

New Legends in the Rebirth of Khakass Shamanic Culture

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Khakassia is a land of majestic mountain and steppe beauty, full of fresh and salt-water lakes. Located near the geographic center of Asia, it is thought by many to be the birthplace of Turkic culture. The Khakass call their land "the sunny world," and their ancestor a white wolf. The Sayan mountains separate Khakassia from Tuva in the south and west, while its northern reaches connect with the forests of the Krasnoyarsk territory.

During the communist period there were major changes in the traditional way of life, which became divorced from the cycles of nature. A large hydro-electric dam (Sayano-shushenskaya GES) has made for significant change in the climate. Especially damaging to Khakass culture was the rapid rise in the non-native population. Today's most important problem is that the ethos in terms of prejudices and policies against native culture, poverty and ill health. Unemployment and the influence of the mafia and rapacious religious cults make new additions to Khakassia's social problems.

As in many parts of Russia today, a powerful revival of native culture is going on. Three lines contribute to this revival: consultation with hereditary tradition through the voices of the elders and ethnographic and historical literature, elements left from the Soviet era, and contacts with the outside world. Central to this revival are the ancient Khakass philosophy and practice of shamanism, and their long and rich oral tradition.

To illustrate these three lines, I would like to introduce briefly the practice of one contemporary shaman, and then go on to some new legends which have been appearing in the last few years, building a bridge from the past to the present. In the words of one Khakass philosopher, "New legends are a serious factor in the revival of the ethnos (Anzhiganova 1997)."

A Contemporary Shaman's Practice

Tatiana Kobezhikova is a hereditary shaman. As in most Siberian traditions, the gift can pass down either the female or male line, and shows up in childhood. In Tania's case, her parents were distressed when she began to predict what was about to happen, and could see auras around people. Since shamanism was forbidden and severely persecuted in the Soviet period, they tried to dissuade her from developing her talent. Since the fall of the Soviet Union she has practiced

more and more openly, with support from her family. Recently she sought consecration from hereditary shamans in Tuva and Mongolia. She has made a costume and drum, and her practice involves traditional methods of soul retrieval and divination.

Kobezhikova received a western-style education in Soviet institutions, including fluency in the Russian language. She now uses knowledge gained during post-graduate work in archaeology together with her psychic ability to help archaeologists locate and interpret sites. She also runs a clinic (which for funding purposes is called a Laboratory of Traditional Medicine,) in two rooms in an *obshchezhitie*, or dormitory/hotel in the city of Abakan. This setting has limited her in terms of drumming and long ceremonies, but at the same time opened her practice to a wide spectrum of clients.

Kobezhikova has contacts with the west through reading the works of Michael Harner and Carlos Casteneda. Meetings with foreign psychiatrists and anthropologists result in exchange of ideas and methods. It is possible that contacts with the outside world may lead to financial support for her efforts to revive all methods of traditional healing in Khakassia. At least she is receiving publicity (Van Deusen 1997:1-15; 1998:22-29).

What emerges from the union of these three lines is something unprecedented in the history of shamanism. (It is worth noting that the shamanic tradition has always been extremely flexible, adapting to changed conditions and the influx of new ideas.) Tania practices traditional soul-retrieval and divination, as well as healing through energy channels, massage, and herbal medicine which are not typical of traditional shamanic practice. She has also developed a practice which I am calling eco-tourist shamanism, in which she guides people through the many sacred sites in Khakassia, helping them to feel the energies of the earth, and developing rituals which contribute to personal growth and ecological awareness.¹ Her practice adapts tradition to today's largely urban conditions and needs.

Cultural Revival

The revival of shamanic tradition fills important needs in the spiritual life of the Khakass, and also serves as an inspiration to their artistic, political and ecological movements. More even than individual healing, today's shamanic practice focuses on healing the ethnic group as a whole. In Khakassia the revival of culture involves individual inspiration and creativity rather than the setting up or imposing of new authoritarian structures. Individual creativity is honored

in the arts as well as in shamanic practice—all are seen as evidence of the shamanic gift. Some of the people I was introduced to as “shamans” are actors, singers, philosophers and musical instrument makers, as well as traditional healers. Politics is considered a valid arena for creativity, and also for competition and trickery, time-honored parts of shamanic tradition. Life stories are being told in reference to traditional beliefs, giving inspiration and warning to those who follow.

Khakass scholars like Larissa Anzhiganova and Alexander Kotozhekov are reconstructing ritual and legend, and they have played a central role in raising the consciousness of rural people during the formation of the new republic (Anzhiganova 1997). Scholars and shamans consult each other regularly, if somewhat uneasily. Khakass music and epic now appear in the national theater, carrying spiritual and ecological messages, while just a few years ago they were viewed as quaint remnants of a primitive past.

An important focus of today's movement is clan ritual, with attention to genealogy, ancestry and especially to the importance of specific places sacred to families and clans, and to others that are power points on the earth. Many of these places are in the mountains, home of ancient spirits who appeared in the past as helping spirits of shamans. Mountains appear in epic and tale as the meeting place of heaven and earth, and a route for approaching the upper world.

Contemporary Legends

People have begun to make direct contact with these ancient mountain spirits, and their experiences turn into new legends that are inspiring the rebirth of culture. Today's legends involve survival, rebirth, initiation, creativity including the interaction of male and female energies, the vital role of music, and most importantly, respect for nature and the land. Certain people have changed the focus of their lives entirely as a result of the experiences and visions that result in these legends. They have begun to concentrate on helping their people. Others tell of how they were offered the shamanic gift in Soviet times, how they refused it and what happened as a result.

In the past the singer of epics, or *khaidzhi*, enjoyed a position similar to that of the shaman. These storytellers, who performed in a type of throat singing called *khai*, came from their own ancestral lineage and underwent initiation like shamans. They showed talent from childhood, and were respected for their clairvoyant abilities. Storytelling was understood as a

healing art. Today's legends are told by new *khaidzhi*, and also by folklore collectors, philosophers, actors, and even elderly people speaking on the radio. Like shamans, the legend-tellers work toward healing the people as a whole.

One contemporary story connected with singing is that of an elderly musician named Itpekov. He was sitting at home one evening playing his *chatkhan* (zither) when a little old woman with snow-white hair and a bright face appeared unexpectedly before him. The *chatkhan* is the sacred instrument of storytellers, and he had felt compelled to take it up after his retirement. “The old woman's clothing amazed him with its former wealth, being made of satin and silk. But it was in a pitiful condition: all torn, with threads pulling out. After they had drunk tea in silence, she told him she was Chir Ine, the mother spirit of all the Turkic peoples. ‘I am the mother spirit and I am dying,’ she told Itpekov. ‘You need to help revive your culture and the people themselves, so that I won't die. You, the Khakass, are my eldest son among the Turkic peoples.’ Not at all long ago Chir Ine had been young and beautiful, she said, because the Khakass people were living according to their customs and traditions. They worshipped her because she was the Soul of the People. When the people is alive and blossoming, she too is well. But now the Khakass have stopped worshipping the spirits of Fire, Water, Mountain, and Taiga. They are forgetting their language, losing their culture. If this continues further, the people will die—the Khakass will hang themselves, drown themselves, kill one another (Anzhiganova 1997).” *Chir Ine* taught Itpekov her song, which he often sang and now others sing too.

Itpekov's story and song are eloquent statements on the shamanic themes of rebirth, initiation through meeting with spirit, and respect for the land. They point the way to contemporary action by combining shamanic philosophy with politics and ecology. Another story with similar themes of initiation through meeting the mountain spirits is that of the sculptor Slava Kuchenov. The specific spirits he met were *khai eezi*—the spirits of singing *khai*, which leads to the art of the *khaidzhi*, or epic singer.

Kuchenov had received his formal education in Leningrad and returned to his homeland with no sense of traditional culture—torn off from his roots. He went to visit an aunt in a far-away village, walking a long way to get there through the mud. When he arrived, he cleaned his boots and went to bed. In the night someone woke him and took him out through the steppe to the mountains. Something happened to him there, a deep transformation based on meetings with

spirits. He was told he must learn five musical instruments, including the *chatkhan* played by *khaidzhi*, the *khomus* (a bowed string instrument²), and *demir-khomus*, a kind of jaw harp played by shamans. Some of the things he was told were to remain secret. Then he returned to his aunt's and went back to bed.

In the morning he woke up and thought it had all been a dream, until he saw that his boots were muddy again. After this experience he began to play music and became an adept *khaidzhi*. He now composes his own poems similar to heroic epics, using classic and contemporary themes. He has become a professional actor and singer, although he had no previous background or education in those fields (Anzhiganova, Kotozhekov, Kazachinova 1997: personal communication).

The instrument maker from whom Kuchenov commissioned his instruments, Petya Topoev says that the meeting with the *khai eezi* happened at the confluence of two rivers, a meeting place of the physical and the spiritual. The instruments he made had unusual shapes, designed according to the instructions of the spirits that Kuchenov met.

The same instrument maker told me a story of his own meeting with spirits—this time with the spirit of a warrior who sleeps in the mountains. Topoev went out to the mountains with a newly finished drum. An instrument gets its soul from being played outdoors, consecrated by the spirits of nature. Only then does it find its own voice. His brother had played the new drum and said it would be a warrior's drum.

Topoev went up to a place where he could see five peaks, and there he played. Beside one peak a big sleeping warrior appeared. Another warrior was trying to wake him. Topoev stopped playing and the two warriors disappeared. When he began to beat the drum again, they reappeared and the sleeping warrior moved around, as if he were about to awaken and get up. At this, Petya was frightened and ran away! (1997: personal communication.)

His story relates to an old legend about a sleeping warrior of the past. In the sixteenth century a hero named Tadar-khan (or Amyr-sama in Tuvan) jumped the mountains into Khakassia from Tuva and became a great leader. He was defeated by the Mongols and went away to sleep in the mountains. Legend says that he will come to life when the time is right, and save the people. Another view on this story is that the warrior, also known as Khoorai-khan will return when the material world ends and people are spiritually reborn. V. Ya. Butanaev thinks it

is possible that Buddhist Shambhala is located in the Sayans and that this legend refers to that tradition (Butanaev 1996:13).³

Topoev says that it is possible to see things like the sleeping warrior near places on the earth with a strong geo-magnetic force. Many of the kurgans and standing stones are located at such places. Once when he was sitting near one of the stone figures, near the confluence of two rivers, he saw the stone start to emerge from the ground. He saw the stone take the shape of a yurt, then a face. He thinks it was the face of a legendary female warrior (Akh kyz) who vowed she would not marry until she drove her enemies from the land. When she died she was buried near that place. He also ties this into the idea of the sleeping warrior who will come to life and save the people.

Female warriors are not at all unusual in Turkic and Mongolian epic tradition, where many if not most of the heroes are women. Khakassia's greatest epic is about several generations of female warriors, among them the beautiful and powerful Altyn Aryg. She and her ancestress Pis-Tyzykh were born in a white cliff. They had many adventures, involving talents for shape-changing and the ability to bring the dead to life.

When I was in Khakassia in 1997, Altyn Aryg was the subject of a new battle—in the theater. A children's theater company called “Skazka” had produced “Altyn Aryg” using puppets and masked actors. Many local people were horrified that the masks were so truly frightening. Children were crying at the show. Colors were dark. One side of a heated discussion said that Altyn Aryg should have been shown as beautiful, while in this production she had the qualities of a witch. Others feel that since the masks were made according to the visions of the actors and artists, it was acceptable to portray the characters as truly horrifying. The argument continued about interior and exterior beauty, whether the concept of female beauty should be seen through male eyes only, and about goddesses who carry destruction within their beauty. But the main thing seems to be the political question of Khakass culture being shown in its ugliest, scariest side. Also involved are issues of how the theater uses imagery and traditional culture to make money. The consensus in that room held with the idea that Altyn Aryg should be shown beautiful, not only as a woman but as a representation of the highest in Khakass culture.

The sleeping warrior is waking up!

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Notes

1. I have also seen a similar practice in Buriatia, where shaman Valentin Hagdaev runs spiritual excursions on Olkhon Island through the Baikal Parks Service.

2. This can be confusing, since in Tuvan the word *khomus* refers to the *temir-khomus* or jaw harp. A Khakass stringed *khomus* made by Topoev has the shape of the sacred swan.

3. Russian psychiatrist Olga Kharatidi also believes that Shambhala, in Russian called Belovodia, is located in this area---she says in the Altai mountains.

Thanks to: Larissa Anzhiganova, Galina Kazachinova, Tatiana Kobezhikova, Alexander Kotozhekov, Petr Topoev.