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Owl Beliefs in Kyrgyzstan and Some Comparison with Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Turkmenistan

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Abstract

So far the Central Asian owl beliefs have not been well studied. As I have had opportunities to live and visit some countries regularly since 2009, it became possible to study owl beliefs mainly in Kyrgyzstan but also comparing some findings with Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Turkmenistan. In Kyrgyzstan, 124 persons were interviewed in 2010: 82 males and 42 females. Age of respondents varied from 12 to over 60 and all lived in the capital area of the country. Half of the respondents listed owls as wise and 43% just as a bird, and nobody saw the owl as a bird bringing bad luck. On the contrary, 34% believed that owls are helpful and bring good luck. Kazakhstan shares a Central Asian veneration of owls. Eurasian eagle owl feathers are used as precious amulets protecting children and livestock from evil spirits. The main reason why so many Mongolian people hold the owl to be sacred could be the history that the owl once saved the life of Genghis Khan, king of kings and supreme Khan of all the Mongols and Kalmyks in Tartary Empire. For the Turkmen, the little owl is a sacred bird, killing of which would be a great sin.

Keywords: owl beliefs, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Turkmenistan

1. Introduction

The entire area of the Kyrgyz Republic is 200,000 km² making it roughly five times the size of Switzerland. The highest mountains reach well over 7000 m (Lenin 7134 m and Pobeda 7439 m). Only 4.5% of the country is covered by forest and there are three large natural lakes. The Kyrgyz Republic does not have very rich birdlife, and most birds have large and inaccessible territories. Therefore, it is no wonder that there are hardly any bird-related organisations and very few bird-watchers. People are generally not very interested in birds and ignore them just as they do with many other things and items that do not belong to them. It seems that hunters are people who still go into the field. They make many observations, but the information is easily lost as it is not collected or stored. Hunting is not very common in the Kyrgyzstan, and it is generally restricted to quails, pheasants, partridges, ducks and pigeons. All other birds are protected including their nests. Luckily



Figure 1.

Tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) is a red data bird in Kyrgyzstan. Photo: courtesy of Jeff Martin.

hunters are not normally killing nonhunting species understanding that especially species mentioned in the *Red Data Book* should not be hunted.

According to Van der Ven [1] some 400 different bird species have been seen in the Kyrgyz Republic, these including 10 owl species: common scops owl (*Otus scops*), pallid scops owl (*Otus brucei*), snowy owl (*Bubo scandiacus*), Eurasian eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*), tawny owl (*Strix aluco*), northern hawk owl (*Surnia ulula*), little owl (*Athene noctua*), Tengmalm's owl (*Aegolius funereus*), long-eared owl (*Asio otus*) and short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*). Lately I have added one more owl, great grey owl (*Strix nebulosa*), into this list [2]. The *Red Data Book* of Kyrgyz Republic [3] includes two owl species: Eurasian eagle owl and tawny owl (**Figure 1**) in Status VII, Least Concern (LC).

2. Methods

By using the Global Owl Project interview form in Russian, 124 persons were interviewed in 2010: 82 males and 42 females. Age of respondents varied from 12 to over 60 and all lived in the capital area of the country. Rural areas could have given different results, but then it would have required the interview form in Kyrgyz or Uzbek languages. Russian language is widely spoken only in the urban areas.

3. Results

3.1 General owl knowledge

From the respondents 98% knew that owls are birds, but 2% were not sure. Around 89% had seen an owl, 7% have not and 4% were not sure; similarly, 73% have heard owls calling, 19% have not and the remaining 8% were not sure. Interestingly 77% were convinced that there are no owls in their living places, only 18% were sure that there are owls near the places where they live, and 5% were not sure. This could be a correct situation in the Bishkek city where I never saw an owl from my rented flats between 2009 and 2011.

3.2 Identification of owl species

Only female respondents (2) stated that they know more than six owl species, while only one male knew 3–5 species. Almost every third respondent were not able to identify any owl species: 29% of the females and 30% of the males. These percentages would indicate that there is no real difference in the owl species identification skills between females and males.

3.3 Biotores

Almost all respondents knew that the owls live predominantly in the forest (97%). Other biotopes were listed as: mountains, 31%; grasslands, 25%; farms, 18%; cities, 10%; and elsewhere, 3%.

3.4 Food

Again, a great majority knew correctly that owls eat rodents and other small mammals (95%). Other food items got the following percentages: snakes, 31%; insects, 30%; lizards, 23%; frogs, 20%; fish, 18%; seeds, 16%; birds, 8%; fruits, 3%; and chicken, 2%. Nobody listed cats or dogs as the owl prey items.

3.5 Breeding

Nesting places of the owls were known as follows: tree holes (89%), other bird nests (20%), cliff ledges (12%), rooftops in the buildings (10%) and much less importantly nest boxes (3%) and burrows (2%).

3.6 Attitudes towards owls

Interestingly half of the respondents listed owls as wise, 43% just as a bird and 26% as creator beings. Nobody saw the owl as a bird bringing bad luck. On the contrary, 34% were convinced that owls are helpful and bring good luck. In addition, respondents gave the following answers: helpful for medicine, 10%; scary, 5%; powerful spirits, 2%; and 5% were not sure. Unfortunately, people did not explain further the medicinal value of the owls as that was not specifically asked during the interviews.

3.6.1 What is your attitude about protecting owls?

Despite very positive general attitudes, people were not so convinced that the owls should be protected. Only 62% felt that owls need protection, 15% would leave owls without protection, and 23% could not make up their mind in this matter.

3.7 Feelings about owls

3.7.1 How do you feel to talk about owls?

Eighty percent of the respondents stated that it is neutral/indifferent to talk about owls, none were frightened to do that, and 8% felt happy to talk about owls. The remaining 12% were not sure which feelings they had.

3.7.2 How do you feel when you hear an owl calling?

More than half of the respondents (56%) felt that it was neutral/indifferent to hear an owl calling, but 12% were frightened, and 13% were happy. Around 16% had never heard an owl calling, and 3% were not able to express their feelings.

3.7.3 How do you feel when you see an owl?

Again, over half (51%) felt neutral/indifferent seeing an owl, but 12% were frightened, and 17% were happy. Around 15% had never seen an owl, and 5% were not sure about their feelings.

3.7.4 How do you feel when someone tells you stories or legends related to owls?

Well over half (54%) feels neutral/indifferent, nobody feels frightened and 10% feels happy. Even 27% had never heard any legends or stories on owls, and 9% were not sure what they should answer.

3.8 Owl classifications

Owl classifications based on the 124 interviews in Kyrgyzstan.

Owls are	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total (%)
Harmless	0	3	2
Not important	3	1	2
Frightening	5	5	5
Important	21	24	22
Bad omen	3	1	2
Beneficial	65	65	65
Unsure to classify	3	1	2
Total	100	100	100
Number of interviews	42	82	124

The table above shows the owl classifications made by the male and female respondents. Interestingly male and female answers are very similar as 65% of both sexes classified owls as beneficial and 21–24% as important. Only one female and one male connected owl with bad omen, and 5% of females and males consider them frightening. One of both sexes was unsure to classify.

3.9 Additional cultural aspects of owls

3.9.1 Have you or do you know someone who has eaten owl meat?

Almost all respondents (95%) were sure that nobody eats owl meat in the Kyrgyz Republic, but 5% were not sure.



Figure 2.
Eagle owl (Bubo bubo) feathers in talisman market. Photo: courtesy of Annegret and Michael Stubbe.

3.9.2 Have you, or somebody you know, used owl eggs for some purpose?

One respondent answered yes, but without any further explanations. Another was not sure, but 98% were sure that nobody eats owl eggs in Kyrgyzstan.

3.9.3 Have you, or someone you know, used owl feathers, bones or meat?

As far as understood, all respondents were referring to the use of feathers only, not bones or meat. One third (32%) of both males and females knew people using the owl feathers (**Figure 2**) as talisman or head-dress. But well over half (63%) of the respondents did not know anybody using owl feathers, and 5% were not sure.

It is not known how often owls are killed to get the feathers, especially in the rural areas. Only one respondent had a friend who had killed an owl. This hunter made nicely banded bundles of the great grey owl breast feathers and sold those to his friends as talismans for the cars to protect drivers against traffic accidents. Large and soft owl feathers are used commonly to decorate traditional folk costumes and head-dress. Interestingly the *Red Data Book* [3] recommends breeding eagle owls in captivity in order to get moulted feathers from live birds without killing them. Many families in the country have a long tradition in keeping eagles and hunting falcons at home, so they would know well how to take care of large owls as well.

During my stay in the country between 2009 and 2011, I don't recall seeing any owl figurines for sale in the market places, but even the National Museum has an example of an eagle owl feather talisman, and some NGOs have printed owl calendars which are often seen in the walls of the government offices.

This may be the first time when owl beliefs have been investigated through an interview study in Central Asia. Owls are not feared but rather ignored.

4. Kazakhstan

Van Orden and Paklina [4, 5] have described how, characteristic to the region (cf. Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia), owl feathers are used in abundance for decoration. Typically, tufts of feathers from eagle owls are placed in strategic places such as



Figure 3.
*Little girl with beautifully adorned hat (including eagle owl feathers), Baiga festival, eastern Kazakhstan.
Photo: courtesy of Van Orden and Paklina.*



Figure 4.
A young lady with eagle owl protection in her hat. Photo: courtesy of Van Orden and Paklina.



Figure 5.
Small boy with cap adorned with eagle owl feathers during a circumcision ritual in eastern Kazakhstan. Photo: courtesy of Van Orden and Paklina.



Figure 6.
A pretty lady with complicated hat decorated with eagle owl feathers to protect her with sacred powers during the festivals and ceremonial gatherings. Photo: courtesy of Van Orden and Paklina.

bedrooms and cradles or used as amulets. Hats worn as part of celebrations or festive gatherings are also decorated with tufts, usually taken from the birds' breast or mantle. In local tradition the feathers are thought to be reincarnations of guardian spirits and endowed with sacred powers (see **Figures 3–6**).

The use of feathers is described as massive in scale and has, not surprisingly, resulted in the eradication of eagle owls in large parts of Kazakhstan [5].

However, in recent years local tribes have taken to explore what are described as “antiquated” power lines where large numbers of owls and other birds of prey are being electrocuted providing easy access to feathers for ornamental purposes.

In the village of Orlovka, in the east of the country, the authors saw a collection of 14 steppe eagles (*Aquila nipalensis*), 4 eastern imperial eagles (*Aquila heliaca*), 3 golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), 6 steppe buzzards (*Buteo b. vulpinus*), 5 upland buzzards (*Buteo hemilasius*), 2 saker falcons (*Falco cherrug*) and 4 eagle owls. The village chief told that all these birds had been found beneath power lines between Orlovka and Ust-Kamenogorsk [5].

This again appears to be only the “tip of the iceberg” given that similar power lines are still in use all over southern Central Asia.

Electrocuted birds are currently thought to be the main source of feathers used in traditional wears and amulets as the wildlife protection and conservation concerns are well understood in the modern Kazakhstan [5].

5. Mongolia

In Mongolia, as in many parts of Asia, the owl is considered a protector and a divine ancestor, who helps to ward off evil spirits, famine and pestilence. One reason why so many eastern people hold the owl to be sacred could be the history that the owl once saved the life of Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century. He was king of kings and supreme Khan of all the Mongols and Kalmyks in Tartary Empire. It is interesting how differently this famous story can be told:

1. Sir John Mandeville, who in the fourteenth century travelled to the court of Genghis Khan in central Asia, also recounted how the Great Khan was saved by an owl: as he and his small army were fleeing from their enemies, his horse was killed, and he hid under a bush; an owl, alighting upon it, convinced his pursuers that nobody would seek refuge where the dreaded owl perched [6].
2. The warrior Khan had on this occasion been defeated by the enemy and was fleeing the battlefield with a small band of trusty followers. At one point he found shelter under a tree; and on a branch of this tree was perched an owl. His pursuers caught up with him but did not pause to investigate, because they did not believe that anyone could be so foolish as to hide beneath a tree on which such an unlucky bird was sitting. On they rode to continue their search elsewhere, and in this way, Genghis Khan was saved from certain death by the providential intervention of an owl [7].
3. Genghis Khan, the twelfth-century Mongol warrior, was once fleeing from a band of enemies, but was outnumbered and needed a place to hide. Eventually, he found a thick copse of trees, where he and his men sat silently. Very soon, an owl appeared and sat on a tree at the edge of the wood. When the opposing forces saw the bird, they knew that Genghis and his men couldn't be there if the owl sat so peacefully. They therefore moved away, and the Mongols escaped. Genghis Khan then adopted the owl as a good luck charm—from then



Figure 7.
Talisman market in Bajan-Ölgij, Western Mongolia. Photo: courtesy of Annegret and Michael Stubbe.



Figure 8.
Owl feather talismans in the market in Bajan-Ölgij, Western Mongolia. Photo: courtesy of Annegret and Michael Stubbe.

on, he and his followers wore owl feathers and charms both to protect themselves from danger and pay tribute to their special saviour [8].

Annegret and Michael Stubbe kindly sent photos (**Figures 2, 7 and 8**) from the market in Bajan-Ölgij, Western Mongolia (the capital of the Kazakhian Almag). One can see eagle owl wings, legs and feathers in these photos which will be used for owl talisman (cf. also Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). The feathers of eagle owls and also great grey and long-eared owls are thought to be reincarnations of guardian spirits with sacred powers.

6. Turkmenistan

Central Asian owl beliefs are still not well studied although I have had opportunities to live and visit some countries regularly since 2009, though mainly Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Neighbouring Turkmenians have an interesting belief on little owl *Athene noctua*. The local name in Turkmenistan is “bai gush” (rich bird), and it is a sacred species. To kill this owl is a great sin [9]. Hopefully this belief is valid also in the wider area of Central Asia.

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