

Contemporary religious life in the Republic of Altai: the interaction of Buddhism and Shamanism¹

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Abstract

Based on extensive fieldwork, this article analyses the state of religious beliefs and practices in present-day and recent Altai. The contending claims and historical traditions of Shamanism, Buddhism and Burkhanism are discussed as part of the process of forging a new Altaian national identity. Altaian intellectuals tend to favour Buddhism over Shamanism, as providing more systematic philosophical content and links with the wider Buddhist community in neighbouring countries. Shamanism, however, more spiritual, unstructured and heterogeneous in its make-up, is more popular at grass-roots level, though there are some attempts at institutionalization and interaction with the political process. Supporters of this view see Buddhism as extraneous and non-indigenous and 'un-Altaian'. Despite instances of open clashes, the author concludes that in the future there may develop more constructive interaction between the two religious traditions.

Keywords: Altai Republic, shamanism, Buddhism, Burkhanism, religion in Siberia.

In an article published over a decade ago Jane Monning Atkinson stated that the category of shamanism had lost its validity for most anthropologists (Atkinson, 1992). She wrote that while this category had been revived within other academic disciplines (such as religious studies or psychology) and popular works, many anthropologists tried to avoid the notion altogether. Instead, 'much valuable work on shamans is not billed as such but is contained in monographs with titles that give no hint of a shamanic focus' (p. 308). It seems, then, that although the ethnographic data which initiated the pre-1970s anthropological

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debates on shamanism remained an interesting subject of analysis, the very notion of shamanism had lost its theoretical urge.

This conclusion is still valid a decade later. In anthropological debates the term 'shamanism' has been repeatedly discredited as a virtually useless cover term for a multiplicity of context-specific spiritual practices. Moreover, while anthropologists still sometimes use this term in written texts, often half-admitting that this is for lack of any better one, during discussions at seminars, workshops and conferences it becomes clear that there is a widely shared understanding of the anthropological futility of this term. Those researchers who still think that we should not throw 'shamanism' completely out of the window usually either hedge the term with detailed descriptions of their particular application of it, or employ various re-workings of the term, such as using it in a plural form or putting the ending -ism in brackets.² These linguistic strategies suggest that the authors are trying to maintain a common core of a specific type of spiritual practices, while at the same time showing that these practices do not form one identifiable complex.

However, it is very difficult to write about the contemporary religious or spiritual life of people in Siberia without using the term 'shamanism'. The term has been broadly adopted by the local people and is often used during contemporary discussions on religious life. While anthropologists express doubts about the usefulness of this term in analysing religious life, some of the people whose lives these analyses concern have adopted the term 'shamanism' precisely in the way opposed by contemporary anthropologists. In this article I am concerned with such a use of this term. I show how it has become a weapon in contemporary struggles over the religious identity of the Altaians living in the Republic of Altai in the Russian Federation. I show that in the context of the religious struggle between Shamanism and Buddhism, these terms have come to stand for two different approaches to religious life.³ From now on I will write 'Shamanism' with a capital 'S' not because I think about it as a clearly identifiable complex of religious ideas and practices from an anthropological perspective, but because of its application in the contemporary Altai.

I am concerned with the interactions between ideas about two religious complexes, Buddhism and Shamanism, which have come to form an axis of difference within discussions related to the religious future of the Altaians. Most importantly I argue that there is a connection between the roles that have been envisioned for Buddhism and Shamanism within the national ideology, the perception of the spiritual knowledge of lamas and shamans at the grass-roots level, and recent attempts at reshaping the way in which the shamans work.

The Altaian nation

Since the mid-1990s the question of the religious beliefs of the Altaians has been one of the most frequently discussed subjects in the Republic of Altai. It formed an important part of processes called by the intellectual and political elites in

many areas of the former Soviet Union *natsional'no-kul'turnoe vozrozhdenie* (national-cultural revival). As the republics of the Russian Federation are explicitly based on a national principle, the idea of national identity and national unity is strongly emphasized by national intellectual leaders, as, in their perception, it forms the basis for the existence of the administrative unit.

Moreover, such concepts as 'nation', 'state', 'national culture' and 'national identity' have been introduced to the Altaians through the Soviet education system and political practice. These concepts convey the idea of national unity based on a range of attributes which should be shared by community members (e.g. a common language, ideas about history, national heroes, national symbols and national culture). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, new national anthems and flags have been introduced, new history books have been written and new monuments to national heroes have been erected.

Religion occupied a very important place in the discussions concerning national unity, especially in the first half of the 1990s. In comparison with some other republics of the Russian Federation, the situation in the Altai is particularly interesting as the question was not only how to reintroduce religious rituals, education or moral principles which were presumably forgotten or suppressed during the Soviet regime, but, more fundamentally, what religion to introduce. The Altai has been a meeting point of many religious influences and animistic or 'shamanistic' beliefs have existed here in a variety of forms over a long period of time.

In this article, I talk about a group of Altaians, whom I call 'the Altaian intellectuals'. The Altaian intellectuals are the people who consider themselves ethnically Altaians (or rather belonging to any of the ethnic groups that are labelled as 'the Altaians') and who take an active part in the public life of the Republic. They explicitly state their opinions on the contemporary situation of the Altaians and they have means of disseminating their convictions and initiatives through the media, visits to the districts, organising meetings with local people or through all sorts of social and institutional networks. Because of their activities and because of the relatively small number of inhabitants of the Republic of Altai, the Altaian intellectuals are quite well known by people living in the countryside. The Altaian intellectuals are explicitly concerned with the future of 'the Altaian nation'. The idea underlining the concept of 'the nation' here is the idea of unity. Their discussions concern various aspects of Altaian *cultural unity*. This is because a nation is conceived as a culture-sharing community.

Religious influences

Two big religious traditions, namely Islam and Christianity, although present in Altai, are not considered by the Altaian national elites as possible unifying forces for the Altaian nation and hence remain outside the scope of this article. These two religions are seen rather as points of contrast than existing options for Altaian religious life. Islam is seen as a religion of the Kazakhs, who form six

per cent of the population of the Republic.⁴ With regard to Christianity the situation is more complicated as there are some regions in the Republic where the Altaians accepted Orthodox Christianity following the missionary zeal of the Russian Orthodox Mission to the Altai organised in 1828 (Potapov, 1953, p. 199). However, nowadays Orthodox Christianity is seen mainly as a religion of the Russians and because of that it is firmly rejected by the Altaian intellectuals as a step towards unification of the Altaian nation.

With regard to Buddhism, there is no doubt that it has influenced the Altai region for many centuries. Although there is so far no evidence of the existence of Buddhist shrines or monasteries in the territory of the contemporary Republic of Altai, there were Buddhist shrines, or even monasteries, in regions very close to its borders.⁵ Moreover, some inhabitants of the Altai travelled to Buddhist monasteries in Mongolia, or even to Tibet, to receive training. These were individual cases, but these people returned with Buddhist artefacts, sutras and ideas. My research also confirms that there were peripatetic lamas in the Altai, who offered their skills and advice to the people (see also Tolbina, 1993).

Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are three institutionalized religious traditions whose influence is visible in the Altai today. However, there is a vast area of Altaian religious life which cannot be straightforwardly related to any of these religions. In the Altaian language a variety of terms is used while talking about such areas of religious life. The most important term to get acquainted with is the term *jan*.

Jan in Altaian means (1) authority; (2) faith; (3) custom, law, principle; (4) canon or ensemble of rules (Baskakov, 1947). In a more colloquial but probably also more comprehensive usage, *jan* can be understood as a general 'way of doing things'. However, in order to be addressed in terms of *jan*, the practice has to be concerned with important matters of consciousness, faith, morality or custom. It is also possible to say *Sovet jan*, meaning Soviet rule and authority, as well as *Krestü jan*, meaning the Christian religion.

Hence, the frequently used expression *Altai jan* would mean 'the Altaian way of doing things'. It can be understood as a general expression, whose precise content depends on the intention of the speaker. *Ak jan* (*ak* = white) is another term which is frequently used and it is sometimes equated with *Altai jan*. However, usually *Ak jan* is more closely related to matters of religious life, while *Altai jan* would be understood in terms of, for example, wedding customs or national dress.

For an interpretation of contemporary processes in the Altai, the most interesting term is *Ak jan*. It seems to denote everything that is related to the realm of pure, white spirits, the Upper World and life. An Altaian ethnographer, K. Ukachina, writes: 'In this case [of *Ak jan*] *ak* stands not for a colour of *jan* but for its essence. In *müürgül*⁶ the word *ak* symbolises righteous character, gratitude, goodness, blessings from a pure soul' (Ukachina, 1993).

There is a plenitude of versions of what exactly it means to be a follower of *Ak jan*. Many articles concerning *Ak jan* in *Altaidyň Cholmony* (which is the main Altaian language newspaper) include statements such as the following:

Now about *Ak Jan*. Many people write about it, but nobody can give us a precise understanding. . . . Everyone writes in the newspaper about *Ak Jan*, but nobody says anything clearly. Are we Altaian pagans [*iazychniki*], Buddhists or Shamanists? Or have paganism and Buddhism been united?'
(Maizin, 1994)

Despite difficulties concerning clarification of the precise content of *Ak jan* and *Altai jan*, these two terms refer to an understanding of the religious practices of the Altaians as something primordial, local and specific to this particular group of people.

Another term that is conspicuously present in contemporary discussions on religion in the Altai is Burkhanism.⁷ It is a commonly accepted name for a religious movement which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Altai, although – and this complicates things even more – in the Altaian language this movement was most often called *Ak jan*. However, this use of the term *Ak jan* cannot be fully equated with its contemporary usage. For some contemporary Altaians *Ak jan* is the name for Altaian beliefs (or a part of them), which do not have to have much in common with the Burkhanist movement dating from the early twentieth century.

Burkhanism is usually characterised on two levels – as a new religion with a messianic dimension and as a national unification movement (Danilin, 1993; Gordienko, 1994 (1931); Kolarz, 1954; Mamet, 1994 (1930); Sherstova, 1989, 1997). This is why Burkhanism proves to be so significant in the contemporary context. In 1904 the spread of Burkhanism became a cause of concern to the tsarist authorities and a gathering of the followers of this new religion was broken up in Tereñ valley by a Russian military unit and local Russian peasants. Nevertheless, Burkhanism remained influential and there is evidence that even at the beginning of the 1930s *jarlykchy* (religious leaders of Burkhanism) were present and interacting with Soviet authorities (Kolarz, 1954; Collins, 1993). From 1933 onwards Burkhanism was persecuted both on the grounds of its political aspirations (nationalism) and because of its religious character.

Contemporary discussions on religion

Svetlana Tiukhteneva, an Altaian anthropologist, writes:

In the ethnographic literature the religious beliefs of the Altaians have not been a subject of any fundamental research. One religious compound, which includes archaic, Shamanistic, Lamaistic and Christian beliefs and notions, is studied in separate sections. The lack of a precise, scientifically based point of view on the religion of the Altaians is reflected at the level of mass consciousness.

(Tiukhteneva, 1997, p. 8)

Many ideas in this short quotation could serve as a basis for further reflection,

as for example a suggestion of the existence and kind of relation between scientific and popular consciousness, or a view of religion as a separated segment of life. However, Altaian beliefs tend to be studied in a way that disregards the fact that people simultaneously hold beliefs that researchers classify as belonging to different systems, e.g. animistic, Shamanistic, Buddhist or Christian. There was a general tendency among Soviet ethnographers to describe beliefs in 'layers' (*plasti*), separating influences of various times and geographic areas (see, for example, Alekseev, 1980, 1984, 1992; Konovalov, 1984; Potapov, 1978; Sagalaev, 1984).

The history of religious ideas and influences remains a focus for contemporary Altaian intellectuals, who were obviously trained in Soviet academic institutions. However, in the 1990s the issues of historical influences and evolution were supplemented by the question of what are the 'real', 'true' Altaian beliefs, what should be classified as 'the core' of Altaian religious systems and what can be seen merely as 'influences' or even 'restraints'. These contemporary discussions are not supposed to serve an entirely academic purpose. Religion has been seen as one of the possible ways of unifying the Altaians as a nation. Although the controversies concerning Altaian religious beliefs contributed to a general doubt as to whether a religion can actually serve as a unifying factor for the Altaian nation, the tendencies and notions that emerged during the discussions still play an important role in the political life of the Republic. More importantly, many people in the villages began to discuss these issues. There was a period of genuine interest, which actually changed the perception and opinions of some people in the villages.

Buddhism and Shamanism – two paths for the religious future

Why have Buddhism and Shamanism become an axis of religious difference in the contemporary Altai? In the above brief discussion on religious influences I have not mentioned Shamanism, but instead I have talked about *Ak jan*, *Altai jan* and Burkhanism. How has the notion of Shamanism appeared in the contemporary discussions?

First of all, it was already present in the discussions revolving around the Burkhanist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. One of the initial tasks of this movement's leaders was to free Altaian religious life from both Russian influences and the practices of *kamdar* – shamans. It is important to remember that Burkhanism was a movement which stressed a unity of the Altaians and had a strong messianic dimension, focused around the personage of Oirok khan, who was supposed to become a political leader of the Altaians. Shamanism was not regarded as a suitable religious path for their political future.

On the religious level the Burkhanists' critique of the shamans focused mainly on the latter's interaction with impure spirits of the Lower World, while the Burkhanists advocated a religious focus on the realm of the pure Upper World

and cult of nature. However, Burkhanist rituals soon incorporated elements of shamanist rituals, including the initially contested 'red offering'. But the initial strong rejection of shamanistic practices can be understood on a deeper level, a recognition that the activities of shamans are based on principles inimical to the development of a homogenized Altaian community. Such a conclusion is confirmed by the fact that at the beginning of the 1990s Burkhanism occupied a central position in the discussions about religious life in the Republic. It was placed somewhere between Buddhism and Shamanism as these two latter complexes came to stand for two approaches to religious life based on different principles.

Following Caroline Humphrey's analysis of various kinds of spiritual specialists (Humphrey, 1996), I have argued elsewhere (Halemba, 2001) that the spiritual knowledge of shamans and lamas works in two different ways. In line with this argument, Buddhism and Shamanism in the contemporary Altai serve as models of fundamentally different ways of religious life. While certain forms of rituals or objects of worship might be similar, the current discussions show that there is a recognition of the fundamental differences between Buddhism and Shamanism. In these discussions Buddhism stands for an institutionalized religion, based on authority of the 'church' and its hierarchy, with dogmas that can be clearly defined and evoked, and a cosmology that can be known, studied, written down and interpreted. Shamanism works as a generic term for those approaches towards religious life present in Altai which are based on the idea of movement, changeability, without dogmatic knowledge, and without a stable, easily traceable cosmology. Shamanism is based on the individual experience of the spiritual world(s), often mediated through spiritual specialists but also accessible for laymen.

During the discussions in the Altai concerning the significance and future of *Ak jan* one of the main concerns was to put it on a scale between Shamanism and Buddhism and decide which of them *Ak jan* is closer to. In these discussions at the beginning of the 1990s it seemed as if Buddhism and Shamanism were two blocks of beliefs, capable of mixing and existing together, but they were also often conceived of as almost mutually exclusive.

The link between the ritual repertoire of Burkhanism and Buddhism has captured the attention of researchers and is an issue carefully explored by contemporary Altaian intellectuals. Andrei Sagalaev describes the ritual part of Burkhanism as 'a mixture of shamanic and lamaic rites, and also the traditional beliefs of the Altai people (worship of spring waters, spirits of places, the Master of Altai and so on), with the predominance of the latter in a new, lamaized form' (Sagalaev, 1984, p. 99). Buddhist influences existed in the Altai long before the beginning of the Burkhanist movement (Ekeev, 1997). In Burkhanism there was an attempt to present Altaian beliefs as a system, backed by the authority of the messenger of Oirat khan. Hence, apart from details of rituals, there was also a structural similarity to Buddhism as a religious system based on a certain kind of authority. There is some material indicating that there were plans to organize Burkhanism in a centralized and hierarchical form. For example, a hierarchy of

jarlykchy (the spiritual leaders of Burkhanism) was set up, which established relations among *jarlykchy* in a very different way from those among shamans (*kam*). Shamans could be considered more or less powerful, but there was no clear hierarchy between them in terms of relating to each other. However, apparently there was such a hierarchical structure among *jarlykchy*. According to Sokolov (1994), Tyryi Agemchi was the head *jarlykchy* in Altai. Twice a year he gathered all the *jarlykchy* of the Altai (who were also divided according to rank) and explained details of rituals to them. Although materials concerning Tyryi are scarce, it is important to note that Burkhanism had a tendency towards monotheism, institutionalization, unification of practices and a hierarchical structure.

Andrei A. Znamenski (1999) is right in stressing that the leaders of the Burkhanist movement saw it as a new ideology for the Altaians. Many features of shamanic practice were actually incorporated into Burkhanist rituals, but on an explicit level it was a movement against Russian influence, and at the same time it aimed at reshaping the internal features of the Altaian way of life. As Znamenski writes: 'Burkhanism represents an example of such a cultural construction that emphasised the cultural unity of the nomads and capitalised on such symbols as Altai as a synonym for a native land and Oirat khan as a symbol of a common origin.' p. 237.

These features of Burkhanism are very important in the light of contemporary processes in the Republic of Altai. Although the situation there is now very different from that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the unifying, centralizing and national dimension of Burkhanism is in accord with the aspirations of contemporary Altaian intellectuals. Hence, at the beginning of the 1990s Burkhanism served as a special focus point for educated Altaians. Books and leaflets on Burkhanism, as well as newspaper articles, were published and special conferences were organized. At that time the majority of my interlocutors among Altaian intellectuals stressed the importance of reviving and developing Burkhanist ideas as a basis for creating a national religion, uniting all the Altaians. There were even plans to establish a committee on religious affairs, whose main concern would be to clarify and write down the rules of Burkhanism. Nevertheless, gradually the tendency towards stressing Buddhist elements in Burkhanism grew.

The shift from Burkhanism towards Buddhism has political significance. It was noticeable that during the period of support for Burkhanism, the accent was put on its unique, national character, distinguishing the Altaians among other nations. Even if Burkhanism was seen as a branch of Buddhism, its specificity was consequently underlined.

At the present time, the key figure in the Republic of Altai connected to the Buddhist option is Altaichy Sanashkin, a journalist working for the Altaian state TV company. At the beginning of the 1990s he established an organization called *Ak Burkan*. Initially this organization was aimed at the revival of *Ak jan*, which was understood as the Altaian faith-religion. However, the organization has gradually focused on Buddhism.

I have been in touch with Altaichy Sanashkin ever since my first visit to the Republic in 1993. He has always claimed to me that the Altaian religion is a branch of Buddhism. But gradually his position has evolved from supporting a revival of Altaian rituals and customs interpreted as having their roots in Buddhism to claiming that Altaians are actually Buddhists. (Altaichy Sanashkin took some Buddhist courses in St Petersburg. His organization has sent several young men to study in Buddhist monasteries in Buriatia, and Buddhist stupas have been erected in the territory of the Republic and the foundations of a shrine were established in spring 2003.)

With time the Buddhist option became more popular among Altaian intellectuals. Many of them began to participate in prayers organised by *Ak Burkan* and in 1998, at a conference in Gorno-Altai, Buddhism was acknowledged as an ancient Altaian tradition, although not without explicit opposition.

This conference began with a Buddhist prayer, chanted by two Altaian students of Buddhism from the Ivolginskii monastery in Buriatia. It was evident that some people were very pleased with this, especially Altaichy Sanashkin. He told me that he was particularly pleased with the following point of a resolution adopted by the conference:

Acknowledging that Buddhism in Altai has been one of the basic beliefs of the Altaian people from Oïrot times (from the seventeenth to the first half of the eighteenth century), influencing their worldview and culture, we recommend continuing research in this direction.

(Surazakov, 1999)

Altaichy Sanashkin interpreted this statement as a sign of official scientific recognition of the leading role, which, in his opinion, Buddhism has played in Altaian religious life. The fact that Buddhists were allowed to open the conference with a prayer, as well as the fact that a trip organized after the conference for prominent guests included a visit to a Buddhist stupa, convinced him that more intellectuals see Buddhism as the future religion of the Altaians.

Nevertheless, during the conference there were also plenty of voices that disapproved of the concept of giving a leading spiritual role in the Republic to the Buddhists. Nikolai Shodoev, a geography teacher from one of the Altaian villages, a well-known personage in the Republic as a philosopher who tries to create a well-structured whole out of various Altaian notions and traditions, objected explicitly. Before beginning his speech at the conference, he stated in Russian: 'I'm sorry, but I am a pagan (*iazychnik*).'⁷ He burned some juniper (*artysh*) and said a short blessing. In this way, he dismissed the Buddhist opening of the conference.

Also, during a trip organized for prominent guests of the conference, a small group of people headed by Anton Iudanov, a theatre director and political activist, separated themselves from the main group at the Jal mönkÿ – a mountain pass which is a venerated place. While the core group was tying *jalama* (strips of white material) and bringing offerings of milk and food at the mountain pass, Iudanov and his followers lit a fire and made a separate offering. He said

that it was because he did not like the Buddhist atmosphere of the main gathering (there were Buddhist lamas and students there). The interesting point to make here is that the forms of rituals made at the mountain pass by the main ('Buddhist') group and Iudanov did not really matter. It is possible that all the elements of ritual action by either group would have been accepted in a different context by the other. It was the Buddhist/non-Buddhist atmosphere of the ritual that mattered.

There are many reasons for the growth in popularity of Buddhism among the intellectuals. There is a general tendency towards underlining the ancient roots of Altaian Buddhism and presenting the Altaians as essentially a nation of practising Buddhists, though not necessarily recognizing it themselves. There is also a strong recognition of the political advantages of Buddhism. It links the Altaians to the world of other Buddhist nations, especially neighbouring Mongolia and Tuva. It would supposedly broaden the opportunities of support from abroad coming to the Republic. It is also seen as a unifying force, suitable for state-like formations. This is usually presented in contrast to Shamanism, which is seen as too diverse and uncontrollable to become the religion of a nation-state (see Hamayon, 1994). Vladimir Kydyev, an Altaian publisher and active participant in the public scene in the Republic, told me openly that his decision to support the Buddhist option was not a matter of sentiment but a rational choice based on his conviction that Buddhism would best serve the future of the Republic. It is also the case that some Altaian intellectuals are driven towards Buddhism by its philosophical potential. They say that *Altai jan*, Burkhanism and Shamanism lack this kind of philosophical layer, which could serve as a base for personal growth. They look for a source of spiritual authority, which could be trusted and upon which they could build their own ideas. This is similar to the Manchu case described by Caroline Humphrey (Humphrey and Thomas, 1994), where in the nineteenth century the members of the imperial family preferred other religions than Shamanism, although many shamanic practices were present in the court.

However, if Shamanism is a non-institutionalized religious tradition, based on experience, changeable and not fixed, how can it interact with Buddhism in the political arena? One answer to this question would be that Shamanism is seen by institutionalized religions as a lurking power, potentially dangerous and destructive but not readily available for discussion or confrontation, especially nowadays when, after years of Soviet repression, there may be fewer shamans and more 'shamanism' in people's everyday practices. Another answer, with which this article is concerned, is that Shamanism is currently trying to enter the political arena and compete with Buddhism within the same domain.

The institutionalization of Shamanism

The Buddhist stupa, which was the aim of our trip after the 1998 conference mentioned above, does not exist any more. It was destroyed in 2002, allegedly

by a group of people from nearby villages, who belong to the *Ak jan* religious movement. This movement was initiated by Sergei Kynyev. He is an Altaian businessman, who spent several years outside the Republic engaging in various kinds of business. After his return to the Altai in 1997, he established a religious organization, *Ak jan*, which is based in the Ongudai (Ondoi) district of the Republic. From the very beginning Kynyev organized meetings of Altaian spiritual practitioners (called in the Altaian language *biler kizhi*, and this term also includes shamans – *kamdar*). Most of these meetings are open to the public. In this way Kynyev wants to create a forum for the exchange of ideas concerning ritual practices, beliefs, knowledge about sacred places and annual celebrations, with the prospect of establishing a common core of Altaian beliefs in the future. He would like to see a special house (in the form of an Altaian wooden house – *aiyl*) in every village, where the knowledgeable people and elders would gather to discuss details of conducting communal rituals and other pressing issues related to the spiritual life of the inhabitants. Since for him the crux of Altaian religious life is the cult of nature, he does not want this building to become a shrine. However, it may become a place where a book describing Altaian beliefs is held – when such a book is finally written.

His attitude towards Shamanism is ambivalent and changing. He opposes the development of Buddhism, as he claims that the Altaians have their own faith and do not need external influences. In the late 1990s, he claimed that Shamanism was *passé* for the Altaians and his assertions were closely linked to the ideals expressed at the beginning of the twentieth century by Burkhanists. However, recently I have met several people in the Altai who attended his latest conferences and were surprised to hear from him that Shamanism is the core of Altaian beliefs and that it should be revitalised within the scope of the *Ak jan* movement.

Sergei Kynyev has told me that he is pleased with all the disagreements and discussions which his activities cause in the Republic. For him these form an integral part of processes aiming at the homogenization of Altaian faith. However, they have also led to the fragmentation of his organization. Nowadays there are at least four branches of the *Ak jan* movement, the members of which are mainly based in the district of Ongudai and Gorno-Altai, often actively deprecating each other. There were even incidents of destroying each other's mountain altars. May it be that Sergei Kynyev underestimated the inherent diversity in Altaian beliefs?

Apart from the *Ak jan* movement, which is on the one hand the most active and on the other hand the most contested in the Altai, there are several other Altaian religion-oriented organizations for whose self-definition Shamanism plays a crucial part. These include *Ak Sanaa*, *Ak Suus*, *Agaru Jan* and *Teneri*. Most of these organizations have a main leader, usually claiming some spiritual abilities. The spiritual leader of *Ak Sanaa* is Dzhan Aleksieva, considered to be the most powerful urban shaman in the Republic. She is 30 years old, an elegant woman interested in finding a place for Shamanism in the contemporary world. She openly enjoys and appreciates the advantages of modern life, likes

dancing, good restaurants and feminine clothes and she is very conscious of the impact that her lifestyle can have on her career as a shaman. She says that her shamanic abilities were given to her at birth and she appreciates them, but otherwise she wants to be a thoroughly modern woman, making a career independent of her shamanic abilities – she is a lawyer.

Ak Suus has a different character, as its leader, Nikolai Shodoev, stresses the scientific validity of Altaian religious traditions and, despite being a religious person, claims intellectual rather than spiritual foundations for leadership. This organization is explicitly against spreading Buddhist influence in the Republic. *Agaru Jan* was established in 1996 and does not have a single spiritual leader. One of its supporters is *aga jaisan* (head of clan leaders) of the Altai, Aleksandr Kindishevich Bardin. In the statutes it is introduced as a pantheistic religious community supporting the revival of Shamanism. *Tengeri* is an organisation headed by Nina Antonova and Danil Mamyev. They advertise themselves as a ‘School of Ecology of the Soul’ and promote what they call a ‘spiritual lifestyle’, based on the harmonious existence of humans in nature. One of the recent actions of Danil Mamyev has been the establishment of a nature park, ‘Üch Enmek’, in Karaköl valley (Ongudai district), the aim of which is to protect Altaian sacred sites against uncontrolled development of economic enterprises and tourism. He claims that internal diversity is an inherent characteristic of Altaian religious life. The reason for this is the deeply rooted connection between religious practices and the land. As landscapes in the Altai range from the vast steppes and high snow-covered peaks of the south to the gentle forested hills of the north, so, according to him, are the Altaians’ religious practices equally varied.

These organizations are well known among the Altaians all over the Republic. Altaian TV and newspapers, students travelling to the capital on a regular basis, teachers’ and House of Culture employees’ conferences and courses organized in the centre, all serve as means of diffusing information. What is more, people in the villages seem to be genuinely interested in the discussions about religion, even if they complain about the intellectuals coming up with all sorts of strange ideas. They seem to know quite well what is happening with these organizations and town-based spiritual leaders.

What is happening nowadays in the Republic of Altai may be interpreted as a multiplicity of attempts to institutionalise Shamanism. This is in no way a process exclusive to the Republic of Altai, as it can be observed in many places in contemporary Siberia. In neighbouring Tuva, shamans have become organized in forms of associations with quite strict rules regarding the acceptance of new members, identity cards, hierarchical structure and ritual conduct. One could argue that in the Tuvan case the establishment of shamanist organizations in such a unified form resulted from the competition between Shamanism and Buddhism for a place in the national ideology of the Republic, which was taking place in the early and mid-1990s. The organisers wanted to prove that Shamanism can function in an ‘orderly manner’, as a positive, unifying force within a framework of a contemporary market-oriented economy and

'nation-state'. They even established an official price-list for shamanic services, to make it possible for the shamans' income to be easily taxed.

So far, in the Altai, the institutionalization of Shamanism has not got anywhere near the level achieved by the Tuvan shamans. The expansion of Buddhism has encouraged the establishment of several organizations concerned with the development and stabilization of what might be considered local Altaian beliefs. Shamanism has become a concept that is used by these organisations to establish their place in the religious arena. 'Where are we placed on the scale between Buddhism and Shamanism?' seems to be one of the questions most frequently asked by their leaders.

However, the flexibility and internal diversity inherent in shamanic experience, which clearly underlies Altaian spiritual practices, seems to influence the contemporary religious scene in the Republic. Although there have been several attempts at homogenization of Altaian beliefs (as in the case of the *Ak jan* movement mentioned above), the 'shamanic' scene in the Republic is not united. However, if the process of institutionalization goes ahead and people like Sergei Kynyevev receive general recognition, this institutionalization will not be only a political process. Taking into account the way in which shamans interact with spiritual worlds and the characteristics of their understanding of spiritual realities, it could be that this very understanding and interaction would change with the institutionalization of Shamanism. Hence, a shaman as we know him/her today in the Altai, would turn into a different kind of religious specialist. The institutionalization of Shamanism would require stabilization of shamanic experience, which would turn from an individual interpretation of causality, always questionable and open to challenge, to a fixed, question-answer authoritative knowledge.

Local responses to Buddhism and institutionalization of Shamanism

While Buddhism receives more support among the intellectuals, it does not seem to be that successful in the Altaian villages. Mentioned above was the desecration of the Buddhist stupa in the centrally located Ongudai district. The district in which I have conducted most of my fieldwork is Kosh-Agach, next to the border with Mongolia and Tuva. Although it is far away from the capital, it is easily accessible, as the international *Chuiskii Trakt* road cuts through its steppes.

Interestingly, the supporters of Buddhism from Gorno-Altai have always considered Kosh-Agach to be the most 'Buddhist' region of the Altai, precisely because of its propinquity to Buddhist Mongolia and Tuva. They even claim that formerly there was a Buddhist monastery or temple on its territory, which allegedly gave its name to one of the villages of the district – Kökörü. Literally in the Altaian language this name could be translated as 'blue dome', and the Altaian Buddhists suggest that the name may come from the colour of the roof of an ancient Buddhist temple. However, the sacred mountain next to Kökörü has a characteristic greenish colour and is called Kök yiyk (literally, blue sacred

mountain). The word *kök* in the Altaian language can refer to some shades both of blue and green, so the mountain itself could also be the source of the village's name. Nonetheless, the advocates of Buddhism organize archaeological expeditions in search of the remnants of this temple. As the director of the Agency for Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Altai said to me, if one really wants to find something, one has a good chance of actually finding it.

So far in the region of Kosh-Agach, there is quite a strong negative feeling about institutionalized religions, including Buddhism and also the institutionalization of Shamanism. While the Telengits (an ethnic group of Altaians living in this region) follow discussions in national newspapers, books and TV programmes on Altaian national unity and sometimes do express concerns about disparity between the Altaians in various respects, in practice they do not easily follow the path of unification.

For the Telengits of Kosh-Agach, Buddhism is seen as a foreign religion. People are accustomed to the presence of Buddhism through peripatetic lamas or even a few local people accepting Buddhist traditions in a more obvious form,⁸ but they readily recognise it as not their own – existing close to them in space, but belonging to other people. Moreover, they do not see themselves as Buddhist.

During *Chaga bairam* (a celebration of the beginning of a new year) in 2000 in Kökörü village in Kosh-Agach, there was an explicit clash between a group of Buddhists, who arrived there from Gorno-Altaiisk led by Altaichy Sanashkin, and elders and clan leaders from the village. I quote what happened next from a letter I received from a friend in Kökörü:

The Buddhists came to our *Chaga* and asked for permission to take part in it [they were granted it – *Author's note*]. However, they then began to beat their drums and produce all sorts of weird sounds, and as a result all the people became really angry with them. It was shown in TV broadcasts afterwards as if Kökörü wants to build a *datsan* and prays in a Buddhist way.

I was also told that *biler ulus* (spiritual specialists) from Kökörü said afterwards that *Altaidy eezin* (a master spirit of Altai) was so scared by all the noise made by the Buddhists that he did not attend the ceremony. His displeasure might cause serious misfortunes and deaths in the village. Hence, in May 2000 a special ceremony headed by *kam* (shaman) Aryman Konstantinov was conducted next to Kökörü village. During this ceremony, a shaman found out that another ceremony was also necessary, with an offering of a yellow sheep (*sary koi*).

Why, precisely, did the Buddhists come to *Chaga bairam*? This is a celebration which can be looked at from various angles, offering many possibilities for political interpretation. As the point marking the beginning of a new year, which is defined by the movement of the moon and the stars, it stresses an important part of Altaian tradition. This in turn can be used in a political argument to underline the differences between Russian and Altaian traditions at the very basic level. At the same time, it provides an alternative link, which to some Altaian intellectuals is presently very attractive, i.e. to the states and nations of

Inner Asia. The usage of a solar-lunar calendar, of which *Chaga bairam* is a part, places the Altaians among the nations of Inner Asia with claims to a different set of issues of history, culture and politics from those of Russia. *Chaga bairam* has both an internal and an external power. While offering a potential for internal unification, it also gives an opportunity to link a unified group with a broader community.

Apart from that, it can also be viewed as a Buddhist celebration, which gives *Chaga bairam* a prominent place in an on-going political and intellectual discussion on the religious future of the Republic. The *Ak Burkan* Buddhist association is extremely interested in the development of *Chaga bairam* as a national celebration, stressing its ancient origin and deep religious symbolism. Moreover, while on the one hand it can be interpreted and perceived as deeply religious, it nevertheless leaves an open door for people who are not much concerned about religious issues. They are free to interpret and accept *Chaga bairam* as a secular feast and perceive it just as the beginning of a calendar year.

The Telengits also reject attempts at the institutionalization of local Altaian beliefs. As a part of his activities as one of the leaders of the heterogeneous *Ak jan* movement, Sergei Kynyev travels to villages in all regions of the Altai, organizing meetings with local people and trying to persuade them to become his supporters. Some members of other branches of the same movement do the same in order to introduce their ideas to people from outside the Ongudai district where the movement originated. One of the explicit aims of the people related to the *Ak jan* movement is to provide a ground for homogenization of Altaian rituals, customs and religious beliefs. For example, ceremonies related to marriage vary greatly between the regions of the Altai. The people from the *Ak jan* movement recognise this diversity, but they would like to see a gradual homogenization of such Altaian customs, which would provide a common, integrative core for the Altaian nation. Religious beliefs are viewed in the same way. As Kynyev told me, 'our task is not to tell people exactly what to do, but to start an avalanche of reflection and search, which would surely end up strengthening Altaian unity'.

So far, however, the *Ak jan* movement has met with scepticism in Kosh-Agach. I have heard several accounts of Kynyev's intervention during marriage ceremonies and all of them were negative. People seem not to see his point about unification of Altaian customs. There is also a strong negative attitude towards any form of missionary activity. People say that Altaians such as Kynyev who consciously engage in the dissemination of their religious views are acting in a way which reminds them closely of the missionary activities of Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses and new Protestant churches. This is not a way in which an Altaian *biler kizhi* ('knowledgeable person') should act. They should receive popular recognition through their actions and not through open propagation of their personal views.

Conclusions

The political interaction between Buddhism and Shamanism could not be understood without first researching the basic features of these different religious traditions in their specific local contexts. Buddhism in many places incorporates ecstatic practices and Shamanism can interact with state formations and centres of political power. However, in this particular case, Shamanism and Buddhism have come to represent two approaches to religious life. The first one, although labelled in local discussions as ‘*Shamanism*’, is difficult to describe, impossible to learn (as shamanic abilities are inherited or/and given by spirits), changeable and open to critique. I have argued elsewhere (Halemba, 2001) that a shaman whose judgement and knowledge cannot be challenged is implausible. The power of the shaman in the Altaian context comes precisely from the fact that his understandings are constantly mediated through the changing worlds of spirits, and can also be challenged by interpretations of other spiritual specialists. On the other hand Buddhism stands for institutionalized religion, which would give people a rest from the constant quest for spiritual understanding of causalities, by providing authoritative answers.

The main question that needs to be asked here concerns the potential of Shamanism to interact with Buddhism as an equal competitor in the political arena. It seems that the supporters of Shamanism in the Altai and other parts of Siberia are trying to bring Shamanism formally close to institutionalized religions. For them, this is a way to ensure that Shamanism has a voice in the modern political arena. However, it is arguable that the experience of spiritual practitioners would change if Shamanism reached the level of regional politics.

Although at present it seems that Buddhism is strongly supported by the Altaian national leaders, it does not mean that the leaders will not be faced with new challenges in future. Flexibility is an internal feature of Shamanism, and as the case of neighbouring Tuva shows, it can make quite successful attempts at co-existing with the centralized state structures. However, such a co-existence requires a re-definition of the role of the shaman in the community, his/her relation to other spiritual practitioners and, above all, his/her relationship with the worlds of spirits. It may happen that in a few years Shamanism will be able to interact with Buddhism at the political level in the Altai, as it does already in Tuva. However, the religious tradition, which wants to be present at the political level within a framework of national statehood, would have to take into consideration the main objectives of a national ideology, which are trends towards unification and stabilization.

Notes

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2 This practice is not limited to the English language. In Russian there is a long tradition of using the terms *shamanstvo* and *shamanizm* referring respectively to the practice of shamans, and the general shamanistic worldview supposedly shared by all community members.

3 This article is based on fieldwork conducted in the Republic of Altai since 1993.

4 Statistical data are derived from the official website of the Republic of the Altai: www.altai-republic.org

5 For example, the Ablai-khid monastery on the territory of contemporary Kazakhstan (Borodaev and Kontev, 1999), or the Ustu-Gimat shrine on the border of Tuva, Altai and Mongolia (Sabin, 1980).

6 'Prayer', also used as a term for 'religion' (Müürgül jaŋ).

7 The word 'burkhan' is a Mongolian word for 'deity', also used with reference to Buddha. Although it is presently considered as a Mongolian word, it is believed to be of Turkic origin (Fasmer, 1964, p. 249).

8 Older people remember that there were a few families in this region who actually had Buddhist altars in their yurts and made offerings in front of them. However, they are remembered as adopting *Mongol jaŋ*.

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