PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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ON THE HISTORY OF PHOTO-ILLUSTRATIVE COLLECTIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SIBERIA OF MAE RAS. I:


During the postwar years MAE RAS received some photo-illustrative collections from Moscow Museum of Ethnology. From multiple items of this rather rich collection two pictures of a raw-hide tent with a big copper mask-guise attached on its external side has recently attracted particular attention (fig. 1). The pictures were taken by a well-known ethnologist Mikhail Grigor'evich Levin in 1927 in North-Baikal region, where he worked with the Evenkis. According to the comments the picture shows a raw-hide tent of the Tungus shaman clan with the guise as a shaman mask. However, the size of the mask is much bigger than a man's face, which means that the shaman didn't wear it during quacking. The size and location of the mask allow us to conclude that it represents an image of the shaman's ancestor spirit and the clan guardian-spirit. Moreover, it is also a guardian-spirit of the territory occupied by the tribe and used for hunting, pasturing deer, etc. In its turn the raw-hide tent is not the shaman's house, but a tribal cultic structure symbolizing a sacral centre of the inhabited area.

The studies of religious monuments in Transbaikalia, Mongolia, Tuva and Tibet give all reasons to believe that M. G. Levin found the Evenkis model of the so-called oboo widely spread in this region (Buryat: oboo, Tuvinian: ovaai, Mongolian: ovoi) [1]. The Buryats, the Mongols, the Tuvins and the Tibetans built it in the form of a rock fill that symbolized a sacred presence of the host-spirit in a certain place or territory.

The majority of scientists believe that oboo traces back to the cult of ancestors, tribe-guardians and territory-guardians. It is also related to the most ancient conceptions of the Universe embodied in the image of a Universal Mountain. Rooted in a wide-spread cult of mountains, these conceptions took shape in traditional culture of Central Asia, Southern and South-Eastern Siberia. Later on the above mentioned cult took an important place in the religious system of Northern Buddhism.

Oboos were built both on hilltops in steppes and mountain valleys and in the most dangerous places of mountain passes, as well as by the roads, at the riverheads or springs. Depending on the place these religious constructions have significant differences in their structure. Along the mountain passes, paths and sources one could find single fills that symbolized the presence of the mountain host-spirit in this particular place occasionally visited by people. Oboo devoted to the "hosts" of large territories permanently inhabited by people represent rather complex structures. In the steppes of Buryatia these structures usually consist of twelve low conic rock fills arranged in the form of a circle. In the centre of the circle lies a higher rock fill holding a wooden pole crowned with a figure of a bird. These fills symbolize the highest mountains of the region and their host-spirits, the guardians of the whole Buryatia. The highest fill in the centre stands for a mythic mountain Sumber [2].

Rock fill shaped oboos characteristic of Transbaikalia, Mongolia, Tuva and Tibet landscapes appear in photo-illustrative collections of many museums and the researches know them very well. The situation is completely different with illustrating and describing these religious structures in other cultures of the region. The picture of the Evenki sacral raw-hide tent with a mask-guise is truly unique, since scientific works contain only brief information about the oboo in the shape of a raw-hide tent and completely avoid mentioning its most important element — the image of ancestor-spirit and host-spirit of the territory (fig. 2). What gives us the ground to assert that the mask on the Evenki raw-hide tent is the guardian-spirit of a particular geographical area?