CHAPTER TWO

THE ‘INSIDE’ OTHER

In every society there are groups which could be viewed as united by different characteristics, for instance biological, economic, social, etc. The attitude towards them usually varies and sometimes changes due to different reasons and events. However, such attitudes can be observed in the way they are represented. For the purposes of this research, in the group that is under scope here, I selected, firstly, the figure of the woman, secondly, that of the shaman/magician (indeed called “koloburs” in Bulgaria, or “qams” among the Turks), and smiths, and thirdly, of all those who did not confess the formal ‘state’ religion. I called them ‘Inside Others’, because all these figures do exist in reality and are common among the societies of the ‘steppe’ empire, but in ways quite different from those typical for the main groups of the given society. It could not be denied that in their status and, also, in the images and notions that followed them there is a certain ambivalence, which one can distinguish quite easily. When putting them under analysis we are indeed facing with clichés and different traditional notions typical of the pre-modern societies. It seems that in many aspects, all these notions and clichés look as determining in advance many of the criteria used to accept or to reject these “marginal” groups.

Still, the very existence of such groups can be put under scrutiny, especially after the beginning of the seventh century, when some contact zones were formed in the ‘Steppe Empire’. Starting from that period on, the former nomads used to learn how to live together, side-by-side and, sometimes, even in common, with the sedentary world. Is there any change, then, in the attitude toward the ‘Inside’ Others that was made possible because of this move? Such kind of changes could be noticed in the attitude towards people who, till this moment, e.g. in the sixth century, were forced to maintain the spiritual, transcendental stability in the given khaganate. The ‘meeting’ with the sedentary civilizations urged the khagans to centralize their polities as well as their positions in the sphere of sacral authority. They acquired most of the supreme priest’s responsibilities thus diminishing the shamans’
It was because of the same centralization that the khagans undertook such serious changes in their polities thus introducing not only the imperial pax in the steppe but also the imperial law ("törü" in Turkic) which, one may suppose, required also innovations at home.

II.1. The female otherness (combining bow and 'female work', or between order and chaos)

In principle, in the steppe region of Eurasia the women are ‘situated’ in four main categories, namely that of the mother, spouse, warrior-woman, and shamaness. In what follows, I shall try to show their role and functions as well as notions of them in the society.

In the Middle Ages, against the tradition of the sedentary civilizations, the nomads did not look upon the maidens with neglect. Therefore, in the steppe the unmarried woman had much more freedom. She also knew how to shoot with a bow and how to ride a horse, i.e. she was well acquainted with the primary males’ ‘steppe’ activities. Since nomadism was quite a risky occupation, it presupposed strong spirit and fast mind-making, especially during bad climatic conditions. That is why everybody in the steppe highly appreciated all those individuals who were able to show courage and initiative, regardless of their sex.

Still, the woman a priori is in the sphere of otherness, because, according to the laws and behavior in such kind of societies, and in the Middle Ages in particular, the above-mentioned activities are mainly the prerogative of men. Needless to say, female otherness is first of all due to biology, but this brings out some social dimensions and repercussions as well. Al-Mas‘ûdî (the tenth century), for instance, noticed one of the differences characteristic to the Volga Bulgars. Among them, and particularly in the tenth century, there existed a differentiation

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1 Especially for the place of the women in Byzantium see, Laiou 1981, 233–260; Carr 1985, 1–15; Beaucamp 1990; Emmanuel 1995, 769–778; Shreiner [Schreiner] 2004, 100–105. For the Byzantine empresses see, Garland 1999; McClanan 2002; Herrin 2001. The Byzantine woman was first of all a house-keeper. Before the eleventh century, women that were engaged in any kind of intellectual work were a rarity. For a general view about women’s role and positions in Western Europe until the end of the Early Middle Ages see, Jesch 1991; Bitel 2002.