in a number of places, particularly in Khorezm (the Gyully-bii mazar near Khanka, the Azver-bobo mazar near Kunya-Urgench, and others), where sacred trees have also been found that are „especially revered because of the fact that they exude sap, which infertile women drink, rub on their bodies and carry away with them“ (*Snesarev* 1969: 203).

³ The flow of pilgrims to mazars, especially in the spring and autumn when huge popular festivities (*sayti*) are organized around the mazar and a lively trade goes on (See: Rassudova 1985: 101) is a significant stimulant to the economy of those settlements where they are located.

⁴ History has many instances of attempts made to eradicate the tradition of worshipping the graves of saints. Thus, in the historical treatise of Mohammed Khakim Khan Tura it is reported that Alim Khan, ruler of the Kokand Khanate from 1800-1809, aggressively persecuted anyone who followed this custom, and considered it to be incompatible with the teachings of Islam. This provoked the people's wrath (Nalivkin - 1886: 215).

Some written sources speak of „miracles“ not unlike those that can be observed today at the shrine of Khodzhi Baror and other Central Asian shrines. Their existence has been known about for a long time, at least since the Middle Ages, and they are spread over quite a considerable geographic area. Al-Jeyhani⁵, for example, writes interestingly about two miraculous pillars that ooze water in the hours of the Friday prayer ritual. Surprised by this information, Abureikhan Biruni writes the following in his *Pamytniki minuvshikh pokolenii* (Monuments of Past Generations):

Even more surprising is what al-Jeyhani recounts in his „Book of Ways and States“ about the two pillars at the Great Mosque of Kairouan⁶. It is not known what substance they are made from, but Jeyhani claims that water oozes from them every Friday before sunrise. It is particularly surprising that this happens on Friday. If it simply said: „on a certain day of the week“, one could attribute it to the fact that the Moon has reached a certain point in its trajectory across the Sun, or something similar. But that Friday should be a requisite condition does not allow for such an [explanation]. It is said that the king of the Rum⁷ sent [people] to purchase these pillars and said: „If Muslims derive benefit from their worth, that is better [for them] than having two stones in their mosque.“⁸ But the inhabitants of Kairouan spurned this and said: we will not take them from the house of Allah to the House of Satan (*Biruni* 1957: 290).

Although in the episode Buruni recounts, as with the Khodzhi Baror mazar, the phenomenon of the miracle is linked with Islam, the origins of this tradition undoubtedly go back to a pre-Islamic cult of trees and its corresponding tradition of endowing columns, pillars and other objects associated with trees, with a sacred power.

The semantics of the ritual associated with the cult of trees, as also the symbolism of trees, is very multi-faceted: a tree can be interpreted as a totem, as a fetish and apotrope, and finally as the attribute of a deity or the embodiment of a deity. It is often impossible to identify the primordial ideological basis that served to nourish the development of archaic cults, either because of significant transformations in the cult itself under the influence of Islam, or because of changes in the landscape resulting in the disappearance of natural objects that originally served as shrines, fetishes and so on. Khodzhi Baror mazar is a rare example of a cult site whose specific natural attribute has survived.

A link with the fertility cult in its most archaic form, in its proposition of the concept of parthenogenesis as a fundamental ideological principle, i.e. belief in the possibility of female conception without male participation, can surely be observed in the custom of using tree sap as a stimulus to procreation. Even in prehistoric times, this ancient concept began to be supplanted by a dualistic concept based on the idea of two fundamentals – the masculine and the feminine, through whose conjoining life is born.⁹ However, there was not a complete supplanting of previous conceptions and these came to be reflected in later religious doctrines. Belief in the life-giving power of plants, in particular, may be found in the legend of the birth of the founder of Zoroastrianism, according to which Zarathustra was conceived by his mother not from his father, Pourusasp, but from a drink made from the sacred plant *khaoma* mixed with milk (*Tolstov* 2006: 151-152).

⁵ al-Jeyhani was a medieval Arab geographer and writer

⁶ Kairouan – a holy city in Tunisia that grew out of an Arab military post at the time of their conquest of the country in 670.

⁷ Byzantines.

⁸ This is a reference to the stone at Qibla, the principal holy site of Muslims, as the first stone, and the assumption is that the reference to the pillars is the second stone. The meaning conveyed by the sentence is that there is no point in Muslims having one more shrine.

⁹ For more details, see: Gorshunova 2000b.

Echoes of a belief in parthenogenesis are still present in the daily lives of the peoples of Central Asia and sometimes have serious repercussions, especially for women. Linked to it is the stereotypical view of infertility as an exclusively female affliction. A measure of how deeply rooted this is in peoples' minds is the fact that the majority of divorces brought on grounds of childlessness, especially among rural families, are initiated by men (*Gorshunova* 2006: 144-145). Interesting too in this regard are the beliefs of Tajiks and Uzbeks, who see infertility as the result of the „sticking to“ or „falling asleep“ of the embryo in the woman's womb and their faith in magical methods aimed at awakening the foetus and thus inducing its appearance on Earth (*Gorshunova* 2006: 151-152).

The spectrum of traditional methods for curing infertility is extremely broad, with parthenogenesis forming the ideological basis for most. In their quest to stimulate childbirth today, just as many centuries ago, women resort to such primitive methods as washing themselves in water from sacred springs, rolling themselves off rocky boulders, rubbing their bellies with earth, etc. These primitive notions and magical methods involving natural objects include drawing on the magical properties of trees, and are remarkable for the extraordinary variety of forms that they take.

G. P. Snesarev, who has studied the genetic roots of these ritualistic expressions, concludes that the cult of vegetation has two origin moments that feed this „female religion“: „First and foremost is an animistic perception of plants, most commonly of trees, as the abode of the spirit or spirits and, secondly... an understanding of the sacred power of the fruitfulness of trees. All female rituals in this cycle converge in their attempts to come close to this force of fertility, by means of a magical pathway, and take possession of the spirit (soul) residing in the tree in order to further their line“ (*Snesarev* 1969: 203).

Belief that souls who have died are present in trees and the possibility of their transference to a woman's womb explains the desire of many childless women who make the pilgrimage to the holy site of Khodzhi Baror to stay overnight. It is also the underlying concept behind the ritual of drinking sap from the trees, which can be viewed as a variation of theophagy, an echo of totemic ideas.¹⁰

Trees as the source of life-giving forces

Although there are almost no traces of totemic beliefs recognisable in the cultures of settled agricultural peoples, ethnographers have detected evidence of the presence of this socio-religious system in their past history (*Tolstov* 1935; *Tolstov* 1948: 294-302; *Snesarev* 1969: 307-330; and others). Among the residual traces revealing links with this belief system, of particular interest is the custom of killing and consuming certain species of animals, which is analogous to the inticium – ritual communion with a totem with the aim of becoming magically closer to its sacred fertility-giving forces (*Snesarev* 1969: 312-313; *Gorshunova* 1993). In the present study, relics of tree totems that have been obliterated over time are also evident.

The most interesting, from the point of view of revealing the fundamental ideological principles of the phenomenon under consideration and its evolutionary stages, is the very ancient cult site of the holy shrine of Khodzhi Baror – an old, withered elm, whose impressive stature and unusual shape makes it stand out from other trees. According to experts, the age of this tree (its girth is approximately three metres) is at least 700-800 years.

¹⁰ In the genealogical myths of some Turkic peoples, it is the tree that takes on the role of the ancestor. In particular, one of the myths of the Uyghur tribes of Ediz talks of sacred trees as the ancestors of the tribe. It is also known that the Khazars revered Tengri Khan in the form of tall trees. But in our case, the custom of worshipping trees undoubtedly arises out of local tradition, as evidenced by many facts: first and foremost, the location of this particular shrine in a part of the valley where a settled agricultural culture has been developing since ancient times.

It is not known when the tree perished, but judging by external signs as well as the testimonies of elderly local inhabitants, who claim it was already withered even in their ancestors' time, it died at least a century ago, probably more. It is noteworthy that there is also an incision in the trunk of the tree, from which sap once oozed.

Despite the assertions of the sheikh about the natural origins of these incisions, there is no doubt that they were made intentionally for the extraction of sap for ritual purposes. Traces of this ritual practice left on the trunk of the withered elm, indicate that Khodzhi Baror is one of the most ancient shrines in the Fergana Valley.

The large hemispherical protrusion formed from the drips of sap resembles the belly of a pregnant woman; hence the name of the tree – *Bogoz kairagach* – or „pregnant elm“.

It should be noted that the name *Bogoz kairagach* applies not only to the tree itself, but also to the small area (8-10 square metres) surrounding it enclosed by corrugated panel fencing. Although the shrine is part of the sacred Khodzhi Baror complex, this small area containing the tree is a discrete shrine, with a certain autonomy and special status. Unlike other cult sites in the complex, this is an exclusively female shrine and men are not allowed access to the space. The sanctuary has its own sheikh – a woman who performs the duties of a ritual servant (she instructs pilgrims and leads rituals). In addition to individual rituals to cure particular problems (childlessness, infant mortality, etc.) collective female *zikrs* (remembrance of Allah) are organised, with the implication that they are pursuing strictly spiritual aims. All these facts demonstrate that in this particular case there is not the customary differentiation in gender roles required by the postulates of shariat, but a more archaic phenomenon, which S. A. Tokarev calls the „religious segregation of the sexes“, implying that the separation of men and women in the religious and ritual sphere is dictated less by differences of status than by religious convictions.¹¹

The ritual performed by women in the enclosure of the shrine of *Bogoz kairagach* is syncretic and made up of different elements, which include the recitation of Koranic surahs and prayers, magical acts and incantations. To perform the prayers, the women kneel and bend their bodies low touching their faces to the ground with their forehead on the earth. At the moment of contact with

the earth, they say that there is convergence with God and their prayer reaches Him. But the principal activity of the ritual cycle is directed at the main object of reverence – the tree: the women hug it pressing their belly up tight against the protuberance. In the women's words, the tree's fulfilment of their wish is conditional on their sincere faith in its power, which is sometimes given quite emotional expression: lamentations accompanied by weeping and sobbing. At the end of the ritual, women make a vow (*nazr*), tie pieces of cloth to its branches and pledge to return to this place and offer a sacrifice (*kurbon*) once their wish has been granted. Inside the enclosure are benches for women who stay overnight.

Citing the legend, the sheikh tells how once upon a time there was a lake where the mazar stands and that on its banks grew a large tree. Once, the inhabitants of a nearby settlement decided to cut it down and sow wheat there. When they came to the lake the next morning, they found to their amazement that there was no tree there. They found it in a different place and were even more amazed when they saw that the elm was pregnant. People came to realise that this was no ordinary tree and began to venerate it, bringing sacrifices and making their wishes to it.

Several moments in this tale deserve our attention, in particular the episode of the sowing of the wheat, in which the notion of fertility can clearly be seen. It is also clear in the episode of the elm's „pregnancy“. Indeed, the legend contains all three „classical“ elements and main fundamentals of a fertility cult: vegetation, water and earth (in hidden form, at the moment of the miraculous disappearance and reappearance of the tree). Although the tree is not personified, and there are no direct clues in the legend to identify it with any specific figure, the fact that it is endowed with an anthropomorphic feature is not by chance. Part of the explanation is the tree's unusual form. However, a single exterior similarity is clearly not sufficient reason for the emergence of a cult; it is obvious that a cult arose on the basis of perceptions of an anthropomorphic female deity and its embodiment in a tree.

The identification of trees with mythical characters or their hosts is not an uncommon phenomenon in Central Asia. Echoes of these ideas can be traced in particular to the Khorezm legend of fallen angels, *Harut* and *Marut* (associated with images of the deities of *Haurvatat* and *Ameretat* in the Zoroastrian pantheon). They fell in love with a girl created from a piece of mulberry tree, who miraculously acquired a soul and later served as the cause of their fall from grace. The angels were punished for this by having to lie in a well for eternity, and the girl disappeared back into the trunk of the mulberry tree (Snesarev 1969: 285). In the Fergana district, where Khodzhi Baror mazar is located, there are many sacred trees that feature in the legends as the hosts of saints or mythical figures who make their appearance from the tree or disappear inside it. One such example is Kyzlar-mazar („maiden mazar“) in the rural settlement of Yarmazar, Fergana region, which legend links to the images of the holy twins – brother and sister – who „emerged“ from the trunk of a mulberry tree (Gorshunova 2000a: 37). In neighbouring Alty-Aryk region can be found another shrine – Childukhtaron. Here mulberry trees grow that are associated with forty holy maidens, well-known characters of Central Asian mythology. According to legend, the most popular patron saint of silk farmers, Paigambar Hazrat Ayub, also hid himself in a mulberry tree (Gorshunova 2001: 220). and the tradition of associating trees with mythical figures underlies the cult of saint *Bibi Uvayda* (Akhunbabaevsky district of the Fergana region), of *Gyulli-Bii* (Khorezm) mentioned above, and other figures of Central Asian hagiology.

Ethnographic studies show that behind the images of these and other saints endowed with phyto-anthropomorphic features, are hidden deities that embody the idea of fertility. In the legends and myths of many ancient Eastern and Mediterranean cultures they are represented by images of the Great Mother Goddess (Cybele, Astarte, Artemis etc.) and her consort (spouse and/or son, less often – brother) – the god of dying vegetation (Osiris, Dionysis, etc.).

In the ethnographic literature on Central Asia, the cult of vegetation is usually associated with the image of the male deity (nature dying and reborn), and the water element with the image of the female deity. Meanwhile, both in Central Asia and in other regions of the world, one can find numerous examples that demonstrate either the opposite or a fusion of the main symbols and attributes of these deities. For example, the Central Asian goddess of fertility, who entered the Zoroastrian pantheon as *Ardvi Sura Anahita*, depicted in the Avesta as a fast-flowing abundant river (Avesta 1990: 24), is often represented in the visual arts as the embodiment of natural plant life.¹² At the same time, male

¹² In Khorezm terracotta figurines of the second half of the 1st millennium BC representing the image of the deity, she is depicted holding in her hand a pomegranate fruit or clover leaf (Vorob'eva 1968: 146). In the ornamental patterns of Turkmen embroidery, there is also an image of a pomegranate with a clover leaf atop, which, according to specialists, symbolises the Central Asian fertility goddess (Lobacheva 1996: 85).

figures in Central Asian hagiology reaching back to the image of the dying and resurrecting deity (for example, the Khorezm *Hubbi*), are often associated with the element of water. The duplication of symbols, as well as of functions, can be observed in other aspects of the male and female deities that evolved into Muslim saints, for example in their involvement in the celestial and subterranean realms.

In part, this „confusion“ is a consequence of the natural and inevitable process of degradation of archaic belief systems as a result of Islamisation and later of secularisation. However, as the archaeological data show, this tendency emerged significantly earlier: approximately at the turn of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC, when the first depictions appeared in terracotta figurines of male deities with symbolic attributes originally inherent in female deities.¹³

The earliest evidence of the existence in Central Asia of tree veneration as the embodiment of the female deity was discovered during the excavations of settlements at the ancient oasis of Geoksyur and at other monuments from the Neolithic period in Southern Turkmenistan, where agricultural cultivation had begun earlier than in other parts of the region. The excavations revealed naked female figurines made of clay, showing an unusual way of depicting the nether region, represented by a pillar-like base instead of legs. According to experts, these female figurines reflect the notion of the deity's embodiment in the trunk of a tree (*Vorob'eva* 1968: 142). A peculiarity of this group of statuettes is the mystical symbolism concentrated mainly in the lower part of the figurines. Thus, in several of them, the sciatic area is covered in a multitude of fine pinpricks, and below the belly is a deep incision. Of particular interest among these rare specimens is a figurine from Altyn-Depe, depicting the image of a pregnant goddess with a swollen belly covered in traces of sharp pinpricks. This indicates that these figurines were used in magical rituals for the easing of childbirth (*Masson, Sarianidi* 1973: 11, 88). The continuity of this tradition can be found in the art of the late Bronze Age, when the figurative style of flat planes for terracotta figurines was introduced. Characteristic of this style is the image of a tree imposed on the front or back of the flat figurine, its branches radiating out to cover almost its entire area like a fan (*Masson, Sarianidi* 1973: 38).

The prohibition of anthropomorphic imagery and the battle against „pagan“ cults during the period of Islamisation led to the complete disappearance of this tradition in Central Asia and the destruction of the system of beliefs on which it was based. But traces of the cult of the goddess have been preserved in the tradition of venerating natural shrines, including trees. It is easy to see the ancient tradition of tree worship as the embodiment of the female deity in the specific features of the „pregnant“ elm, involuntarily evoking associations with the Egyptian goddess Isis, depicted as a tree with a bare chest, as well as in the functional and ritual particulars of the cult associated with it.

Interesting parallels to this cult can be found in *Kafir* (Nuristani) culture, a people who inhabit the northern regions of Afghanistan,, where until recently there existed the cult of the goddess, personifying the feminine principle and known by the name of *Dizani*. This goddess appears in mythology as a tree; it is

¹³ The early anthropomorphic female images found in southern Turkmenistan are Neolithic period and date back to the 6th millennium BC (*Antonova* 1977: 37-38). Similar male images only appeared here in the early Bronze Age, i.e. at the end of the 3rd – beginning of the 2nd millennium BC (*Masson, Sarianidi* 1973: 43, 133).

¹⁴ Kafiristan, now known as Nuristan.

noteworthy that in one of the myths, she emerged from a huge tree growing in the middle of a lake (Yettmar 1986: 98-104). The similarity of this myth to the legend of the tree of Bogoz Kairagach, where one also finds the combination of two principle symbols (tree and lake), is patently not random coincidence. Certain similarities can also be found in other features of these two traditions, in particular in the similar functions of the objects of veneration: Dizani is the patroness of women giving birth, and Bogoz Kairagach is credited with the same function. Moreover, the Kafir goddess is also the goddess of death and the dead; and that connection with the netherworld is also found in the cult of the Bogoz Kairagach tree and its location in a cemetery. These similarities point to the common genus of the two traditions and the single ideological foundation upon which they were formed.

The above analysis of materials collected during the study of Khodzhi Baror mazar suggests that this Muslim shrine arose on the site of earlier pre-Muslim cults. Although attempts to reform „popular“ Islam and eradicate „pagan“ traditions, as for example in the crypt of Khodzhi Baror, still have a place and a purpose, the basic foundation of ritual practice, characteristic both of the ziyerat, and the cult of saints in general, remains a combination of various archaic beliefs and rituals. In the variant of the tree cult under consideration, traces of a multiplicity of worldview belief systems can be found – animism, totemism, the fertility cult – which came together to form a single complex on the basis of which, at a certain stage of its evolution, the cult of the female deity developed. Taking into account that context, in which the cult under consideration was formed and exists, and also as a result of the specific nature of the complex of rituals inherent in it, one may conclude that the supposed deity personified two interconnected sides – life and death. And it embodied not only the idea of fertility, but of the holistic concept of which it is a part. The essence of this concept lies in the cyclical nature of being, according to which all life rests in death, and vice versa.

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