

SHAMANISM AND CONTEMPORARY ART OF THE SAKHA

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In the shamanistic ritual of Siberian peoples, in particular among the Sakha (Yakuts), music, performing art, poetry, and fine arts have been of great importance. Shamanism is not only an ancient religion, but is, to a greater extent, a part of traditional culture, going back to ancient times and reflecting the cosmological views of the people within their surrounding world and life. Its old origin is confirmed by rock engravings of the Palaeolithic period and Neolithic age, which, in the opinion of many contemporary researchers, are of a so-called “shamanistic” character. Archaeologists have studied 115 rock pictures with more than 5000 drawings, showing animals such as ox, moose, reindeer, bear and horse. Yakut cultural studies researcher Lyubov Kuzmina feels that these drawings depict the spirits protecting the shaman. Archaeologist-geologist Alexander Penkov interprets the symbolic attributes of the shaman Grigoryev’s cloak as cosmological information on the length of the lunar cycle.

If we consider the contemporary art of the Sakha, we find that the subject of shamanism and its spiritual influence permeates. It is important to underscore that during the last 20 years the concept of shamanism has changed radically among the present Sakha educated people. Earlier during the Soviet period, there existed a negative image of shamans as evil creatures dealing with evil spirits; shamans were treated as ignorant frauds. Today modern shamans are depicted as educated, intelligent people. There is a difference between the shamans’ activities of the past and the present. Today shamans do not perform ceremonies in public, and when they perform with the aim of medical treatment, they prefer to do it for very few people. Most of them do not call themselves shamans; they prefer the term “healer”. Recently, Peter Nickolaevich Ilyakhov, a former Communist Party activist, has published a book which describes his unforgettable childhood memory about his father, who used to be an assistant to a well-known shaman, Konstantin Chirkov, who hid the shaman’s drum and coat and asked his son, a chance witness, not to

tell anyone about it. Nevertheless, Peter Nickolaevich became a convinced communist, an instructor of the Communist city committee in Yakutsk. In 1975 he suddenly fell ill with an unknown strange disease, which opened to him a gift of healing and literary writing. Ilyakhov connects it with the shamanistic culture.

Well-known Yakut shaman, Vladimir Alexeevich Kondakov, was once a history teacher and today has many titles and memberships. He is a member of the World Network of Shamans, a Doctor of Medicine and Psychology, and a member of the Union of Writers.

In the context of this paper Vladimir Alexeevich's membership in the Yakutia Union of Writers is of special interest. He is the author of a number of *belles-lettres* books including the novel White Shaman, where he shows the development of a future great, naturally gifted shaman, Tegyl,

Recently he has published a new title, the fourth part of his big work, The Secrets of Shamanism: Spiritual Healing. Here he writes that only those who are able to communicate with the highest cosmic forces can be shamans, and the shamanistic art is "an ocean without shores." Those who manage to grasp the shamanistic skill are doomed to be lonely and ascetic. That is why, Kondakov feels, that there are very few real shamans. He is opposed to the notion that a shaman has a distorted state of mind with the traces of insanity. He describes shamans such as G. Gerasimov, Nickon Vasilyev, Konstantin Chirkov and Anna Pavlova as beautiful, intelligent people with their internal, highly spiritual essence reflected in their appearance. Vladimir Alexeevich Kondakov himself is a man of an outstanding appearance, strong and robust. He writes secular poetry, mostly lyrical; he has a strong deep voice and performs at concerts as a singer. It is common knowledge that shamans should have a strong voice and a musical ear for they are required by an old custom to open the traditional folk ceremony *Yhyakh* with the blessing song, *Alghys*.

Even among the educated people there remains a contradictory attitude toward shamanism. A 95-year-old national writer, Sivtsev Sourun Omollon, heads a group of "shamanism opponents." The local government secretly supports his criticism of shamanism as an archaic form of culture, which cannot be restored.

By decree of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), President Mikhail

Nikolaev founded the one-of-a-kind Academy of Spirituality (not to be confused with the Ecclesiastical Academy), which is on a par with the Academy of Science. The acting members of the Academy of Spirituality are writers, artists, and actors, who are selected by the president. Among them are the above-mentioned Suorun Omollon and Archbishop German, the head of the local Russian Orthodox Church. No one represents traditional folk culture. This reflects the desire of the authorities to exclude shamanism. Yet, the cultural revival is strong. A program of traditional folk culture, *Aiyy yoreghe*, was introduced in indigenous schools. Children are taught the fundamentals of the ancient Sakha cosmology, represented by the three worlds. The Middle World is inhabited by people *aiyy* and spirits of nature *ichchi*. The shaman performs the communication between the three worlds. The unity of natural force and the spiritual world of an individual is the basis of the traditional world view of the Sakha. In an individual the central place belongs to the notion of *kut* (soul). It has three forms: *bor-kut* (earth-soul), *salgyn-kut* (air-soul) and *iie-kut* (mother-soul), which plays the leading role, because it is given to a person at birth by the Goddesses *Aiyihyt* and *Iyekhsyt*. *Bor-kut* helps an individual to develop, and *salgyn-kut* connects an individual with nature. A special type of bioenergy of an individual *syur* personifies will power and psychology of an individual. Talented craftsmen and shamans had one common God (deity), *Uluu Suorun Toyon* (Great Deity Raven) who lived on the fifth level of the heaven spheres.

Today many explain the gifted individual as having a shamanic origin. People working in art are inclined to attribute their gift to mysterious cosmic forces. Thus, a well-known couturier, Augustine Philippova, recognized in many fashion shows and whose model, Elleyada, who represented Russian fashion at a festival 1999 in France, told me that her great grandfather had been a famous shaman. Her models usually appeared in her sleeping dreams. Once Philippova fainted several times because of a sudden giddiness, after which she saw in her mind's eye a model (pattern) of a future dress. She immediately makes a sketch of her "vision" and later creates the details, attributes and of, course, the performance.

In Sakha (Yakutia) the restoration of shaman's ritual role in festivities is beginning to occur. For example, the traditional summer

feast, *yhyakh*, is opened by a White Shaman in a rite performed by both artists or shamans. One example might include Nikolai Shamaev, a university professor, sportsman, coach, researcher of Sakha culture, and performer of epic verse, *olonkho*. During the opening ceremony of *yhyakh* festival he represents the *Aiyy oyuuna* or white shaman. In some cases he performs shaman's magic, *kamlanie*. When asked, "How do the scholar and shaman in him get along?" he usually answers, "I try to approach to shamanism from scientific point of view but I do not always succeed. And as I grow older the shaman in me prevails." The heroic epic, *Olonkho*, where the shaman is one of the indispensable characters, is a part of rich spiritual heritage of the Sakha people.

Sakha Drama Theatre, directed by Andrey Borisov, a laureate of Russia's State Award "Golden Mask", became widely known for such stagings as "My Desire for a Blue Shore" based on the novel by Chengiz Aitmatov, Shakespeare's "King Lear" and many others. Recently Borisov began to realize his new project which is to create the Sakha Drama Theatre, or the "Theatre of *Olonkho*." The traditional subjects and modern reality meet here. The performance *Uluu Kudangsa* ("Great Kudangsa") is based on the *Olonkho* epic where a great shaman *Kudangsa* is the main character. The *Olonkho* itself is based on a popular legend in which the cosmos represented by the *Cholbon* star which sends cold and famine to the earth. The shaman *Kudangsa* hacks away part of the star and saves his people, but is cursed for opposing the will of the gods.

One of the characteristic features of Borisov's style is to bring modern elements into any historical or fantastic plots. In this staging (like in all the others) the artist Gennadi Sotnikov presents the stage as three worlds, Upper, Middle and Lower, in constant interaction. Along with traditional *Olonkho* characters, warriors, beauties and shamans, he introduces the images of martyrs of Stalin's repression.

One of the latest achievements of the Theatre is the staging of the *olonkho*, or *Kyys Debiliye* (The Girl Debiliye). The heroin, the *Debiliye Udagan* (woman-shaman) is a maiden warrior, beautiful, strong, bold and fair. She defends the *Aiyy* people and in her struggle with dark forces is assisted by the heavenly shaman-woman, *Aitalyyn-udagan*.

Shamanism takes one of the central places in fine arts. The attitude of artists towards shamanism is evolving. In the beginning of the 20th century the first professional artists, Ivan Popov and Mikhail Nosov, orthodox Christians from local Russian clergy families, were able to observe traditional, hereditary shamans. They depicted shamans from a documentary and ethnographic point of view creating a beautiful historical work.

The history of the state and its ideological orientations can be clearly seen in artists' works. For example, Afanasy Osipov's composition, "The Shaman's Banishment," is constructed according to the canons of classical Russian art. The shaman healer is represented as a frightened, evil old man who steps back as a young beautiful Russian woman doctor enters. The composition was created in the 1950s when Communist limits put on art were especially strict.

Among modern artists one can distinguish Timofei Stepanov who created a series of more than twenty large compositions. He traced shamanism along its routes and stages of development. Shamanism, he feels, is one of the paths of human civilization, which often took specific ritual cultural forms. He feels that the time of great shamans is gone, yet, in his works, he reveals great shamans. He does not consider himself a shaman, though some observers insist that he has such abilities. When Stepanov says that he sees compositions of his works in his dreams, he validates this opinion. We can, then, speak of at least two instances where talented artists (Philippova and Stepanov) gain images mysteriously from dreams.

Isay Kapitonov uses allegories and symbols to express his attitude towards shamanism. A burning icon-lamp, a winding road, the Tree of Life, and a shaman flying in the sky can be found nearly in all his works. He insists on the shaman's ties with cosmos and nature.

Young artists address this theme in order to realize their fantasies. They are attracted by beauty, poetry, and the mythology of shamanism.

Therefore, shamanism stands in the centre of modern Yakut art as a significant source of national cultural originality. The fundamental point of shamanism as well as folk art is the link between humans and nature.

SOCIAL MEDICINE? SHAMANIC MOVEMENTS IN SIBERIA

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer

Zig zags of confidence in public and private spirituality have characterized the past decade of post-Soviet religious life in Siberia. Exuberance that accompanied initial “glasnost” years of cultural roots rediscovery has given way to soul-searching as Siberians accommodate fragmented moments of dreams, rituals, telepathy and faith into personal, idiosyncratic strategies for everyday life. In villages and towns of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), shamanic revitalization has taken place at many levels, from annual nationally sponsored fertility ceremonies, to police use of “seers”, to emergency curing seances. The diversity of shamanic activities is matched by a variety of shamanic styles, and some publicized disillusion with failed faith-healers.

This essay explores the links between individual and community healing in multicultural, multicontentious social contexts. Sensitivity to gender issues is explicit. Hopes of indigenous peoples for spiritual revitalization at personal, community and national levels are taken seriously. Two nascent Sakha shamanic movements are featured, that of a young, rural philosopher-visionary Kyta Baaly and that of the healer and ecology activist Ed’ii (Elder Sister) Dora. Data are based on frequent fieldwork in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) since 1986. The Sakha (also called Yakut) speak the farthest North, Turkic language and number approximately a half million or 40% of their republic’s population.

The literature on cultural revitalization movements is burgeoning and eclectic.¹ Revitalization movements are often

¹ Compare Wallace (1956, 1969); Kopytoff (1964); De Vos (1976); Trompf (1990); Nagel (1997); Trott (1997). Wallace (1956:265) defined a revitalization movement as “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.” Few movements, including revolutions, reach the degree of conscious, encompassing change that Wallace’s theories suggested by their assumption of culture as an

responses to compelling, conscious ideas of internal social reform as well as to pressure from external social oppression. Many political, social, and religious movements have revitalization potential, despite differing manifestations and end results. Whether called revolutionary, messianic, nativistic, vitalizing, or revitalizing, the psychological-functional vocabulary used to describe such movements often implies mass-level spiritual crisis-easing related to cultural rebirth. Single theories stressing “objective” material causes, charismatic leadership, widespread psychological depression, or relative deprivation rarely do such movements justice. Older theories reflecting concepts of holistic cultural integration and disintegration have been superseded by more nuanced acknowledgement of the chaotic expansion of individual and group potentials (cf. Shirokogoroff 1935; Wallace 1956; Fox 1995).

Two directions for further study are especially relevant for indigenous peoples of post-Soviet Siberia: stalled or plateaued movements, and the interrelationship of religious movements with nationalism (Balzer 1999a:75–98). The implications of this should be examined with sympathy, understanding that any narrative about the shamanic leaders featured here as yet has no definitive ending. I use the term “shamanism” carefully, to indicate an eclectic philosophy and cosmology consciously mediated and adapted by shamans in each generation.²

integrated whole striving to reach some “steady state” after colonial or other political disruption. But if emphasis remains on processes of spiritual striving at varying levels of community organization, then aspects of revitalization theories focused on Native North America are suggestive for interpretations of contemporary Siberian socio-political dynamics.

² For debates and definitions, see Balzer (1997); Hamayon (1990); Humphrey (1999); Humphrey & Onon (1996); Pentikäinen (1997); Siikala & Hoppal (1992); Znamenski (1999). Scholars are increasingly sensitive to the over-use of the term “shamanism”, preferring focus on the specifics of what shamans do, “shamanhood”, “shamanship”, “shamanisms”, and on local terms for healers. A strong trend is to move away from the idea that shamans practice a single generalizable “ism” or religion (Atkinson 1992). Nonetheless, room can be left for exploring commonalities (Eliade 1964; Hultkranz 1993).

A young mystic: Kyta Baaly

Kyta Baaly's movement began in the mid-1990s, with one of its hallmarks a private, annual *yhyakh* ritual performed at his farmstead in a region across the Lena River from Yakutsk, the capital of the Sakha Republic. The Sakha ethnomusicologist, Eduard Alekseyev, first alerted me that a rural, poorly educated, charismatic young man had captured the imaginations of a number of followers in his region, the Megino-Kangalask *ulus*, in what appeared to be a classic syncretic religious movement. Kyta Baaly, whose more conventional name was Anatoly Yuryevich Mikhailov, was combining aspects of Sakha (Yakut) religion with claims of being the son of Jesus Christ, and his movement seemed, as Alekseyev termed it, to be an example of “*dvoeveriye*” (double faith). Kyta Baaly's movement provided an excellent opportunity to explore theories and debates about the dynamics in crisis times of “*dvoeveriye*,” syncretism, and shamanism.³

Kyta Baaly's assumed name came from the farmstead he had inherited, wrested from a collective farm. His Sakha *alaas*, or rural homestead, came from his mother's side, for his father had been a Russian, whose heritage he had alternately embraced and rejected. Kyta Baaly means place of plenty.

In June 1997, after 5 hours of driving through swamps and back roads, I arrived with friends in time for Kyta Baaly's *yhyakh*. The setting was magnificent, with a lake, forest, fields and two houses. Eventually about sixty participants formed a procession. Kyta Baaly had transformed himself into a prince, wearing a long beige jacket cut like those of the heroes of Sakha epics, embroidered in symmetrical, curved fertility designs. Women in long satin dresses and heavy carved silver traditional jewelry followed. Less appropriately dressed visitors brought up the rear. We filed unevenly to a majestic tree that had a huge bull skull lodged at the joint of a lower branch. Kyta Baaly softly spoke a prayer, *algys*, as he confidently tossed *kumys* (fermented mare's milk a major symbol of

³ This term has a long and complicated history in Russian studies. Compare Billington (1970:18); Balzer (1999a:54–74).

the *yhyakh* festival) in an arc at the base of the tree, “feeding” the earth.

We proceeded to a slight rise overlooking the lake. First Kyta Baaly and then a few others sang or spoke *algys*, as the spirit moved them. The crowd was hushed, as the soft light over the lake seemed to shimmer. Later some proclaimed that they had seen bejeweled Sakha ancestors in 19th century clothing, mirroring the splendor of the living, emerge from the lake in response to the prayers.

We headed back to the ritual ground where three ceremonial posts, *sergei*, were placed, and where a fire had been laid. Kyta Baaly used a microphone to say another prayer. The fire roared, as the spirits were fed *kumys*, oil, and horse hair through the fire, itself personified as a mediator spirit, *iot ichchi*. The offerings were tossed from a huge *choron*, a breast shaped wooden *kumys* cup with legs mimicking horse hooves, and a *kytiia*, a squat wooden bowl. The elegant carved chalice of *kumys* was passed around our circle, so that all could sip from it in communion.

After a night of feasting, circle dancing, and talking about plans for proselytizing Kyta Baaly’s teachings, we stood facing the east in a gentle breeze, as the sun peeked over the horizon, huge, almost blinding. Kyta Baaly said another prayer-blessing, praising the spirits of the directions, and asking for health and prosperity of the assembled group, while he anointed the earth with more *kumys* offerings. Later, several claimed the breeze was Nature’s (*Aiylga*’s) approving answer to his *algys*, although I thought I felt the breeze before the blessing. As Kyta Baaly said the *algys*, we stood in a ragged arc behind him, holding our arms up, palms out.⁴

⁴ Some Sakha say palms should wave the rays of the morning sun gracefully inward, towards the chest. Sun-greeting ceremonies have become a regular feature of the Sakha *yhyakh*, with some of the first led by the actor-turned-spiritual leader Afanasy Feodorov, in the capital, Yakutsk. Afanasy is adamant that those who place palms outward are shunning, not receiving the rays. This debate has become a symbol; my notes mention “People are seriously agitated about this difference.” Ethnographers such as Anatoly Gogolev doubt that sun greeting was part of earlier Sakha *yhyakh*, but the ceremony has become accepted, if not widely attended.

The next two dizzying, near sleepless days were spent in conversations with Kyta Baaly's followers, on a long walk and personal but aborted curing session with his mother, and in rambling interviews with Kyta Baaly. Eventually, I persuaded him to drum in his mother's cabin, with just the three of us. After protesting that he had not beaten the drum in a year, and that seances (*kamlanie*) were "more for a black shaman (*abaahy oiuum*) than for a white benevolent spirit shaman (*aiyy oiuum*)," he agreed to a drumming session before the old-fashioned Sakha fireplace (*chuval*). Its purpose, more to please his mother and me than to cure anyone, was left atypically open.

Smiling from his fireside stool, he peered sideways at me and said quietly: "I am the favorite son of Aiygy Urung" (the ultimate sky god in the Sakha cosmology of nine heavens, also called Urung Aar Toyon). His low, confident drumming lasted about a half-hour, with a steady rhythm, changing intensity slowly, except at the end when the beats became more intricate, intense and rapid. He was drenched in sweat when he stopped, and his loving mother wiped his forehead with a towel.⁵

Kyta Baaly used his drumming in part to work through his relations with other spiritual leaders. "He made a crude mistake," said Kyta Baaly, referring to a local "*abaahy oiuum*." (*Abaahy* are capricious spirits, sometimes helpful, sometimes evil). This shaman lives in a nearby village, and has become a rival for local affections. Kyta Baaly recalled the first *hyakh* he and his mother had launched several years previously for friends, family, and followers. It had marked the neighbors' open rivalry, for Kyta Baaly felt the shaman had tried to crash his *hyakh* with ill will, and that, according to tradition, *abaahy oiuum* did not belong at *hyakh* ceremonies.

⁵Kyta Baaly's huge drum, made by one of the only drum masters left in the republic, Afanasy Brodnikov, is nine pointed and sided, with three old bells hanging from a steel frame in back. Most Sakha and Tungus shamanic drums have more numerous metal bells and sacred figures on their inner frames. Many Sakha consider that a nine-point drum, with metal symbols, should be spiritually earned.

“I did not give him the road. I made his legs so they would not move. He should not have tried to come like that. Of course he could come, should have come. But not like that. I showed him who was who. He was on my territory. You know how shamans earlier did this? Blocked the path for people?” ... “I sent an arrow.”

When I recalled that shamans fight via proxy helper spirits, he vehemently rejected the suggestion, associating this with *abaahy*. He stressed that while the Russians may view both “white” and “black” shamans as bad, “there is a difference between an *aiyy oiun* and an *abaahy oiun*. I do not communicate with *abaahy*... only benevolent spirits, *aiyy, ichchi*.”⁶ He added: “But this is really coming from me, my thinking and my ability to have the third eye... [that] enables me to travel to the Sky God, who gave me the third eye of wisdom, prediction.”

Two years later, Kyta Baaly had become more mellow and mature. While he still had a team of healers who travel from village to village, he was trying to fulfill his image of himself as a “white shaman,” *aiyy oiun*, a ritual leader and moral authority. “My teachings now stress etiquette and love,” he explained at a home in Maia, the *ulus* center. “People need to live up to relaxing with a drink, and they need to earn the right to have multiple wives... I am for polygamy not just to increase our Sakha people, as Professor Antonov advocates, but to return to Sakha values.”⁷ He described

⁶ The simplistic distinction that *aiyy* shamans are benevolent, or “white,” and *abaahy* shamans are evil, is rejected by many because *abaahy* shamans often cure and help their communities (Balzer 1996). While Russian Orthodox missionaries indiscriminately proclaimed shamanism to be “the black faith,” some Sakha, such as Kyta Baaly, have made the linguistic distinction between *aiyy* and *abaahy* shamans a way to celebrate their tradition of an indigenous priesthood, comparable in social organization to that of “world religions.” For a Russian Orthodox view, see Troshchansky (1903). For Sakha perspectives, see Afanasyev (1993); Alekseyev (1984); Gogolev (1983); Gogolev et al (1992); Utkin (1996).

⁷ The Sakha nativist Professor Antonov, a linguist at Yakutsk State University, has advocated polygamy at least ten years. However, the Sakha parliament is far from legalizing polygamy.

his concept of “sacred debt,” *ytyk ies* that everything one gains in life should be returned back through “strong love” of one’s fellow creatures, human, animal, and especially children. “For the sake of love, you should live fully. But it is not like that with us. Instead we have huge numbers of alcoholics, divorces. It is a big sin to separate from one’s loved ones.” He said this repentantly, given well-known aspects of his earlier personal life. “The key is to increase, not debilitate, our children’s potential. They must learn internal freedom, but within limits.”

Kyta Baaly’s teachings have resonance for government education policies that are targeted at integrating Sakha values and customs into everyday teaching. “Our first goal should be the stimulation of internal renewal, of healing ourselves to the point where reflexive energies radiate out from us, in a kind of sixth sense, *iniir*.” Anyone can grow into this gentle sensitivity, or empathy, since it is more accessible than the special telepathic abilities needed for a shamanic “third eye.” “*Iniir* is needed to spiritually reharmonize the earth, *aiyy sire*,” Kyta Baaly explains.

I asked about his communication with benevolent spirits, *aiyy*, and he confirmed he has “many helper spirits, both small and higher.” “Sometimes I wish for something and it has happened just like that, *chek chek*,” he said with a repeated hand chop. He rejected earlier claims to being the son of Jesus Christ in current carnation, and admitted it had been a mistake to make such extravagant claims, especially on TV. He had thought of the Christian God as similar to *Aiyy Urung*, and was confused by his mixed Christian-shamanic dreams.⁸ His adjustments reveal the pitfalls of hasty categorization of particular social movements at one moment in time.

Kyta Baaly’s philosophy utilizes a cosmology of spiritual hierarchies similar to those of past Sakha shamans, with spirit personae occupying nine levels of upper and underworlds, plus our

⁸ His mother also pushed him to interpret his dreams as linking him to Jesus Christ. A psychological interpretation of Kyta Baaly would consider his complicated relationships with his estranged, reputedly alcoholic Russian father, and his doting mother. His mixed ethnic background makes especially poignant his possible displacement of yearnings to be a favorite son onto first the Christian and then the Sakha highest Sky God.

middle world. “Shamans are working with spirit-received information. But shamans are not shrines; they do not create centers of religion. Spirits dictate to them sometimes, but spirituality goes beyond this. What we are trying to do is create more of a system, a philosophy, more scientific.” He added that his teachings put humans more in control of themselves than shamanic teachings surrendering to concepts of fate (*yldzha*) used to do. “We take in our own spirit. If it a strong spirit, it will be different from a shaman’s spirit, more personalized.”

Kyta Baaly clarified why he differentiates Sakha traditions of “priests” and “shamans.” “Shamans became especially aggressive in the 19th century,” when they were under siege from Christian missionaries. “They were capable of eating people’s souls... their spiritual core was not fully formed. And soon [because of Soviet oppression] there will be fewer shamans able to treat the ill. A shaman without a seance can do nothing.” “Some percent of shamanic teachings is Truth,” he added, “but truth and sincerity come through actions.”

In Kyta Baaly’s teachings, morality is reinforced not by the threat of hell, but by a threat of becoming a wondering spirit of the middle world, earth. “When you die, you will be asked, ‘Did you fulfill your debt?’ Otherwise you will become a *yuor* [a kind of Sakha ghost].”⁹

In Weber’s terms, Kyta Baaly’s movement has routinized (plateaued?) to the extent that his followers know each other by the wearing of small “sacred world path” pins and pendants that elegantly combine a Christian cross with a tree symbol (cf. Weber 1947; Kendall 1996). When worn on a chain with a circle at its tip, the symbol also resembles a stick figure person. By 2000, attendance at the annual Kyta Baaly *yhyakh* had increased modestly, and some of his followers had decided to become accredited healers by taking courses at Yuri Prokofiev’s Center for Traditional Healing, including his still enthusiastic mother. They understood that the practice of traditional

⁹ For perspective on where this fits into Sakha cosmology, see Kolodesnikov (2000); Ksenofontov (1992). For Native American comparisons, see Mills and Slobodin (1994).

medicine, in numerous forms, was soon to be licensed, by both Russian Federation and Sakha Republic law.

An Earth Mother: Ed'ii Dora

Another contemporary, fledgling movement for the moral, spiritual, and ecological healing of the Sakha people and lands is centered on a mother with shamanic heritage from the Kobei region, whose curing “miracles,” celebrated anomalies, have become as renowned as her impassioned speeches and mass rituals. Dora Innokentyevna Kobiakova’s fame is republic wide, and her patients are legion, including, it is rumored, the President of the republic. Some of the same people may be attracted to both Kyta Baaly and Dora, for attendance at their rituals is open. But Dora is far better known; few healers in the republic are considered her equal.¹⁰

Dora has described how she heals in a revealing interview with an admirer, Nina I. Protopopova (1999), although Dora also has said that she has trouble explaining in words her techniques and the requirements of being “chosen by Nature” to heal people.¹¹ Dora has helper-spirits, especially birds, who reveal who will visit her. She also trouble-shoots through dreams and through perceptions at dawn. More profoundly, she taps into the natural interconnectivity of humans, flora and fauna. Each human when born is linked in spirit to a tree and an animal, often a bird, living in that person’s homeland. “This

¹⁰Sakha friends and acquaintances widely debate the issue of how many healers in the republic are “true shamans” (male, *oiuun*; female *udagan*). While effective and talented folk healers may number close to fifty, those using shamanic techniques of drum (*dungur*) or jaw harp (*khomus*) playing to alter consciousness, after having experienced initiatory illness, are far fewer. One of the best known shamans in the republic is Vladimir Kondakov (1992, 1999), founder of the Association of Folk Medicine. See also Popov (1947); Balzer (1993; 1996; 1999b).

¹¹ Compare Basilov (1997), who uses the well-known phrase “chosen by the spirits” and Turner (1996). Dora waffled over an interview with me in 2000. I hope to work with her, although I am closer to some who view her competitively. N. I. Protopopova, an elderly Sakha journalist, makes clear her great respect for Dora, who she interviewed in depth three times for the main woman’s magazine of the republic and for her memoirs. Most of the quotes that follow are from the Protopopova interviews, unless otherwise indicated.

is my system. Those who come to me for cures have a special protection that derives from their land and their kin [ancestors].” Dora empathetically uses the “energy” of that connection to restore health, if necessary by flying herself:

“When I raise myself, I stand straight and go where I am needed. What is travelling is my energy. My vision along the way depends on natural circumstances. Across destroyed earth, I can fly as wind or fog. Over more calm rivers and lakes, I reacquire my own self. I can go anywhere, whether Viliuisk, Japan, America... my body is at home, but my energy is moving like smoke from a cigarette to where it is needed.”

A friend in the Yakutsk intelligentsia was lucky enough to have Dora as a houseguest when the friend’s niece had a terrible accident in which her face and neck were badly burned from an explosion of hot milk:

“She was taken to the hospital, in shock... [Eventually] when we picked her up, her face was filled with burn marks, pus, corpuscles... Dora said: “Do not worry, we can fix this. Our paths have crossed. It is your fate that the explosion happened, but I am here to help you.” She took out a long, thin bone, I think from the leg of a stork, and began to suck and blow all over her face... Pus and blood came out. I saw it all; she sucked it all out, at each spot, systematically all over her face. This is *bokhsuruiuu*, the sucking cure. But when she came to a spot on the neck, she said “I am sorry my darling, but this is where there is a vein and it is dangerous for me to suck this one. There will be two little marks left”... The face was red, with a whole layer of new skin... Dora then apologized, and took her own spit and rubbed it all over my beautiful girl’s face, saying spit is medicinal... Dora also soothed with words, saying “you are lovely and will soon be married and have children.” Sure enough, she soon married and just recently had a first child... I would not have believed all this myself, except I saw it with my own eyes.”

Dora's cures go well beyond the cosmetic. One family took their daughter out of the best Yakutsk hospital when doctors said they could do nothing for her brain tumor without a risky operation. The girl was fading, hardly able to lift her head or to see. They travelled far to Kobei, where Dora used another kind of hollow bone to suck out the illness (*sullerdeen*) and gradually return her to health. The girl is now at a university.¹²

Individual shamanic cures, no matter how sensational, constitute neither a movement nor proof of what Edith Turner (1999) calls the collective subliminal, revising Jung (1926), and playing on Victor Turner's (1977) concept of ritual "liminality." But Dora's own language, claims, and recent rituals suggest correlations of her philosophy of Sakha cultural renewal with Kyta Baaly's, and with aspects of Native American (Handsome Lake) spiritual revitalization that Anthony Wallace (1956, 1969) long ago called "goal culture."¹³ After flooding of the Lena River in 1998, Dora proclaimed in mass meetings: "The spirit of the earth warns us with fires and floods that we must embrace Nature, that we must not forget that we are Sakha. Nature is giving a signal that each *ulus* (region), each *nasleg* (subregion) should not appeal to others for help but should themselves generate their own beneficial renewal."¹⁴

Although some Sakha have blamed Dora for not predicting the Lena River floods, she in retrospect looked on the flooding as punishing purification of Sakha sins:

¹² Note the similarity of "sucking cure" traditions to those of Native Americans, for example as featured in the California Indian films "Sucking Doctor," and "Pomo Shaman," produced by William Hieck, 1964, available through University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, catalogue numbers 37454 (original), 37439 (edited).

¹³ Compare Wallace (1956:265); Nagel (1997); Balzer (1999a).

¹⁴ N. I. Protopopova (1999:185). While the earth and the rivers are personified as grandmothers (*ebe*), one Nature spirit, protector-guide of taiga, tundra and forest hunters, is the male Baianai. Dora told Protopopova (1999:179–180) she mourns the recent massive destruction of Baianai's animals. "When the spirit of Baianai burns his campfire, sparks fly in all directions," Dora warns, referring to recent proliferation of forest fires.

“Nature has eyes, a bellybutton, and roots, veins. The spirit of our great earth has east, west, north and south sides, with a strong foundation. We, the Uranghai Sakha, created strong, were born on that very place that the spirit of Nature built his hearth. We are designated to live in harmony with Nature... yet we, despite considering ourselves a wise people in preserving our language and history, have violated the behests of Nature, and for that sin are being punished. Nature, insulted, has responded with the bitter tears of a flood.”¹⁵

Another key to healing the Sakha people and their land is the reverent summer celebration of *yhyakh*, preferably on the bank of a river or lake, or on a rise with a great vista. While the republic declared June 21 an official holiday soon after it declared sovereignty (within the Russian Federation) in 1991, debate continues over the profanation of the festival in Soviet times and into the 1990s. Dora urges return to the original meaning of *yhyakh*, as a ritual stimulating fertility of people and land, as well as seasonal, cyclical balances of Nature. The summer solstice, when people are closest to Nature, is Nature’s day of peak flourishing, and purification potential. “One should go to the soil of one’s homeland on that day, take meat shashlik and fish, milk products and pancakes, or even just tea, and sit on the green grass in the circle of one’s own kin and friends at the sacred *yhyakh* place (*tyuhyul’ge*).”¹⁶

Contemporary young Sakha women sometimes fault Dora for being too “traditional,” too worried about sexual “sins,” and too oriented toward women’s roles as wives and mothers, encouraging large families. But her advice to young parents stresses the need to

¹⁵ The phrase Uranghai Sakha comes from an archaic name for Sakha that appears in their epics.

¹⁶ The passage continues with acknowledgement that each community may celebrate *yhyakh* in its own way, with its own style (Protopopova 1999:186–187). This alleviates pressures that some indigenous ethnographers have put on communities planning the celebrations to follow specific ritual details. Several well-known and well-respected Sakha ethnographers have been in the forefront of the *yhyakh* revival, including Anatoly Gogolev, Yekaterina Romanova, and William Yakovlev.

stimulate all children to study well, as well as to be proud of traditions of cattle and horse breeding. Scolding, cursing, and disharmony, she reminds, were always discouraged in Sakha families. To avoid the scourges of alcoholism and poverty, so rife in Sakha villages, she suggests trying to help children find value in any kind of labor, whether paid or not. Sakha were once self-sufficient, without money, and need not today find meaning in life only through outsider-driven employment.

Dora is no revolutionary, but she does have social messages that she repeats in meetings and interviews, addressed to her own people. Others should not be blamed for Sakha problems, she suggests, even though as a people Sakha may be as much as fifty years behind where they might have been, both morally and economically, without Soviet rule. “With other peoples one should have an open heart and good will. But at the same time, one should not allow inconsiderate behavior.” She adds: “It is not in the nature of the Sakha people to protest, demonstrate and act out.” For survival, Sakha have become cautious. Elders who participated in war and experienced starvation should teach young people the perils of interethnic and inter-community disharmony.

Conclusion: Millennial faith healing for all?

In the interrelated realms of politics, conscious cultural changes and human psychological potential, shamans and shamanic rituals can mediate interconnectivity, encourage morality, and radiate love. To do this effectively, shamans must speak in a language followers can understand, in a time and context that resonates. As masters at trickster-like creativity, shamans also push the limits of all culturally available metaphors, especially symbols of spiritual power (Hyde 1998). In this system, Jesus Christ can become Aiyu Urung (Urung Aar Toyon) or a shamanic helper spirit. But the system is undermined without faith, without confidence in the mediator, and, especially, when a mediator-shaman loses confidence in him/herself after being called psychotic or given inappropriate drugs by “modern” medical doctors (Balzer 1996; Turner 1999).

The terrifying Soviet propaganda and punishment apparatus was one of the worst confidence destroyers of indigenous belief systems ever known (Slezkine 1994; Bourdeaux 1995). Yet some shamanic healers and visionaries have emerged to piece together faith in spirit powers, human-animal rapport, and a cosmology beyond the arrogance of Soviet-style “scientific materialism.” Sakha, hungry for such faith, nonetheless eat tentatively at the tables of newly-forged-for-the-times shamanic mediators-between-worlds. “Are they real?” “Did they go through a genuine shamanic initiation, being torn apart by spirits and reconstituted?” “Do they use drumming, seances?” Sakha themselves ask, not just outsider ethnographers. Unlike some Native Americans, who have explained to me that they experience and shape ongoing cultural processes of “vitalization,” Native Siberians consider cultural revitalization all too necessary. Their disruptions were too great and their underground too deep to see the post-Soviet emergence of shamans as a steady or normal process.

The two shamanic leaders featured here have each endured culturally defined and legitimizing “shamanic illness” (in Sakha, *ettenii*), the painful initiation into a spirit world that then gives them great benefits to empathetically share with others. I am in no position to judge or question the validity of either self-referential or secondary accounts. While four-day “fugues” and “glossolalia” are not obligatory in Sakha shamanic training, Sakha initiations resemble those of many others in Siberia, North America and elsewhere, including those described by Edith Turner for Inupiat who have integrated shamanic heritage with Christianity (1996, 1999). Drumming too is less significant in the cases featured here, for Kyta Baaly and Dora present themselves in the “white shaman,” or priestly category of Sakha mediators between worlds. Dora does not call herself either an “*oiuun*” (usually reserved for men) or an “*udagan*” (a female shaman) but rather lets her admirers do that for her. She does recall flying to other worlds, and her lovely, archaic prayers help validate her powers and the very existence of spirits for her followers.

Have these two colorful Sakha spiritual leaders successfully created revitalizing movements, or merely seized the millennial moment to piece together in new ways older Sakha traditions? They

are living icons of their time, very much in current self-renewing spiritual agony, so it is premature to artificially slap labels of “new religion,” “cult,” “fraud,” or “aborted reform movement” on them. While Kyta Baaly’s movement has had a modest increase in membership, Dora’s popularity has been more dramatic and had more momentum. Yet in 2000, Dora’s beloved husband and helpmate died, and her necessary mourning period of one year curtails her social activism, curing abilities, and her spiritual purity, according to traditional Sakha values.

In sum, both these social-spiritual movements represent conscious attempts at personal and community rejuvenation in crisis times by charismatic leaders. Particularly striking is the diversity and sincerity of their Sakha followers, although they are a small proportion of the total Sakha Republic population. Whether an urban folklorist experiencing conversion from Soviet atheism, a former Communist leader-turned-politician, or a rural cleaning lady once cured by a shaman in childhood, each supplicant and some cynics have found resonance in messages of ecological renewal, national identity, community solidarity (*communitas*) and return to Sakha family values. While the processes of cultural revitalization are uneven, messy and at times disillusioning, the urge toward spirituality using shamanic idioms continues to enflame and enrich indigenous and scholarly perceptions. In the history of revitalization movements, few have reached the point of constructing a new religion or a genuine revolution. But many, including those described here, have been catalysts for more modest individual and community spiritual renewal. They thus simultaneously create and represent a kind of social medicine that Siberians call shamanic.

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