

# Burkhanism in the making: religious revival in the Altai Republic

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Cover photo:  
The Ak-Burkhan temple, Gorno-Altai. September 10, 2019. *Photo by author.*

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## Abstract

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The Post-Soviet Russia experienced waves of changes in social, political, and economic spheres, the process of religious revival among them. Russian religious revival has been described in numerous books and papers, especially the processes going on in the Russian Muslim regions and within the Russian Orthodox Church. Religious revival in the Buddhist and the ethnic minorities' regions, however, received comparatively less academic attention. The same is true regarding the Altai Republic. This is a region with noticeable shares of Muslim (Kazakh) and Buddhist (Altai) population, that, nevertheless, cannot be completely described as neither Buddhist nor Muslim.

The Altai Republic is a place where a local religious movement called Burkhanism/the Ak-Jan (the White Faith) was formed around 1904. Burkhanism originated in Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism and was also influenced by the Orthodox Christianity. It started to spread among the Altai peoples until the Soviet anti-religious policy disrupted its pace. During and after Perestroika, the Altai Burkhanism was remembered again, and used by many, although being explicitly defined by few.

In my thesis, I attempt to analyze the role of Burkhanism in the modern Altai Republic, on the case of one of the most prominent religious groups that associate themselves with Burkhanism – the Ak-Burkhan community. I use the information from the academic literature on the Altai studies and religious studies as well as my own anthropological observations to describe the Ak-Burkhan members' opinions on Burkhanism and characterize this community as a conscious actor of the Altai Republic's religious life, by implementing an approach of the strategies of religious revival.

**Keywords:** Burkhanism // Buddhism // the Altai Republic // the Ak-Burkhan community // religious revival // strategies of religious revival

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### Introduction to the Altai Republic

The land that is now a subject of Russian Federation called “Altai Republic” became a part of the Russian Empire in 1756, after the fall of the Dzungar Khanate. That was the time when southern territories asked Russian Empire to accept them and to protect from the Chinese aggression, while northern clans were already under the Russian rule at that time. Before the Dzungar Khanate, which introduced Tibetan Buddhism as official religion, the lands were a part of the Mongol Empire.

In 1824, Ulala village was founded by the first wave of Russian settlers, a place that later became the main city of the Soviet Oirat Autonomy (founded 1922), then renamed into Oirod-Tura in 1932 and changed its name again in 1948, on the one it bears until now - Gorno-Altaiisk. Gorno-Altaiisk is the only city of the region, with the population of 63 845 people (2019). The decision of joining the Russian Empire was a willingly made one, as far as we can track it through the documents of that time. In return, the colonization policy was – at first – not as pressing and demanding as it could have been. Later on, however, the Orthodox mission started its way into the region, and Russian peasant settlers also began to arrive. The borderline position of the region also did not contribute to weakening center control over the province – in fact, it served quite the opposite.

Despite both Altai and Russian languages being officially recognized in the region, most of the public announcements and everyday negotiations are being conveyed in Russian, especially in the north of the Altai Republic, where the share of ethnic Russians is higher. This is hardly a surprise given the fact that ethnic Russians are dominating the region’s nationalities distribution<sup>1</sup> (please see Figure 1). Generally speaking, the Russian language is known by the absolute majority, while the Altai language is only spoken by the Altai peoples.

As for the religious landscape, there were 57 registered religious groups in the Altai Republic in 2017. Thirteen of them were Protestant, four – Buddhist<sup>2</sup>, and nine – Muslim. All the rest (31) were the separately registered parishes of the Orthodox Christian Church. The shamanists of Altai are not known to be

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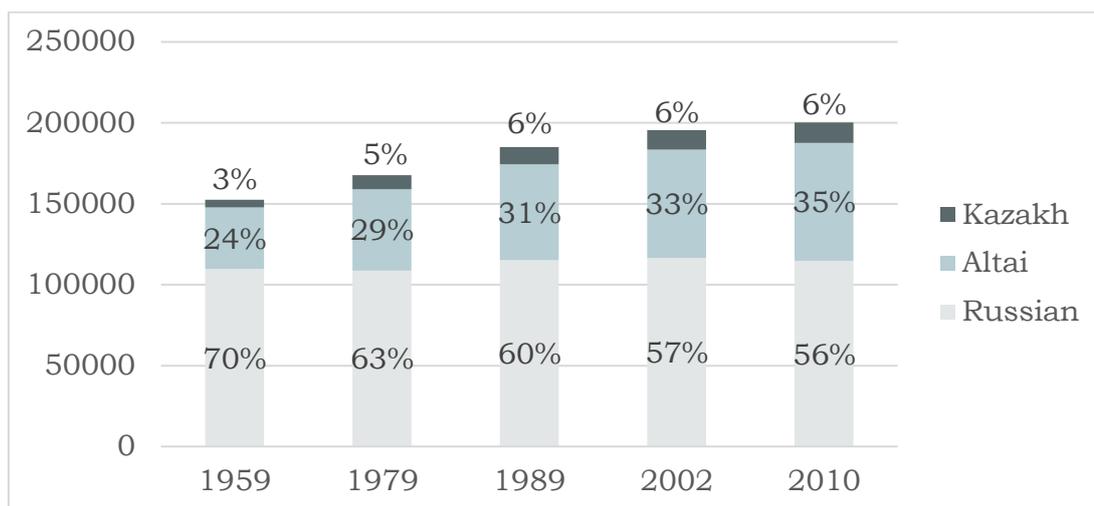
<sup>1</sup> According to the Russian National Population Census, in 2010, in the Altai Republic there were 35% Altai, 56% Russians, 6% Kazakh and 3% minor nationalities in the Altai Republic. (Statistical Yearbook “Republic of Altai. 2015-2019”. (2020). Retrieved from: [https://akstat.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/3oq9R5SA/1.37.5\\_2019g.pdf](https://akstat.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/3oq9R5SA/1.37.5_2019g.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> In 2021, there are already seven registered Buddhist organizations in the Altai Republic. For the list of them, please see Appendix 1. The three organizations that were registered while I was working on the thesis are marked as (NEW).

united into officially registered societies, but in 2020, the first shamanist organization of the Altai Republic was registered<sup>3</sup>.

The map of contemporary Altai Buddhism (a list of the Altai Buddhist organizations, marked on the map of the region) can be found in the Appendix 1. The organization circled in yellow are connected to the Ak-Burkhan community and Gelug Buddhism, the green ones represent other schools of Buddhism.

Figure 1. Nationalities of the Altai Republic, 1959-2010



The Altai Republic is a region with nature and tourist flow dependent economy. The transportation net is under-developed: there is no railway communication in the region, only bus routes and car roads. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many factories were closed (almost all, in fact), which resulted in rocketed unemployment level and social anxiety. Nowadays, decades after the Russian Federation formation, people in the Altai Republic are still suffering from low wages, unemployment, and depressed regional economy. Although the total population of the Republic is not decreasing (206 168 ppl. in 2010; 218 866 ppl. in 2019)<sup>4</sup>, young specialists do their best to move to the nearby regions or to Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. The situation is aggravated by the fact that agriculture in such harsh mountain climate is a risky affair, and only a half or even less of the region's substantial territory (92 903 km<sup>2</sup>) is suitable for large-scale rural activities such as growing cereals. However, some of the Altai Mountains inhabitants make their living by cattle breeding and growing or collecting medicinal herbs and forest resources (especially cedar cones).

<sup>3</sup> Местная Религиозная Организация Шаманов "Ырыс" (Счастье) Турочакского района Республики Алтай [The Local Religious Organization of shamans "Yrys" (Happiness) of the Turochak District of the Altai Republic]. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/1210400000370>.

<sup>4</sup> The total population of the Altai Republic is 218 866 people (2019), with 63 845 people (2019) living in the only city of the Republic, its capital – Gorno-Altaiisk (Statistical Yearbook "Republic of Altai. 2015-2019". (2020). Retrieved from: [https://akstat.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/3oq9R5SA/1.37.5\\_2019g.pdf](https://akstat.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/3oq9R5SA/1.37.5_2019g.pdf)).

## Research question and idea

The Altai Republic is one of the subjects of Russian Federation that are considered to be 'national' – the ones with significant share of non-Russian indigenous population (35% of the Altai compared to 56% of Russians (2010)). The Altai Republic is also a borderline region, a buffer zone, situated on mountain ridges between Mongolia, Kazakhstan, China and other Russian territories. Remote and isolated Altai mountains has always attracted both persecuted and daring: the Old Believers<sup>5</sup> and the Orthodox Russian settlers lived among the native folk for decades, adding much to the native dwellers' indigenous beliefs - shamanism, Buddhism and Burkhanism<sup>6</sup>.

The Soviet regime has petrified both the making of the Altai national identity, which was starting to mature in the form of Burkhanism in between 1900-1922, and the Orthodox Church persistent attempts to celebrate full baptizing of the locals. Lived practices of shamanism, Burkhanism and Buddhism scarcely survived, undercover, and were even further intertwined with the Christian folklore and everyday ritualization and with the Soviet imaginary.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, religions and local traditions started to be discussed in the public, re-lived, reconsidered, and revived. The region witnessed several charismatic leaders trying to unify and congregate the Altai peoples around their chosen cultural and spiritual core: neo-shamanists, Buddhists and eschatological movements are still talking in polyphony, cooperating only in the face of the dominant Orthodox Church – or never cooperating at all.

I aim at describing the **contemporary discourse of Burkhanism** (the Altai national religious movement) through a grounded anthropological observation of the everyday life of the 'Ak-Burkhan' Gelug Buddhist community (among other methods). My major research interest in this regard is the **ongoing process of the 'religion-making'** – I focus on the claims, attempts and mechanisms of constructing the united body of 'native Altai religion', re-assembling it from folklore, ethnological academic reports, current political and social ideology and personal charisma.

Furthermore, I am considering the conscious process of religious revival in the region (at the very least, the complex process of Burkhanism revival) as not only a phenomenon of purely religious and cultural nature, but also as a

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<sup>5</sup> The Old Believers are a Russian Orthodox religious movement dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. After the Patriarch Nikon's ecclesiastical reforms supported by the Tsar Aleksey Mikhaylovich, a significant share of population, from nobles to peasants, refused to accept the new ways of Orthodox liturgy and revised symbolism and went underground. Starting from 1654-1656 (the period of the Nikon's reforms) up to the Soviet and Post-Soviet times, the Old Believers were being prosecuted, albeit with fluctuating intensity. Some of the Old Believers fled to the Altai Mountains to hide from the authorities and stay away from the Moscow Orthodox Church.

<sup>6</sup> Burkhanism is a national religious movement on the verge of shamanism and Buddhism, first documented under this name in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

political and social manifest, in a way. Such a lens might provide valid outcomes not only on the process of national religious revival in the post-communist countries, but also on the process of constructing and managing new religious movement and on the patterns of contemporary folklore formation.

## Methods and methodology

A group of people are sitting at the dinner table: a Roerich follower who knows Blavatsky's writings more than an average scholar would ever do and, nevertheless, humbly says: *'do not record me, please, who am I to tell you anything'*, and several students (us).

We belong to the academy and that person does not, because they are not university institutionalized and, above all, are biased in their ideas on Roerich and Blavatsky. Yet, we were just as biased, only that this bias is an anti-spiritual and secular one. Thus, at the end of the day it is social institutionalization that assigns meaning.

## Methods and data

My research is centered around the hypothesis of Burkhanism religious revival by ethnic minorities in Altai, Russia. To tackle this topic, which might very well be overwhelming in its entirety, I have formulated three major questions to make it narrower and give it shape:

1. How is Burkhanism perceived at present – and by whom?
2. How and why is Burkhanism used alongside the claims of the 'nativity' of both Buddhism and shamanism?
3. What are the patterns of religious revival implemented by the 'Ak-Burkhan' community?

By posing these three questions, I strive to, first and foremost, describe a peculiar discourse of modern Burkhanism – a religious movement that eludes definition, a movement that sparkled, then almost perished and is now being revived in various manners (Halemba, 2003; Sherstova, 2013; Znamenskii, 2015); secondly, to reveal the history of the 'Ak-Burkhan' community (which is not yet academically recorded) and their ideas on Burkhanism, Buddhism and national cultural revival, and thirdly, to benefit the field of new religious movements studies by focusing on the (un)conscious decisions of the community leaders and on their underpinning motivations (Lindquist, 2006; Quijada, 2012).

To answer the first question, I coin the **methodology of discourse analysis** (von Stuckrad, 2003) to systematize the opinions on Burkhanism from (1) Media resources and official statements (what image of Burkhanism they create); (2) the Ak-Burkhan community; (3) the Academic community; (4) Other religious groups (Karma Kagyu, Lotus Sutra, Ak-Jaŋ, shamanists, Orthodox Church).

In other words, I have selected four spheres of stable social interactions in order to frame the otherwise amorphous and 'rhizomatic' discourse of contemporary Burkhanism. The choice criteria for these particular options were based on the 1) accessibility (whether I will be able to use the data source/reach out for that specific audience); 2) importance for the research subject description (how much added value does this or that data field adds to the understanding of Burkhanism) and, finally, 3) achievability (if the data source is not too big and overwhelming for me to study within the boundaries of my current research).

Thus, I was forced to reject several opportunities for the discourse analysis enrichment, for them being impossible to obtain. For instance, receiving any kind of the representative feedback about Burkhanism through random street polls was impossible due to the weather conditions: my fieldwork was in December and February, and winters in this region are, typically, fiercely cold. Likewise, travelling to the remote villages to meet Ak-Jaŋ members was also an arduous affair during the winter months. On the other hand, the four discourse dimensions that I chose to investigate proved to be both reachable and rewarding in terms of the possible research findings. I have also strived to achieve the complexity ('thickness') of the social interrelationships by gathering bits of experiences from a variety of places: visited the Altai National Museum and attended a theatre performance on Altai national mythology, travelled to the Karma Kagyu center in the village near my main place of fieldwork, found the book on Burkhanism written by one of the Lamas, asked people about economic, social and political situation in the region, etc.

By 'discourse methodology' I mean the fundamental understanding of discourse by Kocku von Stuckrad: *'Discourse analysis, from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, aims at reconstructing the processes of social construction, objectification, communication, and legitimization of meaning structures'*; *'Dispositive analysis examines how "assignments of meaning create reality". Discourses develop within cultural processes and dispositives and with reference to specific topics, but many discourses also contain 'strands' from other discourses'* (von Stuckrad, 2013). I use the idea of 'discourse' to conceptualize the multiplicity of social interactions, constructs and institutions around the religious phenomenon of Burkhanism, and, at the same time, to envision the way these social interactions occur. In a nutshell, my research aims at describing a particular religious movement (Burkhanism) in the Altai Republic, Russia through its representations in the legitimizing institutions: media, academic community and religious groups, both Burkhanist and others; in order to subsequently analyze it in the process of becoming social reality.

More specifically, I closely follow concepts of discourse and narrative by Ethan G. Quillen (2017): in his paper on Atheism he investigates, how discursive narratives on religious critique shape the broad and multilayered idea of 'Atheism'. Quillen's research subject being different from mine, his understanding of discursive narratives and their value is, nevertheless, very similar to the one I share in my own work. Like Quillen (although - about Atheism), I am interested in the definition of Burkhanism '*found in the particular discursive field*' (Quillen, 2017). It was neither my intention to find the 'true' Burkhanism, nor to defend the truthfulness of any positivistic statements claimed by my interlocutors. I '*simplify*' (Quillen, 2017) my research methodology through appealing to the narrative analysis of Burkhanism in the chosen fields and therefore, though transferring agency from my academic self to the 'in-betweenness' of the accurate and thorough anthropological observation. This is not to assert any 'objectivity' on my side! Constant self-reflection and self-awareness, both as a person and as a researcher, is a vital part of my approach. I will elaborate on further on.

The second and the third questions are tackled through **unstructured and semi-structured interviews** and **deep participant observation of the everyday life of the 'Ak-Burkhan' community** – one of the actors in the Altay religious scene<sup>7</sup>. I have spent around 46 days in the Altay Republic, Russia (three trips in Autumn, Winter 2019; Spring 2020); conducted 50-55 interviews and activities with 25 different people, most of which were more than 2 hours long. The data collected in the field are stored in a form of '**memos**' (Lempert, 2007) and used as a primary source.

The interviews were not all held as face-to-face conversations, of course. On the contrary, most of my encounters with people – and most of the talks, accordingly, - happened on the move, or during the ceremony, or other joint efforts and activities. In some sense, almost all anthropologists' fieldwork is 'participant observation' by Clifford Geertz (Lee & Brosziewski, 2007). However, understanding the level of integration into the interlocutors' lives is extremely important, both to the researcher and to their possible readers. In my case, I did 'walking interviews' (talking while strolling around the city or shopping), 'tea parties' (being invited for dinner or just sharing an afternoon/midnight meal in the temple), general chatting with the temple visitors and philosophical debates with the Lamas. There were also 'classical interviews', usually with the scholars, when I invited them to the café or came to the appointment at their job place. Yet another type of my anthropological involvement was taking part in rituals/ceremonies, both individual and collective: I have undergone a purification ritual in the temple and performed religious actions during the Sagaalgaan celebration. Also, my meetings with shamans (all three of them) were, in fact, client appointments. I was clear about my goals and affiliations from the

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<sup>7</sup> The reasons for choosing this community over many others were both practical (it is relatively easy to access in terms of transport and communication) and contributing to the research idea (it is one of the communities who use revived Burkhanism rituals alongside with Buddhist practice).

start, of course, but for various reasons, scheduling a ‘treatment’ visit was my best option for meeting them.

Another crucial part of my fieldwork framework is the ‘target audience’, in marketing terms. I focused my attention on the active members of the Ak-Burkhan community (the Lamas, Buddhist practitioners, other temple visitors), scholars and shamans. Most of my talks within the temple were with the community leaders rather than with the common visitors. Such representation was partly based on my limited access to potential respondents (quite naturally, not everyone coming to the temple was ready and willing to speak with me), partly decided beforehand as a part of my research plan. Since my goal was to study a particular community, its history, and its current vision, it was only fair to concentrate my fieldwork activities on the active partakers of the community’s decision-making process.

To specify my understanding of anthropological research, I would like to return to the narrative methodology that I described above. For this research, I saw my primary goal in recording, transmitting, and analyzing the picture of modern Burkhanism, while also being aware of my own experiences and boundaries (both personal and academic). Thus, during the work process I was capturing my respondents’ opinions about Burkhanism and themselves and analyzing them through the lenses of discourse and ethnic religious community building. I am also influenced by the ideas of material religion and sensory experience by Birgit Meyer (1999; 2010): my field observations included records of visuals, smells, bodily and mental states in and around the Ak-Burkhan temple, as well as basic, everyday impressions connected to the places where my interlocutors live, work and spend their leisure. Another anthropological concept that I (albeit partly) used as a model is the methodology of Clifford Geertz. I was striving to achieve ‘thick description’ in my observations and memos while also implementing various ways of gathering information that Geertz also used (walking interviews, attending meaningful events, etc.).

The process of anthropological research is, in essence, a matter of transmitting experiences – and erecting a ‘house of theories’ on top. From this point of view, the anthropological film might have served better than the written report (van de Port, 2018), but, unfortunately, I have neither time nor means for full-length shooting. I have also been quite selective in terms of voice recording. Undoubtedly, recordings guarantee the integrity and flawlessness of the data analyzed; however, in my case, quite a lot of people were not willing/not ready to be recorded. Even when they were, they were still very accurate in their speech while looking at my recorder working silently on the table between us. Therefore, had I made a different choice (in favor of recording each and every conversation), I would have never learned valuable social and political insights which changed my appreciation of their reality – even if I knew that those insights were never to appear in my writing due to the interlocutors’ request.

I decided that the benefits of getting the otherwise inaccessible information outweigh the (possible) harm coming from the faults of my memory and acted accordingly: wrote quick notes on my phone in the process of communicating (laptop being too heavy to carry around) and once in several days collecting these notes into more detailed memos. During the stage of fieldwork material analysis, I created elaborate memos and transcripts of the recordings I managed to get (100 pages of text in Russian, entirely written by me), and subsequently used with this document for the thesis writing.

An integral part of my research methodology was constant **self-awareness and self-reflection** – my sub-goal was to contribute to the anthropological research by an attempt of developing a transparent and honest style of constant reflection and self-conscious writing and analyzing (Lindquist, 2006; Bakker, 2018). I also paid special attention to the ethical concerns. I will describe them in the ‘Reflection over my anthropological experience: being a “halfie”’ paragraph.

## Ethnography, Ethnology and Anthropology

As I have explained above, I primarily identify this thesis as an anthropological research, in a sense that my focus is on getting and analyzing decent fieldwork data. However, it is worthwhile venturing a bit into the understanding of what ‘anthropology’ means, for some scholars from the Russian academia of Altai studies seem to express different points of view on the matter.

Without doubt, ‘anthropology’ has already found its way to the Russian academic vocabulary and is now widely used to refer to the sphere of knowledge as well as to mark the research methodology. However, in the Russian studies on ethnic groups, culture, and language, one can frequently come across such terms as ‘ethnography’ and ‘ethnology’ (especially in those dated back to the Soviet and early post-Soviet times). Is ‘ethnography’ generally defined differently from ‘ethnology’ and ‘anthropology’, or likewise? And in case certain differences exist, what impact does it have on research and fieldwork experiences?

I will go no further in order to illustrate these questions as to describe two situations that happened to me, during my own fieldwork. The first case is, in fact, nothing more than a single phrase, uttered by two different people at different times, in different places. ‘*Oh, the Buddhist-Burkhanist temple in the city center? But they are not true Burkhanists!*’, - this is how two Russian scholars (an elderly male Russian professor from Moscow and a female Altai academic in her 30-s) commented on the subject of my thesis during our face-to-face conversations, absolutely independently of each other. Both times, I asked again: ‘What do you mean by *‘not true?’*’, and both times, the answer I received was neither unexpected nor elaborate. The scholars replied in different words, but with the same meaning: that the Ak-Burkhan temple Lamas are not ‘those Burkhanists’ from the past, because the living tradition of Burkhanism was severed and almost utterly lost during the USSR period. The fact that the Ak-Burkhan Lamas perceive themselves exactly as ‘those Burkhanists from the past’,

providing arguments and a background story to support this claim, did not seem to be held in high esteem by both scholars.

The second ‘encounter’, so to speak, was exactly the one that made me think about the possible differences between ethnography, ethnology, and anthropology. A female Altai scholar (the one whom I mentioned above) dropped the following phrase while characterizing a young Altai studies researcher whom we both knew: *‘It has to be admitted that his methods are different from what we do here. He is doing anthropology, while we are working within the classic ethnographic tradition, coming from the USSR’*. Of course, I immediately clung to this slip of the tongue, asking for details; however, I was not successful in unfolding this topic into a much more detailed conversation. The scholar only briefly mentioned that anthropological methods are somewhat different from ethnography and that she herself is inclined to follow Lyudmila Sherstova’s ideas on ethnology rather than being too optimistic about ‘Western’ anthropology.

What do these two situations mean? The first one, about *‘true and not true Burkhanism’*, touches upon a wide variety of topics: problems of authenticity, self-identification, and agency of those being ‘studied’. The question is, in other words, who decides whether a social movement (religious movement, in this case) is authentic, or not? The movement leaders? Involved members? Scholars? Public opinion? Although these debates are not confined to the post-Soviet academia alone, the answers to the questions above are crucial to the understanding of the both the ‘façade’ and ‘essence’ of the local (Russian, Altai, etc.) school of research methodology in humanities. What I mean by the ‘façade’ and ‘essence’ metaphors is that an anthropologist preparing their research is inevitably challenged by the questions of agency and authenticity. The way they tackle these questions provide them with a methodological framework of their research and, through that, significantly influence their results.

In my case, I experienced a clash of expectations, both in terms of my research methodology and desired results, between the scholars and Ak-Burkhan members I spoke to, and myself. My religious community respondents were expecting me to write a *‘true story’* about Burkhanism. A story that is academically correct and free of personal involvement (*‘objective’*), and therefore, legitimate. The Russian/Altai scholars (some of them) felt uneasy about my methods of diving into the temple everyday life and ensuring my interlocutors’ agency on their own positionality. I did not agree that the Burkhanism of the Ak-Burkhan temple was *‘not true’*, because I do not share the opinion that something could be called *‘true’* when it comes to the variations of people’s beliefs<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> It has to be noted that there is a problem of ‘imposters’ (*‘ryazheniye’/‘ряженые’* in Russian): shamans or clairvoyants who do not believe in what they do but use spiritual practices to make their living. Such cases are mostly common among non-institutionalized spiritual movements: shamanists, esotericists, neo-pagans. However, I would prefer not to go deeply into the problem of ‘sincerity’ in my thesis, for I am sure that the people I spoke with believed in what they had to say – at least, partially.

I suspect that this ‘clash’ was, at least partly, based on the differences in the understanding of the role of a researcher in humanities. As I mentioned describing the second case, some Russian/Altai scholars prefer calling themselves ‘ethnographers’ or ‘ethnologists’ instead of ‘anthropologists’ (a situation that is more common among the researchers who witnessed the decline and fall of the USSR). What are the differences between these terms? To avoid venturing too much into the varieties of existing definitions, which would add little to my goals in this paragraph, I will focus on the boundaries laid down by Lyudmila Sherstova in her PhD thesis (Sherstova, 1999)<sup>9</sup>.

According to L. Sherstova, ‘ethnology’ and ‘anthropology’ can be used as synonyms. She refers to the Russian historiography before 1930s as to a promising ‘ethnographic’/‘anthropological’ school of thought, whereas the Soviet period is described by her as an artificial, dogmatic dissipation of history and ‘ethnography’. By ‘ethnography’ Sherstova means a derivation from ‘ethnology’, an academic discipline that *‘focuses mainly on the non-dynamic, ‘frozen’ past of the peoples of the world’* (Sherstova, 1999). She writes that, due to the prevailing dominance of the reductionist Marxist ideology in the Soviet scholarship after the Stalin’s terror, historiography in the form of ethnology has been divided into history and ethnography: the first one *‘was often used to prove rightfulness of the Communist Party’*, while the second one was downgraded to merely providing a static description, an imprint of the ethnos, in the chosen period or epoch. Thus, Sherstova denies ethnography of historical connectivity, of flexibility and change, and considers Soviet history to be lacking observations of people, their traditions and ways of life.

Sherstova argues that contemporary (to the state of 1999) anthropology needs to be developed in the framework of the ethnology of the pre-Soviet era. According to her, ethnology/anthropology is a discipline that observes and analyzes ethnic groups in their historical change. To reference her point, Lyudmila Sherstova cites Russian historians and philosophers of the Silver Age who developed the idea of the nations’ ‘cycle of life’ (inherent to various nations and ethnic groups periods of ‘birth’, ‘prosperity’ and ‘decay’): Nikolay Danilevskiy, Lev Gumilev, Pavel Milyukov. Sherstova understands ‘ethnos’ (an ethnic group) as a *‘community united by common territory, culture (including language) and self-identification for at least several generations’*. She also adds that ‘ethnos’ is *‘stable in its constant changes’*, inherently volatile<sup>10</sup>. Thus, anthropology for

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<sup>9</sup> Lyudmila Sherstova is a bright and prominent scholar in Altai Studies and Russian Post-Soviet anthropology. Her books and monographs are widely cited, and her ideas have significantly influenced subsequent generations of the Altai studies researchers. It was her definition of ethnology that my interlocutor made a reference to (in the second situation I described).

<sup>10</sup> L. Sherstova’s original quote in Russian: *‘Этнос может быть определен как исторически сложившаяся на определенной территории устойчивая межпоколенная совокупность людей (общего генезиса - Л.Ш.), обладающих не только общими чертами, но и относительно стабильными особенностями культуры (включая язык) и психики, а также сознанием своего единства и отличия от других подобных образований (самосознанием), фиксированным в самоназвании’*. В определении, по нашему мнению, следует поставить акцент на ментальности и едином самосознании этноса, а также добавить к нему то,

Lyudmila Sherstova, and for the pleiad of scholars following her footsteps, is, in fact, ethnology; it is about the history of the land and its peoples, focused on the major historical changes of the whole community rather than on the concrete people, here and now. Naturally, Sherstova is keen on observing the current situation of ethnic culture, language, and ways of life, and both careful and accurate in doing so; but the long-term ethnological perspective is a noticeable part of her works.

Research perspective defines methodology: in the case of the ethnology school, methods of anthropological research are frequently associated with historical communities and their changes over time. In other words, the continuity of the community's connection to the past generations, their traditions and culture, is the 'authentication' of its true existence, - hence the assertions about the non-authenticity of the Burkhanists (*they are not true Burkhanists*) that I described at the beginning of the paragraph. Of course, the inclination to ethnology is not the only, and probably not even the major reason for such claims of historicizing authentication. However, this observation is highly relevant to the topic of my thesis, as it is in the Altai Studies that ethnology/ethnography debates are quite prominent even nowadays, as well as to my own research experience. Both scholars and Ak-Burkhan members have imposed their expectations on me as a researcher, and with this passage about ethnology I tried to explain the extent in which their expectations were different from what I came to do, from what I was asking them about. The imaginary of 'a true scholar' and 'a true researcher' does matter; not only between fellow academic colleagues, but also in the interpersonal communication with the members of studied community.

The two situations ('not-so-true Burkhanists' and 'anthropology vs. ethnology') clearly indicate that, first, modern Russian anthropology/ethnology/ethnography in the whole and the Altai studies in particular are touched by the Soviet legacy (in terms of research goals, methods and results); and secondly, that anthropology is being considered as something other than ethnography/ethnology - at least, by some of the contemporary Russian researchers. The second observation is intrinsically connected with the first one; and while it would be oddly indeed to assume post-Soviet academia to be free of its past (thus making the first conclusion as far from being a revelation as possible), both cases provide us with a glimpse on the differences in expectations of 'Western' and 'Post-Soviet' 'anthropology'.

### Reflection over my anthropological experience: being a "halfie"

Given the fact that I fully support the academic self-reflection, especially in anthropology, gender studies and action research, I myself am bound to do

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*что в нашем понимании этнос - "текущая", внутренне "динамичная в стабильности" категория, заложенная в природе человека, а может быть и высших позвоночных вообще'. (Sherstova, 1999).*

the same in my own research. Also, I cannot but admit that my initial interest in the very topic of the current research might have been ignited by my own personal experience more than I even realize. However, I believe that this is very much the case of any inspiration or interest that people generally have in their lives, so I am not going to reflect on that.

I am a non-believer when it comes to the metaphysical entities and powers, so that I most often describe myself as an atheist (with a non-specific, commonly used meaning attached to the term). I come from a middle-class Russian family from a small town in the Altai Region (Southern Siberia, on the border with Kazakhstan). My hometown is relatively close to the Altai Republic – the region which I devoted my current research to – so that as a kid, I used to go there and visit wonderful nature preserves. My first (Bachelor's in Economics) and second (Master's in Philosophy of religion) degrees were obtained in Saint-Petersburg and in Moscow respectively, and immediately after that I moved to the Netherlands in pursue of the Master's in Religious Studies degree at Utrecht University.

Thus, I found myself in a peculiar situation of being neither stranger nor native to the region of my academic interest, which, among other things, inevitably altered my fieldwork and communication with the locals. On the one hand, I consider myself lucky enough to be somehow close and related to the Altai Republic in my past (I was born in the neighbouring region, and I am familiar with several most spectacular sights of that land). To some of my informants, these facts of my biography seemed to mean much more than I could fathom before meeting them. They tended to stress that I am '*svoya*' – that I am local, almost of their kin, by some semi-territorial, semi-biological foundation (by blood or by genes, as they formulated it). I daresay that if I had been from Moscow or Saint-Petersburg that would have never been a case: partly because of the common attitude toward the Moscow dwellers, derived from stereotypes, partly due to the fact that to their mind, I would have been a stranger that does not understand neither their rhythm, not their problems.

This was also very much the case in relation to the caution expressed towards me as a researcher. Generally, academia and researchers in Russia are surrounded by the aura of significance and respect (especially scientists), and people are usually very friendly to students and professors alike. Nevertheless, I experienced some kind of resentment from my interlocutors with regards to the fact that I am a student from Moscow (not even to mention my Utrecht affiliation). Several of my informants directly expressed concern that I will 'hype' on Altai, their 'unique land', and build myself a name on it without being deeply and 'for real' immersed into the topic. One of them was also worried about the Netherlands – not about the country as such, but about the fact that this is 'the West', and that I am here, in Altai, as a representative from the West (Moscow included), supplying foreign countries with potentially sensitive information.

Still, that is only one example of such concerns (curiously, that exact person was the only one of the people I talked to who has been to the USA and lived in Moscow for several years, but then returned to the Altai Mountains).

Others were much more receptive about me studying at Utrecht, with yet another factor at play – people’s curiosity and at the same time hidden, transformed yet still recognisable feeling of exaltation toward ‘the West’. This feeling, which is understandable to me as a Russian, is less prominent in nowadays Russia as it was in the 1990s, but it is still there to stay – in different forms and among various groups of people.

In short, my fieldwork and the communication process were harder than I anticipated, especially in psychological and ethical departments, but more successful than it could have been under other circumstances (for instance, me being a foreigner, not being a native speaker, not having affiliations with Russian academia, not originating from the region nearby, etc.). I always introduced myself as a student doing research on the local culture and religion, to be absolutely frank with those who were willing to share their knowledge and opinions with me, but I would nevertheless stress different aspects of my curriculum while talking to different people.

In the process of doing so, much to my surprise, I started to feel like a foreigner myself – a foreigner in my own country. The fact that I had to be constantly conscious about what to tell about myself and to whom – without lying and concealing too much – definitely added much to those feelings, but the core root of this anxiety was the discerned dissonance between my informants’ values and goals and those of my own. Sometimes I felt that they go far beyond my personal boundaries (for instance, when I was semi-seriously called a ‘rich-bitch’ [*’burzhui’/’буржуй’*] for living in an inn with a single room, not in a cheapest hostel), and that we do not share much in terms of political views, everyday routine and worldview in general. I am pointing this out particularly to prevent concerns about researchers working on the cases in their countries of origin – I felt it on my skin, that even though I grew up on the piece of land close to the people I try to understand, and speak the same mother-language, I frequently felt myself almost like a person coming from the Moon. If this is not supposed to bring a fresh point of view on the questions studied, I honestly cannot fancy, what could.

Galina Lindquist in her wonderful book “*Conjuring Hope: Magic and Healing in Contemporary Russia*” (2006) addresses the same issue she experienced during her anthropological research as a ‘halfie’ problem. She was born in Russia, then studied and married in Sweden. Although my experience was far less dramatic (no one called me a traitor), I can still relate to her observations of an anthropological research conducted by a ‘semi-native’. I would only like to add, that to my mind, such a predicament may happen not necessarily due to the life divided between two different countries, but also between people from different social strata and – even – different regions within one country.

Combined with the aforementioned veil of awe around the West and the Western, there were also other, prevailing attitudes, and of a more practical

nature. The position of a scholar in Moscow, not to say in the Netherlands (Europe and USA in general) seemed to sound very promising to some of my informants in terms of ways how my research can benefit their communities – if only they could convince me write exactly what they see fit. They were worried in this regard, however, how ‘serious’ I am as a scholar – how much can I be trusted on going further with the information they provide. In short, they did not want their time to be wasted on someone who would not benefit their cause in the end. This was (and is) another source of my struggle as an anthropologist – although it had not been put bluntly, the atmosphere of expectations and responsibility, which they were imposing on me, was felt tangible in the room. It is this part of the anthropological research that I myself find most difficult – the contradiction between my desire to write what I witnessed, felt and analysed fully and in every detail I find significant, and the imposed responsibility towards the community and individuals, who voluntarily shared their time with me. I do not think I have found a perfect way to solve this predicament, but I have developed a set of rules and principles which I try very hard to stay loyal to:

1. I am only using anonymized references to interlocutors, except of well-known people and publicly open Internet sources.
2. I am not using the information that could potentially hurt people I talked to, but I am the one to make a decision on that (this stipulation is designed specifically to deal with conspiracy theories and fears of some of my informants).
3. I am writing the research of my own, with my research design and research goals in mind. I do, however, take into account my interlocutor’s aspirations being stretched on me, but only until it does not violate what I myself hold true with regard to my fieldwork experience and theoretical background.

Most of the times, I presented myself as an ordinary student with limited knowledge on the subject, in order to let my interlocutors talk rather than dominate the conversation. This image of myself was easy to maintain due to my gender and appearance (I am a female and I look younger than my age which makes some people expect me to be less ‘serious’ and knowledgeable than I am), and it automatically gave me a green light to ask ‘naïve’ and ‘stupid’ questions. That was important, because people were not always ready to talk about themselves, either hiding their own opinion out of modesty, or thinking of it as of an insignificant thing, not worthy of my interest as a scholar.

My chosen image also had its downsides: to some of my interlocutors I seemed light-headed enough not to pass through the entry barriers of being allowed to meet with the ‘serious persons’, like scholars and academics, most respected by the community. Needless to say, that when I arranged meetings with the university professors, they went quite smoothly (or, at least, I thought so). In the eye of the Ak-Burkhan community members, however, I had to get older, more ‘mature’ and immersed into the topic in order to qualify for such ‘serious’ meetings. Thus, I frequently felt a bit lost in the communication: on the one hand, whenever I forgot myself and used special terms and showed some

pieces of professional knowledge in the dialogue, I was told not to be too smart [*‘ne umnichai’/‘не умничай’*]; on the other hand, when I was leading a light conversation asking simple questions, I was told that I had to grow up a bit to be granted access to the ‘serious people’ and ‘serious talks. I guess, there was little I could do about this situation: I was simply not close enough to the ‘typical researcher’ figure in my interlocutors’ imaginary. Those limitations imposed on me were stemming not only from my personality and communicational skills, but also from my controversial background: gender (female, not male = not serious enough), nationality (Russian, not Altai = not ‘their’ enough), age (look neither too young nor old enough) and origins (‘halfie’).

## Notes on thesis structure

The thesis consists of the four chapters, each devoted to the separate aspect of the Altai Burkhanism, introduction, conclusion, references, and appendices.

In the introduction, I explain the research design and provide a short overview of the Altai Republic and my academical self-reflection.

In the first chapter (‘Burkhanism of Altai: historical overview’), I briefly describe the phenomenon of Burkhanism and its history. This chapter is the smallest text wise, but nevertheless, very important for understanding the empirical chapters of this research.

In the second chapter (‘Discourse of Burkhanism’), I explore the outsider perspective on the Altai Burkhanism (in the media, by the scholars and by other religious groups).

In the third chapter (‘The Ak-Burkhan community’), I accumulate the results of my anthropological observations: history, everyday life, inner tensions, and gender aspects of the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ community, as well as investigate the details of insider perspective on Burkhanism.

In the fourth chapter (‘Religious revival in the Altai Republic: religion in the making’), I analyze the information presented in the first three chapters and suggest a methodology of strategies of religious revival – the patterns of creating, managing, and spreading a new religious community of the ethnic minority.

In the conclusion, I summarize the results of my research and my findings.

Appendices consist of schemes, photos, and other materials I created or collected during the fieldwork. All photos in the thesis were taken by me.

## Notes on thesis formatting

During my fieldwork, I have worked only with the Russian and Altai speaking people, and all direct citations of my interlocutors are translated by me

(as well as the citations from the written sources in Russian). The most important citations are also quoted in original (Russian), in square brackets. Foreign words and expressions are explained and provided with a Russian/Altai original word and its Latin transliteration, also in square brackets. Quotes are written *in italic*, while important terms are marked **in bold**.

My primary source for the thesis formatting were the Utrecht University Research Master's thesis guidelines, with the reference list designed according to the APA 6 style. I have been using APA for several years of my study because I find this style most convenient for both the reader and the writer. However, since my thesis includes numerous references in Russian and Altai languages, and plenty of references to the foreign online sources, I experienced certain troubles with APA formatting which I tried to resolve for improving the readers' experiences.

Citing foreign websites in-text poses difficulties because these website publications often come with unknown authorship, and with lengthy headings. The fact that these headings are not in English makes it even harder, because using the shortened versions of the headings in the reference is also troublesome.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, I decided to arrange my online references with unknown authorship in a way that I found most convenient for the readers: citing them in a footnote, formatted as: *Headline in English translation*. (Year of publication). Retrieved from: link. This reference style allows the reader to be able to understand the headline of the material I cite, while also gives the direct access to the website, which is crucial, again, given the amount of the references in the thesis.

Books, papers, articles, and other types of materials with known authors are cited according to the APA rules, in-text and in the round brackets. The reason for this is that citing them in the footnotes for the sake of uniformity would have made the thesis much longer text-wise, while not adding significant positive changes to the reader's experience. To make the search for references

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<sup>11</sup> I will use one of my reference list entries as an example.

*Буддисты Республики Алтай вместе с единомышленниками в Бурятии помогли человечеству найти пути решения его проблем [Buddhists of the Altai Republic, together with like-minded people in Buryatia, helped humanity find ways to solve its problems]*. (2004, September 13). 'Bankfax' information agency. Retrieved from: <https://www.bankfax.ru/news/25597/>

The reference entry above is impossible to be cited in-text by its full headline due to its length and the necessity of the English translation that doubles the lines, but it is also does not make much sense to use the shortened version of the in-text reference. The reader would not be able to easily locate the full reference if it is shortened in-text in the language of original, either transliterated or not, e.g. (Буддисты Республики Алтай..., 2004) or (Buddisty Respubliki Altai..., 2004). They will also experience difficulties finding the particular reference in the list if the source is cited by English translation, e.g. (Buddhists of the Altai Republic..., 2004), as there are more than 100 entries in my online reference list, and the English translations come after the original headlines, in brackets. Yet another difficulty with the shortened in-text references is that some website articles from the different newspapers start very similarly, e.g., 'Sarymai Urchimaev died ...'/'Sarymai Urchimaev's death ...'. Again, given the number of references, finding them in the reference list by a shortened version of the headline would have been a very discouraging experience for a reader.

easier, I have divided the reference list into two parts: the 'Academic sources / Printed and online' (139 entries) and 'Online references / News, articles and statistics' (133 entries). The latter is also split into two unequal groups: the 'Authorship known' list (14 entries) and 'Authorship unknown' list (119 entries). I hope that these measures will help the reader to be more engaged in the material I used and referred to.

The last but the least, I do not use transliteration for the sources in non-Latin languages in the reference list (these sources are written in the language of their origin and provided with the English translation in square brackets). I have always seen my role as an academic in presenting the world's cultures in their stunning diversity, and I consider the non-Latin references transliteration a discriminating endeavor – if not by its intent, then in its essence. I understand that it was introduced primarily for the sake of the reference list alphabetical formatting, and I transliterate the surnames of the authors exactly for that matter. However, I sincerely believe that transliterating the non-Latin titles of the books and article headlines instead of citing them in the original language brings more harm than benefit. It strips the academic world of any language systems other than the Latin one, while not contributing significantly to the reader's understanding of the language they cannot speak.

I believe that without embracing diversity at the beginning, there would be no understanding in the end.

# 1 Burkhanism of Altai: historical overview

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- *'Hello, - the Altai scholar looks interested, her eyes attentive and sharp, - Come in, sit down. What is it that you are writing your thesis about?...'*
- *'...Oh, the Buddhist-Burkhanist temple, the one in the city center? But they are not true Burkhanists! You should consider that.'*

At the first meeting with an Altai scholar, the Altai Republic, Gorno-Altai city.

## Chapter overview

This chapter is designed to provide a short overview of Burkhanism and its history which explains how different religious groups came into being after Perestroika and how did their ideas change over time.

One of the most cited scholars of Altai culture and religion, Nadezhda A. Tadina (2013), suggests the following division of the history of Burkhanism, citing, in turn, another major figure of Burkhanism studies Andrei G. Danilin (1993):

- '1) 19th century - 1930s (Key point: public prayers stopped and repressions against Burkhanists began);*
- 2) end of the 1930s - beginning of the 1990s (Key point: Perestroika);*
- 3) 1990s - present time (Key process: revival of Burkhanism)'*

In my attempts to briefly sketch the history of Burkhanism I make a similar trio-periodic distinction, only that I will stop at the 1920s instead of the 1930s, as my reference for the boundary between the first two periods is the strengthening of the Soviet power in the region, which occurred around 1922-1924. Such a division is implemented purely for the sake of my own narrative convenience, and I am sure that the key points suggested by Nadezhda Tadina are more historically stipulated.

I will start with describing the earliest records of Burkhanism as a distinct religious movement of the Altai region (beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and proceed with its fundamental aspects and history (up to the 1920s). After the separate paragraph on the causes of Burkhanism, I do on to the second and third subchapter paragraphs that are devoted to the history of the Altai Burkhanism in the Soviet ('Burkhanism: 1920s-1990s') and post-Soviet period ('Burkhanism: 1990s-present time'). The information provided in the chapter is also depicted on the timeline of Burkhanist history (please see Appendix 2).

*Related materials:*

- *Appendix 2. Timeline of the history of Burkhanism.*

## Burkhanism: 1904-1920s

‘Burkhan’ [*Бурхан/Буркан*], or ‘Byrkan’ [*Быркан*] is a Mongolian term for Buddha – this is the point where multiple sources converge in (Sherstova, 2010; Znamenski, 2015; Dyakonova, 2010). The question of when and how did this term become a signifier for the particular religious phenomenon of the Altai history is, however, not so well-articulated. It seems that ‘Burkhanism’ was a term implemented by the Russians, either the Russian Orthodox Mission or ethnographers. The Altai peoples called their faith ‘Ak-Jaŋ’ [*‘Ak-Tyang’/‘Ак-Јаһ’*], or the ‘White Faith’<sup>12</sup> (Tadina, 2013). During the Soviet times Burkhanism and Ak-Jaŋ started to be more and more mixed and intertwined while circulating in the context of religion being isolated and practices underground, to the extent that they are now (not always!) used to relate to different religious groups and practices. Still, at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, these two terms were referring to the same signified (the ‘new’ Altai faith), albeit used by different groups of people<sup>13</sup>.

I have put the word ‘new’ in quotation marks because it is yet another question, how novel Burkhanism, in fact, was. The Buddhist influence on the Altai peoples was ensured both by historical and cultural links with Mongolia and by the Buddhist Dzhungar past of the Republic (setting aside the discussion on which source proved to be more influential); while the shamans were already organized in a division between the ‘white’ [*ак*] and the ‘black’ [*кара*] (Anohin, 1924). The sacrificial practices of both types are volatile, depending on the region and the concrete kin/nation. One of my informants, for example, shared that the black shamans work with Erlic [*Эрлик*] (the god of the underground kingdom) and that they choose vodka, while the white ones work with milk and with Ulgen’ [*Ульгень/Ўлген*] (the god of the heavenly kingdom). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, shamans of both types could make blood offerings; I have found little evidence in favor of the hypothesis that the white shamans were those who limited themselves with non-blood sacrifices.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace the first time when ‘Burkhanism’ was used to refer to the particular religious movement. I managed to find that as early as in 1854, Decembrist Nicolai Bestuzhev described Buryat gods as ‘burkhans’. According to him, the guests bow to the ‘painted or bronze burkhans’ three times upon entering the yurt, and the ‘burkhans’ are pleased with milk, water and grains offerings (Bestuzhev, 1860). Nicolai Bestuzhev does

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<sup>12</sup> The Ak-Jaŋ can be translated as the ‘White authority/faith/custom/canon’ (Halemba, 2003, p. 168). In short, it is ‘the white way of living’, the white law, where whiteness stands for the sacred color of purity and good, and for the milk offerings instead of animal sacrifices.

<sup>13</sup>In 1904 and earlier, the Altai called their new faith ‘Ak-Jaŋ’, while the Russians described that phenomenon as ‘Burkhanism’. During the Soviet epoch, Burkhanism and Ak-Jaŋ melted together and became either interchangeable synonyms or closely related yet different concepts (Tadina, 2013).

not elaborate on whether these statues were Lamaist<sup>14</sup> or shamanist, but judging by the rest of his paper, where he mentions lamas and Khambo Lama, I find it safe to suggest that he was describing Buddhist paintings and statues. However, it is not clear if the Lamaism he described was the Buryat version of Burkhanism. One way or another, already by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Lamaism was gaining strength among the Altai intelligentsia (Sherstova, 2010), and was spread among some part of the seöks [‘seök’ / ‘ceök’ – kin, family]. By that time Burkhan as a deity was also present in songs and wishing-well hymns. From these songs it appears that Burkhan was perceived more like a creator godlike power, and through this, as an owner of the land, of sorts (Tyuhteneva, 2011), but not directly as Buddha.

The countdown of Burkhanism as a distinct religious movement starts with the events of May 1904, when Chet Chelpan (Chelpanov), the shepherd of the Tereng Valley (Ust-Kansky District [Усть-Канская область] nowadays), and his adopted daughter Chugul (Sorokova) spread a word of the visions they had received from a White rider - a man dressed in white on a white horse (accompanied by the other two riders, who translated the speech of the White rider to the shepherd). The rider through his translators gave the shepherd several revelations of various kind: from the very human-worldly, everyday rules (not to tolerate cats, not to cut living trees, not to welcome Russians, etc.) to the eschatological and ritualistic directions (to stop shaman practices, to wear the sacred colors of white and yellow on the hats, to use juniper boughs and milk for rituals, to tie the ribbons of five colors on the birch as a symbol of the ‘five main tribes and five main religions’, etc.) (Filatov, 2002). Chugul started to receive direct visions of the White Burkhan [‘Ak-Burkhan/Ак-Бурхан’] on the Kyrlyck [‘Кырлык’] mountain and retold them to the locals gathered in number around the mountain; the visions contained the rules of the Ak-Jaᅇ – the White Law/Faith, according to which the Altai should have lived ever after.

The gist of the revelations from which Burkhanism had started is the following: the messianic figure of Khane Oïrot [Ойрот Хан] sent by Ak-Burkhan [Ак-Бурхан] would soon come and free the Altai peoples<sup>15</sup>, to prepare themselves for his arrival they needed to:

1) stop ‘black’ [‘kara/кара’] shaman practices, and start worshipping the White Faith [‘Ак Жаᅇ/Ак-Жан’];

2) worship Ak-Burkhan as one god (instead of following the previous dualistic cosmology of Ulgen’ (the God of the Upperworld) and Erlic (the God of the Underworld));

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<sup>14</sup> The outdated term used to describe Tibetan Buddhism (it is still in use in modern Russian, but generally considered as an archaism).

<sup>15</sup> Here and further, I mean by this the dwellers of the Altai Mountain region, united by the language, traditions, common historical memories and myths. The difficulty here lies in the fact that the nomads (and later, the dwellers) of Altai were never homogenous; there were numerous different tribes, and the latter were also divided into different сдфты (söök / cöök). This söök division remains valid and vital for the Altai up till the present moment.

3) stop making blood sacrifices and offer milk and juniper instead;

4) stop using Russian money, avoid Russians and those Altai people who had become Christians.

The mythical figure of Khane Oirot (Khane is a title of the ruler of the land) is an accumulation of the collective memories of the Oirot State<sup>16</sup> (Dzungar Khanate), which was believed to be a golden age of the Oirot peoples, and the legendary savior, hero Oirot or Amyrsana<sup>17</sup> [*Амурсана/Амырсана*], who was paralleled to several historical charismatic leaders (Znamenski, 2015). The origins of the main deity, Ak-Burkhan, is not so certain, owing mainly to the fact that this deity was never fully formed into a unified god figure with certain powers and role in the cosmology; instead, it has been (and stays, as I will show later) a mixture and/or overlap of an ancient god Uch-Kurbustan [*Уч-Курбустан*], a Turkic deity Ulgen' [*Ульгень/Ўлген*], associated with shamanism (Kleshev, 2006), and Burkhan – Buddha, in Mongolian terms (Znamenski, 2015). As I will show later, and as is also confirmed with the research on the matter (Kleshev, 2006), these godlike figures are frequently mixed, intertwined, and arranged differently within the world cosmology.

It is very important to stress that Burkhanism (the White Faith) was socially engaged as a rigid opposition to shamanism. Burkhanism claimed to 'have cleansed itself from spilling blood' and thus harshly diverged itself from shamanism in which blood sacrifices were common. Shamanism was built upon non-institutionalized authority of shamans ('kams') who were granted their abilities regardless of their own will, while Burkhanism is a more prophetic-type religion, build upon revelations and eschatological expectations. However, I must confess that it remains a bit unclear to me how the Burkhanist clergy ('jarlykchi' [*jarlykchi/tyarlykchi*]) was formed. I did not manage to find lucid indications on whether they were elected in any way, and if so, by which criteria. The Burkhanists from the Ak-Burkhan community of now simply told me that 'jarlykchi' were Lamas, just differently named. One of the scholars in the private talk added, that 'jarlykchi' could have also been former shamans, who have abandoned shamanism<sup>18</sup> for the new quickly spreading faith. According to

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<sup>16</sup> The Oirot used to be the self-identification of the people of the Dzungar Khanate. Later, the Russians called those tribes that came under the Russian Empire rule, 'the Kalmyks' [*Калмыки*], and in the high Soviet Union, ethnonym 'the Altai' was established instead. Nevertheless, indigenous people of the Altai region still remember the Oirot, as a symbol of their unity and their state (Tadina, 2009a).

<sup>17</sup> As one of the Altai scholars and a Lama from the Ak-Burkhan temple told me, it is believed by some that Chugul, Chelpan's foster daughter, was a shamanist apprentice of his, and that she came from the lineage that had been foretold to restore Amyrsana's reign. I did not manage to authenticate this version academically, which is why I only mention it in the footnote.

<sup>18</sup> Today, shamanism is usually referred to as a 'traditional religion' or 'traditional system of practices/beliefs'; however, the Buddhists/Burkhanists I spoke with do not agree with it, claiming Buddhism to be the traditional Altai faith. The notion of tradition is highly problematic on its own: indeed, when exactly does the tradition start? In case of (non)traditional medicine, it is quite bizarre how both these antonyms are used to describe the same thing (also noted by Galina Lindquist, 1999).

Sherstova (2010), for example, Chet Chelpan himself was not only a distant relative of the wealthy Altai family, but also a former shaman himself. This fact adds much to the possible explanation of the convincing power of his and his foster daughter's words and visions.

People gathering around the mountain waited for the White Burkhan to come and mark the beginning of a new era of Khane Oirot and triumph of those loyal to him. This event, known as the Terëng valley praying [*‘Моления в долине Терёнг’*], was rumored to be a ‘pagan cult gathering’ with the local Orthodox peasantry, and eventually was suppressed with the Russian forces and locals. Chet Chelpan, his daughter and 36 (Sherstova, 2010) more adepts of a new religious movement were taken to the court, while others (around 400 people) killed, wounded and scattered. Interestingly, Chet Chelpan and his followers were fully acquitted of the charges against him by the Russian court in 1906, where he was tried for causing social instability in the region. The court found nothing criminal in his actions, to a large extent due to the thoughtful and accurate speech of the advocates who protected Chet (Znamenski, 2015; Sherstova, 2010).

Events described above had bolstered eschatological moods, and the new faith quickly spread among the Altai peoples. Even though the present-day Buddhists/Burkhanists either deny the early Ak-Jaŋ attacks on shamans or blame the concrete fanatical Burkhanism followers for that, there are quite a few pieces of historical evidence that shamans and shamanists have indeed suffered their share of ill-treatment from the Burkhanists. Andrei Anohin (1924; but in fact, 1910), for example, mentions that *‘the shaman woman was attacked by her ‘körtös’ [‘көрмөс’ - a shaman spirit helper] for not having sewn a new ‘manjak’ (‘манжак’ – special shaman clothes) instead of the old one, which has been burned by the Burkhanists’*.

The Burkhanist movement (how it was called by the Russian researchers and officials), however, has not ever again experienced such a rapid growth that directly followed Chet's revelations. Partly, this can be explained by an age of social turbulence and upheaval that came with the Revolutions and the First World War. There was a short period of outburst, when in 1917-1922 Burkhanism was used (and changed) by the Altai and pro-Altai intelligentsia (with Grigorii Choros-Gurkin and Andrei Anohin as one of the most prominent figures) in order to strengthen the unity of the peoples of the Altai Mountains region and to create a sovereign Oirot Republic [*Ойротская Республика*], either with the support of the Communists or without it.

In spite of these attempts, the Soviet regime suppressed the main hotspots of the rebel forces and proclaimed its power over the region in 1922, having formed an Oirot Autonomy [*Oirotskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast’/Ойротская Автономная Область*]. This period was also marked by the social and political activity of the shamans, who, although being suppressed by Burkhanists (sometimes physically persecuted (Potapov, 1991)), were inspired by the

withdrawal of the Altai Orthodox Mission<sup>19</sup>. Shamans and the ‘neme biler kizhi’ [*неме билер кижји*/the ‘people who know’] in general, started to participate in the social and political matters as representatives of their neighbors (Doronin, 2013). These activities, however, did not last for long, and ended up in mass persecutions led by the Soviet forces – persecutions of shamanists and Burkhanists alike.

### The causes of the Tereng valley events

The actions of the Russian government, as well as the role of Altai Orthodox mission in the 1904 events, are not unambiguous: Chet Chelpan was released by the court yet taken to the capital for trial; the local officials were uneasy about resolving the situation by force<sup>20</sup>, and yet such an order was given and executed. As for the Altai Orthodox mission, there is evidence that one of the local Orthodox Church clergies wrote a complaint to the higher authorities that the Burkhan gathering is an act of political and social disobedience (Sherstova, 1904). He described Khane Oirot as the ‘Japan Khane’, accusing Chet Chelpan and his followers in government insubordination through an attempt to support Japan in the Russo-Japanese war.

One group of scholars (led by Lyudmila Sherstova) consider social anxiety and eschatological moods to be the core of the need for social, religious and political renovation in the region, drawn into the imperial conflicts and trying to find its place in the world on the brink of dramatical changes. Sherstova (2010, 2013) and other scholars plausibly show, how internal and external factors (the Russo-Japanese war which exacerbated the nationalistic tensions (Tyuhteneva, 2005); Stolypin’s policy of settling Russian peasant in Siberia that resulted in Russians coming to the Altai region and either taking some of the indigenous peoples’ lands or simply contacting and trading with them more; the role of the Orthodox Christian mission in proselytizing and establishing Christianity among the ‘pagans’) resulted in the heightened existential anxiety and insecurity among the Altai people, which, in term, demanded social and cultural changes.

An additional hypothesis on the indirect causes of Burkhanism, suggested by Sherstova, is that, very much similarly to the Birgit Meyer’s observations on the Ghana material (Meyer, 1999), the Altai Orthodox mission was exploiting the preexisting beliefs of the Altai people, which reminded Christianity and therefore could be forged into it; however, by doing so they also reminded people of those beliefs, which in case of the Altai region were reminiscences of Dzungar Lamaism

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<sup>19</sup> The Soviets forced the Orthodox Church to stop spreading its influence and, later, to go underground. Shamans were eager to take the vacant spot, so to speak, and quickly started to act as representatives in the newly formed local authorities’ institutions.

<sup>20</sup> Nicolai Ekeev in his paper (2005) provides evidence (citing the Tomsk government report of 1904) that while the local Russian population was aggressive towards the Altai peoples, the Burkhanists themselves were of peaceful intentions. The Tomsk official warned that ‘*it would be unwise and highly inadvisable to escalate the situation to the degree of massacre*’.

in the forms of ‘white faith’ and worship of Burkhan (Sherstova, 2010; Vozhakova, 2018, citing Anohin, 1924).

Another group of scholars (A.A. Znamenski, V.P. D’yakonova, V.K. Kosmin and A.A. Nasonov) stresses the influences of the similar process unfolding in Mongolia, and the intense connection to the Tibetan Buddhism authoritative figures and ideas. Their idea is that the Altai region should not be examined in isolation from the processes happening in the world and in the neighboring countries, especially in the light of their common state and cultural past (Dzungar Khanate and Buddhism as a state religion). Ludmila Sherstova, on the contrary, is more inclined to consider Burkhanism as a phenomenon of re-actualized Altai religiosity from the Dzhungar times, which has absorbed both Tibetan Lamaism borrowed from Mongolia and shamanistic traditions (Sherstova, 2010). This disagreement marks one of the deepest ruptures in the contemporary scholarship on Burkhanism: whether Burkhanism was more inspired externally or whether it has grown, rooted into the Altai soil.

An important group of reasons for the Burkhanism burst is an economy and power related one. The Soviet authors tended to exaggerate it, while in the academic writings of the now, there lurks a threat to overlook it. The native population of Altai was undergoing times of trouble and turmoil in 1890-1904s, just as the Russian Empire on the whole. The situation of the Altai peoples was, however, worsened by the national and religious tensions and the changes in land administration<sup>21</sup>. Waves of peasant migrations from the European part of Russia to Siberia, caused by Stolypin reforms, resulted in more troubles for the locals (even though the migrants were probably having the worse of it) and in their land squeezing in favor of the newcomers (Akkerblom, 1905/2014). The Altai became more and more discontented with the economic situation in the region, with the ongoing war<sup>22</sup> and with the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (Akkerblom, 1905/2014; Shvetsov, 1906). Besides, the peoples of Altai did not represent a solidary, united ethnic entity, but were scattered between different nations and seöks. A new religion, monotheistic yet incorporating Altai traditions could have strengthened the national unity and granted a basis for a national self-identification. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Tereng praying were supported and financed by the wealthy brothers, *bais* (‘bai’ [бaй] in Altai – a rich, significant man) Agimai Kul’dzhin and Mandzhi Kul’dzhin (Sherstova, 2010; Danilin, 1993).

What remains certain is Burkhanism’s dependence upon the shamanist traditions and the Lamaism past of the Altai peoples, as well as its inspiration by Orthodox Christianity: as I have tried to describe above, Burkhanism has clearly experienced a strong influence of Christianity (messianic moods, the idea of the sins), Tibetan Buddhism (the figure of the Burkhan) and local animist and

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<sup>21</sup> In 1880, ‘zaisans’ (the leaders of the big seöks and kins) became elected, which was implemented by the Russian government and was welcomed negatively by the Altai (Sherstova, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Danilin (1936) writes about horse duty: the Altai were to supply the Russian army with horses during the wartime, in addition to other taxes and duties they had.

shamanic practices. One way or another, the idea of Burkhanism has led to the renovation of rituals and social norms, making them more symbolic, peaceful and less sexually oriented (Tadina, 2009b). What remains to be agreed upon, however, is the extent of these influences.

## Burkhanism: 1920s-1990s

The idea of Burkhanism echoed in the minds of theologians and artists long after the 1904: for example, in 1925 and in 1935-1936 Nikolai Roerich creates two paintings, inspired by Burkhanism and the Terëng valley events in 1904. All in all, however, during the late pre-war Soviet period, both shamanism and a young Burkhanist movement, as well as any other religious spirits, were forced to hide underground, which resulted in a tragical loss of many elements of the national beliefs, especially those that were not institutionalized and traditionalized enough by that moment. Kams and jarlykchi were repressed alongside the Old Believers and the Orthodox Church clergy; according to Nicolai Ekeev (from Eshmatova, 2018), 14 local spiritual leaders (both shamanists and Burkhanists) are known to be repressed, other were forced to give up their faith under the yoke of the circumstances, either doing it publicly or 'donating' the ritual objects such as shaman drums to museums (Eshmatova, 2018).

It was not only that the 'servants of the cult', as all religious agents regardless on their religious belonging were called during the pre-war Soviet times, were being either killed or imprisoned, but that the national culture was jeopardized by anti-religious propaganda and by selective repression of the representatives of the intellectual elite. Several cultural leaders, among whom was Grigorii Choros-Gurkin, were sentenced to death or imprisonment for (presumably) anti-Soviet actions/espionage (Eshmatova, 2015). The families of those repressed or those who were considered 'not decent enough' have been labelled as 'deprived', starting from 1925 – these people, religious agents included, were not allowed to vote and had a list of other restrictions, such as higher education limit (Eshmatova, 2017). In the Ust'-Kan region alone in 1929-1930 there were 407 'deprived' people, with 22% of them (90 people) – families of shamans and Burkhanists<sup>23</sup>.

Not only active worshipers were prosecuted, though. During 1935-1937, in the Oirat Autonomy 'only' two of the prosecuted people were described as 'worshippers, while 231 people were sentenced from the rural areas and 138 – from bureaucratic structures, for different 'crimes' (Mishina, 2018). A social portrait of the 'averaged' repressed is, again according to Ekaterina Mishina (2019), a '*man between 31 and 50, not educated, not involved in the political parties, a worker or a kolkhoz laborer*'.

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<sup>23</sup> Source: *Политические репрессии в Горном Алтае (1922–1953 гг.) [Political repressions in the Altai Mountains (1922-1953)]*. (2017). Collective monograph by N.V. Ekeev, M.S. Katashev, G.B. Eshmatova (eds.).

Regardless of the actual proportion of shamans and jarlykchi prosecuted and sentenced to being shot or serving in the labor camps, the terror still lives in the people's memory. My informants told me numerous stories of the times when shamanists and Burkhanists were illegal and in fact banned from practicing, and that no more shamans are left, because they were all killed, and thus there was no one left to teach new shamans the powerful old ways anymore. They discussed the topic gingerly and with caution, which adds to the observations of Doronin on the same matter (Doronin 2013)<sup>24</sup>.

Religious 'spring' during the Second World War touched the Altai region as well, but after the war the attitudes towards religion did not change dramatically. What was changing over time was the gradual acceptance of the Altai culture and history in the whole, and shamanist and Burkhanist traditions in particular. This acceptance was significantly inspired by the upcoming flow of new, 'socially approved' results of the USSR national ethnographic research. Although Soviet ethnography was evolutionary and formational in total accordance to the Marxist-Leninist postulates, it provided valuable anthropological data (e.g. Tokarev, 1936; Danilin, 1936; Potapov, 1953) and served to ignite the interest in Burkhanism and shamanism in the region, which was lost over more than 20 years of political struggle and wartime. The Altai culture spread again to the domains of literature and art (for example, in 1989 a fictional history book "The White Burkhan" was published (Andreev, 1989)). Burkhanism and the Altai culture and religion in general were studied as cultural heritage of the 'sister nation', relics of the past era (Doronin, 2013), even though they were happening secretly at the very moment of study, right in the 'field'.

## Burkhanism: 1990s-present time

Perestroika marked not only the borderline for religious freedom and freedom of speech, but also brought along changes in the social structures and aspirations. Religion and different forms of spirituality stopped being scorned upon, and various groups flourished, belonging both to the branches of world religions and to the New Age wave. Being a shaman, or a 'neme biler kizhi' was gradually being regarded as a decent profession choice (to the extent it ever may be a choice of free will), bringing stable income under the conditions of a disastrous economic situation in the 1990s. Shamans, healers and clairvoyants started taking money for their services (Doronin, 2013), and lay people readily turned to such specialists for help in personal life and healing. Such surge was caused by the breakdown of the state medical care system accompanying the fall

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<sup>24</sup> *'I was lucky to meet the elderly kams. However, remembering the persecutions of the Soviet era, they were afraid to talk to me, at first. In September 2012, an elderly, well-known in the Republic Kam Aleksey Yotovitch Kazakulov greeted me by saying: "I don't know anything, I'm a simple, elderly, old person, I don't remember anything, and I don't do anything like that."* (Doronin, 2015).

of the USSR, and the resulting deterioration of the previously strong belief in scientifically grounded medical care (Quijada, 2012).

The partial oblivion and underground practice of Burkhanism and shamanism resulted in the mixture of shamanist and Burkhanist rites and traditions (Sherstova, 2013a). It created an uncertainty upon religious revival that came in the 1990s with Perestroika: which practices belong to the ‘true’ Burkhanism, and which do not? A variety of groups emerged immediately after Perestroika, some of them trying to spread their influence over the scattered individual esoteric practitioners, ‘neme biler kizhi’ and others.

Such was the Ak-Jaŋ<sup>25</sup> revival attempt in the 1990s, led by the Altai TV journalist Altaichy Sanashkin, which was titled as ‘Ak-Burkhan’, and registered officially under that name in 1991. It is the most prominent (and the only one registered) Burkhanist organization in the Republic, claiming its descentance from Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism and establishing connections with the world and Russian Buddhist organizations. Other organizations and groups emerging in the 90s and more oriented towards paganism and shamanism, include ‘Ak Sanaa’, Ak Suus’, ‘Agaru Jaŋ’ and ‘Teŋeri’ (Halemba, 2003). Moreover, many more groups and gatherings exist in half-light, away from the media presence; they convene around a charismatic leader or in remote villages (Knorre, 2011).

Another Ak-Jaŋ group, inspired by Sergei Kynyev in 1997 (Halemba, 2003), was less attracted to the ideas of Buddhism and more inclined to establishing a synergy between Burkhanist practices and the shamanist legacy. Sergei Kynyev, also known as Akai Kine, tried to unite shamanists and shamans into a sort of a confederation, communicating with the government, creating an organization and travelling around villages to talk to people himself. He succeeded at the very beginning, but later on, his efforts proved to be futile – he is still around on TV, but he is not considered as a charismatic leader anymore<sup>26</sup>. The group founded by him was not stable enough to survive inner conflicts, split up in the 2000s (Vasilii Chekurashev’s group, or so called ‘Karakol Initiative group’ seceded from the initial Ak-Jaŋ movement) and was later multiply transformed in the hand of various leaders. The group by Chekurashev has been eventually prohibited by the court, as the ‘sky’ prophecies its members got from the highest powers (from Uch-Kurbustan, Burkhan, the esoteric ‘Higher Mind’ [‘Высший Разум’]) (Khvastunova, 2018), contained nationalistic calls.

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<sup>25</sup> According to the rules of the Altai language pronunciation, ‘j’ at the beginning of the word sounds as a mild ‘t’, which is similar yet non-identical to the Russian firmer ‘t’ (sources: my own anthropological observations; The Altai-Russian language dictionary, 2015, 1<sup>st</sup> edition). The ‘j’ sound is frequently mistranscribed, e.g. ‘Ak-Yang’ (in Arzutov, 2010) or ‘Ak-Dyang’ (in Sherstova, 2013a).

<sup>26</sup> I have been told by the member of the Ak-Burkhan community that it was his lack of shaman powers that sowed doubt in his endeavor. In other words, people ‘*saw that he is not gifted, not at the slightest. And naturally, they stopped following him*’. I asked for his phone number and received it, but it was already too late for us to meet as I was already leaving the Altai Republic.

These multiple attempts of Ak-Jaŋ consolidation and revival resulted in an interesting side-effect: Ak-Jaŋ and Burkhanism (Ak-Burkhan) are now often being distinguished from one another, both by the scholar community (e.g., Sherstova, 2013a) and – sometimes - by the locals<sup>27</sup> and in the official speech. However, sometimes they are used as complete synonyms<sup>28</sup>, as I will also show later. This situation clearly shows how the streams of social, political and religious thought go beyond historically and scholarly developed definitions. Burkhanism was (and is) a Russian term, a marker for the new religious movement gaining strength in the Altai territory at the beginning of the 20th century; Ak-Jaŋ is an internal self-identification marker for the very same religious movement, and Ak-Burkhan is a marker of the deity figure and, sometimes, substitute to Ak-Jaŋ. Nowadays, these three terms – and many more, e.g., ‘*Altai-Kudai*’, ‘*Khane Altai*’, ‘*Sut-Jaŋ*’<sup>29</sup> – can be associated with different social groups, norms and rites, despite originating from one source. This indicates with all clarity that the religious landscape of Altai is currently in its transition and undergoes a phase of formation.

## Chapter conclusion

In the first chapter of my thesis, I have tried to briefly describe the eventful history of Burkhanism and show its varieties in the present day.

Burkhanism is a Russian term for a distinct religious movement of the Altai peoples that became prominent at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Altai Mountains. It started as an eschatological movement that opposed shamanism and Russians and culminated with the event known as the ‘Tereng valley praying’ in 1904. Then, the Altai shepherd Chet Chelpan and his foster daughter Chugul announced to more than a hundred of people gathered around the Kyrlyck mountain, that they received revelations from the Ak-Burkhan (the White Burkhan) God about a new era for the Altai peoples that is soon to come, and a new faith (the White Faith) that they should embrace.

The Tereng gathering was forcefully suppressed by the local government, but the new faith spread, nevertheless. The Soviet rule over the region stopped Burkhanism’s progress and made it remain hidden underground. Burkhanist

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<sup>27</sup> According to Arzutov (2010), people whom he communicated with during his fieldwork, do not usually use ‘Burkhanism’ when describing their faith, neither do they call themselves ‘Burkhanists’, preferring the title ‘The White faith’.

My interlocutors (the Altai Studies scholar Dmitrii Doronin, the Shiretui Lama of the Maima temple) also told me that the ‘Ak-Jaŋ’ do not call themselves Burkhanist. Here, it is worthwhile mentioning that I did not manage to speak to the ‘Ak-Jaŋ’ group representatives myself. My thesis is based on the fieldwork that I conducted in the Ak-Burkhan community temple; I have not been able to travel to the villages where the Ak-Jaŋ group still exist. Even if I had the time and means to do so, it would have been a totally different atmosphere and a different research, because the Ak-Jaŋ groups are more charismatically and prophetically inclined than the Ak-Burkhan community.

<sup>28</sup> Indigenous Altai population’s appeal to Putin will be checked for extremism. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://lenta.ru/news/2015/08/18/altay/>

<sup>29</sup> ‘The God of Altai’, the ‘Khane of Altai’ and ‘the Milk faith’, respectively (Kleshev, 2006)

rituals and lore were largely forgotten, due to the overall anti-religious policy and repressions against religious leaders (shamans, Burkhanists and the Orthodox Christian clergy alike).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, and on the eve of it (during Perestroika), the Altai Republic experienced a burst in newly organised religious groups and charismatic individuals who either claimed to carry on with some of the pre-Soviet religious traditions or started new religious movements. One of these groups, the 'Ak-Burkhan' community, was founded in the 1991 by the Altai TV journalist Altaichy Sanashkin.

In the Altai Republic today, there are two major religious groups that can be referred to as Burkhanists – the Ak-Burkhan community (who call themselves Burkhanists/Buddhists, but who are not considered to be 'real'/authentic, traditional Burkhanists by some scholars) and the 'Ak-Jan' group (who are currently prohibited from public gathering and who, reportedly, do not use Burkhanism in their self-identification narrative).

## 2 Discourse of Burkhanism

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*It is warm in the datsan, and it smells of incense. It is getting dark, and I am very tired, but I am not leaving, as an elderly parishioner tells me her story.*

*She has been specially introduced to me by an acquaintance of mine, so that I could engage in the conversation with someone who is able to share tales of the past and the present.*

*The lady answered my questions on Altai mythology and Ak-Burkhan rituals and told me about other things, calmly and mildly. I enjoyed listening to her. She also told me about her own life.*

*She lost her first job due to the bureaucratic injustice when she was in her 30-s and was desperate to find another. Then she met a tourist from Germany, Doris, who helped her pay tuition fee to the law college. She studied there, graduated, became a successful lawyer and still works as a self-employed. The elderly lady's voice became so soft when she shared her memories about Doris. "She kindly gave me that chance", - she said, smiling.*

### Chapter overview

In my research, I studied modern Burkhanism primarily through an anthropological lens: I talked to people, observed their activities, experienced rituals and community gatherings, and travelled around the region, unearthing sparkles of implicit knowledge from the locals. However, there is another significant part of my attempts to uncover this phenomenon in the making – understanding the common lore around Burkhanism, grasping a plume of gossips, meanings and attitudes that surround it, in the everyday life of people outside of the community.

The best way to achieve this goal might have been a full-fledged poll, ideally quantitative-based and encompassing a representative sample. However, due to the limited resources I had neither time nor the means to achieve that. Therefore,

I chose to implement **discourse analysis** by Kocku von Stuckrad (2003, 2013) as a methodological tool, having systematized the data I got, according to its source. Discourse analysis in the way it is proposed by von Stuckrad goes beyond its linguistical and social hierarchy aspects of discourse, it empowers discourse with meanings of power, action, and relational aspects. This is exactly what I am interested in: in this chapter, I would like to show how Burkhanism is being explained, understood, and communicated on various levels of societal relationships. Moreover, von Stuckrad's idea of the 'academic' and 'religious' discourses mutual impact is extremely relevant to my research results. I hope to show it clearly in the last, fourth, chapter of this thesis.

The '*source*' system which I have imposed is an attempt to organize the stream of information and to prevent chaos during my discourse mining quest. Being sympathetic to the ethnographical ideal of 'thick description' popularized by Clifford Geertz (1973), I always try to look at the phenomenon studied from the broadest angle possible, in order not to overlook any meaningful details which might otherwise stay unnoticed. Therefore, I have distinguished four major groups of discourse around Burkhanism:

- (1) Media resources and official government statements;
- (2) Academic community;
- (3) Other religious groups (Karma Kagyu, the Roerich followers, Ak-Jaŋ, shamanists, the Orthodox Church);
- (4) The Ak-Burkhan community.

This chapter is focused on the first three groups, all representing outsider perspectives on Burkhanism. The insider perspective (the Ak-Burkhan community) is discussed in subsequent chapter, with the very same title.

*Related materials:*

- *Appendix 1.* Buddhist organizations of the Altai Republic, 2021.
- *Appendix 4.* The list of the Ak-Burkhan community founders.
- *Appendix 6 / Photos 3-27.*

## (1) Media resources and official statements

*'City-> Sightseeing-> Eternal values -> 'Ak-Burkhan'  
The path to the 'Ak-Burkhan' temple page on  
the Gorno-Altai city municipal website<sup>30</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> A webpage about religious organizations of Gorno-Altai city. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://gornoaltaysk.ru/gorod/dostoprimechatelnosti/vechnye-tsennosti/>.

If one tries googling (or, ‘yandexing’<sup>31</sup>) Burkhanism in Russian, the first websites in the search result will be those of scholarly stance and travel guides, with Wikipedia at the top of the list suggesting an overview of definition and history of Burkhanism. However, there is yet another source of getting to know Burkhanism as a term and as a social activity field – the news. News, articles and official statements (court cases, religious groups registration, etc.) not only form a sphere, in which the concept of Burkhanism is being used and inevitably identified by different actors, but also add an aspect of power and authoritative opinion to it. Besides, the legislative definition, or a certain understanding of Burkhanism in judicial sphere directly alters the form of its social existence (which religious groups may be registered formally, and which may not).

Therefore, in this part of my Burkhanism discourse analysis, I aim at looking into, first, how Burkhanism is understood by the authorities (actors in power), and secondly, into the public image of Burkhanism, created by the local online media. To achieve the former goal, I have searched the official websites of the region’s government (<https://altai-republic.ru/>) and court decisions database (<https://sudact.ru/>) for any ‘Burkhanism’ or ‘Ak-Burkhan’ related cases. As for the latter (the presence of Burkhanism in the local media environment), I have searched articles related to Burkhanism, shamanism, ‘Ak-Burkhan’ and their opponents, the ‘Ak-Jan’ community, in a selection of local online news portals and social network public accounts. Also, I have arranged several Google and Yandex in-depth searches with various search queries<sup>32</sup> to ensure that I have not overlooked any major publications and topics (for instance, in the federal or local press).

### Altai authorities - on Burkhanism

I have extended my search to several official websites: the official website of the Altai Republic government (<https://altai-republic.ru/>), of the Gorno-Altaysk city municipality (<http://gornoaltaysk.ru/>), of the Altai Republic Parliament El-Kurultai (<http://elkurultay.ru/glavnaya/>), website of the Ministry of Justice of the Altai Republic (<https://to02.minjust.ru/ru/>) and the website accumulating Russian Courts decisions (<https://sudact.ru/>). The reasons for choosing these particular instances over many other (federal websites, other local Ministries, for instance) were that, to start with, it is the local government and parliament websites that contain most of the accumulated official information on the region and on governmental official strivings. Court decisions as examples of power-enforced frameworks of social relations are important tools for determining the legitimate status of an organization (whether it is a religious group or a religious organization, for instance), understanding its conflicts and interests, and discerning the legal definition of the phenomenon researched (in

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Yandex’ is a corporation, a search engine and a successful rival of Google throughout the Russian-speaking countries (<https://yandex.ru/>).

<sup>32</sup> I searched for the variations of “Burkhanist/Burkhanism”, “Buddhism Altai”, “Altai religion”, “Shamanism/Shamanists”; upon receiving first relevant results I used them to concretize search queries (for instance, “Buddhists against shamans Altai”).

our case, the one of Burkhanism). As for the Ministry of Justice of the Altai Republic, this is exactly the place where religious organizations (not religious groups! those are different terms, according to the Russian law) are to be registered in order to be granted official permission to attract new members and, basically, to exist<sup>33</sup>. That is, if said religious organizations show no sign of hatred, intolerance, terrorism and nationalism, and only if they comply to the Russian laws.

The **court cases** search added less information than expected to the understanding of the legal aspect of Burkhanism – I have only managed to find one relevant case, in the Arbitration Court of the Altai Republic<sup>34</sup>. The Arbitration Court (Arbitral tribunal, ‘Арбитражный суд [Arbitrazhnii Sud]’, in Russian) deals with economic and business cases, which might seem distant from the religious sphere, but in fact is not: religious organizations own property, too. The only case related to Burkhanism (to the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ local religious organization, to be precise) that I found was exactly the one concerning property rights. According to the decision of the court, the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ organization was allowed to certify and privatize the temple which was built on the land the organization was given for free, under the condition to use it for religious (non-commercial) purposes only. The court case clearly demonstrates, that the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ organization is an active and officially registered as a religious group, which enjoys a territory and a building almost in the city center. It does not, however, let us draw any conclusions about how Burkhanism is objectified by the authorities.

To tell the truth, I was surprised by such a modest outcome of the court cases search – judging from the media stir around Burkhanism, I expected to find a least one or two cases of vandalism or such (please see the paragraph below). However, criminal offenses are often marked confidential to protect people involved, which is why I might have not been able to find these records.

**The Ministry of Justice of the Altai Republic website**, on the other hand, allowed to procure valid and interesting information on how religious organizations are evaluated and are, literally, granted existence. Just as was already mentioned above, religious organizations and religious groups are two types of religious associations<sup>35</sup>, with a distinction on whether they form a legal

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<sup>33</sup> According to the Federal Law № 125-FZ "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" (Retrieved from: [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_16218/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_16218/)), and Federal Law of 13.07.2015 № 261-FZ (Amendments to the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations") (Retrieved from: [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_182634/3d0cac60971a511280cbba229d9b6329c07731f7](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_182634/3d0cac60971a511280cbba229d9b6329c07731f7)).

<sup>34</sup> The operative part of the decision of September 26, 2016 in case № A02-1009 / 2016. (2016). Retrieved from: <https://sudact.ru/arbitral/doc/KOF5LjLbH6lm/>.

<sup>35</sup> Chapter 2.6.2. of the Federal Law № 125-FZ that explains the difference between religious groups and organizations can be found in English in the Keston Institute's Translation (Keston Institute, n.d.). However, this translation lacks newest editions (those of 2015 and those yet to come in 2021).

entity<sup>36</sup> (organizations do, groups do not). Generally speaking, groups have less obligations as they do not form a legal entity and they use only premises and property that were provided to them by their members – while religious organizations by all means gain ‘legal capabilities of a legal personality’ and may lay their claims to governmental support in providing them with certain property, land and premises<sup>37</sup>.

However, both religious groups and religious organizations have to inform the local branch of Ministry of Justice on their creation (Article 7.2 of the Federal Law № 125-FZ of 2015) and submit regular evidence of their existence later on (once in three years for religious groups<sup>38</sup> and depending on their financial operations - for religious organizations (Article 7.2 of the Federal Law № 125-FZ of 1997). Besides, it is the Ministry of Justice that decides whether religious organizations (not groups!) which submitted applications for official registration may actually be registered and perceived as religious organizations. This way, ideas of religiosity and religious practices, spilled on paper, are being constantly tested by the government, on a case-by-case basis.

The Ministry of Justice officials’ decisions might also be supported by the Expert Council<sup>39</sup>, but they have the right to resort to the expert examination in difficult or ambiguous cases only. Thus, with 60 religious organizations registered in the Altai Republic on 19 February 2020 (among which there are seven Buddhist organizations), I have only managed to find four religious expertise reports<sup>40</sup>. I have searched for a truly long period of time and on various websites and services, but I did not manage to locate any documents on religious organization official registration approvals. The reasons for such situation, mostly likely, are quite simple – these documents might not yet be digitalized, and there might not even be any plans on doing so, because religious organizations have their copies and can show them to anyone interested.

Still, in practice it does not work out so easily. While talking to the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ Lamas during my fieldwork, I have to confess that I hesitated to ask them about their official status and about their papers of state registry. It felt somehow wrong, because, by a general Russian concept of social relationships,

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<sup>36</sup> By ‘forming a legal entity’ I mean here and further ‘*obtaining the legal capabilities of a legal personality*’ (Keston Institute, n.d.).

<sup>37</sup> ‘...voluntary association of citizens, formed for the goals of joint confession and dissemination of their faith, carrying out its activities without state registration and without obtaining the legal capabilities of a legal personality, is recognized as a religious group in this federal law’. Article 7.1. (Keston Institute, n.d.).

<sup>38</sup> To the attention of the leaders (representatives) of religious groups!!! (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://to02.minjust.ru/ru/novosti/vnimanuyu-rukovoditeley-predstaviteley-religioznyh-grupp>

<sup>39</sup> The full title of this institution is ‘Экспертный совет по проведению государственной религиоведческой экспертизы’ [The Expert council for the state religious examination]. (Order of the Ministry of Justice of Russia of 12/30/2011 № 455 (as amended on 11/21/2017). (n.d.). Retrieved from: [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_125793/](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_125793/)).

<sup>40</sup> State religious expertise conclusions. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://to02.minjust.gov.ru/ru/ekspertnye-zaklyucheniya-po-provedeniyu-gosudarstvennoy-religiovedcheskoy-ekspertizy>; Religious expertise results. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://gornoaltaysk.bezformata.com/listnews/religiovedcheskoj-ekspertizi/4570606/>

one is only asking about the state-related affairs when things are going wrong – or when people do not trust each other well enough. It is even commonly said: ‘you want this to be done normally or by the law?’, meaning ‘either we do it trusting each other, or we are showing mistrust by making official arrangements’. Such an attitude towards law is typical neither to every social stratum nor to every region of Russia, so that it should never be generalized. However, I can certainly state that I, being Russian, did not risk asking my interlocutors, both Altai and Russian, about their organization’s legal status, given the early stage of getting to know each other that we were at. I simply did not hold it as a primary goal, and I did not want to risk the bits of appreciation I managed to earn by showing such tactless interests.

I managed to find only four religious expertise reports, and only two of these are referring to Burkhanism (the other two considering the Old Believers and Tengri worship organizations). Nevertheless, even those two reports that contained references to Burkhanism proved to be very telling. The first one, of 2013, is devoted to the state religious expertise of the ‘Local religious organization of Buddhists (Burkhanists) *Kuree ‘Ochyr’* / [*Местная религиозная организация буддистов (бурханистов) Курее «Очыр»*]. ‘Kuree Ochyr’<sup>41</sup> is a religious organization with a temple in Ust’-Kan (a noticeable village to the West of the Altai Republic) and with religious ideas similar to those shared by the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ community in Gorno-Altai. I would not say that these organizations are twins in ritualized practices or siblings in management, but they most certainly are sisters in beliefs. The second expertise, dated with 2017, is dealing with the ‘Gorno-Altai Spiritual and Religious Center of the Altai Faith ‘Altai Dyan’ / [*Горно-Алтайский духовно-религиозный Центр алтайской веры «Алтай дян»*] organization. ‘Kuree Ochyr’ was registered and is active up till now (even though it had its periods of difficulties); the ‘Altai Dyan’ Center did not receive state support from the very beginning (and was never registered).

Both expert reports are made by the same Expert Center, but without any expert identifications. It is unknown, who exactly was responsible for these examinations – most likely, this was one of the measures implemented to ensure experts safety. My primary concern here, however, was the way experts identified Burkhanism, and the way they distinguished concrete rites and beliefs between Buddhism, shamanism and Burkhanism<sup>42</sup>. Both reports are structured in a similar way – they pose several crucial questions that serve the purpose of determining whether organizations seeking official registry entry are indeed

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<sup>41</sup> *Ochyr* (which means ‘diamond’ in Altai) is a Buddhist ritual object, a symbol of strength and pure mind, widely known as vajra (dorje in Tibetan).

<sup>42</sup> Once successfully used in an expert report (by ‘successfully’ I mean that the organization was registered), these definitions might develop and self-replicate, as in the future, both Burkhanist leaders and experts are highly likely to pay close attention to the already settled cases of Burkhanist groups’ registrations. Therefore, even though the ideas on Burkhanism from these expert reports are not secured by any laws and may be debated upon, they might serve as guidelines for the future registration procedures. In essence, these definitions are precedents of legal recognition of Burkhanism.

religious, not just façades for tax benefits. These questions are also formulated similarly: the experts are investigating, firstly, if the system of beliefs of the organization examined is a religious one; then they go on into details of rites and beliefs; then, finally, they certify that the information provided by the organizations is authentic and reliable.

In the 'Kuree Ochy' report, Burkhanism is described as something that is not easy to define, as a religious phenomenon related to the Altai history, to Buddhism and shamanism alike, but also somewhat different from them both. Burkhanism is considered as something with *'its own characteristics that differ from shamanism and Buddhism and are refracted through Altai native beliefs'*<sup>43</sup> (my translation). Therefore, the author of the report continues, *'Thus, the teaching of Kuree "Ochy" is undoubtedly identical to the one of Buddhism. The question of its relation to Burkhanism, however, remains open, since the nature of such unity (meaning – the unity of "Kuree Ochy" and Burkhanism) is not clear, ritual identity is not obvious, and there is still a question about the origin of Burkhanism itself'*, because, as they state, *'there were no such precedents (meaning – Burkhanist-Buddhist organizations, my comment) in the modern history of Russia and the Altai Republic'*. Another highly interesting observation is the report author's notes on the problem of the ambiguity in Burkhanism perception. *'Buddhists are not so popular in the region, as is demonstrated by annual sociological polls, and such terms as 'Buddhism', 'Burkhanism', 'White Faith', as well as the organizations related, are understood very differently by the people of the region. Therefore, it is too early to draw any conclusions about the full identification of Buddhism and Burkhanism'* (my translation).

In the 'Altai Dyan' Center report, Burkhanism is most of the times considered as a religious system and is listed among Buddhism, Tengri worship and shamanism. Overall, the report also shows high level of uncertainty regarding Burkhanism. Two times, it is written as 'Buddhism-Burkhanism', because so do the sources the authors of the report cite (Filatov, 2002; Knorre, 2011). In the conclusion, the experts come to the idea that shamanism, Burkhanism, Altai-Jaŋ, Ak-Jaŋ are *'not without their differences, but ultimately identical, referring to the same phenomenon - Altai ideas about the spiritual world. However, some terms are correct to use, while the others are not. Still, not everyone agrees with such interpretation, because many people attribute fundamentally different meanings to the same names! <...> For instance, those Ak-Jaŋ followers, who are negative towards shamanism, and those who oppose Buddhism, try not to use the term 'Burkhanism'* (my translation)<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> State religious expertise conclusions. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://to02.minjust.gov.ru/ru/ekspertnye-zaklyucheniya-po-provedeniyu-gosudarstvennoy-religiovedcheskoy-ekspertizy>

<sup>44</sup> To be frank, the expert reports I am citing are written in poor Russian and teem with syntax and punctuation errors. I am not able to fully demonstrate this with my English translation, but these language faults are impossible to be overlooked by any native Russian speaker who has a basic understanding of language and grammar.

It is not uncommon for the Russian-speaking people to be negligent in terms of the language rules, but academic workers are usually more careful in their spelling and speech.

These two reports are an exceptionally rich primary source. I have accumulated four important observations from them:

1. that Burkhanism is something that experts are not entirely sure about;
2. that 'Kuree Ochy' is identified as mostly Buddhist, but not self-evidently Burkhanist, despite 'Kuree Ochy' representatives testifying so;
3. that 'Altai Dyan' Center is just as Burkhanist as it is shamanist and 'White Faith' (in a sense that these ideas and communities, according to the authors of the report, mean, represent and do fundamentally the very same)
4. that in order to justify any of their statements, the reports' authors use academic sources (sometimes several, most often – one); but they also pay significant attention on what religious organization members actually do, or, at least what they claim to be doing.

As argued in the footnote above, the perception of Burkhanism from these reports form legal precedent of its state recognition. These very reports were used to support the Ministry of Justice's decisions on registration approval ('Kuree Ochy') and disapproval (the 'Altai Dyan' Center). Such expert resolutions and the like, form a legal sphere, a framework in which religious organizations are bound to exist. These reports are anonymous, I do not know whether they were written by the same experts (according to the significant language differences, this was not the case). However, the structure, the manner of writing, the way of justifying one's point of view is something that inherent not only to the person, but also to a bureaucratic tradition. These reports matter – even if the Russian Religious Studies academic community says otherwise.

The **website of the government of the Altai Republic** (<https://www.altai-republic.ru/>) is relatively easy to navigate. It contains separate tabs on Society, Investments, Economics, Tourism and Culture, which, in turn, showcase a handful of data and reports. 'Religion' tab, however, is nowhere to be found. The list of religious organizations<sup>45</sup> (which was only recently updated up to February 2020; when I started my research, this list was as old as 2017) is situated under the 'Society' tab, but there are no other indications or references to the particular religious institutions and groups. The Altai culture section is rich in national holidays descriptions ('Chaga-Bairam', Kaichi Kurultai, etc.), but does not ever mention any religious affiliations – not even the word 'religion' itself.

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Thus, although the fact that reports contain language mistakes and inaccuracies does not automatically mean that the experts lack professionalism in religious matters, it raises reasonable concern about their level of general education.

<sup>45</sup> Religious organizations of Altai. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.altai-republic.ru/society/religious-denominations/>

The Altai Republic government and parliament websites could be claimed to be eluding Burkhanist discourse, if only they had not contained religious related news and press releases. These press releases indicate that seminars, meetings, and round tables with religious organizations representatives are held in the Republic on a regular basis. For instance, in 2016, El-Kurultai (the Altai Republic Parliament) organised a round-table discussion on the topic ‘The Altai Republic as a region of religious tolerance’<sup>46</sup>; in 2017 there was a meeting devoted to the anti-extremist fight<sup>47</sup>, and within the ranks of the Gorno-Altaysk Administration there functions a special Coordination Council for national and religious associations, where the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ community has a permanent voice.<sup>48</sup> I have only shown several examples of events of such type, but overall, these can be characterized as authority inspired conferences, seminars and meetings of various kinds, which aim at conquering the gap between regulatory authorities, on the one side, and religious/non-commercial/cultural organizations – on the other side. These events are mostly devoted to the topic of tolerance/religious freedom/‘friendship of nations’, to anti-extremist efforts and to clarifying the laws on religious associations to the religious associations leaders.

The term ‘Burkhanism’ is almost never used in this type of press releases: the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ community is called a Buddhist organization, with an emphasize on the status of Mergen Lama (he is a Shiretui Lama of the Altai Republic) and on the fact that the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ community is a part of the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (BTSR). The language of the publicly accessible official press releases and reports is very smooth and neat; they avoid any possible ‘rough edges’. Interestingly enough, religion itself is, apparently, perceived as such an ‘edge’. The website of the Gorno-Altaysk city Municipality hesitates to use the word ‘religion’, appropriating a tab title ‘eternal values’<sup>49</sup> instead<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> "Republic of Altai - a region of religious tolerance". (2016). Retrieved from: <http://elkurultay.ru/deyatelnost/kruglye-stoly/reportazhi-o-khode-i-itogakh-zasedaniy/reportazhi-o-khode-i-itogakh-zasedaniy-6-sozyva/4820-respublika-altaj-region-religioznoj-tolerantnosti-18-05-2016-g>

<sup>47</sup> The Altai Anti-Extremism Commission held a meeting. (2017). Retrieved from: [https://altai-republic.ru/activity/protivodeystvie-ekstremizmu/zasedaniya-mezhvedomstvennoy-komissii.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=25962](https://altai-republic.ru/activity/protivodeystvie-ekstremizmu/zasedaniya-mezhvedomstvennoy-komissii.php?ELEMENT_ID=25962)

<sup>48</sup> Coordination Council for Interaction with National and Religious Associations. (n.d.). Retrieved from: [https://gornoaltaysk.ru/vlast/administratsiya/struktura-administratsii/informatsionno-analiticheskiy-otdel/komissii-i-sovety/koordinatsionnyy-sovet-po-vzaimodeystviyu-s-natsionalnymi-i-religioznymi-obedineniyami-.php?sphrase\\_id=72601](https://gornoaltaysk.ru/vlast/administratsiya/struktura-administratsii/informatsionno-analiticheskiy-otdel/komissii-i-sovety/koordinatsionnyy-sovet-po-vzaimodeystviyu-s-natsionalnymi-i-religioznymi-obedineniyami-.php?sphrase_id=72601)

<sup>49</sup> The ‘Eternal values’ tab also has some text which I failed to translate into English adequately, because I could not find enough English equivalents to the variety of Russian notions used there, all swirling around ‘eternal values’, ‘spiritual values’, ‘good spirit’, etc. For example, in Russian, ‘dushevnyi’ and ‘duchovnyi’ are two adjectives that are related to soul and translated as ‘spiritual’, but they have a noticeably different array of meaning.

<sup>50</sup> The whole path to the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ temple page (and to the Orthodox temple page, and to the Mosque page, etc.) looks like “City-> Sightseeing-> Eternal values -> ‘Ak-Burkhan’ (A webpage about religious organizations of Gorno-Altaysk city. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://gornoaltaysk.ru/gorod/dostoprimechatelnosti/vechnye-tsennosti/>).

Another observation I made while analyzing the web-discourse is that 'Ak-Burkhan' is pronounced and written differently. People within the community say 'Burhan', with a simple 'h' sound (which, for some reasons, is being transliterated as 'kh' in English). In the overwhelming majority of cases, 'Ak-Burkhan' is also written through 'h', just like it is pronounced by literally every single person I managed to talk to. However, in the official list of religious organizations, as well as in the court decision, the community's name is written as 'Ak-Burkan', with 'k' (the sounds 'h' and 'k' are as different in Russian as they are in English). The explanation to such inconsistency is simple yet posing even more in-depth questions: it is clear that the community was first registered under the 'Ak-Burkan' title, back in the 1990s, but, for some reasons, people tend to pronounce it 'Ak-Burhan' nowadays.

### Media - on Burkhanism

This aspect of discourse tracking and analyzing is probably the most controversial in its core. What exactly is media? A Buddhist-oriented website of an academic scholar? An anti-Buddhist paper published by the Ak-Jaq community idea supporters? The criterion of alleged 'objectivity' in defining media is as imaginary as the idea of a 'disinterested third party'. Therefore, I have designed an approach of delineating media which stems directly from my research objective for this chapter. I would like to see, what is said around and about Burkhanism and Buddhism in the online media sources, which are not explicitly run by this or that religious group representatives.

In this category, I have included several news portals (local and federal), tourist websites, data base websites (the list of the main online resources I used is provided in the Table 1). By 'tourist websites' I mean portals on the information about the Altai Republic and websites of commercial tourist firms. It is also tricky, because, for example, one such tourist company, in Mul'ta, belongs to a businesswoman who is also a Krishna follower. However, the main goal of the media source is usually quite clearly readable from its content. I have mostly looked at whether the publications are aimed at manifesting a concrete point of view, or whether they strive to describe a particular thing or event, even though through an inevitably subjective lens. This way, the local former university professor's website on Buddhism and Altai, as well as the 'Amadu Altai' Ak-Jaq paper website were excluded from this sample, to find their place in the 'Academic community' and 'Other religious groups...' paragraphs.

Thus, I have chosen these particular media sources over many others on the basis of the 'content' criterion: whether the newspaper/news portal/etc. focuses on the local affairs or not, and whether it is active in new publications (and, therefore, if it is being read, cited and reposted).

Table 1. Main sources of media discourse for my research

<b>Title</b>	<b>Link</b>	<b>About</b>
<b>'The Altai Mountains news'</b>	<a href="https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/">https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/</a>	The Altai Republic news website (not a printed paper).
<b>'Altai Travel Guide'</b>	<a href="https://altaitg.ru/">https://altaitg.ru/</a>	A tourist planner website, provides services of booking hotels and activities.
<b>Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty: Siberia</b>	<a href="https://www.svoboda.org/">https://www.svoboda.org/</a>	'Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty is a non-profit media corporation that disseminates information on various platforms (Internet, radio, television, video) for an audience in 22 countries of Eastern and Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, Central and South Asia, in 26 languages'.
<b>Information agency 'REGNUM'</b>	<a href="https://regnum.ru/">https://regnum.ru/</a>	'A federal news agency that distributes news from Russia and neighboring countries from its own correspondents, subsidiaries and partners'.
<b>'FederalPress': The Altai Republic</b>	<a href="https://fedpress.ru/">https://fedpress.ru/</a>	'FederalPress is a media holding that includes an expert channel, news agencies, a magazine. Politics, economics, incidents, society. An expert glance at the life of the regions of the Russian Federation'.

It was not my aim to find out if the media sources are controlled or partially controlled by the government or not. That would require a full-scale research on itself. Therefore, I have found, collected, and analyzed publications from the chosen media, bearing in mind that these media might have certain power-enforced goals and information presenting methods, but not trying to unveil any of these possible plots.

I have searched the websites listed above by the following keywords: 'Bur(k)hanism'/'Bur(k)hanists', 'Buddhism'/'Buddhists', 'Ak-Jan', 'Ak-Bur(k)han', 'Shamanism'/'Shamanists'. I did not limit my search to 'Burkhanism' only, because it is what is said about a phenomenon is equally important to what is not. If, for example, it had turned out that the news articles follow a certain convention/a line of behavior (for example - not to use 'Burkhanism' and say 'Buddhism' or "Shamanism' instead<sup>51</sup>), that would have been a very telling finding. I have also implemented an open web search (via Google and Yandex) by the similar set of keywords and phrases. In the open web search case, I acted more in accordance with the 'snowball' search – finding a lead, that following it by searching for further details, that moving on to another lead and so on.

Topic-wise, the texts I found and read can be divided into **four major groups**:

1. High profile events of federal and world-wide importance (archeology, culture, nature)

<sup>51</sup> Which they do not! This is nothing but an example of a hypothetical situation.

2. Local criminal offences (vandalism, acts of violence, etc.)
3. Local court decisions (relating to the heated and much-discussed topics, such as extremism, banning of religious organizations, etc.)
4. Local representative visits and cultural events (visits of famous/high-ranked people, significant celebrations, or divine services)

The events that form the groups above quite often repeat in several newspapers, as the latter reference and cite one another. I have structured my most important findings into the four groups I listed above (please find them in the Table 2).

Table 2. Main issues of media discourse on Burkhanism, content-wise

Group	Content	Headlines and links
<b>High profile events of federal and world-wide importance</b>	The mummy of the 'Ukok Princess' <sup>52</sup>	Шаманы и мумия [Shamans and the mummy]. (2019). Retrieved from: <a href="https://www.svoboda.org/a/27534601.html">https://www.svoboda.org/a/27534601.html</a>
	<b>Local criminal offences</b>	<p>Stupa vandalism cases</p> <p>Threats to Buddhists</p> <p>На Алтае ищут обжегшихся на «Доме солнца» [In Altai, they are looking for those burned at the "House of the Sun"]. (2012). Retrieved from: <a href="https://fedpress.ru/news/society/reviews/na-altae-ishchut-obzhegshikhsya-na-dome-solntsa">https://fedpress.ru/news/society/reviews/na-altae-ishchut-obzhegshikhsya-na-dome-solntsa</a></p> <p>Дело об алтайском крестоповале передано в суд [Altai 'cross-destroyer' case brought to court]. (2013). Retrieved from: <a href="https://regnum.ru/news/accidents/1638010.html">https://regnum.ru/news/accidents/1638010.html</a></p> <p>Суд запретил деятельность Каракольской инициативной группы, проповедующей «Ак-Тян» [The court banned the 'Karakol Initiative group' preaching "Ak-Tyang"]. (2018). Retrieved from: <a href="https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/97558">https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/97558</a></p>
<b>Local court decisions</b>	Ban on the Ak-Jar community	Конфликт между язычниками и буддистами на Алтае будет разбираться в суде [The conflict between pagans and Buddhists in Altai will be dealt with in court]. (2015). Retrieved

<sup>52</sup> The well-preserved mummy found on the Ukok Plateau in the Altai Republic in 1993. There has been a lot of stir in religious circles (and especially among the Ak-Jar followers) with regard to the fact that the mummy has been taken to Novosibirsk for the archeological expertise, and it finally has been transported back to the Altai Republic, even though not to the spot of her initial rest, but to a newly constructed museum building. The discovery of the 'Ukok Princess' has influenced not only the Ak-Jar followers and the Altai people, but also various mystic and esoteric individuals, groups and societies (in particular, the Roerich followers).

**Local  
representative  
and cultural  
events**

'Buddhists'  
and 'pagans'  
conflict

from:  
<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1952939.html>

«Наезд» язычников на буддистов прошел без последствий [The pagan raid on Buddhists passed without consequences]. (2016). Retrieved from:

<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2059006.html>

Шаманы против Будды: в Горном Алтае разгорается религиозная война [Shamans against Buddha: a religious war erupts in the Altai Mountains]. (2016). Retrieved from: <http://gornoaltaysk.bezformata.com/listnews/gornom-altae-razgoraetsya-religioznaya/45084653/>

Pandita  
Khambo Lama  
visits

Пандито Хамбо лама: Алтайцам следует принять буддизм [Pandito Khambo Lama: the Altai should accept Buddhism]. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/40999>

Foreign  
delegations  
visits

Пандито Хамбо лама заложил символы мудрости в основание буддийского храма в Майме [Pandito Khambo Lama laid symbols of wisdom in the foundation of a Buddhist temple in Maima]. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/40254>

Local  
celebrations  
and events

Хамбо Лама Дамба Аюшеев заложил в Горном Алтае буддийский дацан [Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev laid a first stone Buddhist datsan in the Altai Mountains]. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.infpol.ru/162805-khambo-Lama-damba-ayusheev-zalozhil-v-gornom-altae-buddiyskiy-datsan/>

На Алтае ищут обжегшихся на «Доме солнца» [In Altai, they are looking for those burned at the "House of the Sun"]. (2012). Retrieved from: <https://fedpress.ru/news/society/reviews/na-altae-ishchut-obzhegshikhsya-na-dome-solntsa>

Ступу Будды построили в Горно-Алтайске [Stupa of Buddha was built in Gorno-Altaysk]. (2014). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/30449>

From **the news articles** one can learn that, first of all, there is a major confrontation between the Ak-Jarj and Burkhanists/Buddhist groups, and secondly, the Ak-Jarj community was officially banned by the decision of the court for nationalism and extremist pleas. Overall, the tone of the texts is more Buddhist friendly: even though the 'Ak-Jarj' are, in most of the cases, neither directly blamed nor labelled in any way, the Buddhists are more often described as victims, as the 'Ak-Jarj' Chekurashev's group members destroyed stupas, broke Orthodox cross sign (a small road sanctuary), disrupted the Buddhist ritual and threatened the Buddhists<sup>53</sup>. I have personally received many testimonies of this event from the Burkhanists I spoke with. However, I have not talked to the Ak-Jarj followers themselves, due to my limits of my fieldwork schedule and significant distance between the capital of the Republic and the villages in the south of the region, where some of the remaining Ak-Jarj followers. Speaking with person from the village when they are most active was as close as I could get. That person was a Buddhist Lama, although not a practising one. He came from the village where the Ak- Jarj was still quite strong, and he personally knew the Ak- Jarj followers, as his relatives and neighbors. I will elaborate on this in the 'Other religious groups and individuals' paragraph.

As for the language used and terms coined, Burkhanists are most often related to as 'Buddhists'. One newspaper even presented the conflict between the 'Ak-Jarj' and Burkhanists as a conflict between 'Pagans and Buddhists'<sup>54</sup>. Buddhists (in fact, Burkhanists, because it is the 'Ak-Burkhan' temple community that is being talked about, and almost never - other Buddhists groups of the region) are written to receive foreign delegations (Buddhist monks from Thailand, Mongolia and other countries) and to welcome high-ranked guests, like, for instance, Pandita Khambo Lama Damba Ausheev (the head of the Russian Buddhist Traditional Sangha (BTSR), which also includes the 'Ak-Burkhan' community).

Thus, the 'Ak-Burkhan' community is mostly presented as a 'purely' Buddhist local branch of BTSR, while shamanists and Ak-Jarj followers are either called pagan and unified, or distinguished, but still held as opposition to

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<sup>53</sup> Sources (news agencies):  
Altai 'cross-destroyer' case brought to court. (2013).  
<https://regnum.ru/news/accidents/1638010.html>;

In Altai, they are looking for those burned at the "House of the Sun". (2012). Retrieved from: <https://fedpress.ru/news/society/reviews/na-altae-ishchut-obzhegshikhsya-na-dome-solntsa>;

The conflict between pagans and Buddhists in Altai will be dealt with in court. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1952939.html>;

The pagan raid on Buddhists passed without consequences. (2016). Retrieved from: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2059006.html>;

Shamans against Buddha: a religious war erupts in the Altai Mountains. (2016). Retrieved from: <http://gornoaltaysk.bezformata.com/listnews/gornom-altae-razgoraetsya-religioznaya/45084653/>.

<sup>54</sup> The conflict between pagans and Buddhists in Altai will be dealt with in court. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1952939.html>

Buddhism in the region. The rhetoric about the national celebrations, however, is different. There, just like on the governmental websites, the words ‘culture’, ‘heritage’, ‘traditions’ are coming to the fore. The Altai celebrations, like ‘Chaga Bairam’ and others, are frequently called ‘national’, or ‘ethnic’ [‘народные’]<sup>55</sup>.

**Tourist websites** are mostly concentrated on introducing Altai and the regions of the direct proximity to their commercial interests as a a) ‘*land of wonders*’ and b) a ‘*land of ecological purity*’. This is hardly unexpected, given the Russia-wide image of Altai as a mysterious, sparsely populated reserve of nature’s triumph. Buddhism and Burkhanism, as well as shamanism and Roerichism, are rarely explained in much detail, and are usually tied up to the native peoples’ faith, to the grandeur of local nature and to the rich and ‘*unique cultural heritage*’<sup>56</sup>. As for ‘Ak-Jan’, it is almost never even mentioned – this is hardly surprising, taking into consideration that this community is officially banned from gatherings.

It is highly likely that some online texts<sup>57</sup> about the Ak-Burkhan temple were written or at least corrected by the Ak-Burkhan representatives themselves: *‘In 1991, the Ak-Burkhan religious association was formed in Gorno-Altai, with the goal of reviving the Altai form of Burkhanism, similar to the early Tibetan one. The Buddhist center "Ak-Burhan" has been built shortly after and is now functioning for the adherents of the Buddhist faith. The kuree-datsan services encompass ritual practices and divine worship.’* We can see from this small fragment that the person who wrote it deemed it crucially important to demonstrate the stable existence of the community over the years, the idea that it is ‘early Tibetan’ Buddhism that they follow, and that they offer both rituals and worships. As for the latter, however, I am more inclined to think of it as a figure of speech rather than of precision in religious terminology, because in Russian, using elaborate phrasing and plenty of synonyms are mostly considered as the good manners of speech. Besides, ‘divine worship’ [‘богослужение’] is a word usually used with relation to most widespread religions in Russia: Christianity and Islam (because, unlike Buddhism, these religions have a concrete God to worship). Therefore, I suppose that here, it has been used partly for the sake of the beauty of speech, partly as a tribute to an existing language norm.

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<sup>55</sup> Date of Chaga-Bairam 2021 celebration determined. (2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/126652>

Altai holidays. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://www.altay-info.ru/about/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B8%20%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B9%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%B2.php>

<sup>56</sup> Altai monuments and throat singing can complement the UNESCO heritage. (2012). Retrieved from: <https://ria.ru/20120513/648163529.html>;

The importance of natural and cultural heritage in modern society is discussed at a conference in Gorno-Altai. (2018). Retrieved from: [https://altai-republic.ru/news\\_lent/news-archive/25044/](https://altai-republic.ru/news_lent/news-archive/25044/)

<sup>57</sup> Buddhist temple Ak-Burkhan. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://altaitg.ru/catalog/interesnye-mesta/religioznye-obekty/buddiyskiy-khram-ak-burkhan/>

Also, it is notable that the word ‘kuree’ is used. In the ‘Kuree Ochy’ expert report, it was noted that the religious community members are advised to come to terms with the usage of either the word ‘kure’ or ‘kuree’, with two ‘e’. ‘Kure’ and ‘Kuree’ are in practice pronounced the same; even if there is a slight difference according to the rules of the Altai language phonetics, it has been forgotten in favour of the Russian pronunciation, just like the correct sound of ‘ÿ’ is being ignored (again, Russian sound system over the Altai one). They use the correct Altai spelling on their official social network webpage, though: ‘Ak-Burkan ‘kÿree (datsan)’ / [‘Ак-Буркан" кÿрее (дацан)], (Burkhanist temple public page in the V Kontakte social network, <https://vk.com/public65760886>). I asked several people from the community, what does the word ‘kuree’ mean for them; they mostly were rather vague about it and said that ‘*this is how it was called some time ago, and this is how it is now*’. I talked to both Altai and Russian people, but I wonder, what could have been replies of the former, were my questions asked in Altai.

## (2) Academic community

*“I am a materialist! What is it you still do not understand about Burkhanism? I cannot see. Always look at the economic relations! The bai<sup>58</sup> lands were taken back then, taken by the Russian settlers and authorities, and they thought to regain political and economic strength by supporting and implementing, in fact, a version of a syncretic religion’.*

*.... several minutes and two topics later...*

*‘...And then, I noticed a burial hut<sup>59</sup>, and through the fissures in the wood the coffin could be seen. I did not give it a single glimpse, of course. What if the one from the inside took it personally and cursed me...’*

*A personal talk with an Altai scholar.*

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<sup>58</sup> ‘Bai’ – a landowner in Altai. ‘Zaisan’ – a head of ‘seok’ (head of a kin lineage).

<sup>59</sup> This type of burial is called ‘сруб’ [‘srub’] – a round-log structure, in principle identical to a typical house of Russians. In Russian folklore, even the ‘ordinary’ coffin is frequently called ‘izba’, ‘izbushka’, ‘domovina’ – just like a house, but for permanent residence. The Altai nomads had various burial traditions, and they did not visit the graves of their deceased, but at some point, Russian burial etiquette started to permeate. Also, some of the ancient burial mounds found in what is now the Altai Republic, have this very ‘srub’ structure.

In most articles, theses, monographs and other written by-products of academic thought that I was lucky to encounter, the scholarly stance on the problem discussed is set aside from the first-hand observations and personal perspectives and occupies a separate chapter or separate paragraph in a chapter. Thus, the academic point(s) of view on the matter(s) researched is, therefore, often considered to be somewhat special, somewhat enjoying a particular power of argumentation and reasoning, and a specific ability of describing phenomena 'as they truly are', not 'as they seem to be' to the various interested parties involved. In other words, it is carrying along the rights and privileges of the etic perspectives over the emic ones.

It is my intention, however, to reassess this pre-defined positioning in the current chapter on the discourse of Burkhanism. I have placed the academic discourse of Burkhanism, its media and legal coverage and various religious groups reflections about it in one chapter consciously and on purpose, in order to better convey the subtlety and relativity of the array of assumptions under which the academic discourse is given a prior explanatory role. This is not to say that I seek to undermine the paradigm of academia and academic knowledge – I do believe that nothing has been developed to successfully substitute it, yet, - but to demonstrate how fragile, almost invisible the emic/etic distinction might be.

This is exactly one of the points poignantly grasped by Kocku von Stuckrad in his discourse analysis approach: that the academic research of the religious phenomena influences the phenomena studied (von Stuckrad, 2013, p. 6). I have witnessed this theoretical paradigm at work during my fieldwork, and noticed it expressed either explicitly or implicitly, in numerous works of other authors (Lindquist, 2006; Quijada, 2012; Bakker, 2018). In this regard, the two main methodological conclusions that I would like to illustrate with what follows are that, first, scholars might often be driven by their intrinsic motivations and beliefs to the extent that it becomes unclear whether their perspective is etic or emic, and secondly, that the academic discussion of the phenomenon researched (I will show it on the case of Burkhanism) is, in principle, nothing but yet another kind of discourse around this phenomenon, closely interrelated to and intersected with other discourse 'clouds'.

The latter observation (how exactly the academic discourse is twisted onto the religious community thread of argumentation and ideas) will be discussed in detail further on, in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Here, I aim at both exemplifying the first point made above (that it is not so simple to palp the invisible border between a scholarly discourse and the opinion of a person 'from within') and summarizing the main academic discussions and lines of thought about (and around) Burkhanism.

Burkhanism has been researched significantly in the scholar circles, although the English sources about it remain scarce (for example, Halemba, 2003; Znamenski, 2014; Krader, 1958), and are mainly translations or reprints

of the works of the Russian scholars. This may even be not particularly surprising, given the fact that the Altai Republic is a sparsely populated and hard-to-reach mountain region, and that to operate there successfully and an anthropologist one needs to be not only a fluent Russian speaker, but also (ideally) possess at least a certain knowledge of the Altai language<sup>60</sup>.

However profoundly discussed, Burkhanism is followed by discrepancies and divergences, and not only so in the academical field, but also in the ways it is being identified by the people of the Altai Republic themselves. These inconsistencies in the everyday, lay understanding the term were the starting point of my own interest in the topic: having asked several respondents about their attitudes toward Burkhanism, I got several different opinions on the matter. And yet, the field of Burkhanism studies does not seem to be flexible enough to grasp these observable varieties of comprehension.

By and large, inconsistencies around Burkhanism begin with the term itself. The present state of the observable phenomenon is so heterogeneous, and it differs from how Burkhanism was described in early scholarly sources so evidently, that giving it a (relatively) universal definition might be the impossible endeavor. By ‘*historicizing* approach’ (Hanegraaff, 2015) one can come, for example, to the following understanding of Burkhanism, or ‘Ak-Jar’ (White Faith): a ‘*syncretic*<sup>61</sup> beliefs and rituals system which absorbed Buddhist traditions and was rooted into cultivated animistic lore but was to a lesser extent influenced<sup>62</sup> by Islam and Christianity’ (Nasonov, 2011). This definition was accumulated by Alexander A. Nasonov from various pieces of thought about Burkhanism, drawn from its academic contemporaries’ works as well as from the Altai Spiritual (Orthodox) Mission thinkers’ conclusions on Altai history and culture<sup>63</sup>. Without doubt, it would be too hastily to jump to a conclusion that Christianity did not play a noticeable role in Burkhanism history; Lyudmila I. Sherstova suggests and plausibly shows how spread of Christianity brought

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<sup>60</sup> However, this is only valid to the researchers of shamanism who travel to the remote Altai villages. The overwhelming majority of the Altai people speak Russian fluent enough to be recognized as native speakers.

<sup>61</sup> To the extent this term (‘syncretic’) can still be used as a valid explanation of the reality observed. I restrain from it in my own research methodology, but it has been widely used in 2000-s in (Russian) academia. I must admit being taken by surprise when one of the Ak-Burkhan Lamas once told me, ‘*Do not think much of syncretism and mixture of ideas – there were no pure ideas to begin with*’.

<sup>62</sup> It is worth noting that some scholars and theologians of that period (Yadrintzev, 1891; Sapozhnikov, 1926) were more inclined to see Burkhanism as an internally formed phenomenon (Sherstova, 2010). The question of external borrowings of religious ideas from the nearby Mongolia is one of the major open discussions in Burkhanism and Altai studies nowadays.

<sup>63</sup> In (Danilin, 1993) one can obtain yet another evidence of this cumulative statement by Nasonov: the Archpriest Michael Pugintsev wrote during his Altai trip in 1880-s, that ‘*the indigenous population of the Altai mountains is a pagan one, with their beliefs being a mixture of Lamaism and shamanism*’.

along with the Russian influence over the region, triggered, or, as she writes, 'made actual again' the '*layer of Dzungar Lamaism*'<sup>64</sup> (Sherstova, 2010).

The influence of Lamaism and shamanism on the formation of Burkhanism has been also agreed upon in the academic discussion of the period of **early Burkhanism** (around 1890-1920). Prominent Russian Turkologist Sergei E. Malov, for instance, wrote in 1914-1924<sup>65</sup> in his foreword to the book on Altai shamanism by Andrei V. Anohin: '*Burkhanism is a mixture of Lamaism and shamanism without blood offerings; it is mostly widespread in Western Altai as positions of Lamaism has always been stronger in this region, according to the Altai Spiritual Mission reports*' (Anohin, 1924). Russian academic and 'spiritual' elite of that time mostly welcomed Burkhanism as a vestige of local national self-identification and cultural boost. In a non-linear yet traceable familiarity to the evolutionary ideas of Enlightenment, they saw Burkhanism as a vestige of a new, more 'developed' faith option for the Altai peoples, as a next step from shamanism towards world religions (Christianity and Buddhism). Among others, such were contributions of Russian ethnographer and scholar Grigorii N. Potanin and ethnographer and academic Dmitrii A. Clemenz, who was also an expert in the Chet Chelpan court case and whose contribution to the process was vital to Chet Chelpan's release (Danilin, 1993).

There were other voices in this non-univocal choir, of course; for example, those of the Altai intellectuals and wealthy landowners. Despite the targeted literature search that I made, I have not yet been able to create a satisfactory sketch of how Burkhanism has been reacted upon by its countrymen from the well-educated stratum. There are pieces of evidence from the contemporary observers, that '*the otherkin intelligence circles are straying away from shamanism, moving towards Lamaism*' (Sherstova, 2010, citing Shvetsov, 1897). The Kul'dzhin brothers might have hoped to gain economic benefits and social weight from establishing a new faith, but from their life stories I am not currently able to make any steadfast suggestions on how exactly they saw Burkhanism.

The same is sadly true regarding the figure of the Altai artist Grigorii I. Choros-Gurkin, whose spiritual and artistic heritage is looming over the landscape of the Altai creative elite. It is known for certain that Grigorii Choros-

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<sup>64</sup> This process as described by Lyudmila Sherstova bears distant resemblance to the Ghanaian observations of Birgit Meyer (2000), where native spirituality has also been prosecuted by European missionaries and where the figure of the Devil has received a certain familiarity to the locals; an outcome which fair Protestant pastors could have never anticipated. The Altai Christian missionary case, even though similar in some ways, resulted in very different processes, both religious and social. This most certainly requires a close study, as a research topic separate from my current attempts.

<sup>65</sup> The book by Andrei V. Anohin was accepted in print in 1914, with his observations had been collected a couple of years earlier, in 1910-1912. The Civil War and first years of the Revolutionary reign froze the work on the book, hence its late publication in 1923. The text of the book (by A. Anohin) and the foreword (by S. Malov) remain in its original form, written according to the rules of the pre-revolutionary Russian orthography, while the editorial appeal is composed in modern Russian language.

Gurkin was keenly interested in Altai rituals, culture and traditions<sup>66</sup>, and that he was also deeply caring about the preservation of the Altai culture and the Altai national revival. What is not yet entirely clear, at least, to me, is what were his religious beliefs and worldview. It is well-known that he wrote in Russian (even personal correspondence) and was not too much of a politician (Samyikova, 2008). He studied at the Altai Orthodox Mission school and even taught there, and later labored in the icon painting<sup>67</sup> (Goncharik, 2010), but it is also true that he shared an interest in the legacies of shamanism and Burkhanism (Erkinova, 2008; Goncharik, 2011).

In most of the literature devoted to Gurkin which I managed to unearth, this keen interest of an Altai artist to the native land is being described in art studies terms such as ‘ethnografism’, ‘romanticism’ and ‘nationalism’, and as a deep love to the local motherland<sup>68</sup>. One of the sources (Filatov, 2002), frequently cited online, directly states that Gurkin was a Burkhanist, but gives no references to support this fact. Thus, I hesitate yet to draw any certainties about Grigorii Choros-Gurkin’s point of view on Burkhanism and shamanism. It is safe to say that he tried to preserve and cherish national culture as fiercely as he could, and that he and the circle of like-minded ethnographers (G. Potanin, A. Anohin, etc.) were certainly influencing the idea of Burkhanism with their writings; but I cannot state with the equal degree of certainty whether his views on Burkhanism were more in line with Buddhism or with shamanism, and what were his and other Altai prominent individuals motives in relation to Burkhanism<sup>69</sup>. In other words, at the current state of my research I am not sure yet, how the Altai intellectual elite perceived Burkhanism and which goals they tried to achieve through supporting it (if any!). Further historical and hermeneutical research is needed to shed more light on this matter.

The whole other story is the one about the Altai Spiritual (Orthodox) Mission’s / ASM attitude towards Burkhanism. As already mentioned in the ‘Media discourse...’ paragraph of this chapter, the role and actions of the ASM in the events of 1904, as well as in the Altai baptism process is far from being univocal for various interested parties involved. It has also been conceptualized

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<sup>66</sup> His truly numerous sketches and paintings on Altai households, shamanist rites and everyday life are evidence enough just by themselves (*Этнографические рисунки Г. И. Чорос-Гуркина [Ethnographic drawings by G. I. Choros-Gurkin]*. (2014). Album. Gorno-Altaiisk: Ak-Chechek).

<sup>67</sup> Andrei Anohin has also received an Orthodox seminary (Biysk catechism school) education and worked at the church choir and as a singing teacher – to the question of how Russian Altai ethnographers and academics of pre-revolutionary and early-Soviet period were influenced by their Christian background.

<sup>68</sup> One of the sources on this topic: *Г.И. Гуркин и Горный Алтай – гений и место [G.I. Gurkin and Altai Mountains: genius and place]*. (2019). Antology by T.P. Shastina (ed.). Gorno-Altaiisk: Altyn-Tuu.

<sup>69</sup> Sherstova argues, for instance, that among other motives, the Altai intelligentsia was trying, maybe even consciously, to present their own kin (‘altai-kizhi’) as a model representation of various nationalities dwelling in the Altai Mountains and formerly united under a shared political structure as ‘Oirot’ people (Sherstova, 2013).

differently before the Russian Revolution, during Soviet times and after the fall of the USSR. The sources which I find convincing in this regard (Nasonov, 2010; Sherstova, 2010; Danilin, 1993) seem to agree on the following: the ASM did execute a mass proselytism campaign (to speak in modern terms, of course), especially in the Northern part of the region, opened schools and public charity institutions, contributed to the overall knowledge about the ways of life, culture and religion of the Altai peoples – yet in their own fashion. This way, the ASM discerned a political stance of the Burkhanist movement in a way that might very well have been exaggerated by the local church members in charge. It is still unknown whether the slogan ‘For Japan-Khan!’ ascribed to the Tereng valley worshippers by some authors, was a mystification enacted by the ASM, but it seems to be true that the ASM was generally more inclined to portray the event around Burkhanism as a threat to the political system and to the social stability.

The reasons for such line of action might be connected to the fear of losing influence in the region: as Buddhism has long been recognized by the Russian Crown, it was against ASM’s best interests to proclaim Burkhanism to be a part of the religion which they could not successfully (and legally) compete with. Shamanism was a whole different matter; but above all, the political instability of the war time guaranteed authorities’ attention to any signs of in obedience in the borderline national region – which was the Altai part of the Tomsk Governorate. Therefore, the ASM took Burkhanism seriously not only because it altered significant masses of Altai people and led to notable lifestyle changes of those involved (thus jeopardizing the so far established Mission’s progress in baptizing the locals), but also because it was perceived by many as a form of Buddhist proselytizing attempt, kneaded on the nationalist agenda (Nasonov, 2011; Sherstova, 2010). However, it would be wrong, unfair even, to underestimate the importance of the Altai Orthodox mission contribution to the cumulative ethnographic knowledge about Altai. As is shown above in the example of the foreword by Sergei Malov, the ASM reports were one of the information sources for their academic contemporaries (who were also quite often religious people<sup>70</sup>).

In Nina Shatinova’s paper on the Altai family-related rituals (Shatinova, 1980), for instance, Burkhanism and shamanism are used as two different ‘modes’ of Altai ‘traditional’ religiosity, without, however, further clarifying their difference. Leonid P. Potapov, whose point of view was dominant for a long time during the USSR existence (as is carefully noted by L. Sherstova, 2010) was busy showing that the Altai Burkhanism cannot be considered as the ‘national liberation movement’, but as a ‘reactionary’ one instead (Potapov, 1953), which in the times of the prevailing Marxism-Leninism terminology meant if not sheer

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<sup>70</sup> I have only spent about half a year delving into the Burkhanism and its scholarly analysis, which is absolutely not enough for drawing any major conclusions, but I believe that the topic of early Russian scholarship on Burkhanism has not yet been studied profoundly in terms of the critical analysis of the ‘theological implications’. By ‘theological implications’ I mean the hermeneutical reflection on personal (religious) beliefs and biographies of the Altai scholars of that time.

oblivion, then vigorous condemnation. Andrei G. Danilin opposed L. Potanin by arguing that Burkhanism in fact was a 'national liberation movement' (Danilin, 1993), and therefore, was worthy of further research. In doing so, however, Danilin has concentrated mostly on the political and economic sphere, seeing the ASM's and pre-revolutionary academic's enthusiasm in discussing the religious side of the story as more of a hindrance. As hinted by Sherstova (2010), it might have been a sheer necessity to avoid the punishing sword of censorship, but it nevertheless alters the perception of the text, as I can state going over it now, from a modern academic perspective.

Even though this paragraph is devoted to the **contemporary academic discourse on Burkhanism**, I saw it fit to allow such a lengthy digression to the academic apprehensions of Burkhanism of the past, as the current academic paradigm is highly receptive to the results of the former generation of scholars' labor. Thus, Leonid Potapov was clearly inclined to rely upon the ASM's reports on the political and nationalistic agenda of Burkhanism, while Andrei Danilin was mostly basing his arguments on Potanin's and Anohin's work. Lyudmila Sherstova, who, with her profound monograph on Burkhanism (2010), is undoubtedly the most eminent scholar in the field, is basically continuing the line of Danilin, although successfully avoiding his at times steep Marxist statements. Sherstova's main argument on the reasons of the advent of Burkhanism is its eschatological nature: the soil for it having been prepared by the years of Dzhungar Lamaism and local shamanism traditions, Burkhanism was triggered into shaped existence by Christian proselytism, rapid social and political changes and instability, nationalistic moods (Sherstova, 2013). The Altai peoples hoped for a new era of prosperity and joy and welcomed it in the form of the 'White Faith'. Burkhanism, according to Sherstova, was not an anti-Russian movement (as it might very well seem), but a movement, a social construct that appeared in order to strengthen Altai national identity on the verge of making a step into a globalized world of other ethnicities and world religions.

According to the Vyacheslav A. Kleshev, who, among other scholars, is a disciple of L. Sherstova, Burkhanism can be most successfully described with a notion of '*folk religion*'<sup>71</sup>, almost equating it to the 'folk culture' in terms of intertwinement of the sacred and the profane in the everyday life, but differentiating it from the 'national religion' which presupposes a more institutionalized and socially oriented<sup>72</sup> system of religious beliefs. Thus, according to Kleshev's and Sherstova's argumentation, Burkhanism is a folk religion, an entity more structured and formed than 'folk beliefs' (Kleshev, 2006), but not institutionalized enough to be a national religion<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> "Volksreligion", in the stream of G. Hegel's thought.

<sup>72</sup> By this I mean the national self-identification on the religious basis.

<sup>73</sup> Boris K. Knorre also calls the complex of modern beliefs in the Altai Republic 'the Altai folk faith' (Knorre, 2011)

Other scholars, in contrast, consider Burkhanism to be a neoshamanist movement. Nadezhda A. Tadina introduces the term '*Burkhanism reborn*' ('*возрожденный бурханизм*'), which, according to her, differs from the original Burkhanism, as '*Shamanism reformed*' (Tadina, 2013). To be more precise, Dmitrii V. Arzutov (2010) calls 'Ak-Jar' the '*neoshamanist tradition*', and Nadezhda A. Tadina and Tengis S. Yabyshtaev (2012) define '*reborn Burkhanism*' as a '*neopagan religious movement*', stemming from the traditions of the Altai indigenous population (Altay-kizhi) and mirroring the urge of the Altai people to recover their national self-identification, culture and knowledge of the language. From what can be read through her notes on the 'old' and new' Burkhanism (Tadina, 2013), it seems that Tadina considers the Ak-Jar movement to be a representative of the '*Burkhanism reborn*'.

Sherstova strongly objects to Tadina's arguments (Sherstova, 2013) on the grounds that, first, Burkhanism changed dramatically over the period of its existence (hence the idea of culture preservation was not the leading one throughout the whole Burkhanist movement), and secondly, that the idea of Burkhanism as a primarily nationalistic movement does not go in line with the apparent similarities between the early history of Burkhanism and the Melanesian cargo-cults (hence Burkhanism, according to Sherstova, is to a lesser extent a nationalistic movement of the negative self-identification against Russians, but more a consolidation core of the different peoples of the Altai region, opposing the transnational processes of globalization and cultural unification).

To put it simple, one group of scholars stresses the nationalistic character of contemporary Burkhanism and trace its origins to the Altai peoples' traditions, while another one highlights the idea of Burkhanism as an artificial construct, being used to encompass various and diverse phenomena of the Altai folk religion. The picture would have been incomplete without sketching a third party – scholars, who disagree with both positions listed above. For example, Andrei A. Znamenski (2015) argues (in opposition to L.I. Sherstova and in line with Vera P. D'yakonova, 2001) that Burkhanism experienced a strong, even formative, influence of Tibetan Buddhism and the '*ethno-national revival*' (term by Znamenski) spreading at that moment in the neighboring Mongolia, and thus it is more justified to consider Burkhanism as a part of the Buddhism world, not merely as a unique 'passionate'<sup>74</sup> outburst. Vera D'yakonova (2010) directly calls Burkhanism a 'local variety of northern Buddhism', citing<sup>75</sup> Elizaveta E. Yamaeva (2002).

These disputes, just as the differences in understanding the term itself, stem not only from the political and social sensitivity of the topic<sup>76</sup>, but also from

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<sup>74</sup> In terms of Lev Gumilev.

<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, Nadezhda Tadina also cites Elizaveta Yamaeva in one of her works (2013), using her analysis of the Burkhanist hymns as resembling Manichean religious poems as an argument in favour of her theory of the two Burkhanisms – the '*new*' and the '*old*' ones.

<sup>76</sup> There is an intense discussion between the point of view of Sherstova (she states it, for example, in her paper of 2013a), who thinks that scientists can never be careful when dealing

disagreements about the historical influences on Burkhanism, the reasons behind its emergence and rapid expansion and about its social and political functioning nowadays. Lyudmila Sherstova's efforts were (and are) focused on rethinking the Soviet academic tradition on Burkhanism, preventing Burkhanism to be perceived as a nationalistic movement. I have no doubt that it was predominantly her academic contribution and social stance that helped prevent Burkhanism from being viewed now as a threatening nationalistic 'Other' of the Altai religious landscape<sup>77</sup>. Her present-day opponents, however, object against this 'biased' approach: *'the approach by Sherstova vividly demonstrates, how history is too often serving the lived reality'* (Znamenskii, 2015).

Yet another stumbling block of the discussion around present-day Altai and Burkhanism in particular, is a question of methods and methodology. We could observe a clash of what is called either 'responsible research' (by its supporters) or 'biased research' (by its opponents) and a paradigm of attending to the facts regardless on the sensitivity of the topic (or, at least, not giving it the primary role). There is more to it. One of the Altai scholars, whom I deeply respect both as a person and as an academic, told me in a personal talk, that the young researcher from Moscow who wrote his thesis and several papers on Altai religion and society, is not doing what *'we are doing here'*. His *'anthropology'* is not the same as their *'ethnography'*. I found this slip of tongue extremely interesting, and I thought about it a lot while talking with other representatives of the Altai academy. Unfortunately, the story behind includes, among other things, an egregious neglect of researcher ethics, made by that concrete scholar, so I was not able to push the narrative of *'their'* and *'our'* methods further.

I can state with certainty, though, that 'ethnography' is being perceived by the Altai scholars whom I was lucky to meet, as a direct descendant of the Soviet ethnographic traditions. They do not, as far as I could notice, insist on any Marxist-Leninist tenets, but they are influenced by it nevertheless: either by the unwillingness to completely break with what they have been taught<sup>78</sup>, or by claiming to be a 'materialist' and describing social events from an economic basis. This paragraph's epigraph serves of an example of the latter. The scholar whom I talked to was agitated to prove, that she is a *'materialist'* and that social things always have an economic bottom. After the story about the coffin, which she narrated from her personal experience, and after getting the recommendation of the local city shaman from her, I asked her bluntly, puzzled: 'What do you mean by being a materialist?' It could be nothing but my own speculation, but I saw

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with the questions of national culture, pride and history, and the stance of Znamenski (2015), who thinks that fear of the national antagonism has influenced the academy too much.

<sup>77</sup> Even though in supporting Burkhanism she sometimes casts a shadow of doubt over the voices of the native Altai scholars (Nadezda Tadina).

<sup>78</sup> This is not to say that such a rupture would be good or anyhow desirable! I am only trying to describe the odd feeling of not belonging, which I experienced at times while talking to the academic community (even though this feeling reminded about itself so less often than in my talks with some of my other interlocutors).

her hesitating with an answer. I daresay that she did not want to formulate it clearly, maybe even to herself.

Personal convictions are also something that seems to be very much prominent in the local academia. The two (or even three) camps of local academics, with a true battlefield in between, are formed by people who are openly sympathetic to certain beliefs, and who are doing Burkhanist (in historical sense) rituals/visiting shamans themselves. These scholars, Altai by nationality, are, in fact, within the stream of action research – but I am sure they would have never admitted it. They work tirelessly on supporting Altai language and culture and provide ‘true’ arguments in favour of their ideas, with the latter being clearly based, among other things, on their own personal experience. This way, I received contacts of a city shaman and a ghost story from one (former) academic and heard a personal narrative about Burkhanist ritual from another; and yet they somehow combine this with ideas of materialism and ‘Soviet ethnography’.

It took me two fieldwork trips and many talks in the region close to my own homeland to truly sense how illusionary the division between ‘interested parties’ and ‘academic community discourse’ might be. I will give two examples which I consider most explicative in this regard, both anonymized and stripped of any leads to concrete people.

The first example is a personal talk with one of the successful Altai scholars, who was very kind to see me several times and generous to share various information which I would have never found, if not for this person. Our talk started a bit abruptly, however (this is typical for the Altai people, as I learned later) - having listened to my introduction and research aims, the scholar exclaimed: “*but those who you study are not real Burkhanists, you know that, right?!*” I have also heard this idea of a community being ‘real’ or ‘not real’ coming from a Moscow professor (Russian by nationality). It seemed to mean different things for both of them, though. The Moscow professor meant that the Burkhanists I study are in fact Buddhists, only claiming the rights to the part of the Altai religious legacy known as ‘Burkhanism’, but not enjoying its continuity. In case of the Altai scholar, it was about these purely academic distinctions as well, but also about that they know the *real* present time Burkhanists – the disciples of the White Faith beliefs and practices, continued albeit inevitably changed. This kind of knowledge was an internal one, stemming from the personal experience, childhood memories of the Altai scholar I spoke with. I had a feeling that the Burkhanists my interlocutor is talking about are not just either ‘real’ or ‘pretending’, but also either ‘our’ or ‘other’.

Among other things, we talked about the possible need for ‘Archyn’ (a local type of Juniper plant) protection – it is used widely in the tourist industry and for religious (spiritual) purposes, and people who obtain it are not so often preoccupied with ecological consciousness. My interlocutor, however, said that they personally are against protection measures, at least, on a governmental level, because ‘if prohibited, people will just stop doing the rituals, and this culture will fade away instead of having a rebirth’. They also added: ‘*besides, it*

*is impossible to procure enough archyn in urban surroundings nowadays if one is following traditional restrictions<sup>79</sup>; my family, for example, is getting archyn from one source only, from the distant relatives who still live in the mountains*'. It was not just the general understanding of the life in the Republic, it was a personal experience. The scholar was at the same time a representative of a certain group of people whom they also studied.

Another example is a talk with a traveler, spiritual person and former (well known) scholar, who was recommended to me by one of the 'Ak-Burkhan' community members (or, rather, I was recommended to them). This person maintains a website about Altai nature, religion and culture where one can also find a call for financial support for building stupas and dugans in the Altai Republic, from the 'Ak-Burkhan' religious group. As we spoke, I gradually got to understand their personal convictions of a simple, nature-oriented life in a house built by a true master ('darhan'<sup>80</sup>), and many more of their spiritual ideas and ideals, which, unfortunately, do not harmonically blend in the life of an academic researcher, just as they are hard to achieve in modern realities<sup>81</sup>. I was told that, *'it is important to gain a degree and to live in a big city when you are young. It is only after that one realizes what is really important in life, and returns to the land of one's roots'*, just after we discussed the recent works on Burkhanism and the Russian and Altai folklore and shared opinions on the hardships of getting an academic position. I got a persistent feeling that not only does that person see their academic position and gained knowledge and experience as means of spreading their ideas, but that scholarship is an integral part of their life, and they try to smoothen the ruptures between their academic career and their ideas of ecologism and spirituality.

In both cases described above, I was not sure whether the talks I had with these people and the points of view they shared should be delineated as academic discourse or that of the 'interested parties involved'. I am still not sure, because I started to doubt this distinction as such. There is nothing new in the idea of everyone's biasness (as Edward W. Said has cogently showed), of course, but it

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<sup>79</sup> Traditionally, archyn should be taken from the bush after a special ritual involving milk and praying, and not more than 12 branches should be removed taken by a person (or household, my interlocutors were not really specific about that) a year; not more than 2-3 branches from a bush. It is very interesting how these ritual restrictions are at the same time ecologically valid.

<sup>80</sup> The smith figure devotion in Buryatia and Mongolia shamanism. Dar(k)han means 'a smith' in Mongolian (Zhalsanova, 2017).

<sup>81</sup> Being a 'darhan' means being able to craft anything – sturdy, decent, 'true'. It also means being close to nature, to the 'true way of things'. Darhan knows how to create, just like a person who lives in harmony with the 'true way of things', knows when to stay at home because soon it is going to rain. It is not a conscious knowledge, but a feeling, or even a sense. One willing to gain this understanding of the 'way of things', needs to become close to the 'real' things in life – nature, homemade food, wooden house, handmade things. The traveler and her husband explained it to me as we talked, and then added, that, unfortunately, this way of life is hardly possible to practice in the cities, and overall, hard to maintain in the modern society. I nodded in agreement – in the house made of wood, the laptop on the table and the refrigerator in the corner were silently exuding an aura of technological modernity.

is interesting and very telling, how people themselves are speculating their own presupposition, personal experience and try to get it in line with what they think means to be a scholar.

### (3) Other religious groups and individuals

- *'Oh, Burkhanists? They are someone from the city. From the north. We are but pagans here',* - the woman from the Kucherla museum seems slightly confused with my question...
- *'Burkhanists are historically and traditionally Buddhists. It's just that people forgot everything and mess it up with shamanism',* - the active member of the Ak-Burkhan group and a scholar agreed to meet me in the café...
- *'Burkhanists are like Tibetan bon, half-shamanists, to us...'* - a beautiful woman with breathtakingly bright blue eyes and charming mild voice tells me as I am sitting in the Buddhist Retreat kitchen and drinking tea...
- *'This is a story that I tell Russians. To the Altai who come to the museum, I have a different story, of course. They are like children, our younger brothers and sisters; they understand everything too directly. I do not want to offend them',* - a local artist shows us her museum.

Various bits of interviews, collected by me during my Altai trips

These bits and pieces, flashes of thoughts, opinions and beliefs about Burkhanism, which I, initially unintentionally, kept collecting throughout the vast land of the Altai Mountains, were the very sparkle that triggered my interest in Burkhanism, in the first place. To my astonishment, people tend to think about Burkhanism very differently. They do so about many other things, no doubt about that. However, what surprised me most with regard to Burkhanism was that people sometimes articulated totally opposite meanings, attributed to it.

First and foremost, I would like to introduce the scope of my data base in this regard (please see Table 3 for the list of my interlocutors from the various religious movements). It is my primary intention to present the information in a clear and lucid manner, so that no generalizations could have been made on the basis of limited knowledge and experience I am able to present in this thesis. I can only speak of the results of my talks with the people mentioned in the table above, and of the online materials I managed to get.

Table 3. Religious groups and individuals I asked about Burkhanism

Religious community	People I talked to / Information I have	Places
<b>Orthodox church</b>	Church volunteer	Ust'-Koksa village, Church of Mary's Canopy ( <a href="http://koksa.cerkov.ru/">http://koksa.cerkov.ru/</a> ; Appendix 6/Photo 32)
	Church acolyte	Gorno-Altaysk city, Church of Saint Macarius of Altai ( <a href="https://eparhia-gorniyaltay.ru/?page_id=149">https://eparhia-gorniyaltay.ru/?page_id=149</a> ; Appendix 6/Photo 29)
<b>Karma Kagyu Buddhists Shamanists and Shamans</b>	Retreat center <sup>82</sup> volunteer	Askat village, Karma Kagyu Retreat Center ( <a href="https://vk.com/retritaskat">https://vk.com/retritaskat</a> ).
	Retreat center encourager	
	Buddhist shaman	Gorno-Altaysk city <sup>83</sup>
	Shamanist clairvoyant Shaman	Mul'ta village Gorno-Altaysk city
<b>Ak-Janj Chekurashev's group</b>	No direct contacts, only a talk with two persons related to them through family and friends	Gorno-Altaysk city, the 'Ak-Burkhan' temple ( <a href="https://vk.com/public65760886">https://vk.com/public65760886</a> ; Appendix 6/Photos 3-13)
	Pro-Ak-Janj website and opinion articles published online <sup>84</sup>	
<b>Roerich followers</b>	Four Roerich followers	Mul'ta, Upper Uymon, Lower Uymon villages
	Museum website article on White Burkhan	Cultural complex to N.K. and E.I. Roerich, Roerich heritage Museum ( <a href="https://uymon.ru/">https://uymon.ru/</a> ; Appendix 6/Photo 32)

The position of the **Orthodox Church** regarding Burkhanism is hard to grasp – I wonder if such position even exists, it being split over parishes and individual priests. The Altai Orthodox diocese website ([<sup>82</sup> For a list of the Altai Buddhist organizations, please see Appendix 1.](https://eparhia-</a></p>
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<sup>83</sup> For the Gorno-Altaysk city views, please see Appendix 6/Photos 14-27.

<sup>84</sup> В Горном [V Gornom] personal website (<https://v-gornom.ru/>); Амаду Алтай ['Amadu Altai'] newspaper website (<https://amadualtai.wordpress.com>); ЯНГЫ АЛТАЙ ДВИЖЕНИЕ ['JAHY ALTAI' – MOVEMENT], the Ak-Janj oriented public page in the Vkontakte social network (<https://vk.com/club47031643>). The last two sources were blocked during the time of my research, for the reasons unknown (it could have happened due to the nationalistic texts, hate speech or because of the online attack on the community – unfortunately, there is no way for me to know for sure). Therefore, its content is no longer available.

[gorniyaltay.ru/](http://gorniyaltay.ru/)) is focused on publishing primarily diocese events and news, and the questions of other religions in the area and inter-religion communication do not receive substantial attention there. However, the webpage about the *Altai Orthodox Mission*<sup>85</sup> (literally translated, 'The Altai Spiritual Mission' ['Алтайская Духовная Миссия'/'Altaiskaya Duhovnaya Missiya']) has something to tell one interested in the Orthodox perception of Altai faith.

The history of the Altai Orthodox Mission on the Altai Orthodox diocese website is a lengthy article which is mostly focused on the deeds of Saint Macarius (Bishop Macarius), on education and public charity provided by the Church in its attempts to convert Altai peoples. It is worth noting here, that Bishop Macarius (1792 – 1847) was ranked Metropolitan of Altai in 1920, after his death, and is an esteemed and highly venerated local saint. The church in Gorno-Altai city center was founded by him and goes under his name and spiritual protection ('The Church of Saint Macarius of Altai'). He was a scholar, translator, theologian and an idea of the Russian Bible translation sympathizer. Bishop Macarius's missionary activities and his life-example were well-respected and acknowledged by all Orthodox Church members I spoke with.

The situation is, however, quite different on the other side of the river. I mean it literally – the 'Ak-Burkhan' temple is situated on an opposite riverbank from the Church of Saint Macarius of Altai. Three Lamas from the 'Ak-Burkhan' community whom I spoke with were not so positive about the figure (and efforts) of Bishop Macarius. They either mentioned him rather vaguely, dropping hints that not everything was so black and white back then, or confessed directly that his role in the Altai Spiritual Mission, as well as the role of the Altai Spiritual Mission in the 1904 Tereng valley events, are to be re-estimated and revised.

The Tereng valley incident, together with Burkhanism, are mentioned on the Altai Orthodox diocese website in one sentence only: '*Since 1904, the Altai Mission was forced to withstand the spread of Burkhanism - the Altai form of Lamaism, which was claimed to be the national religion of the Altai people*'. The translated text slightly alters the meaning of the original citation, but it is clear that, firstly, Burkhanism is pictured as something that they were forced to oppose, thus reserving the role of self-defense to themselves, and secondly, that to them, Burkhanism is a sort of Lamaism which was only claimed to be an Altai native religion, but not necessarily was one. It is important to note that Burkhanism is not described as Buddhism here. This way, it is stripped out of the Buddhist legacy and present-day support through being equaled to Lamaism, which is not so well-known to the public. The Altai national faith, according to the Altai Orthodox diocese website article, is '*shamanism-paganism*', in this wording literally. In the article on the Altai Orthodox Mission, it is also mentioned in one sentence only. Thus, the Altai Orthodox diocese website leaves an impression that the Altai Orthodox Church is more concentrated on its own history, deeds and activities in the region rather than on the region and its people. This is hardly surprising, given the Altai Orthodox diocese's desire to spread over

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<sup>85</sup> History of the Altai Spiritual Mission. (n.d.). Retrieved from: [https://eparhia-gorniyaltay.ru/?page\\_id=1023](https://eparhia-gorniyaltay.ru/?page_id=1023)

the region and be welcomed not only among the Russians, but also by the Altai peoples. In pursuing this goal, they also try to consider local public inquiries, such as the Altai language concern: the Altai Orthodox diocese website provides links to the Altai-Russian dictionary and the Altai language practice application.<sup>86</sup>

People close to the Orthodox Church in Altai whom I managed to interview (an acolyte in Gorno-Altaysk city and an active volunteer in Ust'-Koksa village) did not demonstrate any full-fledged opinion or in-depth knowledge on Burkhanism and the 'Ak-Burkhan' temple. The Church of Saint Macarius of Altai acolyte (Gorno-Altaysk city) was well aware of the Ak-Burkhan temple's existence, but he told us that the Orthodox Church representatives and the Buddhists mostly see each other on the meetings organised by the government. He has read about the 1904 Tereng valley events, but to him, it was more about the eschatological expectations of the Altai people and about the tense atmosphere in the region at that time. He was referring to the 'Ak-Burkhan' community as Buddhists (just like five different people on the street whom I randomly asked: "I wonder if you know what it might be?", pointing at the yellow roof of the temple).

The elderly male volunteer from Ust'-Koksa, who was tending to the Church early in the morning when our group of four students came to visit it, was not particularly aware of Burkhanism in the form of the 'Ak-Burkhan temple' (which is not so surprising given the distance in 800 km between this village and Gorno-Altaysk city), and his idea about the native religion of the Altai people was that they worship nature. Interestingly, he was not strongly against it per se and expressed a solid share of understanding towards the Altai converts who have to respect their traditions (by which he meant nature worship) and who are at the same time baptized Christians. However, he was firmly negative towards the local esoteric/Roerich/Krishna followers center, as he felt *'a heavy bad aura'* radiating from it. We also learned from him that the Orthodox Church in Ust'-Koksa provides the Old Believers of the nearby settlements with their special body cross signs – a fact that tells us a lot about how small religious communities can arrange their everyday needs<sup>87</sup>.

The Altai Republic picture of Buddhism is predominantly colored by three officially registered associations: Karma Kagyu, Gelug and Lotus Sutra

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<sup>86</sup> Studying the Altai language... (n.d.). Retrieved from: [https://eparhia-gorniyaltay.ru/?page\\_id=4165Russian](https://eparhia-gorniyaltay.ru/?page_id=4165Russian)

<sup>87</sup> The Old Believers' crosses differ from those used by the modern Russian Orthodox Church: they are eight-pointed while the latter are four-pointed. I was surprised to see, that the Old Believers of Mul'ta, Ust' Koksa and Uimon villages buy their special crosses in the local Orthodox church. The parishioner who was in charge of the church shop told me that they deliberately buy the eight-pointed crosses to provide the local community of the Old Believers with their symbols of faith.

*'And they just come to the church and buy crosses?'*, - I asked. *'Yes'*, - the church shopkeeper shrugged, - *'Where would they get them other than from us?'* I wonder what is more to it: the law of the market (the supply follows the demand) or the desire to help fellow Orthodox believers while at the same time having the possibility of converting them.

The source about the Old Believers' crosses: Which body cross is the right one? (2014). Retrieved from: <https://starove.ru/obychai/krestik/>

Buddhists. I have studied the second ones and visited the first ones, for the Lotus Sutra community is situated in the Ongudai village which is more than 1000 km away from my main research venue (Gorno-Altai). **The Karma Kagyu** Buddhist community (<https://vk.com/retritaskat>) is concentrated in the Askat village, not too far from Gorno-Altai (in an hour by car). Its proximity to the capital of the Republic serves Askat inhabitants a good deal – the place looks if not well-visited, then certainly used to welcoming guests. Such an impression is created by the looks of a private museum and hotel, the direction to which is carefully marked by the custom-made wooden signs and is strengthened by the locals' attitude towards my arrival – their calmness and restraint confirmed that they were more than familiar with strangers coming to Askat.

As I came without warning, I waited for about an hour to be met by two Retreat Center inhabitants: a young 30–40-year-old woman who is seemingly in charge of this place, together with her husband, absent at that moment; and a male middle-aged volunteer who came to this retreat from as far away as the Far East of Russia. They were doing their morning meditation when I came, and therefore they could not see me until it was finished. An hour and a half talk with them revealed many interesting details about their life in this Retreat Center and about their beliefs, but here I am only going to mention their ideas about Burkhanism. There is not much to say in this regard, except that they consider Burkhanism as '*something like Tibetan bon, half-shamanists...*'. They are not too much aware of the Gelug Buddhist activities and of Altai religious history, because they came here, to Askat, for different purposes – hence their lack of interest in Burkhanism, shamanism and the Ak-Burkhan community.

I had a persistent feeling that the Askat and Ak-Burkhan communities exist in different realms and attract different people. The Ak-Burkhan community is predominantly Altai by nationality. The Askat attracts mostly Russians. People in Askat to whom I spoke were more into spiritual self-oriented practices and meditation and follow closely the Nydahl couple teachings<sup>88</sup>; the Ak-Burkhan Lamas were more inspired by traditional Buddhist schooling and levels of ordination. What holds them close, however, is their mutual immersion into their own affairs. People from both communities were reluctant to talk much about the other Buddhists in the region and tried to change the subject of the conversation and talk about their own faith and ideas as soon as they could. The Askat community members with whom I communicated told me, that they represent 'Western Buddhism', focused on the inner self of each individual, while what they teach in Gelug, in Buryatia datsans and in 'Ak-Burkhan' is a bookish, Eastern tradition. They said that they would have no problems entering the temple in Gorno-Altai and meditating there, but the place is far less important

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<sup>88</sup> Ole and Hannah Nydahl are the Danish Buddhists, founders and popularisers of Diamond Way Buddhism of the Karma Kagyu school. They published many books and translations on Tibetan Buddhism for Western practitioners and established a worldwide organisation of Diamond Way Buddhism. One of their works, which I saw in the Askat Buddhist Retreat: Nydahl, O. (1985). *Entering the Diamond Way: My Path Among the Lamas*. Blue Dolphin Pub.

than the person's will, inner strength and desire of reaching freedom through dharma.

To conclude, the Askat and Ak-Burkhan communities do not unite to celebrate Buddhist holidays as 'the Askats' do not see much sense in it, while the Ak-Burkhan Lamas are busy with their own flock. The Buddhist New Year, Sagaalga, which I witnessed in the Ak-Burkhan community, was visited by one person from Askat only. It was a young man, and he tried to speak to the local Lamas to ask the questions he had about Buddhism. He did not stay for the night at the temple, though, and left soon after the main ceremony.

The Roerich couple<sup>89</sup> esoteric system seems to be quite distanced from the long-established Gelug Pa tradition, but that first sight-impression might lead one on the wrong track. In fact, the **Roerich teachings** are quite closely connected to contemporary Burkhanism in the form of the Ak-Burkhan community. This bond is not so much rooted in the Roerich's background in E.P.Blavatsky's legacy, but is traced back to the Ak-Burkhan community's early establishment. According to Sergey Filatov, one of Ak-Burkhan inspirators Brontoï Bedyurov once said: *'the Roerich followers taught us Buddhism'* (Filatov, 2002). Filatov argues that *'the leaders of Burkhanism-Buddhism themselves recognize the enormous influence of the Roerich teaching on the ideology of their movement'*. He also points out that, despite the strong connection between the Russian Roerich societies and the Buddhist-Burkhanist movement at the very beginning of the latter, the current Roerich followers' projects in Altai are developed completely independently from the Ak-Burkhan community, and vice versa. I will add my own observations on this account a bit further.

The Roerichism's influence on Burkhanism might even go back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Altai intelligentsia of 1900-1920 might have known if not about the Roerich's couple ideas and art, but at least about the Roerich family's expeditions as they travelled from the north of the Altai Mountains to the south and further, to Tibet and India. Unfortunately, I have not been able to determine the extent of the Roerichism influence over the Burkhanism of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to the limited scope of my research. Also, it was quite hard to find the details of the early Burkhanist supporters' connections. For example, Grigorii Choros-Gurkin, who among other artists and thinkers of his time invested in the Altai self-identification, could have met Nicolas Roerich<sup>90</sup>. However, neither Choros-Gurkin nor Roerich

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<sup>89</sup> Elena Inanovna Rerikh (also known as Helena Roerich) and her husband Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh (Nicholas Roerich) were Russian travelers, theosophists, artists and public figures. They influenced the esoteric and philosophic thought in Russia and worldwide immensely, through their teachings, written works and translations, pictures and expeditions to Central Asia and India in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Elena Rerikh worked closely on the ideas of the 'Secret Doctrine' of H. P. Blavatsky and developed them into a philosophic teaching of Living Ethics ('Agni Yoga'). The importance of Elena Rerikh's ideas and personality for the modern Roerich followers is hard to overestimate (just like the life and work of Helena Blavatsky's – for the modern Theosophists).

<sup>90</sup> The Altai meetings. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://altay.sibro.ru/roerich/ra19.php>

mentioned it explicitly in their letters and diaries, which is why their possible acquaintance is merely a hermeneutic speculation.

The Roerich followers whom I met in the Mul'ta, Upper Uimon and Lower Uimon villages were not so much interested in 'varieties of Buddhism' in general. They were, in most of the cases, self-oriented individuals, developing their own worldviews – all based, however, on the common root of the two Elenas' works: Elena Blavatsky and Elena Roerich. They simply did not seem to care much about both present day Burkhanism and the Burkhanism of 1904, because, just like people from Askat, they came to the Altai Mountains and settled there for different, personal reasons. I have noticed a slight scent of leniency in the way some of them are relating to the Altai people – as if the older brother mildly pats the younger one's hair. I suppose that there are two major factors that could contribute to such attitude: first, that the Russians are the 'title' nation, the religious and ethnic majority; and second, that the Roerich teaching itself has a pro-Russian stance; to be more precise, it is very much aware of the Russia's role in the coming war between the forces of light and those of the dark. This is extremely interesting to observe embedded in people's ideas, beliefs and aspirations, and this deserves to be properly studied.

Here, however, I will only mention one more 'Roerich-related' case. The Roerich Museum in Upper Uimon village, 'Cultural complex to N.K. and E.I. Roerich, Roerich heritage Museum', as it is titled on the official website, offers a story of Burkhanism<sup>91</sup> as a historical background for the picture by Nicolai Roerich, 'Oiroi – the White Burkhan envoy', created in 1925. Burkhanism is portrayed there as an eschatological and national liberation movement, and described both heroically and poetically, in a legend-resembling fashion. White (Ak) Burkhan is no one other but Buddha, as is stated on the Museum website with reference to Nikolai Roerich's quote. Thus, the Altai people were open to receiving the peace and wisdom, manifested in the form of Burkhanism; while the authorities were scared of this '*very passive form of national liberation*' and tried to interfere in any way they could: '*The local administration was confused to learn about this new faith (Burkhanism), as they called it. Peaceful followers of White Burkhan were brutally persecuted. But the instructions of Blessed Oiroi did not perish. Until now, the rider on the White Horse appears in the mountains of Altai and faith in the White Burkhan is spreading*'. The court case against Chet Chelpan which ended in his acquittal, is reported on the website as a result of a perfect job made by Chet Chelpan lawyers ('*Three Saint-Petersburg lawyers defended Chelpan in court and secured his release*'). The anti-Russian and aggressive revelations of the White Burkhan (i.e. about murdering cats) are neither mentioned nor published on the website, with a hymn-like song<sup>92</sup> in Burkhan's name shown instead.

**Shamans' and shamanists'** (also, 'pagans') grasp of Burkhanism is even harder to describe than Burkhanism-related discourse of any other group of

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<sup>91</sup> N.K. Roerich. Oiroi - the White Burkhan messenger. 1925. (n.d.). Retrieved from: [https://uymon.ru/exhibitions/artists\\_of\\_altai/roerich/45757/](https://uymon.ru/exhibitions/artists_of_altai/roerich/45757/)

<sup>92</sup> The hymn is described on the website as '*touching and sublime*'. It tells about the coming of the ruler of Altai, the White Burkhan who is compared to the Sun and Moon.

believers that we have discussed so far, primarily due to its principled dispersion and high level of personal beliefs and practices individualization. This also applies to the Roerich followers, but in this case, there is a 'Roerich International Center' organization which accumulates at least some of the 'Agni Yoga' disciples. Shamanists of Altai are currently not engaged in any organization<sup>93</sup>, even though the attempts of charismatic individuals to establish one were numerous. Therefore, the shamanists' points of view on Buddhism and Burkhanism are especially irreducible to a general trend. What I aim to do in this paragraph is to share my experiences over interviewing several people who identify themselves as shamans and shamanists (and pagans) and try to clearly present their ideas on the phenomenon of my close attention.

The clairvoyant, for the lack of a better term, an Altai woman from Mul'ta village, with whom we spoke in a group of three during my internship, called herself a shamanist, but not a shaman. She highlighted that she does not have a shaman drum, and therefore, she does not wield the power of true shamans, who, as she bitterly stated, are no more any longer – all were repressed (either killed and imprisoned or forced into hiding) during the Civil War and early Soviet times. Therefore, she considers herself as a 'shamanist', but not as a 'true shaman'<sup>94</sup>. The shaman's knowledge and traditions have faded away, reportedly, together with the shaman's powers. The idea that '*now it is not like it used to be*' is present, by the way, in the narratives of both Buddhists-Burkhanists and shamanists whom I interviewed.

The shamanist woman in Mul'ta told us that she uses stones to look for what is lost (either things or people), and previously she used beans<sup>95</sup>. She confirmed that shamans and shamanists have specializations (as I also heard from other shamanists I talked to) and confessed that her own skill brought her many troubles, so that she was even forced to stop '*looking into death*'. She used to work with the dead, finding them, especially those who had drowned, but she

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<sup>93</sup> As I was working on my thesis in 2020, the first Altai shamanist organization has been registered (Местная Религиозная Организация Шаманов "Ырыс" (Счастье) Турочакского района Республики Алтай [The Local Religious Organization of shamans "Yrys" (Happiness) of the Turochak District of the Altai Republic]. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/1210400000370>).

<sup>94</sup> It was a very interesting distinction that she articulated rather implicitly, through broad definitions and loose thoughts. 'Shamanists', according to her, are people who have certain abilities of communicating with the spirits or with the dead but not gifted enough to become 'shamans'. Also, there was a gender aspect at play: as our dialogue developed, she told us that the powerful male shaman whom she met once or twice accepted her own spiritual strength. Thus, she considered herself as a person whose abilities are compared to those of the dedicated shamans. However, she was either too modest to call herself one, or too unsure in her own agency to do that. She mentioned several times that '*men should be above the women*' and that nowadays, the gender roles are mixed, and women take too much on themselves, e.g. going into politics, etc. Albeit being a strong-willed and self-made woman herself, she explicitly disapproved such social changes.

<sup>95</sup> She said 'beans', but I am not sure whether she meant bones or actual beans. These are two absolutely different words in Russian, but a specific type of cow bones can also be called somewhat close to the Russian word for 'beans'. I have not specified it during the interview, and then it was already too late.

does not do that anymore, for the dead always *'come for their share'*, and she was afraid that they might take her life as payment. She mentioned many interesting things in her monologue about her life and shamanist devotion, but here, I will only highlight her stance regarding Burkhanism and Buddhism.

There is not much to describe, unfortunately, for she did not seem to be too interested in the 'Ak-Burkhan' community and Buddhism. She did not even know about the community, to start with. The 1904 events were also not the topic she was particularly inclined to keep up. All she told us about Burkhanists and Buddhists was that *'those are the people from the city, right?'* and that she does not belong to Buddhism. Neither did she explicitly identify herself with the Ak-Jan: being asked about the Ak-Jan, she reacted rather vaguely. It is not telling whether she deliberately avoided being associated with this religious group or whether she did not know much about it or did not care to explain her attitude. Overall, she was more interested to talk about her own encounters with shamanism and her experiences of looking into the lost things (she described it on a very material, bodily level – as someone whispers into her ears and presses on her shoulders from the back), as well as about the current state of Altai culture and shaman powers (mentioning the Ukok princess and shamans healing high rank politicians, among other things). I am sure that I could have learned more, if only I could talk to her at least twice of three times, but we managed to pay her only a single visit. Her narrative seemed quite smooth at first, and she immediately started to talk about her life even without us asking for it properly, so it was either that she saw our intentions, or that she has already met scholars coming to the village and talked to them before.

The Gorno-Altai city shamans whom I visited were quite different from the shamanist in Mul'ta - both in the manner of speech and in their arsenal of practices. One of them, a man, was recommended to me by the Ak-Burkhan community (Aram Lama mentioned several times that this shaman *'sees'*, thus bestowing his support and trust on him), and I managed to get an appointment with him only through my acquaintances from the community. He received visitors in his house, but we had to take his wife from the local school where she works because the shaman has physical problems with speech, and it was her who could *'translate'* what he meant. She did not help me, however, to understand him better even though she tried; I suspect that she was not always in line with his narrative herself.

The shaman was aware of who I am and why I came, but he decided to start with *'seeing'* me, as if I were a visitor who came for his special power. I was not too happy about it, but I agreed, and it turned out to be very worthwhile – as long as I could not always understand what he meant with his speech, I could at least note his actions. In the process of *'seeing'* me he used both shamanist (also early-Burkhanist) practices and Buddhist ones, adopted from the Ak-Burkhan community (I know that it was Aram Lama who gave the shaman several objects of Buddhist common practice). He gave me a branch of archyn and asked to rub it a bit in my hands, he then looked closely at the bubbles of air in the vodka bottle I took with me and later poured a bit of vodka right on the floor. The full bottle was then granted to the local alcoholic addict, who came

shortly and quickly walked away, seemingly overjoyed with the fact of such beneficial cooperation.

Then, after asking me several questions, which I understood only through some intuition, he lightened up the incense burners and sprinkled a bit of rice around me, taken from a Buddhist mandala on the table. He agreed to answer my questions after having looked at me in this spiritual way, and we have talked for about two hours. He specializes in '*finding the right people, finding shamans*', and he has already taught at least two shamans as his disciples. He himself was helped on his way of becoming a practicing shaman by a Russian woman, who taught him how to deal with the shaman illness and how to communicate with the dead. His description of the shaman illness was not the same as the description of the shamanist woman from Mul'ta. He was very hard to understand, but I managed to make out that he had visions of a naked woman and he felt very bad, almost died. The shamanist from Mul'ta described an old man coming to her dreams and telling her stories about the past and lashing her hands for not practicing her skill and not helping people.

He explained, that Burkhan is the same as the White Tara, and that aspects of Buddha and Burkhanist gods are the same (by the latter, he might have meant Uch-Kurbustan or Erlic and Ulgen, but I am not entirely sure as it was very difficult to understand him talking). Therefore, he uses both practices in his communication with the spirits, even though he sees spirits all by himself, without any external ritualistic assistance. He described seeing both spirits of the mountains and the soul of the deceased, as I looked at one of the shelves in his counter, where a small Buddhist altar to the White Tara was arranged. After the visit, the shaman and his wife nodded me to that altar, answering my mumbling on where I can leave a token of my gratitude for their time.

Such peculiar combination of shamanism and Buddhism is actually a common thing: one of the Lamas, for example, does not hide that he could predict death and see spirits as a child. He is not so specific about the present, but from what I managed to understand, he learned to cope with his gift through Buddhist training, while the gift itself is here to stay.

The female shaman was someone completely different. She is much younger – in her 30s (while the male shaman is 50 or even 60), and she rents an office for her practice, with a registered sole proprietorship company. I arranged a meeting with her via WhatsApp, and her phone number was given to me by a female Altai scholar, who told me that '*this woman I know personally, we have common relatives*'. I came to the office of the city shaman in time and waited for her for five or ten minutes. She came with a cup of coffee in her hands, apparently, having grabbed it on the street, on her way.

Once again, as we seated and I introduced myself, she suggested to '*look at me*' first, and then proceed with my questions. Unlike the two shamans whose style of work I described above, she used neither stones nor any Buddhist sacred objects. She only took my hand, holding and tapping it a special way, as if measuring my pulse through my finger, and asked spirits of the deceased about me, then listened for a very short period of time. She then stopped holding my

hand and started to quickly write things in the notebook, already lying prepared on her table. She told me some things about my life and relationships (even though I never asked her about any of that), and then, just like with the male shaman, we started to talk.

Interestingly, the female shaman has also 'looked' into my questions about Buddhism, shamanism and Burkhanism – she asked the spirits to answer my questions. She only just started to answer my first question on whether shamanism and Burkhanism are the same or are different, on her own, with her own words, but abruptly stopped, seemingly confused, and asked me to start anew – with the spirit's assistance. She took my hand just like she did before, and asked the spirits, first, '*Can you tell us, what is Burkhanism?*', and after that, '*Can you tell us about shamanism?*'.

Answering the question of Burkhanism (or, rather, transmitting the information that the spirits provided her with), she described a stooping middle-aged man with a hat pulled down over his eyes; the man was neither alive nor dead (*'he is not to be found among the living, and yet – there he stands and talks'* (standing in the front, as a living soul, - my note). His body died 70 or 150 years ago. That man created this religion (Burkhanism) on his own: he wrote, the Lamas then picked up on his writings (*'It is a book religion, it is about texts and books'*). He did not have relations with women and did not eat meat, and *'became light and started to ascend, horizontally, with his belly up'*. At the end, the shaman said that this man *'tells you to write about his religion, you will succeed – it will spread all over the world, like flower petals. You should look for him in the temple, with the red spinning drums. There he will be. You will feel warmth – this is how you will understand that he is there'*.

The spirit that came to answer the question about shamanism was a different one. The shaman described seeing a ritual – the fire and figures around the fire, dancing in the night (*'dances like those that the Indians do'*, - she shows me, shaking her shoulders). These dancing figures were calling for a spirit of nature, and eventually, he appears, and comes closer. Suddenly, the shaman signed, as if it was too difficult for her to continue and grabbed a small metal amulet (an animal skull with horns)<sup>96</sup> from the pen holder in front of her. She put the amulet in front of her and continued, breathing normally: *'This is the spirit of nature, the owner of Altai. He watches over everything here'*. At the end of the seance, the shaman repeats what she said earlier, a bit monotonous, as if she was deciphering something, directly shown to her. *'Burkhanism is close to Lamaism, to the texts in the Lamaist language<sup>97</sup>; that religion was invented by men. And shamanism is like what she does – rituals, communicating with the spirits of nature'*.

The spirits the shaman communicated with during my session were unidentified (she told me the names of two dead people who came to tell her

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<sup>96</sup> I call it an amulet, because I do not know its true role in her shamanist practice. It could have been the totem of her guarding spirit, or a personal charm – we cannot know.

<sup>97</sup> I translate her words as close to their original meaning as I possibly can. The language she told me about was neither 'Tibetan' nor 'Mongolian', but 'Lamaist'.

about me, but she could not name the spirits whom she was asking the questions about Burkhanism and Shamanism). According to her, the spirits are drawn to her, depending on the question: for example, when asked to find the whereabouts of a lost person, she invokes his soul to find the body (either living and breathing, or not); when she asks some abstract question, just like in my case, any spirit can respond to it, from the beings like the Altai Princess (the Ukok Princess) to the human souls of the dead and the living. She never sees them, only hears, and knows/feels, how they look like. The spirits of the dead stand behind her and talk, the spirits of the living stand in front of her her, but she does not see them, anyway. She added that those shamans who claim to have seen a spirit are nothing more but charlatans.

While we talked, and she called for the spirits' assistance, I had a chance to look around the room. It was a typical office of a small company or a person doing business on their own, – a room in one of those buildings that house lots of rooms-offices like that one. A simple wooden table, accompanied with two office chairs, occupied the space near the window. A narrow bookshelf was half-filled with paper folders and books. The only two elements that seemed a little bit alien to that office style were a printed picture of a woman with a tiger on the wall, and a thick carpet on the floor. On the table, there were office supplies: a common black pen holder filled with paper clips of different sizes, pencils and pens, and a stack of copybooks, comfortably arranged to be quickly taken if needed.

That woman was a modern city shaman. Nevertheless, she was not too embedded into the contemporary esoteric narrative, as she did not communicate in terms of popular esoteric definitions such as 'mind forms' or 'energetic fields'. On the other hand, neither did she went too much into the shaman lore and spirit helpers. According to her, every person can be a shaman, it is just that some have this connection to the spirit world, and some do not – yet. This connection can be nourished and grown in every person, either Altai or Russian, and it is reachable through different paths. She added that if she used the shaman practices as '*kamlanie*' (the ritual with a shaman drum) she would have acquired this connection as well, albeit of a different way.

Shamanism and Burkhanism coexist in the contemporary Altai Republic in a wide variety of intermingled forms. Altai shamanism with its current weak extent of institutionalisation is, in fact, a 'melting pot' of individual practitioners who call themselves 'shamans' or 'shamanists'. These people use different practices (from Buddhist mantras to early Burkhanist rituals and modern esoteric spells), and their personal understandings on Burkhanism/Buddhism are extremely difficult to summarise.

The Ak-Burkhan community are not the only ones who are using Altai folklore to strengthen their legitimization story. The **Ak-Jaŋ group**, although legally forbidden, have their own opinion on the history of Buddhism and Burkhanism in the region, and they use charismatic mystical revelations as a

key to authenticate their claims (Khvastunova, 2018). The situation is complicated by the fact that some of the Ak-Burkhan Lamas are friends, relatives or neighbors of those practicing Ak-Jaŋ, and religious and historical disputes are often burdened with personal relationships (or the other way around). One of my respondents whose relatives live in the village where the Ak-Jaŋ community used to be quite strong, told me: *'You need to talk to everyone if you wish to understand. And to talk justly, not judging people beforehand'*.

Unfortunately, during my fieldwork I have not been able to reach the central and southern parts of the region, where most of the Ak-Jaŋ followers are reported to be gathering. Theoretically, it might have been possible to find them in the north of the Altai Republic, in the capital or the villages nearby, but that would require much more time than I had in my disposal, because the Ak-Jaŋ are not known to be actively advertising their presence<sup>98</sup>. Due to these circumstances, my sources of information about the Ak-Jaŋ were limited to the anthropological articles (Doronin, 2015; Khvastunova, 2018, 2019a, 2019b) and online resources (news media and government websites<sup>99</sup>, the 'Altai Amadu' newspaper website (<https://amadualtai.wordpress.com>), the Ak-Jaŋ public page in the VKontakte social network (<https://vk.com/club47031643>) and other Ak-Jaŋ-oriented online resources<sup>100</sup>). The 'Altai Amadu' newspaper website and the Ak-Jaŋ public page are now blocked in Russia, and while the 'Altai Amadu' website is still accessible in the Netherlands and through VPN services, the Ak-Jaŋ public page is completely unavailable. It limits the scope of my research significantly, as now I have at my disposal only those few posts and articles that I copied from the Ak-Jaŋ public page while it was publicly available.

The ideas of the Altai national faith and the Ak-Jaŋ were in the air already in the 1990-s, and the first well-known group under that name was established by Sergei Kynyeu in 1997 (Halemba, 2003). The Ak-Jaŋ movement that is discussed here is an offspring, so to speak, of the Ak-Jaŋ-inspired community by Sergey Kynyeu (an Altai writer, journalist and public figure; also known as Akai Kine [Акай Кине])<sup>101</sup>. In 2003-2004, his structure began to split into

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<sup>98</sup> The Ak-Jaŋ group did not receive state registration and therefore is not permitted to spread its teachings. The Ak-Jaŋ followers who tried attracting new members in 2018 got fined. (Source: Ak-Jaŋ missionaries fined for public proselytising. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/93249>). There might have been other cases like that, but this is the one I have been able to find in the open sources.

<sup>99</sup> Please see the detailed description of the media sources in the 'Media resources and official statements' paragraph.

<sup>100</sup> Altai Dulles Plan. Part 2. Nipponzan Mehoji. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://v-gornom.ru/lenty/kholodnyj-belok/67813-altajskij-plan-dallesa-chast-2-nippondzan-mekhodzi>

<sup>101</sup> As I briefly sketched in the first chapter, Sergei Kynyeu was among the first encouragers of the Altai national faith (re)construction. He started his religious endeavours in the late 1990s: in 1995, he reported a visit of the *'Spirit of Altai'* that called upon him to *'save the Altai people'*. Around this time Kynyeu also started the formation of the Ak-Jaŋ community and called himself 'Akai Kine' [Акай Кине / 'The White Ruler', in Altai]. From 1995 to 2004 Akai Kine was trying to incorporate what he called 'Altai national beliefs' into the system of state-confessional relations. In other words, his ambitions were to develop and institutionalise the Ak-Jaŋ faith, which he considered mainly in terms of shamanism and the 1904 Burkhanism. Initially, his vision started to spread rather quickly, but due to the personal and political reasons

individual practitioners and smaller groups guided by charismatic leaders. The group led by Vasilii Chekurashev was among the latter.

Vasilii Chekurashev used to be Sergei Kynyev's associate<sup>102</sup> within the Ak-Jaŋ movement up to 2004, when they parted ways: Chekurashev became the leader of the 'Karakol Initiative group "Ak Tyang" group, while Akai Kine created his own religious centre "Kin Altai" (Faustova, 2021). It is not entirely clear whether the 'Karakol Initiative group' was founded by Chekurashev and Kine together or was it the idea of either one of them (or somebody else), because almost nothing is written about Chekurashev's activities before the 2004. Having studied a variety of newspaper articles and talked to the people in the Ak-Burkhan temple who remembered those days, I suppose that the 'Karakol Initiative group' was founded around 2000, most likely by Vasilii Chekurashev, and included primarily the Onguday district locals who united in 1991 to stop excavations in the Karakol valley<sup>103</sup>. However, this is nothing but an educated guess of mine that should be verified though the interviews with Akai Kine and other (current and former) members of the 'Karakol Initiative group' and the Ak-Jaŋ community.

What is known for certain is that Vasilii Chekurashev's 'Karakol Initiative group "Ak Tyang"' started in the Ongudai district of the Altai Republic, in the villages of the Karakol valley. Later, Chekurashev's version of Ak-Jaŋ found its way to the south (Kosh-Agachskii district)<sup>104</sup> and to the west (Ust-Kanskii and Shebalinskii districts) (Khazov-Cassia, Soloviev & Pakhomov, 2021) of the Altai Republic. The community tried to get the official registration twice (to be registered as a religious organisation – a procedure described in the first paragraph of this chapter), but both times they were unsuccessful<sup>105</sup>. The expert commission's resolution was negative due to the nationalistic ideas expressed in

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he lost most of his influence by the 2004. However, he is still leading the Turkic religious centre "Kin Altai" that he established in 2004 and doing shaman ceremonies (Faustova, 2021).

<sup>102</sup> I do not know, unfortunately, how closely did they work together. My suggestion based on the information from the open sources is that Chekurashev and Kynyev were united at least by the desire to prevent archeologists of Novosibirsk (a big Russian city in Siberia) from excavating the banks of Soora river (Karakol valley, Ongudai district). As a result, in 1991, archaeologists were forced to leave the Karakol valley. Ironically, they started to dig the Ukok plateau instead, and soon made the most prominent archaeological breakthrough of that decade – the well-preserved mummy of the "Ukok Princess".

Sources: Khazov-Cassia, Soloviev & Pakhomov, 2021; Gornyi Altai: punished for faith. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://fedpress.ru/article/2203105>; Gornyi Altai and the story of Ukok. (2012). Retrieved from: [https://fedpress.ru/news/polit\\_vlast/reviews/gornyi-altai-pytaetsya-usvoit-ukok-istorii](https://fedpress.ru/news/polit_vlast/reviews/gornyi-altai-pytaetsya-usvoit-ukok-istorii)

<sup>103</sup> Gornyi Altai: punished for faith. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://fedpress.ru/article/2203105>

<sup>104</sup> Gornyi Altai: "Ak-Tyan" against datsans. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://zolord.ru/news/689>

<sup>105</sup> Gornyi Altai: punished for faith. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://fedpress.ru/article/2203105>

their registry papers and the overall ambiguity of how they described their faith<sup>106</sup>.

Such variability is not too surprising given a rather high level of individual creative incorporation into the Ak-Jañ movement development exercised by Vasilii Chekurashev's disciples. Overall, Vasilii Chekurashev's understanding of the Ak-Jañ is quite different from the one propagated by Sergey Kynyev, which is why the 'Karakol Initiative group' cannot be considered as a direct descendant of Kynyev's Ak-Jañ community. Characterized in one sentence, it could be called an esoteric movement leaning towards mysticism and messianic moods.

According to the Karakol Ak-Jañ followers, the Messiah has already come and started his teachings, and this is Vasilii Chekurashev himself. In the texts written by his followers, Chekurashev is referred to as a *'teacher'*, as a *'one and only person in the world who can see sacred places'*, as a *'missionary of the Supreme Creator'*, who was sent to us in the third millennium, *'just as Mohammed was sent in the second, and Christ – in the first'* (Khvastunova, 2019b). In the same paper (2019b) Khvastunova also points out that although Chekurashev's alleged abilities, as they are described by his visitors, bear a strong resemblance to the Altai shaman powers, he is not regarded as one by the members of the Karakol Ak-Jañ community.

Overall, the Ak-Jañ disciples<sup>107</sup> do not explicitly associate themselves with any particular stream of existing religious practices. Their self-identification as the 'White Faith' (Ak-Jañ) followers indicates a connection to Burkhanism (historically, the 1904 Burkhanism was called the 'White Faith' by the Altai). However, the language of their prophetic texts is also rich in the Roerich and Blavatsky theosophic references: *'the fire age'*, *'the Energy system, the Energy balance'*, *'the salvation of the people of the sixth race'*, etc. (Khvastunova, 2018, 2019b). The rank system within the community is constructed on the basis of the elements of the 1904 Burkhanism hierarchy (*'jarlykchi'*) as well as the Altai national titles given to the people with abilities and used by both modern shamanists and Burkhanists (*'neme biler kizhi'*) (Khvastunova, 2018). Likewise, the divine source of revelations is called the 'Altai Kudai' (literally, 'the God of Altai/the Altai Master'), sometimes 'Byrkan' (another version of 'Burkhan'), but the textual analysis of the revelations clearly shows the dominance of the theosophic terminology in the Ak-Jañ prophetic discourse (Khvastunova, 2018).

The aforementioned revelations (prophetic messages) are a special type of communication of the Ak-Jañ members with the higher power. The messages are

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<sup>106</sup> I managed to find only one expert report on the 'Altai Dyan' organisation registration (State religious expertise conclusions. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://to02.minjust.gov.ru/ru/ekspertnye-zaklyucheniya-po-provedeniyu-gosudarstvennoy-religiovedcheskoy-ekspertizy>). It is analysed in the 'Altai authorities – on Burkhanism' paragraph of this chapter.

<sup>107</sup> Here and further by the Ak-Jañ community I mean only the Karakol Initiative group led by Vasilii Chekurashev, not Akai Kine's 'Kin Altai' organisation and not individual shamanist practitioners attributing their activities (or part of them) to the 'White Faith' (for example, such as the Gorno-Altai city shaman Zinaida Tyrysova).

called ‘diktovki’ [ДИКТОВКИ/’dictations’]<sup>108</sup> and are only received by the Ak-Jaŋ women. The women who receive the divine<sup>109</sup> messages get them unexpectedly (for example, ‘diktovka’ might come at night), sometimes in an unknown language<sup>110</sup> or in a form of a draing (Doronin, 2015) and write them down upon receiving or express in drawings or weaving (Doronin, 2015; Khvastunova, 2018). Later, they spread these messages through handwritten notes, printed texts, books<sup>111</sup>, leaflets and media articles<sup>112</sup>. The names of women who received the divine messages are mostly known (some preferred to stay anonymous): they are Altai by birth, some of them started to get messages at the beginning of 2000s or later and then stopped, some continue this communication up to the present moment<sup>113</sup>.

This is what I meant by the ‘individual creative incorporation’: despite Chekurashev’s undoubtedly high authority and prestigious position within the community, he is not the one (or, at least, not the only one) who is able to communicate with the divine. Judging by the differences in the revelation texts recorded by different women, it seems safe to suggest that these texts are not always designed with the same ideas in mind. Such a flat structure might potentially offer a certain degree of freedom in the Ak-Jaŋ teaching further development. On the other hand, the role of the charismatic leader (Vasilii Chekurashev) presupposes a much more active participation in the communication process within the community: he is the one who ‘sees’, ‘speaks bare truth’, ‘reads every text in Amadu Altai before publication’ (Khvastunova,

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<sup>108</sup> This is a special name given to this phenomenon by its receivers. The word ‘diktovka’ is spoken Russian and it means ‘dictation’ – receiving information, usually by ear, and writing it into a text.

<sup>109</sup> It is not really accurate to speak of the ‘divine’ here, because while some of these messages are reported to be received from Altai Kudai (a god-like figure), the others are said to be originating from the ‘Higher Mind’ or “Cosmic Forces”. So, I am using the word ‘divine’ in a generalised rather than in its literal meaning.

<sup>110</sup> The first possible line of influence coming to mind is, of course, the evangelical ‘speaking in tongues’. Evangelicals are present in the Altai Republic, although mainly in the central and north districts. However, in the academic literature dedicated to the Ak-Jaŋ, there is no any indication on the possibility of the Evangelical influence on the Ak-Jaŋ group. There are other hypothesis expressed: for example, the one by Doronin and Ekeev. Dmintrii Doronin (2015) cites another Altai studies scholar Nicolai Ekeev and argues that most likely, the origins of these ‘divine messages’ lie both in the Altai ‘heaven letters’ of 1920-1930 and in the early Burkhanist texts that were believed to be coming from the supernatural beings.

<sup>111</sup> The book *Алтай Кудайдың бичектеру [Letters of Altai Kudai, transl. from Altai]*. (2012), contains 22 "letters" recorded by O.R. Oynotkinova, A.V. Tokoekova and D.I. Almasheva. (Doronin, 2015).

<sup>112</sup> *Амаду Алтай* [‘Amadu Altai’] newspaper website (<https://amadualtai.wordpress.com/>); *ЖАҢЫ АЛТАЙ ДВИЖЕНИЕ* [“JAŊY ALTAI” – MOVEMENT], the Ak-Jaŋ oriented public page in the Vkontakte social network (<https://vk.com/club47031643>).

<sup>113</sup> There is no telling why ‘diktovki’ were received by these particular women and not the others. The academic literature on the Ak-Jan group is rather scarce, and I have not met any records on this matter yet. Khvastunova (2019) briefly mentions that at the very beginning of the Ak-Jaŋ community formation, there were four women receiving ‘divine messages’, then more joined their circle, and that ‘receiving *’diktovki’* is a basic thing in the Ak-Jaŋ group’. However, I cannot know for sure from the context, whether she meant that getting such messages is ‘basic’/’important’ or whether it should be read as ‘basic’/’widespread’, instead.

2019b). According to his followers, he is the one who is sent; while the revelation recipients are merely the ones who receive. The nature of the recorded messages from the higher mind/godlike being empowers the receivers, but also alienates them from their own agency (Khvastunova, 2019b).

Such a detailed immersion into the Karakol group religious specifics is helpful in explaining main points of their teachings. The Ak-Jaŋ ideas summarized by Khvastunova (2019a) can be briefly described as follows:

1. Prohibiting the Buddhist agenda in the region (both the Ak-Burkhan and the Lotus Sutra communities);
2. Spreading the 'true faith' through the media resources published by the Ak-Jaŋ followers;
3. Stopping Chaga-Bairam celebration and introduce Altai traditional holidays instead;
4. Preventing building Christian temples and crosses in the Altai Republic;
5. Adopting a law-enforced protection for the sacred territories in the Altai Mountains;
6. Making Altai language compulsory in schools and universities of the Altai Republic.

As we can see, the Karakol community is strongly against venerating other religions by the Altai dwellers. It is no coincidence that the first place in the list is taken by Buddhism – anti-Buddhist polemics is a significant share of the Ak-Jaŋ discourse. The major line of their argumentation is formed around the idea that Buddhism came to the Altai Republic from the foreign countries (namely, from Japan, through the Lotus Sutra community branch), and spreads as a totalitarian terroristic sect to gain control over the minds of the Altai peoples<sup>114</sup>. These accusations are of an immediate concern by the Ak-Burkhan community, because the Ak-Jaŋ perceive it as a purely Buddhist organization (regardless on the fact that they accept Burkhan as a deity in their own religious texts) and as a direct conductor of the Japanese/American extremist influence<sup>115</sup>. In their articles on this matter the Ak-Jaŋ appeal, among other things, to the Russian anti-extremist legislation and President Putin's press-releases on the anti-terrorist policy in the country.

Considering everything written above, the mutual tensions between the Ak-Burkhan and the Ak-Jaŋ communities do not come as a surprising course of

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<sup>114</sup> Altai Dulles Plan. Part 2. Nipponzan Mehoji. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://v-gornom.ru/lenty/kholodnyj-belok/67813-altajskij-plan-dallesa-chast-2-nippondzan-mekhodzi>; Chamchiev, (n.d.). The second source is no longer available, but I have it saved in a text file.

<sup>115</sup> There are several articles expressing this idea, but most of them are now blocked on the territory of the Russian Federation. The video on YouTube is, however, still available (most likely, not for long):

"Ak Burkhan" - branch of the International Terrorist organization "Nippodzan Mehoji" by Junsei Teresawa. (2018). YouTube. Retrieved July 22, 2021, from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcbnvfS7kwA&ab\\_channel=J%D0%90%D0%9D%D0%AB%D0%90%D0%9B%D0%A2%D0%90%D0%99%D0%94%D0%92%D0%98%D0%96%D0%95%D0%9D%D0%98%D0%95](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcbnvfS7kwA&ab_channel=J%D0%90%D0%9D%D0%AB%D0%90%D0%9B%D0%A2%D0%90%D0%99%D0%94%D0%92%D0%98%D0%96%D0%95%D0%9D%D0%98%D0%95)

events. These tensions are also supported by actions from both sides of the conflict: one of the most heated topics concerning Burkhanism/Buddhism and the Ak-Jarj in the media has been their two decades-long confrontation. In 2006, the Ak-Jarj affiliated individuals broke into the local museum and tried to destroy the Buddhist mandala which was exhibited there<sup>116</sup>. In 2010-2012 and 2015, several 'Altai Amadu' articles were deemed extremist for sowing religious hatred and nationalistic enmity towards Buddhism and Buryats<sup>117</sup>. In 2013, the former editor of 'Altai Amadu' was sentenced to community services for vandalism – he broke down the Orthodox Christian cross<sup>118</sup>. The 'Amadu Altai' authors also published a public appeal to the Russian President in 2015, asking to stop Buddhist influence and prohibit the Buddhist organisations (also the Ak-Burkhan organisation)<sup>119</sup>. The Altai Republic Prosecutor office instigated proceedings but the court decision on the case was negative – the text of the public appeal was not deemed extremist.

These series of actions drawing legal attention to the Karakol Initiative group resulted in the official ban of the community public practise. In December 2018, Chekurashev's movement was banned by the court for propagating "*the ideas of the superiority of the Altai nation and their beliefs over other nationalities and religions*", as stated in the court decision<sup>120</sup>. In February 2019, it was added to the Russian Federal List of Extremist Organizations<sup>121</sup>. This decision did not

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<sup>116</sup> In Altai, they are looking for those burned at the "House of the Sun". (2012). Retrieved from: <https://fedpress.ru/news/society/reviews/na-altae-ishchut-obzhegshikhsya-na-dome-solntsa>

<sup>117</sup> Gornyi Altai: "Ak-Tyan" against datsans. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://zolord.ru/news/689>

<sup>118</sup> Altai extremist association accounts blocked. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://altapress.ru/zhizn/story/na-altae-zablokirovali-scheta-ekstremistskomu-objedineniyu-chi-posledovately-uchastvovali-v-krestopovale-238045>

<sup>119</sup> Altai peoples' appeal to the Russian President is not regarded as extremist. (2016). Retrieved from: [https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/harassment-protection/2016/01/d33650/;](https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/harassment-protection/2016/01/d33650/)

The court refused to recognize the Altai believers' appeal to Putin as extremist. (2016). Retrieved from: <https://altapress.ru/proisshestviya/story/sud-otkazalsya-priznavat-ekstremistskim-obrashchenie-k-putinu-altayskih-veruyushchih-171917>

<sup>120</sup> Gornyi Altai: "Ak-Tyan" against datsans. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://zolord.ru/news/689>

<sup>121</sup> Faustova, M. (2021). Whose spirit dominates Altai. Retrieved from: [https://www.ng.ru/ng\\_religii/2021-03-02/9\\_503\\_altai.html](https://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2021-03-02/9_503_altai.html)

The court's decision on the Ak-Jarj case in 2019 was mentioned in many local and federal newspapers:

The Ministry of Justice has banned the organization promoting the "white faith" in Altai. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3894406>; In the Altai Republic, the court banned the activities of the Ak Tyan movement. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/refusal/2018/12/d40429/>; The banned organizations list extended by the Ministry of Justice. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/6144808>; Altai religious organization officially called extremist. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://politsib.ru/news/29461-altajskaa-religioznaa-organizacia-oficialno-priznana-ekstremistskoj>; The Ministry of Justice included Ak-Tyan to the banned organizations' list. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/100208>

prohibit the freedom of individual faith and practise<sup>122</sup>, but severely limited their opportunities for proselytising.

The Ak-Burkhan Buddhists took the ban on the Karakol group favourably – at least, such were the reminiscences of the Lamas whom I spoke with in the temple. This is hardly surprising, given the accusations in terrorism that were thrown at the Ak-Burkhan community in the ‘Altai Amadu’ newspaper articles written by the Ak-Jaŋ followers. Overall, Buddhists and the city intellectual circles look at the Karakol gatherings askance (Doronin, 2015; Khvastunova, 2019a), and according to my own observations, also with a noticeable shred of condescension. The Ak-Burkhan Lamas, for example, reassured me in their peaceful intentions no matter of the possible harm they might suffer from the ‘lost’ (the Ak-Jaŋ), - and then they added: ‘*No one shall doubt our ability to protect ourselves when needed, of course*’. When asked to clarify they explained that by ‘protection’ they mostly mean talking and seeking justice in law. Thus, very recently (in December 2020) they sued the Ak-Jaŋ for their video<sup>123</sup> that accuses the Ak-Burkhan community and the Lotus Sutra Buddhism in terrorist acts and intentions.

## Chapter conclusion

In the second chapter, I have investigated three groups of discourse about Burkhanism: (1) the media resources and official government statements; (2) the academic community; (3) the other religious groups (Karma Kagyu, the Roerich followers, Ak-Jaŋ, shamanists, the Orthodox Church).

There is at least one aspect that unites these different fields of discourse: the close relation to power and authority. Media influence the public agenda by ‘legitimizing’ the topics worth being shared with the wide audience, the academic community gives names to things and events and lights them up with its authoritative aura, and religious communities, in turn, have power over the opinions of their followers. Governmental acts (court decisions, etc.) form the fabric of social interaction by enforcing rules and frameworks. Thus, the discourse analysis of Burkhanism is a story of social relations, interests, conflicts, hierarchy, and power.

In the media, both local and federal, Burkhanism is mentioned mainly for high-profile news stories, such as the Ak-Jaŋ/Ak-Burkhan disputes and the visits of Buddhist lamas. It is usually either explained to the readers as an Altai religious tradition, or as a local type of Buddhism. The Ak-Burkhan community is the one that is most often related to the Altai Burkhanism. The local authorities, on the other hand, seem to avoid discussing religion in general. However, the Ak-Burkhan community has a seat in the Coordination Council for

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<sup>122</sup> Gornyi Altai: punished for faith. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://fedpress.ru/article/2203105>

<sup>123</sup> Altai Buddhists decided to sue pagans for libel. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/741323>

national and religious associations of the Altai Republic, acting as a representative of the Altai Buddhists.

Throughout the 20th century, Burkhanism has been defined differently by the scholars, thinkers, and artists of the Russian Empire and of the Soviet Union. Contemporary academic discourse on Burkhanism consists of the two major groups: Ludmila Sherstova and the followers of her ideas, and Andrei Znamenskii and the scholars who share his line of argumentation. The aspects in which these two groups disagree with each other mainly concern the role of Burkhanism in the ethnic self-identification, both contemporary and historical, and Burkhanism's origins. Yet another area of academic ambiguity in the Altai studies is the definition of contemporary Burkhanism, as there are several Altai religious groups that provide scholars with the reasons to be considered as Burkhanist. As shown in the first chapter, the most prominent of these groups are the Ak-Jaŋ and the Ak-Burkhan communities.

The Ak-Jaŋ is translated as the 'White Faith', which immediately refers to the 1904 Burkhanism that spread under the same name. Nevertheless, there are no records of the contemporary Ak-Jaŋ followers appealing to the Tereng events of 1904. Neither are they using Burkhanism as a term. Their attitude to the 'White faith' is not a revival attempt but its evolution in esoteric and mystical directions. The Ak-Jaŋ and the Ak-Burkhan have a long history of difficult relationships, as the Ak-Jaŋ is opposed to Altai Buddhism in general, and the Ak-Burkhan group in particular.

The members of another Buddhist school in the Altai Republic, the Karma Kagyu Buddhism, seem to be generally indifferent both to the Ak-Burkhan temple and the history of Burkhanism in the region. The Orthodox Christian Church of Altai, on the other hand, considers the moods of the Altai and their history, while trying to strengthen its influence in the Altai Republic while also taking into account the local culture and customs, both the Altai and the Old Believers in origin.

It is impossible to discuss the integral discourse of Burkhanism among the Altai shamans and shamanists because most of the times, they are individual practitioners, not engaged into any kind of an institutionalised hierarchy. The shamans I met during my fieldwork trips had different attitudes towards Burkhanism: one of them used Buddhist sutras and imaginary in his practise and was connected to the Ak-Burkhan temple; the other did not use any paraphernalia at all and considered Burkhanism to be another kind of religious conviction, different from her own.

### 3 The Ak-Burkhan community

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The Ak-Burkhan temple, 2 am

It is quiet and dark. A small grey mouse peeps and wiggles its whiskers, puzzled, whether to go to the right, to the alluring smell of fresh cookies, or to the left, to the familiar and reliable smell of rice.

Some inches above, several people are having a heated conversation over the mouse's fate.

- *'I say! It is absurd to let mice live and fat; they will destroy all the crops as they always do!'*, - the middle-aged woman who came for a massage session insists.
- *'But in Buddhism, no one may cause suffering, let alone kill anyone. Or anything. Let the mouse live!'* - one of Lamas tells her. The other one is busy with the massage practise.
- *'Well, it gets in the way all the time! And what if the rodents destroy all the fields, then what?'* - another woman intervenes. The argument continues until their therapy comes to an end and they leave in the winter night.

The little grey mouse still lives in the datsan, and the Lamas still do not hide their food - apparently, they came to an unspoken understanding.

#### Chapter overview

While the previous two chapters discuss Burkhanism of the past (Chapter 1, Burkhanism of Altai: historical overview) and discourse of Burkhanism from the outsider perspective (Chapter 2, Discourse of Burkhanism in the Altai Republic), this chapter is focused on accumulating and transmitting my experiences about Burkhanism, gathered from the insider sources.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the past and present of the Ak-Burkhan community. One might say that it is a quintessence of my fieldwork experience, for I spent most of my time in the Altai Republic with the members of the Ak-Burkhan community: talking to them, walking around the city; closely watching their everyday activities and partaking in the celebrations and rituals.

I will start with the history of the community: it has already been mentioned in the first chapter, but only as a short sketch. Here, I am going to provide more details on the communities' early years and development over time, relying on the information gained from the open sources (among others, the community public webpage and the book written by the Ak-Burkhan female Lama) and from the talks with my interlocutors. Next, I will proceed to explain

the everyday routine of the Ak-Burkhan temple Lamas that I observed during my fieldwork, thus highlighting the role of Burkhanism in communities' spiritual (and mundane) activities.

The chapter is concluded with the analysis of the Burkhanist discourse *within* the Ak-Burkhan community. The final paragraph of the third chapter accumulates the information on the insider perspective on Burkhanism while also referring to the material of the second chapter (the discourse of Burkhanism). In order to distinguish between the community members' reactions towards the 1904 Burkhanism and its contemporary apprehension, I have divided the last paragraph of this chapter into two parts: the 'Burkhanism of the past' and the 'Burkhanism of the present', accordingly.

*Related materials:*

- *Appendix 1.* Buddhist organizations of the Altai Republic, 2021.
- *Appendix 3.* Social network accounts of the Ak-Burkhan and Ak-Jaq related religious groups.
- *Appendix 4.* The list of the Ak-Burkhan community founders.
- *Appendix 5.* The Ak-Burkhan community: personalities.
- *Appendix 6 / Photos 1-13.*

## History

Despite the temple building's attractive location (almost in the center of the capital of the Republic - an achievement that no other Buddhist/shamanist organization enjoys so far) and overall level of community social recognition, the history of the Ak-Burkhan community is hazy and difficult to uncover. It is neither present on the official government website<sup>124</sup>, nor described on any community-related website<sup>125</sup>. The Ak-Burkhan history is yet to be narrated by its leaders<sup>126</sup>, for community's organizational structure and ideology are still in their formation. The most reliable source on the history of the community are community members themselves, the ones who have been there at the very beginning. However, they are not so enthusiastic to share the whole story, at least, not to a complete stranger. Yet another way of locating noteworthy community path marks is searching for legal information such as community official registry entry, court cases, etc. I have done both, and thus, the history of

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<sup>124</sup> The Ak-Burkhan community is only mentioned in a small paragraph on the official government website (Religious association 'Ak-Burkhan'. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://gornoaltaysk.ru/gorod/dostoprimechatelnosti/vechnye-tsennosti/ak-burkhan/>).

<sup>125</sup> Much owing to the fact that the Ak-Burkhan community maintains its online presence in social network rather than via website.

<sup>126</sup> The history of the community is described by an active member Archyn Torbokov (Ekeev, Torbokov, 2018; Torbokov, 2015), who is a scholar in linguistics and currently works as Ak-Burkhan community representative in the V Public Chamber of the Altai Republic, and by the Buddhist nun Chechesh Toboeva (Toboeva, 2014). However, these sources are either academic or printed in small numbers, thus not being widely accessible.

the community was being revealed to me gradually and from a variety of perspectives as I grew more and more familiar to the people I talked to. In this sub-chapter, I will describe the facts that I managed to learn from the interviews and talks, and my own observations on topic. The most notable events of the Ak-Burkhan community history are listed in the Table 4, and I will elaborate on them further. Please also refer to Appendix 5 ('The Ak-Burkhan community: personalities'), which might be useful in providing the picture of the personal relationships within the community.

What is known for certain is that the community was established in 1991 by a local group of Altai intelligentsia and registered officially as a religious organization in 2002<sup>127</sup>. I have asked various people for names of those who were at the helm when the community was founded, but I was never given a precise answer – either my interlocutors did not remember that much, or they did not trust me enough. The Ak-Burkhan organization entry in the Unified State Register of Legal Entities [EGRUL (Edinyj gosudarstvennyj reestr juridicheskikh lic)/ЕГРЮЛ (Единый государственный реестр юридических лиц)] provides anyone curious enough with the names of 10 people who have officially registered the organization (please see Appendix 4), but it says little about their actual role within the community<sup>128</sup>.

Table 4. The Ak-Burkhan community's history

Date	Event
1991	The Ak-Burkhan community was founded
1990-2002	Buddhist statues and ritual objects were found in Altai Mountains (not only by the Ak-Burkhan members, but also by other people)
1992	The Ak-Burkhan organization first registered
1995	First group of <i>hubaraks</i> (disciples) was sent to Buryatia
1996-1997	Several <i>suburgans</i> (stupas) were erected in Altai
2001	10 Altai disciples finished their education as Lamas
2001	'Centralized Spiritual Administration of Buddhists of the Altai Republic' was founded, and gathered for the first time
2001	Erketen Kozhutov was elected as a first Khambo Lama of the Altai Gelug Buddhist Sangha
2002	The 'Ak-Burkhan' religious organization was registered
2002	Kuree "Ongudaisky" was registered in Onguday (existed till 2011)
2002	Kuree "Ust'-Kanskii" was registered in Ust'-Kan (existed till 2013)
2003	Mergen Shagaev was elected as Khambo Lama of the Altai Gelug Buddhist Sangha.
2007	Aram Kypchakov received the title of Geshe in Buryatia.
2007	(Aram Kypchakov is an Altai Lama of the Ak-Burkhan temple. He is currently one of the most influential figures in the community).

<sup>127</sup> Ak-Burkhan's association articles were registered in 1992 (Sadalova, 2010), but after joining the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (and also following the latest federal legislative changes) the organization had to be re-registered.

<sup>128</sup> As written in Archyn Torbokov's article about the Ak-Burkhan community (2015), 'most of the financial support was provided by people engaged in business (N.N. Kestelev, V.I. Piryaev), social and political activities (N.F. Vitovtsev, G.N. Piltin, V.K. Amurgushev, V.E. Kydyev, A.K. Bardin, V.V. Kudachin, M.Y. Epishev, I.I. Belekov)'. Despite being Ak-Burkhan recognised benefactors, only several of these people continuously participated in community's activities.

<b>2012</b>	A group of Tibetan monks from Goman Datsan of the Drepung monastery visited Altai Buddhists and created a mandala <sup>129</sup> .
<b>2012</b>	The Ak-Burkhan temple built in Gorno-Altai city.
<b>2013</b>	'Kuree "Ochyr", an Ak-Burkhan sister community in Ust'-Kan village, resumed its work. The Ak-Burkhan temple was renovated.
<b>2014</b>	Stupa of Buddha's Enlightenment was built on the Ak-Burkhan Gorno-Altai temple grounds.
<b>2014</b>	Chechesh Toboeva (an Ak-Burkhan active member and Gorno-Altai temple Shiretui Lama's wife), published her book on the history of Altai Burkhanism (Toboeva, 2014).
<b>2015</b>	The leader of the Russian Gelug Buddhism, Khambo Lama Damba Ausheev spent a week in the Altai Republic <sup>130</sup> .
<b>2016</b>	Sarymai Urchimaev died. Sarymai Urchimaev was the Shiretui Lama of the Ak-Burkhan temple and a well-known Altai artist.
<b>2018</b>	A Buddhist stupa was erected in the Kokorya village, marking the spread of the Ak-Burkhan Buddhism. The first Buddhist-Burkhanist celebration took place in Kokorya <sup>131</sup> . Chechesh Toboeva and Vera Kynova (the leader of the 'Ochyr' organization) took Buddhist monastic vows in Drepung Monastery, India.
<b>2019</b>	The 'Ak-Sumer' [the Sacred Peak] Buddhist organization was founded in Ongudai. The 'Amyr-Sanaa' Kuree [The Calm Mind temple] is being built in the Maima village. The 'Altai-Oirot' society is being developed by the Ak-Burkhan community leaders and active members.
<b>2020</b>	Chechesh Toboeva (Buddhist name Getsulma Songmo), her son Gelong Emil Kergilov (Yonten Phulzhung) and Emil Kergilov's associate Gelong Yonten Gendun started building a retreat monastery to form the first strictly monastic Sangha in Altai.

It seems that Altaichy Sanashkin and Vladimir Kydyev were at the very core of that circle of the community founders, because their names were very often remembered by the community members I spoke with. Other people from the list of the organization official registry, on the contrary, were almost never mentioned. These observations, together with the pieces of evidence found in the community-related literature<sup>132</sup>, make it safe to assume that Altaichy Sanashkin and Vladimir Kydyev both had a solid share of influence on the community during its early period, even though they might or might not have triggered its inception.

<sup>129</sup> Tibetan monks build a mandala in Gorno-Altai. (2012). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altai.info/news/16266>

<sup>130</sup> The leader of Russian Buddhists will visit Gorny Altai. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://regnum.ru/news/1960157.html>

<sup>131</sup> "Sary Boer" or "Yellow Leaf Festival" was held in Kokorya village. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://altai-info.com/novosti/16850-sary-bur-ili-prazdnik-zheltoy-listvy-proshel-v-kokore.html>

<sup>132</sup> According to Filatov (2002), the TV journalist Altaichy Sanashkin founded the first Buddhist community in the Altai Republic. This information can also be found in (Halemba, 2003).

As a TV and radio journalist, writer and well-known public figure, Altaichy Sanashkin has been a prominent actor of the Altai contemporary cultural and social scene. He has been taking part in contests, celebrations and events connected to the Altai history and traditions<sup>133</sup>. Although I did not manage to meet him in person, I have heard numerous stories and opinions about him from both my interlocutors and academy colleagues, which only serves to prove his vital contribution to the Ak-Burkhan community. Altaichy Sanashkin was a first leader of the community<sup>134</sup> and has been reported to support the Ak-Burkhan temple financially: not only did he help with the bills, but he also helped obtain a piece of land in Gorno-Altaysk city and thus secured the possibility of temple's construction. The modest piece of land that they managed to get from the city authorities (first – via rent, starting from 2016 - as a private property) inspired far-reaching plans. Sanashkin, Kydyev and others developed a project of a 'territory of Altai culture' in the capital. They wanted to create a place where Altai culture, folklore and history would be studied, cultivated and exhibited. This idea was realized only partly – only two objects (a gym for kids and grown-ups and the Ak-Burkhan temple) are now standing on the spot where the cultural center was meant to spread further, encompassing different kinds of establishments related to the Altai language and culture. These facts, alongside Altaichy Sanashkin's occupation as an Altai-language TV presenter, show that the desire to preserve and cherish Altai national culture plays an important role in his life.

Sanashkin's keen interest in Altai culture was equally shared by his colleague and Ak-Burkhan co-founder, Vladimir Emilievich Kydyev (died in 2013). Vladimir's wife, Svetlana Karamaevna Kydyeva<sup>135</sup>, is now a chairperson on 'Ene-Til'<sup>136</sup> – an organization for the rights of Altai peoples, established and

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<sup>133</sup> These pieces of information can be picked up on the website of the news channel where he works (Altaychi Sanashkin, program host and TV journalist. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://elaltay.ru/o-kompanii-gtrk-gorniy-altay-men-75/o-kompanii-gtrk-gorniy-altay-personal-men/zhurnalisty-men-107/75-o-kompanii-gtrk-gorniy-altay-sanashkin-altaichi>) and on the webpages devoted to the various events which he took part in, either as a journalist or as a judge, etc. (for example, The results of the first competition of environmental journalism "Altai - Golden Mountains" have been summed up in Altai-Sayan. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://tigirek.ru/en/node/306>).

<sup>134</sup> Mentioned briefly in the article devoted to the Ak-Burkhan datsan construction (The first Kure-Datsan will be built in the Altai Republic. (2012). Retrieved from: <https://gornoaltaysk.bezformata.com/listnews/pervij-v-regione-kuree-datcan/3255641/>); also stated in (Filatov, 2002).

<sup>135</sup> Svetlana Kydyeva is a journalist working in printed and online media. Among other professional activities, she writes a column in the Altai language for the Altai Republic newspaper "Altaidyk Cholmony" (<https://altaicholmon.ru/>).

<sup>136</sup> 'Ene-Til' ['Mother-language', in Altai] non-commercial organization is known for its pro-Altai political statements and public stance, as well as for its solid contribution to the Altai and Burkhanist cultural revival. According to Archyn Torbokov (2015), 'Ene-Til's efforts on supporting Altai traditional holidays, restoring social institutes (*zaisan*, *Kurultai*) to a large extent benefited the simultaneous Burkhanist-Buddhist revival.

(Sources: "Ene Til" defends the independence of Altai. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/572844>; The Altai national organization "Ene Til" declares the desirability of appointing the only ethnic Altai applicants to the governor's post in the Altai Republic. (2009). Retrieved from: <https://www.bankfax.ru/news/64797>; "Ene Til" proposes to

led by Vladimir Kydyev<sup>137</sup>. Even though Kydyev's name is not present in the Ak-Burkhan community official registry (his father, Emil Kydyev, is there instead), his role in the formation of the newly established community cannot be overestimated. Vladimir Kydyev is remembered by everyone I spoke to as an exceptional man of many talents<sup>138</sup>: he was a publisher, a journalist and worked for the local government for some period of time. Although he himself did not belong to any religion explicitly (neither does Altaichy Sanashkin, to my knowledge), he was especially sympathetic towards Altai traditional faith, by which he meant this combination of Buddhism and local traditions. He is also reported by his daughter to have been inclining to the ideas of Altai as a cradle of Buddhism. However, the Lama from the Ak-Burkhan temple who knew him personally did not support this claim (probably because this idea goes against his better judgement of Vladimir Kydyev).

Be that as it may, the Ak-Burkhan foundation circle was formed by the public people (writers, journalists, social activists) who were not so vigorously religious themselves but saw their primary goal in restoring Altai national traditions, culture and faith. The main idea of the community changed over time: it seems<sup>139</sup> that at the very beginning, Altaichy Sanashkin tried to unify local Burkhanist rites and beliefs – what was left of them after the Soviet rule – and ideas and international power of Tibetan Buddhism, in order to unite Altai national minority and prevent further cultural decline. His ideas were highly influenced by Roerichism: Nikolai Roerich wrote that the White Burkhan whom the Altai people eagerly await is the future Buddha, Maitreya, and the 'burkhans' are Buddha idols, scattered in the Altai-Mongolian region as silent remnants of Dzungar Khanate (Roerich, 1974). Altaichy Sanashkin has adopted the idea of Burkhanism as Altai Buddhism popularized by the Roerich followers (Ulanov, 2012), and in the early 1990s (according to my interlocutors, in 1991) such an approach to Burkhanism was 'approved' by the Dalai Lama on the meeting organized by Altaichy Sanashkin and Brontoj Jangovich Bedjurov<sup>140</sup> (Filatov,

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the President to appoint an ethnic Altai as the head of the Republic. (2009). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/5256>).

<sup>137</sup> He also founded several organizations specializing in culture and sport, such as the 'Non-profit foundation for promoting spiritual and cultural development of Altai ethnos "Turk kabai" (the Cradle of Turks)' and the Greco-Roman wrestling school "Baatyr" (Kydyev Vladimir Emilievich. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/person/kydyev-ve-041102285271>).

<sup>138</sup> A significant portion of information about Vladimir Kydyev can be found in the necrologies and commemoration articles (for example: The family of Vladimir Kydyev donated Gurkin's letter to the museum. (2018). Retrieved from: <http://musey-anohina.ru/index.php/ru/novosti/item/906>; Well-known social activist Vladimir Kydyev dies in the Altai Republic. (2013). Retrieved from: <https://www.bankfax.ru/news/89686>).

<sup>139</sup> Unfortunately, I have not been able to meet Altaichy Sanashkin in person – during my fieldwork he was in the hospital for a medical treatment. Therefore, the information I have about him came from the people who know him: the Ak-Burkhan Lamas, active community members, the daughter of Vladimir Kydyev.

<sup>140</sup> Brontoj Yangovich Bedyurov is an Altai poet and Turkologist. He was awarded several titles ('Honored Worker of Culture of the Russian Federation', 'National writer of the Altai Republic') and is highly esteemed in the Ak-Burkhan community. People talk about him with recognition and respect.

2002). In 1996 the Ak-Burkhan community joined the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (BTSR), which belongs to the Gelug school (Tibetan Buddhism).

This story seems to echo the 1920-1922 Burkhanism revival, which was brought up by the Altai intellectual elite as a means and at the same time as a desired outcome of the Altai national consolidation. Just as the 1920s Burkhanism project, the 1990s Burkhanism had an intensive start, which did not result in a further major expansion. However, neither did the organization vanish completely. The Ak-Burkhan foundation, represented by Altaichy Sanashkin, Vladimir Kydyev, Brontoj Bedjurov and others, were managing the community for more than a decade – it was they who decided in favor of joining BTSR in 1996 and they who reached property arrangements with the city authorities. However, they were not trained as Lamas – at the very least, neither of them finished the whole course of Buddhist Gelug education<sup>141</sup>. At some point, the reins of the community and the temple were gradually withdrawn from the foundation circle and taken by those who were actually serving the rites and – later - tending to the temple.

The aforementioned ‘circle of founders’ were active in their Altai Buddhism endeavors – they met national and foreign delegations, took part in conferences and built shrines (*suburgans* and *dugans*) (Torbokov, 2015, pp. 112-116). Nevertheless, they were not initiated Buddhist monks – they did not take monastic vows and had not been trained in Buddhist datsans. Therefore, one of the major concerns of the young Ak-Burkhan community was to ensure educated Lamas whose status would be recognized by the national Buddhist Community. In 1995, a ‘pilgrimage’ of Altai *hubaraks* (disciples) willing to study Buddhism in Buryatia, center of Russian Gelug Buddhism, started. It was organized by the Ak-Burkhan circle and Altaichy Sanashkin himself and sponsored by the like-minded people, local businessmen. There were at least 20 students in the first wave (according to one of my temple interlocutors), and that trend continued further on, even though not on such scale. In 2000-2001, 10 students from the first organized group of Altai disciples finished their studies in Buryatia and became Lamas<sup>142</sup>.

The year 2001 marked another swirl of consequential yet prospective changes in the history of the Ak-Burkhan community. The first generation of

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<sup>141</sup> There are several photos of Altaichy Sanashkin dressed as a Buddhist monk, but he has not been systematically trained as one. As far as I was able to find out, his level of Buddhist hierarchy is ‘*genin*’ (Torbokov, 2015) (‘*genin*’ is a lay person, who took five precepts (Gazizova, 2018), and a ‘doctor of Buddhist philosophy’ (Toboeva, 2014, p. 17). He was also given the honor award of the Aginsk Datsan (Sanashkin Altaichy Mankyrovich - doctor of Buddhist philosophy, chairman of the Buddhist Community. (n.d.). Retrieved from: [http://aginskydatsan.ru/pages/spisok\\_medal\\_02](http://aginskydatsan.ru/pages/spisok_medal_02)).

<sup>142</sup> The monograph chapter by Archyn Torbokov, one of the best sources on the history of the community, provides the readers with their names: ‘*Kypchakov Aram, Kozhutov Erketen, Shaldanov Baikal, Ochurdyapov Buuchai, Urchimaev Sarymai, Shagaev Mergen, Salamov Eduard, Bakhramayev Sergey, Matyev Renat, Chertykov Valerii*’ (Torbokov, 2015). Three people also studied at Datsan Gunzechoinei in Saint-Petersburg: Altaichy Sanashkin, Mergen Shagaev and Sarymai Urchimaev (Altai Buddhism - Khambo Lama of Altai. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://eshedrugpa.wordpress.com/2015/08/26/mergen-shagaev/>).

local Lamas made it possible to institutionalize the organization further – the ‘Centralized Spiritual Administration of Buddhists of the Altai Republic’ (CSABAR)<sup>143</sup> was formed shortly after their graduation, also in 2001. This voluntary religious association was not officially registered (at least, I did not manage to find any registry entries on this one), but it functioned in line with the national Buddhist associations and their procedures. CSABAR is based on the yearly local Buddhist Sangha congress, and its leaders (*Khambo Lama* and *Shiretui Lamas* – the Head of the region and priors of local temples) are elected every 5 years. Currently<sup>144</sup>, there are four leaders of Altai Sangha - Khambo Lama of the Altai Republic and 3 Shiretui Lamas of Gorno-Altaysk, Ongudai and Ust’-Kan Districts.

In 2001, Lama Erketen Egorovich Kozhutov was elected as a first Khambo Lama of the Altai Gelug Buddhist Sangha. It was during his time that the Ak-Burkhan community was re-registered in 2002, and he was also mentioned in the news and press releases<sup>145</sup>. His most cited statement: “*It seems to everyone that Buddhism is a contemplative soft religion, but we too have the power to protect ... Shamans may have imagined that they possess magic, while Buddhism also has some experience that had been accumulated for millennia*”<sup>146</sup> refers to the heated situation of the Ak-Jaj/Ak-Burkhan conflict, which has been smoldering for more than a decade<sup>147</sup>. In 2003<sup>148</sup>, the Khambo Lama title and

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<sup>143</sup> Such a title is of no coincidence - the ‘Centralized Spiritual Administration of Buddhists of Russian Federation’, a predecessor of the contemporary ‘Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia’ (BTSR), was re-registered in 1999 (Bakaeva, 2012). Its legacy evolved into other Buddhist organizations, one of which is called ‘Centralized Spiritual Administration of Buddhists’ (CSAB) and exists up till now, and another one, ‘Spiritual Administration of Buddhists’ (SAB) was liquidated in 2020. I cannot say which organization (CSAB or SAB) influenced the Altai Buddhists of 1990-2000 more, but it could very well be SAB, given the Ak-Burkhan community strong affiliations with the Datsan Gunzechoinei in Saint-Petersburg (the Datsan Gunzechoinei was one of the three legal entities which formed SAB in 1998).

<sup>144</sup> With more temples built and more organizations registered, there might be more Shiretui Lamas in CSABAR in the nearest future.

<sup>145</sup> For instance, in some posts on the Ak-Burkhan temple social network account (A story about Burkhanism in Altai and the current Maima Shiretui Lama’s ancestors. (2015). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/wall-65760886\\_2892](https://vk.com/wall-65760886_2892)) and in the news of the Russian Buddhism (Buddhists of the Altai Republic, together with like-minded people in Buryatia, helped humanity find ways to solve its problems. (2004). Retrieved from: <https://www.bankfax.ru/news/25597/>).

<sup>146</sup> Cited from (The Buddhist stupa destroyed in June 2002 caused a conflict between Burkhanists and shamanists in the Altai Republic. (2002). Retrieved from: <https://www.bankfax.ru/news/19050>), in my Russian-English translation.

<sup>147</sup> The conflict between the Ak-Jaj and Ak-Burkhan communities was described in the second chapter. Here, I would only like to point out here that the attempts of some of the Ak-Jaj followers to harm the Buddhist community were stretched in time (there were incidents in 2002, 2006, 2015 and 2016). Source: In Yakonur, three drunken guys tried to destroy a Buddhist stupa]. (2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/51280>.

<sup>148</sup> The Ak-Burkan community was also re-registered that year – it used to be Ak-Burhan, but in 2003 it was spelled as Ak-Burkan (Local religious organization of Buddhists "Ak-Burkan" in Gorno-Altaysk, Altai Republic. (n.d.). Retrieved from: [https://www.list-org.com/company/2045058/show/founders\\_history#founders](https://www.list-org.com/company/2045058/show/founders_history#founders)).

position was carried over to another Lama, Mergen Vasilievich Shagaev (Torbokov, 2015)<sup>149</sup>, who holds this position up to now.

The Gorno-Altai community Shiretui Lama, Stepan (Sarymai) Tadaevich Urchimaev, also elected at around 2001, was (and is) well known to the public<sup>150</sup> as a talented *kaichi* (national Altai songs singer). He travelled around the world with his ensemble<sup>151</sup> and earned two Guinness World Records for the longest documented *kai* singing (overtone, or throat singing). Sarymai Urchimaev was Shiretui Lama of the main Sangha in the capital of the Republic for 15 years (from 2001 to 2016), and it was during those years that the community built their own *kuree* (temple) and *suburgan* (stupa) of Enlightenment devoted to the 110th anniversary of the Tereng Valley events, in 2012<sup>152</sup> and 2014, respectively (Ekeev, Torbokov, 2018). Most of the funding came from Lamas and Altai Buddhism supporters, with smaller financial support coming from the government. However, the community got the piece of land in the city center before 2012 and constructed a small house which was used as a 'chapel' before the main temple building was erected. The temple was renovated in 2015 with the help of active parishioners and *darhan* (smith, master of the craft), Fyodor Georgievich Putintsev.

The ways of the other two local Sanghas, in Ongudai and Ust'-Kan Districts, were not so smooth: both communities experienced a break in their activities and legal status. 'Kuree "Ongudaisky"', the Onguday Burkhanist organization, was first registered in 2002 by 10 founders under the supervision of Boris Mikhailovich Kindikov. However, it only existed until 2011, when the legal entity was liquidated by the court for inconsistencies with the new law for religious rights<sup>153</sup>. It was only in 2019 that the Ongudai branch of Altai Gelug Buddhism was brought back to existence as an 'Ak-Sumer' *kuree* (the Sacred Peak, [Ак Сүмер кыпее]) Buddhist organization ([https://vk.com/ak\\_sumer](https://vk.com/ak_sumer)). The Ust'-Kan community, 'Kuree "Ust'-Kanskii"' was also registered in 2002, by three

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<sup>149</sup> According to Ochyrova (2010, p. 133), Mergen Shagaev was the first elected Khambo Lama – or, at least, she does not mention Erketen Kozhutov's name. However, due to my first-hand knowledge about the community and my acquaintance with Archyn Torbokov, who is a scholar and an active member of the Ak-Burkhan community, I have no doubts in his version of this story. Also, Erketen Kozhutov is mentioned on several news portals in the title of Khambo Lama of the Altai Republic (please see the references above).

<sup>150</sup> In 2017, an annual festival for Altai national and folklore songs was established to commemorate Sarymai Urchimaev (Festival "Kanar Kozhon" awarded at the Russian competition. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/111114>). His death was marked with numerous commemoration articles and obituaries in the local newspapers (One of the most informative: Sarymai Urchimaev passed away. (2016). Retrieved from: <https://zvezdaaltaya.ru/2016/11/ushel-iz-zhizni-Sarymai-urchimaev/>).

<sup>151</sup> One of interviews with Urchimaev where he speaks about his life, journeys and aspirations (Sergeeva, 2013).

<sup>152</sup> The idea of a Buddhist temple in Gorno-Altai was discussed long before 2012: in 2009, the Head of the Buddhist Kalmykia region, Kirsan Ilumzhinov, paid a visit to the Altai Republic and promised his support to the sister Sangha. However, those plans did not come to fruition (for various reasons), and the temple was only built in 2012 (The authorities supported the idea of building a Buddhist datsan. (2012). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/15674>).

<sup>153</sup> Kuree "Ongudaysky". (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/394184>

people under Nikolay Pepishovich Shatinov's leadership, but it was dismissed in 2013 due to inactivity<sup>154</sup>. However, in the very same year it was restored as 'Kuree "Ochyr"', founded by a group of 11 other people and led by Sergey Vladimirovich Bakhramaev and Vera Egorovna Kynova (Torbokov, 2015).

The Buddhist community slowly started to be perceived as one of the notable religious groups of Altai: foreign monk delegations visited the newly built temple<sup>155</sup> and in 2015, the leader of the Russian Gelug Buddhism, Khambo Lama Damba Ausheev spent a week in the Altai Republic<sup>156</sup>. In 2007, Aram Viktorovich Kypchakov received the title of *Geshe/Gebshé* (Doctor of Philosophy) at the Aginsky Buddhist Institute in Buryatia. Sarymai Urchimaev's wife, Elena Nikolaevna Toboeva (Chechesh Kalai kyzy), published her book about Buddhism as a teaching and as a part of Altai history<sup>157</sup>, and her son started his training in the Indian Drepung Monastery. It seems that the Gorno-Altai community grew faster and developed more interconnections with the world and Russian Buddhism than the Ust'-Kan and Ongudai Sanghas (considering the 8 years long period of Ongudai community inactivity). Even though *suburgans* kept being built, it is safe to suggest that the Altai Buddhist institutional structure was not heavily centralized during that period of time. This has clearly changed over the past four years.

The first period of changes being the one the Ak-Burkhan faced in the 2000s, the second one came in 2016 with the death of the Gorno-Altai community Khambo Lama, Sarymai Urchimaev. His death marked a fracture in the community members, or, rather, made it apparent and visible. That fracture was likely to stem from the turmoil of 2003, when Erketen Lama was dismissed from the Khambo Lama position and excommunicated<sup>158</sup> from the community.

With Sarymai Lama's death, his wife's positions in the community started to weaken. I got strong evidence that it was Chechesh who has been the driving force of the community for a long time, supporting the temple and her husband with volunteer work and financial questions. However, at some point, Chechesh

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<sup>154</sup> Local religious organization of Buddhists, Kuree (prayer house) "Ust'-Kansky". (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.list-org.com/company/10591912>

<sup>155</sup> In 2012, monks from Drepung Monastery visited Altai and created *mandala* in the Ak-Burkhan temple (Construction of the mandala in kure, Photo. (2012). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/photo-65760886\\_330115629](https://vk.com/photo-65760886_330115629)).

<sup>156</sup> The leader of Russian Buddhists will visit Gorny Altai. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://regnum.ru/news/1960157.html>

<sup>157</sup> Chechesh Toboeva, as she calls herself in the social media, has a PhD in Pedagogy and is dedicated as a Buddhist nun under 36 vows. She wrote a book (Toboeva, 2014), in which she examines the history of Buddhism in the Altai Republic and explains major elements of Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>158</sup> As I learned from my interlocutors in the temple, excommunication did not mean prohibition of visiting the temple, but that the excommunicated was not welcomed in the closely connected society. Excommunications were reported to be extremely rare, but there is at least one other case of excommunication – Chechesh Lama (Sarymai Urchimaev's widow) excommunicated the daughter of Vladimir Kydyev (one of the founders of the community) from the temple. Vladimir Kydyev's daughter visits the temple now, in 2019-2020, but it was a long time for her that she did not go there.

started to be directly opposed by the new community leaders, for the reasons of property distribution and ideological disagreements on Burkhanism. There are also family issues at work<sup>159</sup>: Chechesh was married more than once, and her ex-husband is Mergen Lama, the current Khambo Lama of the Altai Buddhist Sangha, whom she reportedly left for Sarymai Urchimaev.

There are yet another two dimensions of this lingering conflict. In 2018, Chechesh Toboeva and Vera Kynova (the leader of the *Kuree* 'Ochyr' organization) took Buddhist monastic vows in Drepung Monastery, India, and became the first female nuns of the Ak-Burkhan community. They received Tibetan Buddhist names: Chechesh Toboeva - Gyaltzen Songmo (meaning Virtuous) and Vera Kynova - Gyaltzen Tsultim (meaning: A person of high moral)<sup>160</sup>. After an intensive course in the same monastery, they returned to the Altai Republic in 2019<sup>161</sup>. Chechesh Toboeva's son, Emil Kergilov (monastic name Yonten Phulzhung) is also affiliated with Drepung as he completed 10 courses for obtaining a degree in Buddhist philosophy<sup>162</sup>, also in 2019. Even though these accomplishments could not but strengthen the overall authority of the community and they were addressed appropriately on the Ak-Burkhan official account, they seem to hit the Altai Gelug Buddhists leaders pressure points: gender and Buddhist monasticism.

The Buddhist monastic vows do not impose too severe obligations on the Ak-Burkhan Lamas – Tibetan Buddhism, which they belong to, generally allows eating meat and getting married (although not for those who has undertaken strict vows, such as *bhikkhu/Gelong*, for example). Much like their Kalmykian colleagues (Gazizova, 2018), the Altai Burkhanist-Buddhist Lamas are neither full monks nor lay people. Most of them have finished the Gelug traditional datsan training but had not taken too many vows, explaining it through the lens of 'Northern Buddhism peculiarities' and Altai and Tibetan harsh climate. Chechesh Toboeva's case, however, is different. She did not receive the datsan course but took more monastic vows than the male Lamas – and, as I have heard from one of her supporters, she has been keenly following them. Therefore, she represents not only the different attitude towards Burkhanism (I will talk about

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<sup>159</sup> In a small family-like community these personal bonds seem to mean much more than I could imagine before coming to the field. Also, there is another dimension in this story – a kinship one. The kinship bonds, formed by belonging to this or that kin – (*söök* [cëok, in Altai]) – are still very prominent and strong among the Altai peoples. Most of them know their kinship, and they generally hold in mind the relationships between their kin and the others. For example, when one of my interlocutors was characterizing people we both knew, she told that, '*A. is half-Kara-Maiman, he has this hunger to power, while B. is from Telëz, they are more like heroes trying to win the day*'. She was not the only one who used the person's kin to describe their personality, although others were not doing that in such an unambiguous manner.

<sup>160</sup> Altai pilgrims took monastic vows in India. (2018). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_7566](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_7566)

<sup>161</sup> After an intensive course at the Indian monastery of Drepung Gomang, Altai nuns Sangmo and Tsultim return home to celebrate Chaga Bayram. (2019). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_7803](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_7803)

<sup>162</sup> Bakshy Emil successfully passed the exams for the title of "Doctor of Buddhist Philosophy" at the Drepung Goman Monastery. (2019). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_8440](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_8440)

this later), but another way of being Buddhist. The fact that she is a woman serves well to add even more to their differences.

One of my interlocutors from the academy stressed especially that there are not many female Buddhist monks in Russia (she even said that Chechesh was the only one or at least one of the very few), and that she would recommend me take this fact into consideration. There is only one datsan for women in Russia, Zungon Darjeeling in the Republic of Buryatia, and female Buddhist nuns are not too common of a sight. However, one of the Ak-Burkhan community's members is said to be studying there. I have met her during my fieldwork – she was helping around the temple and did some bookkeeping, and during the Sagaalgan holiday she sat next to the male Lamas in the center of the room, never looking bullied or oppressed. Thus, female Lamas are neither prohibited nor unwelcomed. Nevertheless, one would find it hard to ignore some distinct signs of misogyny within the Ak-Burkhan 'inner circle'. The majority of Ask-Burkhan Lamas (I have met 5 of them) are male, and the only female 'exceptions' are Galina Lama and Chechesh Lama. According to the male Lamas with whom I managed to discuss gender questions, they do not believe women to be inferior to men, and women are not prohibited to be nuns per se. However, it somehow slipped between the lines of our talk that women are just *less likely* to be nuns - as if the male birth offers more for one willing to take refuge in the Three Jewels. The decision-making process is almost solely occupied by men – they<sup>163</sup> hinted on that rather openly as they were trying to let us women know that they need some 'men only' space. One can only guess whether this is a consequence of the conflict with Chechesh Lama or one of its reasons.

All the listed above, together with the death of Sarymai Urchimaev, resulted in the 'change of power' within the community. It would not be too far-reaching to conclude that this situation has not been settled yet<sup>164</sup>, and that the death of Sarymai Urchimaev and consequent change of course are not entirely left in the past. Chechesh Lama was not excommunicated, but she is a rare guest in the temple now, spending almost all of her time in the small hut at the temple grounds which used to be community's only shelter before 2012. Since 2019, Chechesh Tobaeva became *Getsulma* Songmo (a title for those who took 36 monastic vows) together with her son, Gelong Emil Kergilov (Yonten Phulzhung)

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<sup>163</sup> Currently, the close-knit 'inner circle' includes Aram Lama, Mergen Lama, Andrei Lama, Soltoi Tugudin and Archyn Torbokov.

<sup>164</sup> I spoke to various people in and around the temple, but I have only heard Sarymai Lama's name once or twice. He was a well-known person, and it would be safe to suggest that the narrative on the history of the community would include his name and achievements with great pride – only that it did not (not yet, at least). I was also very lucky to find out about Chechesh – we met at the temple completely by chance during her extremely rare praying there. Otherwise, I am afraid that I might have not met her at all. The male Lamas were reluctant to talk about her, even though they were careful enough not to blame her and to hide their mutual disagreements, and the only ones who spoke about her openly were her friends and supporters among the parishioners.

and his co-author Gelong Yonten Gendun<sup>165</sup> is building a retreat monastery to form the first Altai Sangha with strict adherence to monastic rules.<sup>166</sup>

The Ak-Burkhan temple is now maintained by those who were educated in Buryatia in 1995-2000: although not all *hubaraks* finished their schooling, and not everyone who did returned and decided to live a life of a Buddhist priest; now, there are at least 5 Lamas in the Altai Republic who completed the 5-year datsan course. Some of the Lamas, on the other hand, did not receive systematic training, but they have either attained the necessary Gelug Buddhist dedications to treat people and to perform rituals, or use the Altai Burkhanist ceremonies. Aram Kypchakov (Aram Lama) and Mergen Shagaev (Mergen Lama) are among those who graduated from Buryat datsan in 2000 and chose to stay within Buddhism for life.

As Khambo Lama of the Altai Republic and Shiretui Lama of the Ak-Burkhan kuree, Mergen Lama executes a number of representative functions with the help of Archyn Torbokov<sup>167</sup> and Andrei Lama. Mergen Shagaev is also known as *Emchi Lama* (healer) and he has a practice in Datsan Gunzechoinei in Saint-Petersburg<sup>168</sup>. Aram Lama is a Shiretui Lama of the Buddhist Sangha in Maima (a populated village right near the capital of the Republic), and a director of the *Amyr Sanaa* (Quiet Mind, [Амыр-Санаа күpee]) Buddhist organization founded in 2019<sup>169</sup>. The respective temple in Maima is still under construction, so technically, Aram Lama does not have a parish of his own. Regardless of that, his noticeable rank in the Buddhist hierarchy (*Geshe*) and his personal charisma ensure his vast influence over the whole Altai Sangha.

It became most evident over the past two years, with more *suburgans* built and three new societies registered: the aforementioned *Amyr Sanaa*, the *Ak-Sumer* and *Altai-Oirot* organizations<sup>170</sup>. *Ak-Sumer* is a sister Sangha of the Ak-Burkhan Gorno-Altai community, based in Ongudai and led by Soltoi

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<sup>165</sup> A new book by Yonten Gendun & Yonten Phulzhung. Vows on the path to awakening. (2020). Retrieved from: <http://savetibet.ru/2020/07/04/book.html>

<sup>166</sup> We are pleased to announce that this spring 2020, the building of a retreat monastery for long closures was started in the Altai Republic. (2020). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/tibetan\\_dharma?w=wall-53269\\_41396](https://vk.com/tibetan_dharma?w=wall-53269_41396);

A retreat monastery built in Altai. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://sanghainfo.ru/%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D1%8B%D1%80%D1%8F/>

<sup>167</sup> Archyn Vladimirovich Torbokov is a scholar in linguistics and the Ak-Burkhan community representative in the V Public Chamber of the Altai Republic (The Public Chamber of the Altai Republic. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://opra04.ru/o-palate/sostav/>).

<sup>168</sup> Mergen Lama's personal page in the Vkontakte social network: *Мерген-лама, потомственный костоправ [Mergen Lama, hereditary chiropractor]*. ([https://vk.com/mergen\\_lama](https://vk.com/mergen_lama)).

<sup>169</sup> Local Religious Organization of Buddhists "Amyr Sanaa" (Calm Mind) of the Maiminsky district of the Altai Republic. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/11903295>

<sup>170</sup> The fourth temple, in Chermal - *Altyn Sudur Kuree* (the Golden Prophecy temple, [Алтын Судур күpee]) – is currently under construction, and this Sangha has been registered as a religious organization very recently.

Narynovich Tugudin<sup>171</sup>. It was founded in 2019 to carry on with the legacy of the *Kuree 'Ongudaiskii'* which ceased to exist in 2011, and it is supported by another organization registered the same year and on the same person – the '*Altai-Oirot*' organization<sup>172</sup>. The Altai-Oirot society reminds of *Ene-Til* – previously very active and still existing group of Altai intellectuals devoted to preserving national language and culture, - except the fact that unlike its senior colleague, *Altai-Oirot* is mostly oriented towards historical education and history of religion (Appendix 5).

Most of the Ak-Burkhan Lamas are Altai by nationality, with one exception only - Aronov Andrey Alexandrovich (Andrei Lama). Andrei Lama studied at Agin'sk datsan in Buryatia. He had also undertaken several Buddhist courses and learned from different Lamas (e.g. he spent a month in France apprehending the doctrine of Padmasambhava<sup>173</sup>). Russian Lamas and Buddhists appear in the Ak-Burkhan temple the more often, the more the community is extending its external network and integrating into the national Buddhist community<sup>174</sup>. The Altai Gelug Buddhist community has solid connections to the Agin'sk and Ivolga Buryat datsans (hardly surprising, given the number of Altai Lamas who gained their titles there) and enjoys a reliable friendship with Saint-Petersburg Gunzechoinei datsan (mostly through Mergen Lama). The neighboring regions (the Altai Region and Novosibirskaya Oblast') are also closely connected to the Altai Republic Buddhist Sangha – Aram Lama has a disciple in Novosibirsk, Emchi Maksim, who visits the Ak-Burkhan community from time to time. The Altai Region Buddhists are scattered and do not possess any specific place for meeting, which makes them more inclined to come to take the 300 km road to the nearby Gorno-Altai community. Also, as already mentioned, three Altai Buddhists were educated in Drepung Monastery, India. This adds to the community's extensive geography of mutual friendly visits and international conferences<sup>175</sup>.

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<sup>171</sup> Local Religious Organization of Buddhists "Ak Sumer" (Sacred Peak) Ongudaysky district of the Altai Republic. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/11952532>

<sup>172</sup> Organization "Altai-Oirot". (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/11810954>;

The "Altai-Oirot" organization public page in the V Kontakte social network. Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/altai\\_oirot](https://vk.com/altai_oirot)

<sup>173</sup> Andrey Lama left for Padmasambhava's teachings. (2017). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_5254](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_5254)

<sup>174</sup> In 2015, the first Buddhist temple was consecrated in Novosibirsk, and Lamas from Tyva, Buryatia and Altai Republic made the first solemn service there. Participating in such events strengthens the Buddhist community ties and hints that the Altai Republic can also be perceived as a Buddhist region (The first Buddhist temple was consecrated in Novosibirsk. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/siberia/novosti-gorodov/pervyy-buddiyskiy-hram-osvyatili-v-novosibirske>).

<sup>175</sup> An International Buddhist Conference is being held in Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia. <...> The representative of the Buddhists of the Altai Republic, Aram Lama Kypchakov, also takes part in the event. (2019). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_8431](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_8431)

## Everyday practices and rituals

*‘Why have you chosen these blue and white wallpapers? Was it you wish to make the temple look like Buddhist heaven?’*  
– I asked, anticipating a positive answer, just like the one I have heard in one of the temples in Thailand.

The Lama laughs, - *‘We bought what we could afford. Those were the cheapest, as I remember’.*

Note: the honorable Lama played cunning. Even before the renovation, when the current wallpapers were bought, the temple walls already were light blue, and featured curious painted scenes of demons and mythic landscapes.

The bright yellow double roof of the Burkhanist temple shines both on the Google maps and in reality – the temple stands on the bank of the river, near the center of the Gorno-Altai city and just one bus stop afar from the new building of the national museum, where the famous ‘Ukok princess’<sup>176</sup> is exhibited. From the 4 Buddhist groups registered in the republic, the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ organization is the only one claiming to be a Burkhanist group and, probably, the one that can most accurately be called Burkhanist. The temple lamas used this self-identification themselves while we talked, even though it remains to be seen whether they use this name when talking to the locals.

I have arranged our first meeting through the Vkontakte social network: the temple has a public profile there, which I used to find the contacts of those who might have been able to discuss our project group’s visit to the temple. For the further appointments, I got the telephone number of one of the lamas and called him to schedule an interview; one time, my colleague and I just went to the temple hoping it would not be closed – it was not. Thus, with more visits and occasional talks, the information cloud around the temple and its inhabitants gradually started to thicken and to take a particular shape.

Before proceeding to my fieldwork observations, I would like to focus one more time on the way I gathered primary data. Of the 46 days spent in the Altai Republic, 4 full weeks were devoted to the observing the everyday life of the Ak-

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<sup>176</sup> The well-preserved mummy found on the Ukok Plateau in the Altai Republic in 1993. There has been a heated discussion in religious circles about the fate of the mummy, and demands to bury it to the exactly same spot from it was taken, have been made by the various religious groups and individuals. More on the topic (Palveleva, Mokeev, 2019).

Burkhan temple. I saw rituals and participated in them, witnessed medical practices, talked to Lamas and temple visitors, discussed Buddhist philosophy, drank tea, washed dishes and went shopping. It would be no exaggeration to say that I shared a tiny part of life with the community I came to write about (I thought about it straight and clear after a tiring day in the temple full of visitors, when the Lama and me were going home after midnight). Of course, I did interviews, but mostly in a manner of a free-flowing conversation and lively dialogue. My goal was to get a bit of an understanding of what kind of people come to the temple, how are they treated, and what is the everyday Ak-Burkhan Lama routine. Therefore, I did not concentrate on the temple symbolism and architecture, as well as to the ritual context, having chosen to be focused on building and maintaining relations and connecting to people.

However, it seems worthwhile to give a short description of the temple's exterior and interior (Appendix 6/Photos 3-13), for Buddhist temples are not identical worldwide. Generally, Buddhist temples in Russia (and especially *datsans*) are a territory with several buildings of different purposes. The Ak-Burkhan kuree (temple) is no different, even though it can only boast the one-story main temple hall, *suburgan*, a small utility hut and an outdoor toilet. The temple grounds are surrounded by a decent fence, and it is always clean and tidy (even in winter, when a path to the temple twists between meter-high snowdrifts). Red prayer wheels greet temple visitors to the right from the entrance, and everyone is urged (not to say welcomed) to go around the temple hall past the white *suburgan* and rotate them on the way. The entrance to the temple is preceded by a sturdy porch – an architectural element inherent to Buryat temples, but not Mongolian or Chinese Buddhist sacred buildings (Dulgarov, 2010, p. 295). Another Buryat influence can be noticed looking at the templetop – bright yellow tiles are slightly curved upward at the four edges, giving the impression that the roof is hovering over the building. This type of roof resembles the Chinese and Japanese temples, but is in fact of Buryat origin, inspired by Tibetan Buddhist temple shapes (Dulgarov, 2010, p. 294).

Interestingly, the *suburgan* and the temple itself was to a major extent constructed by the hands of the community. Only several symbolic elements, regarded as too sacred and too complicated to be created by lay people (the painted eyes of Buddha, *dharmachakra*<sup>177</sup>, *gandzhir*<sup>178</sup>) were made by professionals. The *gandzhir*, for example, was made by the friend of the community, *darhan* Fyodor Georgievich Putintsev<sup>179</sup>, in 2013. The temple

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<sup>177</sup> Dharma Chakra, the Wheel of Dharma, is 'a vital symbolic element of the northern Buddhism temples. It is a sculptural composition of an eight-radius wheel of the Dharma in the center and two deer to both sides of it' (Asalkhanova, 2014a, p. 16).

<sup>178</sup> *Gandzhir* – a 'special decorative figure in a form of spiers, filled with printed prayers for the consecration of the temple' (Asalkhanova, 2014a, p. 15).

<sup>179</sup> I met him and his wife, professor Rimma Arnol'dovna Kushnerik, during my fieldwork. They were very kind as to invite me to their house and tell me much about *darhans*, Buddhism and shamanism and other religions of the Altai Republic. One of their interviews to the Siberian news channel can be found on the GTRK Chita website (Drozdova, Knyazeva, 2019).

interior was also done by the community: during the grand temple renovation Lamas and their family members helped wallpapering and decorating the temple with tanka (thangka) paintings brought from Thailand, Buryatia and Saint-Petersburg. Overall, the temple interior mirrors traditional northern Buddhist ornamentation: the altar zone is located to the north side of the main hall and features sculptures and tanka of Buddha Shakyamuni; side walls are devoted to the images of deities and bodhisattvas such as the White Old Man (Appendix 6/Photo 9), Vajrapaniwind and Avalokiteśvara (Asalkhanova, 2014b, p. 191).

Last but not least, the Ak-Burkhan temple is called either ‘datsan’ or ‘kuree’. That requires some explanation. ‘Kuree’ is an Altai version of the Mongolian ‘*huree*’ (circle, round fence) – a round-type Mongolian Buddhist temple (Asalkhanova, 2015, p. 316). Judging from the looks of the building, it is too small to be called ‘datsan’<sup>180</sup> (not to mention the total absence of students). Thus, it would make more sense to call the temple ‘*sume*’ – a small temple on the datsan grounds. *Sume*, however, entails inferiority of some kind, and partly due to this reasoning, partly thanks to the associations inspired by the fence *around* the temple territory (even though not really in a circle-shaped form), it was decided by the Ak-Burkhan leaders that the temple would be called ‘kuree’.

Ak-Burkhan kuree is open almost every day, although on an irregular schedule. Lamas are usually treating people starting from 10-11 in the morning and take turns to be on duty; during summertime and grand celebrations, however, the temple is hardly ever closed. The Ak-Burkhan community is mostly Altai by nationality, with Russians coming for the massage sessions and (rarely) spiritual services. This observation does not come as self-evident: in the Karma Kagyu community of Askat village, for instance, most of the practitioners are Russian. Judging by the popularity of meditation and yoga in the big cities of Russia, it would actually be safe to suggest vice-versa – that Russians are more likely to come to the Buddhist temple. I have tried to get into this more and found out that the Ak-Burkhan Lamas simply do not use most popular Buddhist ‘eye-catchers’, such as meditation classes, yoga and retreats. One of the reasons being the lack of space (the temple is spacious yet relatively small), it is also a matter of experience and (un)desirable attention. In a private talk, one of the Lamas confessed that they ‘*do not know how to do it, never had a practice of public meditations*’ and ‘*do not want to attract too much attention*’. The latter, as I suspect, is closely related to the interests of the Orthodox Church in the region.

According to my observations, the temple visitors can be divided into two unequal groups: the ones seeking health and divination services and the ones interested in any kind of spiritual guidance<sup>181</sup>. The temple mostly attracts people

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<sup>180</sup> A term that refers to a Buddhist centre of learning and study.

<sup>181</sup> According to one of the posts on the temple public page (my translation): ‘*Despite the fact that the local population knows little about Buddhist philosophy, they are primarily interested in the ritual side (purifying and protective), Tibetan medicine and the practice of divination. People come to the datsan or invite the clergy to their home. Religious services from Lamas are not always ordered by Buddhist laymen, it can be Orthodox Christians, Muslims and, sometimes, Krishnaites, as well as people of an atheistic worldview*’ (A public post on the Burkhanist temple page in the

coming for the medical support – Andrei and Mergen Lamas practice massage, manual therapy and Su Jok Therapy<sup>182</sup>. They are called not doctors, but *chiropractors*, which clearly indicates their inclination to the eastern traditional medicine. Thus, patients coming for healing are either already positive about the eastern traditional medicine or doubt the effectiveness of the free medical care provided by the government. Private medical centers are quite popular in big cities in Russia, but Gorno-Altai with its 80 000 dwellers cannot boast a variety of those. Even if there were plenty, most of the locals would not be able to afford their services.

The Kuree visitors' demography is predominantly female, aged 25-50, sometimes with kids (or coming to ask for their kids). There were also several men, all of them middle-aged or elderly. Lamas do not advertise their services: they rely on the word-of-mouth and social network temple account posts<sup>183</sup> (Appendix 3). Thus, most of the people who came for a massage claimed to have heard about it from their friends/family who found this treatment effective. Andrei Lama did about 3-6 massage sessions each day, and I could attest to how tiresome it could be. I could not but notice a kind of a national subdivision: Russian patients usually come to Andrei Lama (also Russian by his looks), while the Altai come to Mergen Lama, their fellow countryman. Still, since Mergen Lama is not always in the temple, some of the Altai visitors turned to Andrei Lama for help, showing no signs of distrust. And vice versa - some of the Russian visitors, for example, a family couple from Barnaul city, were coming to see Mergen Lama and Aram Lama specifically.

The medical services do not come for free. Even though to the Ak-Burkhan community, money is not something to hide or to be ashamed of (they are used directly in Sagaalgan ritual for prosperity, for instance), the temple status still imposes certain restrictions. Just as in the Orthodox churches, the fees are gathered as donations. Typically, patients ask about the price, and the Lama says something like: 'People usually give N rubles'. Money for the massage and other treatments is either given to the Lama, or is put directly at the altar<sup>184</sup>, just

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Vkontakte social network. (2017). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_5091](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_5091).

<sup>182</sup> The Su Jok therapy was developed quite recently - in 1987, in South Korea (About Su Jok. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://www.sujok.ru/ru/su-dzhok/o-metode>).

<sup>183</sup> For instance, this one – about Emchi Lamas and their professional skills: '*The medical practice became widespread in the region thanks to the Emchi Lama Mergen Shagaev's efforts*' (A public post on the Burkhanist temple page in the Vkontakte social network. (2019). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_7890](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_7890)).

<sup>184</sup> Oddly enough, I felt some kind of resentment when I was told to put the money for one of the rituals on the altar. I suppose that it comes from the Orthodox churches' tradition of strictly separating money and sacred objects. The church shops selling candles, icons, etc. are organized just as any other shops, with price markers on goods. However, those are considered not as 'prices' but as 'the recommended amount of donation in return'. Thus, a purchase by function is not a purchase by name. Money does not even come to touch the church products: there are two different zones at the cashier, one - for money, another one – for goods that switch owners. Even though I am not Christian by faith, I must have absorbed this attitude of separating money (as lay, low, profane) and objects of the cult (high, moral, spiritual).

like the ritual offerings and gratitude for spiritual help. The pricing policy is sparingly suitable for a small provincial town – Mergen Lama’s sessions in Saint-Petersburg cost four times as much. Nevertheless, this practice grants Lamas a vital source of income, which is partly appropriated by them to sustain their own living, partly spent to pay the temple bills. By and large, financial flows of Lamas and the temple ones seem to be almost merged. One reason for this is that Lamas cannot make a decent living and uphold the community solely by tending to the needs of their flock, and the other reason is that the local government does not provide any assistance in building new temples, having advised the Ak-Burkhan leaders to ask local businesses for help. Therefore, the community can count only on themselves while dealing with financial matters, both in personal life and in supporting Buddhism throughout the Republic.

Rituals cost money, too, but in this case, the ‘pricing’ is more voluntary and therefore less predictable. The list of *sutras* and rituals that can be served in the temple (no prices mentioned) greets visitors on the porch, right before the entrance to the hall (Appendix 6/ Photos 1-2). Due to the fact that the temple occupies a house with one spacious room, rituals, massage sessions and tea-drinking are performed under one roof, often - all at the same time. The temple is clearly zoned – the sacred part to the far end of the room is a bit lifted up and marked by the long altar; the tea corner mingled with a small shop is to the left, and the patient zone with a tall medical couch is situated to the right. The Lamas explained that if a ritual or healing requires privacy, they ask everyone to wait outside. Of course, this rule is hard or even impossible to respect in winters.

All in all, people come for medical help more often than for rituals, and more often for rituals than for the individual praying in the temple. As one of the Lamas explained me, *‘Well, by our, Altai, standards, if a Lama does not know practical things, he is generally considered a charlatan or illiterate. So there is no point in contacting him, no point in communicate with him in any way. Asians have such an idea, at least. That is, if one is a Lama, then one must predict, foresee something, stop some blows of fate, do some kind of salutary prayers so that someone will recover. If you just preach some incomprehensible things, they say: well, he is just a chatterbox, this man. Not serious at all, you see’*. In other words, the locals expect certain practical help with their everyday needs: illnesses, divinations, seeking of the lost, horoscopes. The Lamas do all of that, even though there is only one of them who confirmed having visions and can therefore rely not only on the Buddhist ‘arsenal’, but also on his own (super)natural wits. And people do come – for *zurhai*<sup>185</sup> divinations, for evil spirit protection, for

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I would hypothesize that the attitude towards money which I witnessed in the Ak-Burkhan temple is influenced by both Orthodox Christianity and Altai traditions regarding ownership and wealth (more about it in e.g. Tyuhteneva, 2011).

<sup>185</sup> *Zurhai* (horoscope) is a Mongolian-Tibetan astrological system, which is a part of the Buryat datsan Lama course. When using *zurhai*, Lama asks the visitor for the full name and date of birth on the basis of which, according to the special book, gives practical hints, such as which clothes are favorable to wear, which elements are better to avoid, etc. (Ekeev, Torbokov, 2018, p. 93). I have heard from one of the Ak-Burkhan active members that the books which are used for *zurhai* divination are *sutras* (my interlocutor was not specific in this regard) and ‘Sudur

purification and spiritual help (Appendix 6/Photos 1-2). Some are reluctant to visit the venue in person (especially those high-ranked in state service, as I have been told), and Lamas go to their houses themselves.

This small detail clearly shows that even though religion is finding its way back to people's thoughts and to city streets after the years of the communist party regime, the caution and anxiety surrounding it are yet here to stay. As a native Russian, I suppose I can somehow relate to the desire to hide one's religious identity. Religion is no longer prosecuted, but it is not the default option. Rather, religion is something people either mock ironically or do not speak about – even though more and more religious people are taking discussions about their faith to the public. However, this is mostly true regarding Christianity – esoteric-minded people are not so shy to discuss their worldview. In case of the Altai officials reluctant to demonstrate their religious affiliation, there might be more factors at stake: from the questions of nationalistic agenda and political influence to the unconscious habit of hiding religious feelings dating back to the Soviet times<sup>186</sup>.

The rituals that are conducted in the Ak-Burkhan temple are predominantly Tibetan Buddhist. Lamas use ritual objects such as vajra, ereken (japamala, or prayer beads), ghanta (sacred bell) and le bum (activity vase), and read appropriate sutras in Tibetan, sometimes translating to Russian or Altai for supplicants to follow the whole procedure. In a one-to-one interview with a Russian Lama, I asked him to perform a small ritual for me. We agreed on a first part of a purification cycle. The Lama used zurhai horoscope to check which problems I might face in the coming year and asked the saint guardians of the temple to ward these problems away, with the use of sutras, incense and a bell. Neither milk, nor white/yellow ribbons or chanting in Altai language were involved. I found it important to pay attention to because it was one of my first visits to the temple, and I expected to see something directly taken from the 1904 Burkhanist rituals. It took me much more time to gain a more subtle

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Bichik' [*'судур бичик*]. Sudur Bichik is a 'book of teachings' in Altai folklore, a curious amalgam of the Buddhist 'sutra' ('sudur') and Altai heroic epos (Torbokov, 2017). The Ak-Jaŋ followers, at least, one of them, is reported to call the letters she receives from the sky 'Sudur Bichik', much to the other religious groups' aggravation (Tadina, 2013).

People who use zurhai to tell fortunes are called '*zurhaichy*'. According to the information from the Ak-Burkhan temple public page, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century '*zurhaichy*' were called '*sudurchy*', because they used Sudur Bichik (*У сойонов (ред. – старое наименование тувинцев среди алтайцев и хакасов), что жили за рекой Чулышман, были гадатели – судурчы (ред. – речь идёт о буддийских астрологах – зурхайчи) [The Soyons (ed. - the old name of Tuvans among the Altai and Khakassians) who lived beyond the Chulyshman River had fortune-tellers - sudurchi (ed. – the same as the Buddhist astrologers - zurkhaichi)]*) (A public post on the Burkhanist temple page in the V Kontakte social network. (2017). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_5266](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_5266)).

<sup>186</sup> There is even more to it, I reckon. The city folklore takes bizarre forms, and one of the stable variations of it are rumors of the high-ranked officials seeking help from a shaman healer or esoteric witch. These stories are told about politicians everyone knows and especially those who emit an aura of awe (Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, Sergei Kuzhugetovich Shoigu). I have heard such stories from the shamanist in the Mul'ta village, and I was not particularly surprised to find them spreading in the Ak-Burkhan temple.

understanding of the role of Burkhanism in the contemporary Ak-Burkhan community.

One of the Lamas told me that at first, they were trying to copy the Buryat rites as closely as they could (Tibet is too far away for any full-value communication, and the connection with Tibetan Lamas is severely undermined by the political situation). Later they started to seek their own way by implementing Altai traditions and Burkhanist rites. For example, during the Saagalgan<sup>187</sup> (the New Year) celebration that always attracts a lot of people, Lamas greeted their colleague upon returning home from the international conference in Mongolia with *hadak* (an Altai traditional belt made of long strip of cloth (Toboeva, 2014, p. 120), and some people exchanged brought along hadaks with that Lama after the ceremony.

Another Burkhanist influence was praying in Altai on the second day of Sagaalgan. Sagaalgan is celebrated in February together with the Turkic-Mongolian *Chaga-Bairam* [Чараа-Байрам in Altai]<sup>188</sup>, and is typically divided into two parts – the first one, purification, starts after solemn hurals<sup>189</sup> and continues up to the New Year's Eve, and the second one, benevolence, starts in the morning of the first day of the New Year. In the Ak-Burkhan temple, during the 2020 Sagaalgan which I witnessed (23-24 February 2020), the purification part of the rite was conducted in Russian and in Tibetan, and the benevolence part was held mostly in Altai and in Tibetan. Not only was the Lama talking in Altai on the second day and Russian – on the first, but the Tibetan chants themselves were interspersed with Altai Burkhanist songs.

This is a singular case highlighting a general trend: the Altai/Burkhanist rituals and songs are intertwined with the Gelug/Mongolian rituality and, sometimes, act as a substitute of the latter. A lucid example of the substitution process is the 'Ak-Sumer' Ongudai community ([https://vk.com/ak\\_sumer](https://vk.com/ak_sumer)). The head of the Ak-Sumer Kure, Soltoi Tugudin, belongs to the 'inner circle' of the Ak-Burkhan Lamas and plays a significant role there (he also moderates the

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<sup>187</sup> Sagaalgan ([*Сагаалган*] in Russian, [*Tsagaan Sar*] in Mongolian) is a Buryat-Mongolian Lunar New Year celebration, originating in Tibetan Buddhism and Dzungar calendar cycle rituals (Kushnerik, Moiseev, 2004, pp. 25-26).

<sup>188</sup> This too causes quite some misunderstanding. The Chaga-Bairam is called 'a national Altai celebration' and is honored in villages and cities as a big feast and performances. In Gorno-Altai, the central city square is all flooded with people watching the show, sponsored by the local government. The Burkhanists, however, are not present there. On the one hand, they consider Sagaalgan to be a part of, or even equal to Chaga-Bairam. On the other hand, they are cautious as to become too visible – to arrange a procession, etc. Such actions, if not sanctioned by the government, in the worst-case scenario might be prosecuted as a crime against freedom of religion. Even though a sanction from the local government is not impossible to be obtained, it requires much time and effort. Therefore, there are, in fact, two celebrations on the same day, and of the same nature: Chaga-Bairam, financed by the government and noticed by many, and Sagaalgan, held by the Ak-Burkhan community and noticed by few (New Year's holiday Chaga-Bairam in Gorno-Altai. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://gorno-altai.ru/obshchestvo/novogodnij-prazdnik-chaga-bajram-v-gorno-altajske>).

<sup>189</sup> A hural, or khural is a type of elected government in Mongolia and Buryatia (something like an assembly of deputies). It is also used to describe a specific type of the Mongolian Buddhist worship. The Ak-Burkhan Lamas used it to refer to the significant Buddhist celebrations and prayers that are performed communally.

Altai-Oirot society public page in the VKontakte social network). However, his status in the Ak-Sumer community is not of Tibetan Buddhist origin, but of a Burkhanist one. Soltoi Tugudin is called ‘jarlykchi’ – a title given to the White Faith religious leaders of 20th century. Soltoi cannot conduct Buddhist rites because he lacks both necessary Buddhist vows and traditional datsan education, but he helps people with Altai Burkhanist rituals instead.

Such an implementation of Altai rituals into the Buddhist core is a clearly noticeable trend developing within Altai Buddhism/Burkhanism. It is undoubtedly fascinating on its own, and yet it serves to provide a space for another curious implementation. The fact that Altai Burkhanism and Tibetan Buddhism of Buryatia are equaled ‘theologically’ creates an opportunity for a reverse reading: the Buddhist rituals are taken and used alongside Burkhanist (in this context – shamanist) activities. The shaman from Gorno-Altai incorporating Buddhist imaginary into his rituals, the visit to whom I described in chapter two, is one of examples of such behavior. There could be one more reason for such mutual tolerance: given the spirits truly exist<sup>190</sup> and might be visible to some people, then both shamans and Burkhanists are dealing with them, albeit through different means and often pursuing different goals. My temple interlocutors (Lamas) confirmed welcoming shamans in the temple<sup>191</sup> and visiting shaman sites and even doing some rituals together, but only those where no animal is hurt – even though Lamas confirmed eating meat and using milk for their rituals, some of which are closely tied up with the local traditions of the calendar cycle<sup>192</sup>.

Sagaalgan is indeed the culmination of the Ak-Burkhan community religious excitement of the year. I witnessed people coming from remote villages<sup>193</sup> to visit Lamas, to be treated and purified and to ask for help on behalf of their relatives (sometimes, without them knowing about it). For instance, one elderly woman came with a case of her grandson’s depression – at that moment, he lived in Moscow and graduated from the prestigious university, but then began feeling worse, started to behave shy and reserved. The woman and the Lama talked in Altai language, but they used quite a lot of Russian words, and I was able to follow the communication thread. Yet another factor at play is the

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<sup>190</sup> Speaking of the evil: the Lamas assured me that evil spirits are indeed present in the world. Nevertheless, temple priests seldom do what might have been called ‘exorcism’, for it is usually the man who must set their own deeds right, not to blame the evil spirit’s influence. The Lamas spoke more about the basic karmic principle of causation than about saving people from the malevolent beings. Without doubt, this is what they also say to those coming to the temple for guidance.

<sup>191</sup> Chechesh Toboeva writes, “*When shamans become weak and their life energy wanes, they come to the Buddhist lamas for purification rituals. I witnessed it happening myself several times in the ‘Ak-Burkhan’ temple*” (Toboeva, 2014, p. 177).

<sup>192</sup> The most known and observed ones are Green Leaf Holiday [‘жажыл бүүр’], celebrated in spring, and Yellow Leaf Holiday [‘сары бүүр’] (Tadina, 2013), celebrated in autumn. The Green Leaf day was called ‘*The Dawn of the Grass*’ by the Ak-Burkhan Lamas, who also take part in these rituals of local origin.

<sup>193</sup> By ‘remote’ I mean a village 800 km away and from 500 to 1000 meters up in the mountains.

fact that both Aram Lama and Mergen Lama (Shiretui Lama and Khambo Lama) do not live in Gorno-Altai all the time – they spend nearly half of the year in Buryatia and Saint-Petersburg, respectively, so that when they come to the Ak-Burkhan temple, people are trying to see them while they still can. Sagaalgaan celebration is a temporal marker, a peak of the temple activity, with visitors coming and friends from the other cities joining the festivities. In 2020, for example, Aram Lama's student from Novosibirsk, Emchi Maxim came to Gorno-Altai to participate in the Sagaalgaan and to heal people with Tibetan herbs medicine and acupuncture. Three Gelug Buddhists from Barnaul (a big city in the Altai Region, very close to my hometown) also came, motivating their journey by the absence of a Gelug temple in Barnaul. Interestingly, for the biggest holiday of the year they have chosen neither staying in their city on their own nor joining other Buddhists groups (e.g. Karma Kagyu), but to travel four hours by car here, to the Altai Republic. They could have met the New Year in the Novosibirsk Gelug temple, which is bigger, older and is approximately the same distance from Barnaul, but they decided to go to Gorno-Altai instead. When asked about the reasons of such choice, they explained that they have organized several retreats in the Altai Republic and learned from Mergen Lama, - in other words, they already built a long-established relationship with the Ak-Burkhan Lamas.

Yet another group of temple visitors are those who come to talk about philosophy, religion and life (young people as well as older ones, men and women alike). The general concept maintained by the Lamas is that everyone can come to the temple and everyone has a right (and a possibility) to talk to the Lamas whenever they are free. Most often they are baptized Christians who seek answers to the existential questions outside of their institutional faith, or people claiming to be Buddhists yet not so deeply involved in Buddhism to become regular visitors. On the whole, people come to the temple on an occasional basis, from time to time, – those who require ritual services come when these services are needed, those who seek medical aid come when their back hurts, and those who come to talk come whenever they have free time and desire for it. One of the Lamas complained that people, both the Altai and Russians, are used to come to the temple only upon big holidays (Sagaalgaan being the biggest) or personal necessity, but not on a regular basis for clearing thoughts and ambitions.

The Ak-Burkhan temple is positioned as a place of healing and soul care, available for anyone. Several visitors pinpointed that the Lamas are always there for a talk, while Orthodox priests are distant and never to be found in the church. The Lamas, in turn, try to maintain this image by distancing themselves from politics and concentrating on the everyday people's needs and on the Buddhist routine. This has resulted in interesting implications of the temple status – from what I have been able to see and feel, the temple is more a place of a functional value for the community than a sacred place.

This contrast comes from the comparison with the Russian Orthodox Church. Although providing various kinds of experiences (audio, visual, material, smell, etc.) to the parishioners, the church is mostly perceived as a special place

by the Russians; a place where people come on the peak occasions of their life (birth, death, wedding, etc.) and to become closer to the God and saints, to 'absorb' the sacredness. Of course, the Orthodox Christians also carry their everyday needs to the church, placing candles and paying for the prayers for their close ones. But they do not receive massage sessions in the church building (at least, not in any Orthodox Church that I ever heard of), as well as their behaviour changes to the more uptight and tense mode when they cross the church's threshold – something that I seldom observed happening to the Ak-Burkhan members. I believe that the juxtaposition of the Orthodox Church and the Ak-Burkhan temple is a relevant observation, because the Orthodox Christians form the majority of the religious people of the Altai Republic, and their attitudes to the sacred/profane matter, even though this is not something that is directly shared by the Ak-Burkhan members<sup>194</sup>.

The Altai Karma Kagyu community's distinction of the sacred/profane, on the other hand, seemed to resemble the behaviour I observed in the Ak-Burkhan temple. Their retreat centre combines physical and spiritual practices, and the room for the meditation sessions is both a functional place and a space for the ways of spiritual ascension. In that regard, the verge between the sacred and profane in their community is not just ethereal and translucent, it is non-existent anymore<sup>195</sup>. It is important to specify once more, that I am talking here about the attitudes to the places of religious worship: the Ak-Burkhan temple, the Orthodox churches, the Karma Kagyu retreat centre inner rooms.

I have already mentioned that the Ak-Burkhan temple has several zones, all under one roof: the medical one, with a couch, the 'talking' one, where a table with tea stands, and the ritual one, which is further in the room and contains Buddha statues and mandala. This last zone is what both Lamas and visitors perceive as sacred in their actions and talks, but the rest of the temple serves more for the purposes of meet-and-talk, thus bringing the like-minded congregation together even more.

The Ak-Burkhan community is well-present in a social network which is most popular in Russia, 'InContact' [ВКонтакте]. One of the Ak-Burkhan community members creates most of the posts, and in doing so he relies mostly on academic sources and community live photos. Contacts with media and with other Buddhists (either foreign delegations coming or temple Lamas visiting

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<sup>194</sup> Here, I follow Nancy Ammerman's ideas on spiritual practices in the everyday life: '*The things named as spiritual practices by our participants are not merely habits and are not undertaken without some sense of agency, and they do often reflect the imprint of institutions that give them shape. They often lie at the creative tension between structuring patterns and individual agency*' (Ammerman, 2013, p. 57).

<sup>195</sup> This is very close to the results of Coleen McDanell's observations of the American Christians. She writes: '*Christian commitments, musical taste, economic achievement, and domestic stability - none of these elements can be easily separated from the other*' (McDannell, 1995, p. 16). In this quote, she listed things that she found present in the religious lives of the Christians from her case studies; if I were to formulate the same list based on my own research, I would include 'functionality' (in terms of finding solutions to the mundane, everyday needs), the 'concern for the spiritual development', and the 'search for the self-identification'.

Mongolia or India) are not on the day-to-day basis, but also not very scarce. By and large, the 'Ak-Burkhan' religious organization can boast if not a significant, but at least some media presence – apart from their public page in the social network VKontakte, they are also introduced on the Republic's official website and are from time to time mentioned in the local press. Lamas can be called public persons, and while their communication with journalists, authorities, researchers and other types of 'external visitors' is not yet routinised, they are already getting used to it. Their publicity among the local dwellers might, however, be lower than they would like it to be. Only two people out of six that my colleague Sergey Vityaev and I asked about the datsan confirmed that they were aware of its existence (one of them also happened to be an Orthodox church servant). Others, among whom were two Altai young women, a bus driver and a bus conductor, told us that they do not even know that this Buddhist temple is there in the city they live, let alone its exact location.

## Buddhism? Burkhanism? Shamanism?

*“How does the White Burkhan being the main deity of Burkhanism correspond to your faith in Buddha?” – a student asked during the group meeting with the Ak-Burkhan Lamas.*

The Lama smiled, *“Do not you dare say that Burkhan is not a god in front of the old country lady! She will just beat you on the spot”*<sup>196</sup>.

Group visit to the Ak-Burkhan temple,  
11 September 2020  
Gorno-Altai, Russia

In the first chapter, I gave an overview of the origins of Burkhanism; in the second, I briefly described how Burkhanism is represented in the present-day Altai Republic, and by different people. This chapter started with the history of the Ak-Burkhan community and continued with my first-hand observations on the community's everyday life. Burkhanism was constantly mentioned throughout the text, sometimes as an opposition to shamanism, sometimes as a synonym for Tibetan Buddhism, but most often, on its own. I am aware that such a variety of information could not but cause certain misunderstandings, unavoidable as much as they are unwelcomed. What is it about Burkhanism in the Ak-Burkhan community, if almost all they say and do is Tibetan Buddhism

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<sup>196</sup> The dialogue in Russian:

[- Подскажите, пожалуйста, как Белый Бурхан как главное божество коррелирует с верой в Будду?

- Не скажите только при бабушке из деревни, что Бурхан не бог! Она вас побьет (смеется).]

in Buryat reading? And how exactly is Burkhanism connected to shamanism, when the one community claims Burkhanist legacy for Buddhism, and the other one uses the same Burkhanist songs for esoteric practices?

While in the previous chapters I tried to systematize the information on Burkhanism accumulated through field research, academic literature and media discourse analysis, in the paragraph below I am analyzing the role Burkhanism plays in the community of my close attention – the Ak-Burkhan temple Lamas and laity. Such a summary seems especially helpful in view of the fourth, concluding chapter that is devoted to the questions of religious revival in the Altai Republic.

### Burkhanism of the past

As follows from the first chapter, Burkhanism is the past of the Altai peoples. It is a phenomenon from the past, at least, partially, and it belongs to a certain historical period: the beginning of the 20th century, the legacy of animism and Buddhism of the Dzungar Khanate, the reign of the Russian Empire over the region and, later, of the Soviets. Therefore, people's opinions on the particular matter from past are separated neither from their attitudes to the surrounding historical narratives, nor from their present interests and visions of the future. Burkhanism poses no exemption.

Narratives of the Burkhanist past are constructed differently by almost all the interested parties involved: scholars are speculating over its origins and nature, the Ak-Jar community (reportedly) deliberately does not focus on the events of 1904, while the Ak-Burkhan Lamas are interweaving it with their story of Altai Buddhism. Thus, the jarlykchi of 1904 who proclaimed the eschatological arrival of the White Burkhan were, according to my temple interlocutors, no one else but Lamas who rose on the wave of Buddhism restoration. When asked about the origins of Burkhanism, the Lama I spoke with began his story with the history of Buddha himself. What stroke me as noteworthy was not exactly the manner in which he retold the story of Buddha, but the fact that he originated Burkhanism in Buddhism directly, in both temporal and ideological continuity.

Thus, Chet Chelpan's role and the revelations his daughter and he received were not considered as a ground-breaking, new-order-establishing event by the Ak-Burkhan Lamas. My respondents even seemed to be not so well aware of the exact meaning of Chelpan's revelations<sup>197</sup>, or not willing to elaborate

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<sup>197</sup> *'What do you think about Chet's revelation on killing cats? Why would they hate cats back then?'*, I asked the Lama who sat at the most venerable place in the temple, right near the altar.

*'Well... that was not exactly about killing cats. We like cats! I don't know why he would have put it that way. You see, there were a lot of so-called prophets, and Chet was one of them. Not that all his revelations are to be taken seriously', the Lama answered, sounding not entirely confident.*

[In Russian:

on that part of the story – the latter being more than understandable given that Chelpan’s visions did not hint much at Buddhism. This way, the Ak-Burkhan community leaders consider the history of Burkhanism as an integral part of the global history of Buddhism, with the local traditions and ‘superstitions’ [*суеверия*] added on top<sup>198</sup>.

The members of the community who have been entrusted with the task of presenting the community in public (‘the voices of the community’, so to speak) coin various ways of highlighting this idea, extensive usage of an academic discourse being the most notable of them. The Lamas (some of them more than others...) are keen on resorting to scholarly works on Burkhanism to demonstrate their point, and the community is quite active in the academic field: at least two of the small group of Burkhanists are well-educated researchers with a degree (Chechesh Toboeva and Archin Torbokov). Extensively cited in this thesis Archyn Torbokov has written a paper on ‘Buddhist terms in Burkhanist lexicon (6-13th centuries)’ (2017). The excerpts from this paper are cited on the Ak-Burkhan’s public page in the social network<sup>199</sup>, among extracts from other academic books and papers and live photos of the community events. Previously, before 2016, Chechesh Toboeva also participated in publicizing the Burkhanist society (I even suspect that it was her who started the public webpage). However, her ways with the rest of the community have parted since then.

The history of Burkhanism is also a story of loss. The memory of Revolution and Stalin repressions is still bitterly vivid among the Altai (and among the Old Believers) – it was their culture that suffered, their language that waned and their sacred objects that were either ‘voluntarily’ gifted to the museums or hidden in houses/buried until better times<sup>200</sup>. A lot of shrines and

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— *Что Вы скажете относительно заповеди Чета «убивать кошек»? Чем кошки-то им тогда помешали?* — спросила я нашего собеседника, ламу, сидящего на самом почетном месте в храме.

— *Ну, как вам сказать..., - мешкает с ответом лама. Видно было, что его этот вопрос поставил в тупик. —Тогда много было пророков, время было такое. Каждый что-то свое говорил. Не надо так уж смотреть на то, что говорил именно Чет, он же один из многих.*]

<sup>198</sup> Even though the present-day Ak-Burkhan Sangha experiences a state of turmoil, both parties involved seem to be consent on this matter. As Chechesh Toboeva writes in her book, ‘It seems to me that “Burkhan-Jarj” can be considered not so much as a new religious movement, but as a novel ideology of the existing worldviews basis – as a syncretic mixture of Buddhism and elements of the traditional beliefs’ (Toboeva, 2014, p. 15).

<sup>199</sup> Such as these posts, for example:

Представляем Вашему вниманию ещё одну научную статью Арчына "Буддийские термины в бурханистской лексике: заимствования древнетюркской эпохи (VI-XIII вв.)" [We present another academic article by Archyn "Buddhist terms in Burkhanist vocabulary: borrowings of the ancient Turkic era (VI-XIII centuries)"]. (2017). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_6139](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_6139);

СУДУР-БИЧИК [SUDUR BICHIK]. (2019). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_8001](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_8001).

<sup>200</sup> The ‘better times’ are not mentioned here as a figure of speech. Talking to the Altai Lamas at the temple I noticed how they pinpointed, ‘*Now is different time, we can practice our faith now*’, ‘*Those were tough times*’ (about the Soviet epoch). Chechesh Toboeva also specifically mentions ‘times’ in her book, ‘Buddhist lamas of the Ak-Burkhan community revived the Teaching of Burkhan-Bakshi. *Different times has come (cursive by Ch.T.)*. The ethnos is being renewed.’ [*Буддийские ламы общины Ак-Бурхан возродили Учение Бурхан-Бакши. Сейчас*

sacred places were also lost, deserted if not destroyed. The reconstruction of the past is, at least partially, the reconstruction of their own self, their kin and ways of life. This line of thinking helps to understand the grasping attention that has been paid by the Altai intellectuals to the archeological evidence of the past. In both Chechesh Toboeva's and Archyn Torbokov's historical overviews the part on the lost and found Buddhist relics is featured prominently among the direct accomplishments of the Ak-Burkhan community (Toboeva, 2014; Ekeev, Torbokov, 2018).

For example, in 2002, a small wooden casket was found in the Ongudai district; the casket contained 'a Tibetan book of prayers, ritual bells, rosary, ritual staff, two stone lion figures and figurines of deities made of lapis lazuli'<sup>201</sup>. Such findings are widely used by the Burkhanists of the Ak-Burkhan temple to prove factually that Buddhism is indeed an ancient faith of the Oirat peoples. Another significant finding, the *syul'de of Amyr-Sanaa* [Сюльдэ Амыр-Санаа]<sup>202</sup>, was found in 2018 in the south of the Altai Republic. The *syul'de* discovery was widely circulated in press<sup>203</sup> and resulted in a series of events and rituals in commemoration of Amyr-Sanaa<sup>204</sup>. Those findings, whether they are attributed to the heroic figures of Buddhism and Oirotia (e.g. Lama Boor<sup>205</sup> and Amyr-Sanaa, respectively), or demonstrated as palpable evidence of the past, are not only *authenticating* the Buddhist presence in the region, but also reminding the Altai national minority of their shared history<sup>206</sup>.

In Chechesh Toboeva's metaphorical prose (2014), these stories are given the shape of personal experience – a story happened to a concrete person who shares it with the reader within direct speech quotation marks. It is almost a

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*настали другие времена. Обновляется содержание этноса'.]* (Toboeva, 2014, p. 15). I cannot speculate about this distinctive turn of phrase, for I lack the knowledge on the Altai-Russian dialect. However, I find this observation extremely interesting, as it clearly resembles the eschatological mood of the early, 1904 Burkhanism.

<sup>201</sup> Residents of the Altai Republic found a box with Buddhist relics in the mountains. (2002). Retrieved from: <https://credo.press/16186/>

<sup>202</sup> *Syul'de* is a *bunchuk* (horsetail) pommel in the form of a spear. The *syul'de* found in 2018 in Altai was very well-preserved and ornate, thus alluding to a high status of its owner who lived at

<sup>203</sup> Local newspapers also provided a vivid explanation of the semi-mythical figure of Amyr-Sanaa (*Syul'de of Amyr-Sanaa found in Altai*). (2018). Retrieved from: <https://altaicholmon.ru/2018/03/26/syulde-amyr-sanaa-nashli-na-altae/>).

<sup>204</sup> The Altai *syul'de* of Khan Amyr-Sanaa was worshipped in Buryatia. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://altai-info.com/novosti/14982-obryad-pokloneniya-naydenomu-na-altae-syulde-hana-amyr-sanaa-proveli-v-buryatii.html>.

<sup>205</sup> A scholar and Buddhist Lama who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Ekeev, Torbokov, 2018; Torbokov, 2015).

<sup>206</sup> The 'hidden treasure' stories shared by my Altai interlocutors were often similar to the 'terma' revelations of Tibet (Gayley, 2007). An elderly temple visitor, a Lama, and a young Ak-Burkhan community member told me about the ancient texts (sutras), a statue of Buddha, and other elements of Burkhanist/Buddhist that were hidden during the times of repressions and were either revealed to someone worthy, or still lie buried in the ground and waiting for the right time to come to be found. In these stories, the sacred things are given a hint of their own agency, even though they are usually bound by a prophecy, or a system of signs foretold by a respect and well-known figure.

*'bylichka'* [*'быличка'*] – a specific type of spirit stories in Russian folklore, where otherworldly encounters are told to have happened with someone close (if not the teller themselves). The news about archeological discoveries is celebrated by many, Russians and Altai alike. Nevertheless, listening to the monologues of my Altai interlocutors I felt something more personal related to these findings. Something that, much to my disappointment, I have not been able to grasp in its entirety.

To the Altai part of the Ak-Burkhan community, the history of Burkhanism cannot be separated from the history of their people. Still, the past stands not only for nation and state. Past means family. This is what provides the strongest connection of Burkhanism's past to its present, and this is what means much more to the Altai people than it does to Russians (according to my research experience). I have heard more stories of the continuity of generations and family heirlooms from my informants and seen more related posts on the communities online account than I can ever describe. Altai interlocutors discussed their family trees, kin (*seök*) relatives and countrymen. The Lamas told me about their ancestors who were Burkhanist and studied in Mongolia<sup>207</sup>, about their inherited shamanist abilities and close relatives (grandparents and parents) who brought them up in respect for the traditions of their motherland. They mention it on the public community account, too. From the social network posts I learned that Sarymai Urchimaev's last will was to be cremated as his ancestor Barnul Madayev, exiled together with his family for Buddhist religious activity in the early 1900s, and that one of Aram Lama's ancestors visited Mongolia and was killed during the Revolution, and another one managed to move and hide but was always praying in Burkhanist custom, with milk and tea, and uttered mantras<sup>208</sup>. These stories and many more others – I have heard them numerous times, but I am bound to confess that I was not able to fully comprehend them. It is only after I read texts by Altai scholars and about Altai people that I started to realize, that kin and family mean much more to them than they do to the average Russian. I can see now, that even though we spoke the same language, we had different things in mind<sup>209</sup>. Chechesh Toboeva writes, *'Take a look back at our centuries-old Ways. Study and analyze, do not waste time on those who have not figured it out about themselves, those who cannot overcome pride, egoism (ignorance), who do not know their history, traditions and customs'* [*'Оглянитесь на исторический Путь народа на протяжении столетий. Изучайте и анализируйте, не теряйте время на тех, кто сам в себе не разобрался, не*

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<sup>207</sup> He told me that, *'кто-то проходил в Монголии в монастырях маленько обучение... У меня прадед учился... ну, его брат. Такие люди были, которые... И вот они брали на себя роль вестников'* [*'Some people had a little training in monasteries in Mongolia ... My great-grandfather studied there ... well, his brother did. There were such people who ... who took on the role of messengers'*].

<sup>208</sup> A story about Burkhanism in Altai and the current Maima Shiretui Lama's ancestors. (2015). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/wall-65760886\\_2892](https://vk.com/wall-65760886_2892)

<sup>209</sup> I have already mentioned that the Altai people still mostly know their kin (*seök*). This kind of bonds are non-existent in the community of my origin, and quite often I found myself impatiently waiting for the end of the kinship stories. It was an unconscious desire to avoid something that I cannot fully refer to.

может преодолеть в себе гордыню, эгоизм (омраченность сознания), не знает своей истории, традиций и обычаев’] (Toboeva, 2014, p. 175). This blood-and-land-kinship connects the Burkhanism-from-the-past to the Burkhanism-in-the-present.

## Burkhanism of the present

The policy of the Soviet religious prosecution and, to a much lesser extent, Christian proselytism of the Russian Empire undermined the process of generational succession of Altai traditions and culture. Thus, those of the rites and ‘superstitions’ that survived are intermingled between different lines of religiosity: shamanism, Burkhanism and Buddhism. The Altai people are trying to find their own place in this spiritual melting pot, but above all, they are trying to preserve their language and cultural behavior patterns that were observed in their family and in the family of their parents. Therefore, the implementation of Burkhanism rites to Buddhism and Buddhist/Burkhanist symbolism to shamanism is hardly surprising. According to an Altai scholar I spoke with, Burkhanism/Buddhism is most widespread in the north, near the capital. In the villages to the southern and central part, people either call themselves ‘pagans’ (clearly a Christian influence) or Burkhanists/Shamanists; their rituals being similar to those that the Ak-Burkhan Lamas are interspersing between Buddhist dogmatic teachings.

The Gelug Buddhism division into mundane, lay worship and monastic, scholarly worship serves well to nurture these local Burkhanist adoptions in the body of the Gelug Buddhism. The Ak-Burkhan Lamas told me about it straight and plain. They fully realize that the complex of Altai folk beliefs is to a large extent disconnected from the ‘true Buddhism’ they were taught, and refer to it as to ‘a peculiarity of local mentality’ [‘особенность местного менталитета’]. The idea of the difference between ‘folk’ religion and ‘Buddhism taught in datsan’ has a direct impact on the temple’s everyday practice: as one of the Lamas confirmed, with a bit of a bitter smile, ‘*What is lama worth without divinations?*’ [‘Надо, чтобы лама гадал. А так – что за лама?’]. He continued by explaining that what people generally believe in and what he was taught in datsan for a Lama title might not be the same system of beliefs, but that it is not his responsibility to ‘make things right’. He sees his calling in aiding those who seek help, as well as in spreading Buddhism and restoring its rightful place in the hearts and minds of his fellow landmen.

As mentioned above, not only Lamas, but also shamans can help people, as well as jarlykchi and ‘neme biler kizhi’ (‘people who know’ [‘неме билер кижн’])<sup>210</sup>. Who of them are Burkhanists? Those who consider themselves to be ones. Typically, Lamas and jarlykchi (the title that was given to the Burkhanist ‘clergy’ in 1904) are called Burkhanists, while shamans and ‘neme biler kizhi’

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<sup>210</sup> Chechesh Toboeva distinguishes between these four categories (Toboeva, 2014, p. 175), and she is not the only one to do so (Doronin, 2013; Khvastunova, 2019a).

are more often described as ‘pagans’ or, unsurprisingly, shamans. However, these categories of spiritual authority can easily be merged: Soltoi Tugudin’s<sup>211</sup> position as jarlykchi<sup>212</sup> does not allow him to comfort his flock with Buddhist rites, but opens the path of the Burkhanist clergyman. Needless to repeat that he is a part of the Ak-Burkhan ‘inner circle’ and therefore, his actions are approved of by the community leaders. Besides, the Lama who confessed having visions in his childhood described his spiritual experience very similarly to what is frequently referred to as a ‘shaman illness’ (although he never spoke these words himself). Moreover, that Lama told me he knows a shaman closely enough and that he does not see any harm if people go to shamans for help<sup>213</sup>. Even though, he added momentarily, ‘*the shamans do some other things than we do*’<sup>214</sup>.

The mythology of the otherworldly realm and spiritual ontology of shamanism and Burkhanism have suffered the consequences of the forced Soviet oblivion. The ‘lore’ (the system of beliefs) is nowadays highly inconsistent and volatile. Younger Altai city dwellers and Russian Buddhists whom I met in the temple tend to use esoteric language, clearly influenced by the New Age, Paulo Coelho and Elena Blavatsky (maybe not fully consciously)<sup>215</sup>. Those of age (in their 30s and older) are seemingly more concerned about the practical matters of getting a positive impact on their life and health<sup>216</sup>. I have asked several people about the deities they believe in, and their replies, although quite comprehensive, were not univocal. They are referring to Ak-Burkhan in their prayers in the temple, but some of them also distinguished between *Uch-Kurbustan* and *Altai-Kudai* – or thought that Kudai is a title of a god in general, while Altai-Kudai is the God of the Altai land.

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<sup>211</sup> The Head of the Ak-Sumer Kuree ([https://vk.com/ak\\_sumer](https://vk.com/ak_sumer)) in Ongudai.

<sup>212</sup> Interestingly, jarlykchi today are mostly self-proclaimed. They used to be elected on the basis of their abilities and/or education back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but nowadays people who can boast any level of Buddhist vows are more likely to use the Buddhist institutionalized rank system. Therefore, jarlykchi can only be self-proclaimed and later acknowledged as such by the people coming for help.

<sup>213</sup> This situation reminds of the relationship between shamanism and Buddhism in Nepal.

<sup>214</sup> By saying this, the Lama meant that the Buddhist monks and the shamans have different relationships with spirits. As he explained to me later, the shamans ‘play with the spirits, while the Lamas rise above them’. Shamanists communication with the spiritual realm and its dwellers is a horizontal one, and even worse – eventually, a spirit will always find the way to get the best of the shaman, even though the latter might believe otherwise. The Lamas, on the other hand, ask spirits or command them, but never stand on the same level with them. Interestingly, Chechesh Lama writes about similar distinction between shamans and Lamas in her book (Toboeva, 2014).

<sup>215</sup> This is especially visible when talking about spirits and ‘spiritual energies’. Valentina Kharitonova shows in her works on neoshamanism how spiritual imaginary was influenced by the New Age and techno ideas (Kharitonova, 2016).

<sup>216</sup> During the Sagaalga, the middle-aged and elderly visitors (mostly female) were carefully placing white sweets and bottles of milk at the altar and collected them the other day of the celebration, in order to bring them home and receive good fortune from them. These white food offerings were considered ‘blessed’, because they stayed in the temple the whole night that the Lamas spent sleeplessly, reciting sutras and blowing the ritual horn; and there was no shortage of those willing to become closer to the ‘blessing’ through the food and drinks.

One of my interlocutors, a cheerful elderly lady, defined *Burkhans* as spirits ('eesi' ['ээси] – a spirit-master of the place or element; e.g. eesi of fire or eesi of mountains), in numbers and variety, and at the same time as spiritual teachers of refuge, as aspects of Buddha. Uch-Kurbustan, according to her, is someone (something?) more significant and more complex<sup>217</sup>. She also identified Altai Kudai as a god of the whole Altai land, just like three other people I talked to. The 1904 Burkhanist god-like figures 'yaiks' ['яики'] (sing. Yaik ['яик']) derived from the shamanist pantheon (D'yakonova, 2010) were never mentioned by my respondents.

Other shamanist beliefs (especially those regarding the spiritual realm), nevertheless, seem to stay imprinted in the lived religiosity. The elderly woman whom I cited in the paragraph above told me that spirits are numerous; if though there is one spirit of the water and one spirit of the mountains, there could very well be spirits of the local places, e.g. of a mountain pass or of healing springs. Malevolent spirits ('kōrmōs' ['көрмөс']) are mostly active on the old, waning moon – there is a widely-known shamanist custom to only communicate with the spirits ('to kam' ['камлать']) on the waxing crescent. The core ontological beings in shamanism, Erlic and Ul'gen, were almost never mentioned by the people I talked to. Interestingly, the Lamas of the Ak-Burkhan community neglected the role of Ul'gen among their recognized deities, for this entity is '*a shamanist one*'. This way, they neither confirmed they believe in Ul'gen's existence nor rejected it entirely<sup>218</sup>. Erlic, however, found a place in their Altai Buddhist cosmology: they spoke of him (it) as of a judge, a manifestation of the law of Karma. This piece of evidence is incredibly interesting, for, according to the literature and to the anthropological evidence of other scholars, it is usually Ul'gen that is associated with the white, the sky, the law; while Erlic is a god of shamans for its links with the underworld, the black and blood. It could be a mistake that Lamas made, having confused two unfamiliar names. However, it did not seem to be the case. A further research on contemporary folklore is needed in order to make this observation clearer.

The process of intermingling Buddhist deities and bodhisattvas and local gods in itself is no novelty: Mongolian and Dzungar 'Burkhan' and its variations were taken directly from Buddhism, as Burkhan means Buddha (D'yakonova, 2010). Under the influence of shamanism and local animistic beliefs, 'burkhans' started to be perceived as multiple gods/spirits<sup>219</sup>, and are still referred to as

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<sup>217</sup> She said, '*Those who are more spiritually advanced - Lamas, healers - those go to pray to him*' ['Уч-Курбустан – это уже более комплексное и большое. Кто более продвинутый духовно - ламы, целители, - те к нему'].

Interestingly, Nadezhda Tadina (2013) writes that some of the Ak-Jaŋ followers identify Uch-Kurbustan and Burkhan as the same God, the God of Sky.

<sup>218</sup> The Russian Lama acted as if he has never heard of this god – or as if he is genuinely uninterested. The Altai Lama sitting nearby, however, recognized Ul'gen and Erlic and confirmed that '*yes, we have those*'. Unfortunately, I did not manage to obtain more details from him, as he was in a haste to leave.

<sup>219</sup> Decembrist Nicolai Bestuzhev wrote in his ethnographic notes about Irkutst region in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century: 'In the middle of the valley there was a shrine with the Lamaist

multiple entities. Burkhanism of 1904, however, was built around the idea of the White Burkhan – one and only. This monotheistic idea together with eschatology of the time provided Nicolai Roerich who visited the Altai Mountains on his way to Tibet with an opportunity of regarding Burkhan as Buddha Maitreya (Roerich, 1974). From some indirect sources (occasional talks) I learned that the first generation of the Ak-Burkhan leaders were likely to be influenced by this idea. And indeed, on my blunt question, ‘Who is Ak-Burkhan?’ the Lamas answered, ‘Why, this is Buddha. A Mongolian/Oirot Buddha’. Still, there is yet another opinion on the matter.

The Ak-Burkhan temple is decorated with images of bodhisattvas and the ‘saint guardians’ of the Gelug school, to which the temple belongs: Avalokiteśvara, The Green Tara, Palden Lhamo, Vajrapāṇi, Mañjuśrī and... Ak-Burkhan. The White Burkhan, or the White Old Man [‘Сагаан Убэгээн’ in Buryat], was introduced to me as a guardian of nomads, protector of forests and animals, and the whole Altai land. The Lamas’ perception of this figure is interesting, for it is undoubtedly the White Old Man who was canonized in the Tibetan Buddhism in 18th century and is widespread in Buryat (Asalkhanova, 2012) and Kalmykian (Gazizova, 2018) Buddhism. Thus, I have been told that Ak-Burkhan is Buddha (*the Buddha*), and at the same time that he is the White Old Man. I believe that this incongruity has roots in the difference of Lamas’ education and background<sup>220</sup>. The Russian Lama who told me about the White Old Man, never used Altai language during his rituals, and was more inclined to develop within traditional Tibetan Buddhism and esoteric teachings. It is not that he was not aware of Burkhanism and its deities; it felt more as if he simply did not give it too much thought.

The Altai national culture inclusion into Buddhism is happening not only though intermingled mythologies and beliefs. In the ‘Everyday practice and rituals’ paragraph I mentioned that during Sagaalgan, the second part of the celebration was held in Altai language. Altai Lamas performed Tibetan chants and mantras together with Altai Burkhanist hymns. Interestingly, most of those Altai songs and prayers were taken<sup>221</sup> from the Soviet and 20th century ethnographic reports<sup>222</sup>. Some of these poems are structured as hymns (those that venerate Ak-Burkhan), others – as Altai national folklore pieces, ‘benevolence poems’ of wishing well and prosperity [‘алкыши’, in Altai; ‘благопожелания’ in Russian] (Minakova, 2012). The audience was clearly more captivated by praying in their native language than in Tibetan, and from time-

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gods - burkhans, and lamas settled around the shrine and dug a deep well nearby’ (cited by Chukovskaya, 1950).

<sup>220</sup> On the other hand, it could also stem from the ‘trikaya’ teaching (the concept of the three bodies of Buddha and the idea that Buddha can take many forms). Hence, theoretically, nothing prevents him from being the White Old Man as well.

<sup>221</sup> Also, Altaichy Sanashkin, Brontoi Beduyrov, Vladimir Kydyev and other Altai intellectuals of the 1990s have contributed greatly to collecting and publishing pieces of Altai folklore.

<sup>222</sup> Ak-Burkhan community’s special attitude towards academy and scholars became strikingly evident when the Lama started the welcoming speech with a thick abstract from the academic paper, claiming Tibetan Buddhism to be inherent to the Altai Mountains.

to-time people joined the choir, singing ‘*Op Kurui!*’ [‘Оп Күрүй’ in Altai]<sup>223</sup>. That scene, together with the revival of the *jarlykchi* position alongside with institutionalized Buddhist Sangha of Russia Lama titles demonstrates that to the Ak-Burkhan Sangha leaders, it is important to develop Altai Gelug Buddhism, not Gelug Buddhism of Mongolia, Tibet or even Buryatia.

## Chapter conclusion

The Ak-Burkhan community has changed its course several times over the almost three decades of its history. What started as an earnest attempt to revive Altai national culture and language, through appealing to the origins of the local religion, became a Tibetan Gelug temple with clearly observable allusions to the Altai national culture. Moreover, the Ak-Burkhan community has not been crystallized and fully institutionalized yet. The community’s public image and ideology are currently undergoing a period of active formation – the de-facto split of the community that happened after 2016 and became evident in 2020 confirms this statement with all clarity. The fact that the community has not yet created a sustainable narrative on its history also testifies to the said hypothesis of the ongoing period of formation.

The Ak-Burkhan temple in the capital of the Republic is used both as a meeting point and as a place for ritual ceremonies; people are visiting the temple for medical and spiritual treatment more often, than for praying and discussing Buddhist philosophy and dogmas. The Ak-Burkhan Lamas all have their individual stances on the matter of Burkhanism and Buddhism they practice, yet something can still be summarized to characterize the role of Burkhanism in their religious life and worldview.

Burkhanism as the past of the Altai peoples is seen by the community as a way of legitimizing the long and continuous history of Buddhism in the region. Burkhanism, therefore, is believed to be a local type of Buddhism, a step in the Buddhist history of the Altai people. The cornerstones of Burkhanism history are considered through the Buddhist frame (for instance, that the Tereng praying of 1904 was done by Lamas and that Chet Chelpan was trying to restore Buddhism). Thus, the Ak-Burkhan community leaders see their primary goal not in restoring Burkhanism in its historical ‘purity’, but in strengthening the Buddhism of the Gelug school, through appealing to the Buddhist/Burkhanist past of the Altai people. This process is undoubtedly a vital part of the religious and cultural revival in Altai, which started shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union and continues up to the present moment.

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<sup>223</sup> A special exclamation uttered during the ritual of blessing, most likely, of shamanist origins (Altai-Russian dictionary, 2018, p. 404).

## 4 Religious revival in the Altai Republic: religion in the making

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### Chapter overview

In this chapter, I explain what I mean by religious revival in Altai (thus touching upon the post-communist religious field) and communicate my observations on what people from Ak-Burkhan think about their mission and actions consciously and how are they choosing their decisions based on their aims and on the surrounding social environment.

In the first of the two paragraphs of the chapter ('The Altai Republic: post-Soviet context'), I briefly discuss the specifics of the post-communist religious revival and point out some common patterns and differences in how religion resurged after the rule of the Communist regime:

- the role of science and academic research,
- alternative healing,
- religion and identification.

In the second paragraph ('Ak-Burkhan: strategies of religious revival'), I go on with the case of the Altai Republic and the specifics of the Altai's religious revival. The paragraph starts with the theoretical implications on religious revival, strategies of religious revival, and discussion about the religious revival in the Altai Republic. Then, I proceed with elaborating on the strategic decisions of the Ak-Burkhan leadership, and on the four strategies of religious revival: 'national identification', 'sovereignty', 'making of religion', and 'legitimation'.

I constructed these strategic patterns of religious revival bottom-up, based on the material I gathered in the Altai Republic. They are formed by the conscious choices of the Ak-Burkhan community leaders, by the internal and external social environment factors, and by the goals the community leaders are striving to achieve.

#### *Related materials:*

- *Appendix 1.* Buddhist organizations of the Altai Republic, 2021.
- *Appendix 4.* The list of the Ak-Burkhan community founders.
- *Appendix 6 / Photos 1-13, 29-31.*

## The Altai Republic: post-Soviet context

*During one of our conversations over a teacup, Aram Lama told me about a curious incident that happened with him in some remote Altai village:*

- *Once, when I was visiting a village, in the south, a drunken fellow came to me and asked: 'Listen, brother, what is it that you believe in?'. Not waiting for me to answer, he continued: 'I pray like this: "White Burkhan, Earth and Sky, Genghis Khan – big brother", and it works hard, it does!'*
- *Well, - Aram Lama smiles slyly, reminiscing, - I told him: 'Yeah, I am about the same thing, something like that'.*

As much as my research is not centered around the post-communist axis, I feel bound to mention the Soviet legacy of the Altai Republic. By and large, everything of the present is a result of the past; in this regard, the Soviet legacy is discussed not only in this paragraph, but within the whole chapter. My attention here, however, is focused on the reception of the Soviet Union and the proclaimed sustainability of its social constructs.

In the following three paragraphs of this subchapter, I will describe three markers of the post-Soviet reality that are directly related to my topic: the post-Soviet legacy, the ethnic self-identification through religion and the post-Soviet attitude to the alternative healing – all referring to the Altai Republic. In the process of describing these aspects of life in Altai, I will introduce several concepts ('Homo soveticus'/ the Soviet man, the 'four Russias', the 'heterodox religiosity') that are useful in understanding the content (and context) of both this subchapter and the next, and final, one.

### (Post)soviet?

It has been a matter of a widespread academic discussion over the last 5-10 years that the sociopsychological type of a soviet man, 'Homo soveticus', or 'Simple Soviet man' (Levada, 1993), remains surprisingly persistent and here to stay (Kasamara, Sorokina, 2015; Workshop of the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2008). '**Homo soveticus**' is characterized as '*a person who has adapted to a repressive state, a person of double consciousness*', of '*negative identity and hierarchical totalitarianism*', and, according to Lev Gudkov, this state of mind is reproducing itself due to the continuous state oppression and lack of individual freedom (Gudkov, 2016). Given the current political situation in Russia (especially the 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution), these hypotheses might very well be true. It is also partly supported by Aleksandr

Agadjanian's work (2006) on the two overlapping patterns: '*a syndrome of missed modernity*' and '*a late-modern (or high-modern) condition*'. The first pattern describes a process that widens the gap between the sacred and the profane, secular and religious, while the second one is the re-enacted conflict between the private and the public which was triggered by 'the Communist system's institutional and symbolic collapse' and by the shattered private/public status quo of religious feelings. This contrasting and overlapping duality seems to be rhyming, in parts, with the sociological portrait of a 'Soviet man' by Levada.

The abovesaid might also be valid for the Altai Republic. Unfortunately, I have no recent data on political and sociological polls, but the 2013 survey results (Pritchina, 2014) indicate a prevalence of 'social equality' and at the same time a 'monocentric hierarchical state authority' and 'public peace' ideas. Elena Pritchina concludes, that '*the hierarchy of values in both the Altai Region and the Altai Republic is rather contradictory, combining the values of modernity and traditionalism*', and that the Altai Republic dwellers 'are choosing strategies of adaptive and apolitical behavior' due to the lack of institutional trust.

These quantitative observations can also be supported anthropologically – the talks about politics and social structures I had with people of the Altai Republic generally show the same picture. There are, however, crucial nuances which I would like to pay attention to. First, I would be very careful in stretching the USSR experience to the present-day Russia, be it the 'Soviet type of man' or some other social processes. On the one hand, the Soviet Union had a great influence over its former Republics; on the other hand, at least two generations (of young people and children) have never experienced the USSR reality. The USSR exists in the social imaginary about the Soviet as a myth, as a social simulacrum – not only for those who were born after Perestroika, but also for the older generations, who tend to be either critical or positively nostalgic towards their lives' experiences. Nowadays Russia is by all means a post-communist state, but this post-communist echo is starting to wane against the realities and shared history of a young state, 'the Putin Russia'.

This gets even more important considering that Russia is not homogenous. According to a scholar Natalia Zubarevich, there are '**four Russias**' – four types of societies grouped by the economic welfare and dominating social structures. The Altai Republic belongs to the fourth type – 'national republics of Caucasus and of the south of Siberia' (Zubarevich, 2016). These regions are in their 'early stage of modernization': they are characterized by a significant share of country population, by 'higher birth rates, patriarchal-clan structure of society and sharper ethnic contradictions'. Although the Altai Republic is not a Muslim region, which makes it stand out of the group of Caucasian Republics, it is

undoubtedly a non-urbanized<sup>224</sup> and low wage<sup>225</sup> region with strong presence of national minorities and patriarchal-kin social structures common among the native Altai dwellers. All of this makes it hard, questionable even, to extrapolate socio-political observations from other parts of Russia to Altai.

Thus, the post-communist legacy of the Altai Republic might not be the same as the one in the other regions of the Russian Federation. Although lacking relevant statistical data, I would summarize my own observations in this regard as follows: the Altai peoples are less likely to be nostalgic to the USSR than the Russians living in the Republic, while the Orthodox believers are more likely to be positive towards the Soviet past than religious people belonging to non-Orthodox denominations (the Old believers, Burkhanists, Buddhists, etc.). I gained these observations by talking to the people of various occupations, age groups and gender, and even though these conclusions are in no way representative, I can support them with some argumentation.

Religious people (non-Orthodox) are generally thankful to Perestroika and to the present Russia for not being scorned upon even more: even though these feelings are more and more substituted by the annoyance of the overt state support of the Orthodox Church, the Old Believers, Burkhanists and Buddhists still remember the days of repressions and terror, and are grateful to be allowed to practice their faith in the open. The Orthodox Christians attitude towards the USSR is a tricky subject; I will only state that despite the Soviet intolerance to religion in general, Orthodox people (most of the ethnic Russians) are less likely to be negative about it.

On the one hand, the Altai peoples are glad to receive state support for minor nationalities (although not all of them have gained such a status) and to be more open in their national and cultural policy and preferences. On the other hand, their worries about their culture and language gradually vanishing are well-grounded, and the lack of both national representation in the regional parliament and the state support for local language are constantly adding up to the Altai people social anxiety. The Altai Republic is poor, and people (Russians and Altai alike) are extremely dissatisfied with their wages. The Altai peoples are also worried about the land they regard as theirs – more and more tourist infrastructure is built in the mountains by wealthy Russian businessmen from big cities, and it bothers not only the native dwellers, but also local Russians. Nevertheless, the common nostalgic aura of the Soviet has found its way to their

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<sup>224</sup> As described in the chapter 1 and Introduction, there is only one city in the Altai Republic – its capital, Gorno-Altaysk, with a relatively small population of 63 thousand people. The two thirds of the entire population of the republic lives in villages: as of January 1, 2019, the share of the urban population was only 29,2 % (The Altai Republic in figures. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.altai-republic.ru/about-the-region/pasport/>; Reports on the main indicators of socio-economic development. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.altai-republic.ru/>).

<sup>225</sup> According to Russian Federal statistics, the Altai Republic is also characterized by a high unemployment rate and low wages: in 2019, the average annual unemployment rate was estimated at 11% (Report on the socio-economic situation in the Altai Republic. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://gks.ru/region/doc1184/Main.htm>).

minds, as well: I have met a young woman who is a communist party activist, wishing to restore the USSR in its rather radical manifestations.

My purpose was to show that the Altai Republic is not just a post-Soviet region, but also a national region. It would have been far too reductionist to bracket out the latter.

### Alternative healing, heterodox religiosity and respect for science

The USSR ideology changed over time, becoming at times more, at times less vigorous and dogmatic. One of its aspects that seems to have remained almost intact throughout the Soviet history was the reverence for science (here and further: science is understood here in a wider sense, as a complex of knowledge and related epistemological concepts). Science, despite being controlled by the Communist Party, was a key to the unexplored; thanks to the inspiring academic breakthroughs of the Soviet scientists and scholars (the Space program, pedagogical and psychological works, etc.) the world seemed to be fundamentally cognizable. This epistemology, supported by the rapid industrialization and urbanization and scholar's privileges (decent wages, individual apartments), quickly resulted in the boost of the scientific career's social prestige. Thus, science (mostly natural science but also humanities scholarship) became twice as respected: it was believed to be the one and only ladder to the progress of humanity (in direct opposition to religion, as it was regarded by the Marxist-Leninist theory) and therefore, respected; it also was a desirable and prestigious occupation for the life-long career. Academics, teachers, scholars and scientists were highly esteemed and had a significant authority.

Religion, on the other hand, was severely prosecuted at first and relegated to the category of 'guilty pleasure' later, to the end of the USSR existence. The new type of a human being, the 'Soviet man', was not expected to be engulfed in religion and 'superstitions' – the positive evolutionary epistemology left no space for transcendental and other-worldly experiences and beliefs. Personal religiosity became mocked and ridiculed (as a last for the wicked and elderly), but most often it was simply not mentioned in public, as if it had vanished from the life of people and can only be faced in the museum under two layers of glass.

This promulgated opposition of science and religion, having spread both to the ontological and epistemological ideas and to the social dimension of career choices, resulted in several major outcomes of the late-and-post Soviet Russia. I will mention two of them: the fascination for science and the hunger for magic and alternative healing.

As sketched above, science in the USSR was perceived as a source of truth and as an honorable occupation. The university education was free, but the number of vacant spots was very limited, which made it even harder to pursue academic, pedagogical or medical careers. Nevertheless, university education provided young people with a realistically available option of the social mobility, which was used by the youth Union-wide. The ethnic minorities were probably influenced by the educational upward mobility more than the Russian

population, as the USSR has been declared to be an international state free of ethnic discrimination. Even though this aim was never fully accomplished, due to the all-encompassing school education people from ethnic minorities (Buryatia, Altai, etc.) had a chance to go to the university and receive a degree – and they did use these chances (Quijada, 2012).

After the USSR collapse and during the subsequent economic crisis a lot of research institutions, schools and creative centers stopped being financed and had to close or shrink in personnel, thus producing a wave of the intellectual elite unemployment. People had to adapt to the market needs, and former professors and teachers either found other sources of income (e.g. reselling imported goods) or tried to leave the country for good<sup>226</sup>. During the decades of the modern (post-Soviet) history of the Russian Federation, science and high level of education almost stopped bringing money and lost prestige in terms of career perspectives but kept their aura of social respect and superiority. Thus, a scientific-resembling explanation is still a valid (even preferred) mode of authentication in Russian society – also when it is used to support para-scientific and esoteric practices (Lindquist, 2006; Quijada, 2012). The authority of the academic community also did not vanish – the academics are now respected not only for the fruits of their intellectual labor, but also for knowingly choosing a non-profitable occupation. *‘This is a calling’*, as people tend to say about university professors, teachers and medical workers.

Back in the USSR, scholars of the Humanities (ethnographers, linguists, literature and cultural studies scholars, etc.) and museum specialists were exactly those who acted as a bridge between religion and public discourse. Religion has not been discussed publicly before Perestroika (Agadjanian, 2001), not in a positive context anyway. Academic papers together with museum reviews were a rare opportunity for scholars to address religion publicly, in a not condemnatory manner. Moreover, while studying religion scholars have inevitable changed it, either unconsciously or purposefully. Not only did they support museums, cultural and religious movements that they sympathized with<sup>227</sup>, but they also influenced the religious environment directly – through their writings, and by the side-effect of the authority of the academy, distilled in their texts and speeches.

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<sup>226</sup> *‘Structural changes in the economy have led to an increase in unemployment. Intelligentsia was hit the hardest: unemployed with higher education in 1993 in Moscow accounted for 25.2%, in St. Petersburg - 22.1%’* (Naumova, 1996; my translation).

<sup>227</sup> Besides university professors and museum workers attempts to preserve ethnic cultural heritage of the peoples of the USSR, the wider circles of intellectual elite were also keen on restoring traditions and local culture (although this happened mostly after Perestroika). For example, the Ak-Burkhan community, as described in chapter 3, was established by a group and local intelligentsia (Altai and Russian scholars, journalists, artists and writers combined their efforts in restoring Altai culture and language). Another example is shamanism – the city intellectual elite contributed significantly to the shamanism revival and developed a separate branch of (city) neo-Shamanism (Kharitonova, 2003, 2009). This trend is, however, by no means exclusive and not inherent only to the post-communist society. The 1920-1922 Burkhanism was also boosted by the intellectual elite attempts at national integration.

A mixture of the long-negated religiosity and fascination with science contributed to a heightened interest in everyday religious and magical practices (divination, healing, etc.), which was (and still is) a noteworthy trait of the post-communist Russian society. Needless to mention that it was not the only reason: the vacuum in public and private values after the USSR collapse made people look around for social and spiritual guidance, and religion in its variety of forms was able to provide both<sup>228</sup>. Science, however, has also been able to captivate people's thoughts and imagination - without diving into the debates of the post-secular world and science as quasi-religion it is safe to assume that the era of technological discoveries after the World War II had a great influence on literature, art, and religion<sup>229</sup>.

**'Heterodox religiosity'** (Belyaev, 2010), on the other hand, was something that has always been there and that flourished in the 1990s. What I am calling 'heterodox religiosity'<sup>230</sup>, referencing the article by Demyan Belyaev, is a mixture of religious beliefs, 'superstitions', tales and paranormal stories. Even before the fall of the Soviet regime, the city folklore has risen following the increasing pace of urbanization. Traditional country folklore in modern Russia, on the contrary, is almost lost - the villages were transformed into '*collective farms*' [колхозы] in the USSR, and after Perestroika they were largely dismissed due to the financial unsustainability of such enormous enterprises in the market economy. People left the countryside and moved to the cities, and their needs for spiritual support changed accordingly.

Even though I cannot yet prove it statistically or through a significant array of anthropological observations, I suppose that the 'heterodox religiosity' with its inherent tendency of tending to people's everyday needs, went along well enough with the private character of the Soviet spirituality. It is still quite noticeable in day-to-day conversations with Russians (and, to some extent, with

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<sup>228</sup> '*...one could not expect religion to provide complete and full protection, given the 'religious non-musicality' of the post-atheist culture, but it certainly provided some safety in a time of growing cognitive entropy*' (Agadjanian, 2001).

<sup>229</sup> I mean here the epoch of the sci-fi pulp magazines and the golden age of science fiction literature. This influence was never confined solely to the Russia society, of course: it would be enough to remember history of scientology and its sci-fi origins to stop assuming that. In Russia, and earlier - in USSR, this attraction to science and science fiction certainly had its unique features. First of all, foreign sci-fi books were not so often printed in USSR, which made them gain an extra charm of a forbidden fruit. Secondly, these books (both of Russian and foreign authorship) were fantastic. They did not portrait real life, and they were captivating for the generation of the atheist state. One of my interlocutors, a Roerich follower, confessed that she started her life-long journey into Elena Roerich teaching because of the ... science fiction books that she loved to read as a teenager. She remembered with a gentle smile, that those books were hard to find because everyone wanted to read them and because they were rare; she also said, '*I think, all my generation has been marked by these books*' [Вообще, все наше поколение было отмечено этой научной фантастикой].

<sup>230</sup> '*Heterodox religiosity is quite deeply rooted in Russian culture. It was common in many forms and in various parts of society in tsarist Russia and continued not only among Russian emigration but also in the Soviet Union and even within the Soviet leadership. The arrival of democracy and the media freedom that came with it promoted its spread among large parts of the Russian population. The intensity of interest in heterodox religiosity and the scale of its proliferation are post-communist phenomena; but it is a long-established feature of the Russian religious landscape*' (Belyaev, 2010).

the Altai): religion is usually either not spoken about or mentioned with some distrust, and religious people make their affiliations public mostly in the safe environment of the like-minded. The horoscopes, everyday magical beliefs, energy fields and fortune tellers are, at the same time, discussed much more openly, even though with a confused smile.

Regardless on the suggestion above, the heterodox religiosity takes a vast variety of forms, from the esoteric guru teachings to the visits to a local fortune teller. It can also be supported by the authority of science and official accreditation ('charisma of the office', Lindquist, 2006)<sup>231</sup>, and it is widely used for healing. Galina Lindquist in her book 'Conjuring hope' lists most common types of the healing practices not belonging to the state-ratified methods of treatment (Lindquist, 2006): '*folk medicine*', '*bio-energy healing*', '*non-Russian medical traditions*', '*complementary medicine*', etc. These diverse practices are united with two factors which are at work on both customer's and seller's side: the common distrust to the state healthcare system (Quijada, 2012) and (often but not always) distrust to contemporary medicine as such. In the Ak-Burkhan temple I have observed both types of motivation, combined with the idea of the Altai 'people who know' and their traditionally prescribed healing functions (Doronin, 2013).

## Religion and identity

The ethnic Altai wishing to support their nation and culture are faced with at least two major questions: 'What does it mean to be Altai?' and 'What can be done?'. These questions are, of course, tightly interconnected as well as deeply immersed in the current social and political situation.

As previously sketched, the Altai identity quest is not an easily resolved matter. To start with, there is no historical Altai nationality<sup>232</sup> – people belong to

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<sup>231</sup> I would like to use my meeting with a female city shaman to illustrate this idea. As described in the chapter 2, part 3, a female shaman from Gorno-Altai met me in an office building, near the room that she rented for her sole proprietorship consulting services. She made an impression of a modern shaman, the one who does not dwell in the forest and the one who is seamlessly integrated into the social reality.

While I was waiting for her to come, I was thinking about whether this image serves to boost her clients' confidence in her abilities or, on the contrary, to jeopardize her practice. Much to my own surprise, I caught myself on a vague thought: 'Well, if she is registered as a sole proprietor and has an office, then she must have a steady established practice, and she is less likely not to turn up to our meeting'. In a situation when the only firsthand information I had about a shaman was the door of her office with a sole proprietorship registration plate on it, I, almost unconsciously, interpreted her entrepreneurship positively. I started to trust her more, even having never seen her face.

<sup>232</sup> As much as the 'altai-kizhi' ethnic group is often perceived as one (Sherstova, 2016). It is important to mention that Nadezhda Tadina polemicizes with Lyudmila Sherstova about it and asserts (2013) that there is an inter-ethnic collective idealized image of an Altai called 'su-Altai'. 'Su-Altai' developed on the basis of the 'altai-kizhi' image, which, according to Tadina, was used to distinguish Altai shamanists from the Christianized part of the Altai population. The 'altai-kizhi' and the 'su-altai' are the 'ethno-stereotypes' (Tadina, 2008) of those who have not been assimilated by the Russians. I have no reasons not to believe Nadezhda Tadina, a native

different 'seöks' and native ethnic groups which are various kinds of relation with one another. They have a common past as a part of Dzungar Khanate and later – as a part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, but the peak of their national unity was the Oira(o)t Confederation of tribes (15-17th century), which later split in the Kalmykian and Dzungar branches. This period, however distant, is being remembered by at least some of the modern Altai public figures, including one of the Ak-Burkhan temple Lamas (Komarov, 2018). The Altai peoples are now mostly eager to be called as a unified ethnic group, as I have been reassured by my Altai interlocutors, but they are also most of the time aware of the concrete ethnic affiliation of the people they know<sup>233</sup>.

Another option for ethnic identification is nearby Mongolia. The Mongols are a sister ethnic group to the Altai peoples not only through history and origins, but also through the shared religious preferences – Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism. I have to confess that I do not quite understand why Mongolia is being scarcely discussed in terms of the Altai ethnic identity. People whom I asked shared concerns such as: 'We are not Mongols, we are different, even though we stem from one root', 'Buryatia is much closer to us than Tibet and Mongolia'. Therefore, it could be assumed that due to the distance of, literally, time and space, the Altai peoples are not so keen to think of themselves as Mongolians. There might be more reason to it – Mongolia occupies hardly any line in the news (online and TV), and I have noticed no grants or subsidies of any kind devoted to strengthening Mongolian-Altai relations<sup>234</sup>.

The Altai also have an option of associating with 'the Turkic World'. Altai territory is believed by some to be a cradle of Turkic civilization<sup>235</sup>, and I have heard from my interlocutors and read in the media numerous stories how Turks

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Altai scholar, but as long as this question is not of my primary focus, I am not elaborating on this topic further.

<sup>233</sup> I have to admit that this was something I had difficulties with. I have been told from time to time: 'Look, he is from Khakasia', or 'She is not Altai-kizhi, she is Telengt', but my mind was not processing it right. To me, there was absolutely no difference of where the people whom I talk to came from. Of course, it interested me as a researcher, but not so much as a person. I mean that to me, brought up in Russian region, people's origins meant much less than they did to my Altai acquaintances. That was one of the matters I always tried to be consciously aware of.

<sup>234</sup> It does not mean that those are non-existent, but that they do not seem to be well-known. However, cultural and religious events between Altai and Mongolia are organized on a regular basis, especially those related to Buddhism.

<sup>235</sup> For example, Nikolai Ekeev, one of the founders of the Ak-Burkhan community, has also helped establish the 'Non-Profit Foundation for Promoting the Spiritual and Cultural Development of the Altai Ethnos "Turk Kabai" (Cradle of Turks)' which operates until now (RNF "Turk Kabai" (Cradle of Turks). (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/2721065>). In 2019, the Altai ethno-troupe 'Turk Kabai' had a tour around the Altai Republic (Ethno-group "Turk-Kabay" goes on tour around the villages of the Republic. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/109147>).

However, the Altai Republic has a rival fighting over the 'Cradle of Turks' title – Eastern Kazakhstan is also a land called Altai (geographically, Altai is a name of a big region of mountains and steppes), and it is also considered to be the place of Turkic origin. Conferences, forums and other events are being actively held in Kazakhstan to support this idea (Kazakhstan is the cradle of the Turkic world. How to make the country's cultural heritage popular? (2019). Retrieved from: <https://informburo.kz/special/kazahstan-kolybel-tyurkskogo-mira-kak-sdelat-kulturnoe-nasledie-strany-populyarnym.html>).

came for intercultural visits and donated money on certain organizations<sup>236</sup>. The preventing factor, in this case, is religion – the Turks are Muslim, the Altai are not. Moreover, the Muslim Kazakhs who live in compact diasporas in the southern Altai have had several conflicts with their Altai neighbors, and ethno-confessional anxiety was in the air when my Altai interlocutors mentioned the Kazakh.

The Altai are not alone in their search for their identity of an ethnic minority surrounded by more numerous nationalities. Their neighbors, Buryatia and Khakasia, are also engaged in this quest, and this makes the native people of the three republics feel much in common. At the present moment, Buryatia might be the closest ‘role model’ for some of the Altai peoples in terms of religious situation and local parliament representation. It does not mean, however, that people of these republics forget their origins and that they belong to different ethnic group, albeit closely related.

The options listed above are only several of the possible Altai identities list, with Russia and Japan being in it as well. These possibilities are, however, not so popular among the Altai locals as the desire to restore or create the idea of the Altai identity. The question ‘What does it mean to be Altai?’ still remains, and native people of the Altai Republic seem to be eager to seek an answer to it in language, culture, family traditions and religion. This is hardly surprising, as the questions of language and culture are vital to every minor ethnic community within Russian borders<sup>237</sup>, Altai being no exception (Tadina, 2011; Aseeva, 2017). Respect to family traditions and the tendency to remember ones’ roots provide an additional aspect to this vitality – religious and cultural patterns are cherished not only due to the ethnic patriotic sentiment, but also as part of ones’ family and social environment.

Religious and cultural traditions are thus something that reminds native people of who they are and where they came from. The fact that religion is one of the major parts of the identification process in Russia, especially in the ethnic republics, is not surprising in itself (Hertek, 2010; Agadjanian, 2001; Treisman, 1997); what makes the Altai case particularly noteworthy is the amalgam of family-kin values, largely forgotten religion and culture and non-unified ethnic minorities. In order to provide the national identification with an axis of religion, the people of Altai have to (re)establish one, first.

This process bears resemblance to the ‘su-altai’ ethno-stereotype of the 18-19 century, described by Nadezhda Tadina (Tadina, 2008). The Altai who did

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<sup>236</sup> The money is the stumbling as well. If Mongolia is seemingly not willing to support the pro-Mongolian moods, the Turks are, at, at least, were. The rumour of the Turkey and Kazakhstan (Kushnerik, 2007) financing Muslim organizations has spread, however, and reached a peak as a threat to the national interests of Russian Federation (especially with regard to the notorious foreign agent law (121-FZ of November 2012). Although no high-profile court cases were initiated, the media exposure of those organizations and the overall publicity of the Turkish sponsorship made it difficult for the situation to develop further.

<sup>237</sup> Even to those who managed to negotiate school education in the native language, like Republic of Tatarstan.

not convert to Christianity and did not adopt Russian ways of life had to distinguish themselves, calling themselves somewhat differently. The already existing identification map of concepts did not seem to allow for that. Now, the Altai are faced with a similar yet non-identical challenge: to find something (religion, symbol, idea) that would unite them as one social entity. Knowing the native language is one of such markers (Tadina, 2013). Another one is the melting pot of customs, traditions and religious rites, observed in families and recognized by those originating from the same place.

As Natalia Tadyшева (2017) hypothesizes, confessional affiliation was expressed by her respondents not only because of their religious feeling, but as a marker of ethnic self-identification: *'since I am Russian, I must be Orthodox, or since I am Altai, I am a pagan'*. Rituals, customs, beliefs serve as an anchor to build up and to demonstrate one's ethnic self-recognition. In a way, it reminds of the Japanese case: the Japanese are following a complex of Shinto and Buddhist rites not because they consider themselves religious, but to show their 'Japaneseness' (Thomas, 2012) – the state of being a Japanese and behaving like one. Even though the Altai situation is slightly different (as Tadyшева writes, people are calling themselves religious in order to be related to a corresponding ethnic group), I would suggest that it is nevertheless very similar. The rites and religion-related customs that my interlocutors shared with me were, just like Shinto, neither religious nor secular. Rather, these traditions seemed to be a part of the Altai way of life, a part of being Altai (or feeling Altai).

These lived spiritual practices are a background of, and a basis for the process of (re)establishing the religion of the Altai. They are observed not only by Buddhists, shamanists and Burkhanists, but also by the baptized Altai people<sup>238</sup>. As for the overarching religious systems, the Altai people have several options (which is not so surprising considering the Altai's geographical position on the crossroads of different nations and states). Buddhism (either Burkhanism/Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism) is known for being compassionate to the preservation of local rites – an advantage Ak-Burkhan Lamas told me a lot about; shamanism/Burkhanism is closer to the layer of lived religion and bears a scent of popularity and contemporary esotericism, yet in principle decentralized. Buddhism and shamanism/Burkhanism are, of course, not the only options. One of the aspects of the common Turkic identity is revival of Tengrism – nature (especially sky) religion that used to be the dominating faith in the medieval Central Asia populated by the ancestors of the nowadays Mongols, Kalmyks, the Altai and Buryats. Elements of Tengrism are present in the nowadays Altai religiosity (especially in the intellectual circles and in the lived religion of the Burkhanists/Shamanists), and there are attempts of reviving this religion over a long period of oblivion in Buryatia (Sherstova, 2016).

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<sup>238</sup> One of the Orthodox Church clergies, in Ust'-Koksa, told me a fascinating story about the baptized Altai native people: that *'they come to the Church seldom, on big holidays, but they even buy the Altai Bible sometimes. And they still have to do their pagan stuff, even if they do not want to. What can be done? Those are their people; they have to be like their own. I do not blame them for serving their nature worship ceremonies'*.

The search for a shared ethno-religious identity has its other side – the quest for authentication. Various aspects of authenticity and authentication were already mentioned in my thesis: in the second chapter (in relation to the Ak-Jañ charismatic leadership) and in the third chapter (in relation to the Buddhist archeological findings in Altai). In this paragraph, my intention was to show that in the search for the ethnic identity, the ‘What does it mean to be Altai?’ question turns into a similar, yet more concrete ‘Who is a true Altai?’ question<sup>239</sup>. In a way, the search for identity presupposes the search for the plausible markers of authentication. Being positioned in between overlapping, contrasting and sometimes conflicting identities (Russian by citizenship/Altai by ethnicity; Christian by religious affiliation/doing Altai traditional rituals with milk and archyn; Turkic/not Muslim, etc.), the Altai people try to prioritize those aspects of their self-identification that might mark them as a nation, as a ‘community united’. Religion, both in the form of shared beliefs and common practices, is but one of these markers.

## Ak-Burkhan: strategies of religious revival

I am just about to step outside to the winter night and loiter inside for a moment to thank Aram Lama once more for his time tonight. He stayed with me that late, even though he had a day full of work and an early wake-up tomorrow morning.

He is clearly tired but answers with a smile: *‘It’s okay. If our talk has served to strengthen Buddhism here in Altai, then it was not in vain, and then I am happy’.*

*2:00 am, the Ak-Burkhan temple.*

Before proceeding to the Ak-Burkhan religious revival, I would like to sketch several major features of the religious situation of the contemporary Altai Republic, based on the information from the previous subchapter.

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<sup>239</sup> Craig Martin asks the same question about Christians in his chapter on authenticity (Martin, 2017a): ‘*Who is a true Christian?*’. After a careful investigation into the motivations, process, and results of religious authentication he concludes that authentications claims made by the communities rely on are often too vague to be a decent research tool as ‘*Almost every group that identifies as Christian uses different criteria for group membership*’ (Martin, 2017a, p. 145). Therefore, he continues, ‘*We should replace questions about authenticity with investigations into the process of identification: who claims identities for themselves or others, who recognizes those identities, and what consequences, benefits, or penalties follow from that identification*’ (Martin, 2017a, p. 157).

It seems to be constructive to start with an explanation of what is meant by **‘religious revival’**. Despite (or, rather, due to) being almost self-evident in terms of common-sense reasoning, this phenomenon does not usually receive a clear-cut definition. ‘Religious revival’ as a term is either taken for granted (Toboeva, 2014; Kushnerik, 2007) as if being self-evident, or elucidated indirectly, through explaining the research hypotheses and methods (Greeley, 1994). It does, however, matter how ‘religious revival’ is measured and understood – through church attendance? church membership? forms of religious participation? self-identification? (Gorski, 2000).

Having studied the variety of literature of revival(s), I assume it safe to consider two major approaches to ‘religious revival’. One of them is ‘revival of a religion’, that is, ‘religious revival’ and ‘religious growth’ are used synonymously (Tomka, 2011) as a process opposite to ‘religious decline’ and ‘secularization’ (in its common sense). Another one is ‘revival of *the* religion’, an approach which stresses meanings bound to the word ‘revive’ - to return to the previous state, to re-establish something having existed previously (Heimola, 2013). There are also other terms in use: ‘religious commitment’ (which, in the paper by (Kryshtanovskaya, McAllister & White, 1994), is formed by religious affiliation, religious behavior and religious belief), ‘religious participation’ (Minarik, 2014) and ‘religious revitalization’ (Asavei, 2017).

For my research, it is vital how and why certain religious traditions are revived prior to others; therefore, in my case, the term ‘religious revival’ seems to be methodologically correct. In this work, I define ‘religious revival’ as a *process of persistent actualization of a particular religious agenda related to pre-existing religious movements*. The ‘pre-existing’ religious movements are Burkhanism, Buddhism and shamanism<sup>240</sup> while the Ak-Burkhan community is the one generating the process of religious revival. Thus, I am mostly talking about ‘religious revival’ in a second sense, as a revival of *the* religion (Burkhanism).

What can be said about religious revival in the post-Soviet Altai Republic? Statistically, not much. Statistical data which I managed to unearth is scarce and not consistent: in comparison to the relatively well-researched question of post-communist Russian religiosity, the Altai religious situation is a grey zone, in some sense. Major statistical surveys and polls are mostly held federal-wide, which leaves Altai Republic in a state of an unrepresentative minor aberration<sup>241</sup>. Local surveys, on the other hand, are underfinanced and are mostly conducted

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<sup>240</sup> It could be useful to clarify that these pre-existing religious movements should have been temporarily stopped from being practiced (otherwise, it would be a process of a tradition continuation, not revival). Nevertheless, it is hard to carefully impose such a restriction in the Altai case, because all three religions listed above were observed throughout the Soviet history, albeit mostly underground.

<sup>241</sup> For example, the 2020 poll by Levada Center (an independent Russian research organization) shows that “Other” religions, including shamanism, Paganism, etc., only occupy 1% of the sample. However, this data is representative for the whole Russian population, and therefore, it can only serve to describe the popularity of “Other” religions throughout all subjects of the Russian Federation (Do you identify yourself with any religion? If yes, which exactly?]. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/03/03/velikij-post-i-religioznost/>).

through a governmental subsidy or as part of a research which the state has requested from a particular research institution. Even statistical data collected by the local scholars aware of the subtleties of the Altai religious situation are not detailed enough: in the survey of 350 Gorno-Altai students, for example, Burkhanism, Ak-Jaŋ and shamanism were grouped together under the title ‘Altai traditional beliefs’ (Tadysheva, 2017).

The most recent and reliable statistical data I have is of 2007-2008 and of 2014-2015. Both surveys were conducted by the scholars from the Institute of Altai Studies (Nikolai Ekeev and Nadezhda Tadysheva, respectively). Unfortunately, in both cases I was not able to get a hold on the statistical reports themselves, so that I can only speculate on the figures from the papers which were written based on the collected data.

In 2007-2008 (Ekeeva, 2013), the survey was conducted among people from the Gorno-Altai city and all 10 districts of the Altai Republic. According to the nationality (44,5% Russians, 41% Altai, 6,9% Kazakh and local minorities 4,8%) and gender (58% women) distribution, the poll sampling seems to be plausibly representative<sup>242</sup>. 56% of the respondents self-identified as ‘religious’, 31% as ‘doubters’/hard to say and 13% as ‘non-believers’. Table 5 shows that the majority of all religious respondents (61%) were Orthodox, a quarter were observing Burkhanism/Shamanism and 10% were Muslim.

Table 5. Ethno-religious distribution of the Altai peoples, 2007-2008

<b>Confession / nationality</b>	<b>All respondents</b>	<b>Altai-kizhi</b>	<b>Telengits</b>	<b>Che(a)lkans</b>	<b>Tubalars</b>
<b>Orthodox Christianity</b>	61%	10,7%	27,8%	50%	71,4%
<b>Burkhanism<sup>243</sup></b>	>25% (with shamanism)	81%	54,3%	(no data)	4,8%
<b>Shamanism</b>		5,3%	11,1%	25%	5%
<b>Buddhism</b>	<4%	2,2%	4,2%	(no data)	(no data)
<b>Islam</b>	10%	(no data)	(no data)	(no data)	(no data)

The 2014-2015 survey was conducted among 350 students of Gorno-Altai university and demonstrates slightly different figures: 66,5% of the respondents claimed to be religious in contrast to 20% of ‘doubters’. Among the believers there were 52% of Orthodox Christians and 33,4% followers of the ‘Altai traditional beliefs’ – shamanism, Burkhanism, Ak-Jaŋ altogether (Tadysheva, 2017).

<sup>242</sup> In 2019, the share of women in the Altai Republic was 52,5%. In 2010, the national demographic distribution remained predominantly Russian (55,7% Russians, 33,4% Altai, 6,1% Kazakh). (Statistical Yearbook “Republic of Altai. 2015-2019”. (2020). Retrieved from: [https://akstat.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/3oq9R5SA/1.37.5\\_2019g.pdf](https://akstat.gks.ru/storage/mediabank/3oq9R5SA/1.37.5_2019g.pdf)).

<sup>243</sup> Burkhanism and Buddhism are placed in separate lines as Burkhanism from this poll is not what is meant by Burkhanism in my research. It is not Burkhanism/Buddhism, but Burkhanism/Shamanism, or, rather, ‘paganism’ – the mixture of Burkhanist and shamanist practices and rituals which is observed mostly by the central and southern Altai nations.

How can these figures be interpreted? Undoubtedly, such fragmentary statistical reports cannot be used for creating any representative opinion on the Altai religiosity. They do, however, demonstrate several very important aspects of the Altai Republic, that might easily be ignored, especially by an outsider's gaze. The data from Table 5 indicate the fact that Lyudmila Sherstova (2016) and other scholars working on Altai are constantly highlighting, – that there was no such entity as 'Altai people' until the Soviet times, and that even now, after the years of the Soviet regime, the Altai peoples are well aware of their kin and their minor nationality. The second crucial observation is closely connected to the first one: religious belonging varies significantly for different nations, depending on their history and lands of origin. Northern Altai peoples<sup>244</sup> (Tubalars, Chelkans, Kumandins and Shors), for instance, became a part of the Russian Empire much earlier than the Southern ones (Altai (Altai-Kizhi), Teles, Telengits and Teleuts), who joined the Empire voluntarily, albeit on certain conditions including mass Christianization (Tadysheva, 2010). Therefore, the differences in religious affiliation among nowadays Altai people from different regions and kin can be explained not only with the efforts of the Altai Spiritual Mission and difficult access of some of the Altai nations' residence locations, but also with the circumstances of receiving the Russian citizenship.

Thus, I would like to use the Table 5 data to pinpoint once again that what I have observed and written about the Ak-Burkhan community cannot be extrapolated to a bigger populational group or generalized in any way. I have chosen not to focus on this matter in my thesis, because the community of my attention is based predominantly in the capital (northern Altai), but the Ak-Burkhan circle also includes people from both southern and northern parts of the Republic, and I witnessed their origins influencing their judgements (quite naturally so) often enough not to be inclined to consider all Altai native dwellers as one entity.

Let us return to 'religious revival' discussion: do these figures testify any sign of it? In other words, is there any evidence to support the statement of the Altai Republic undergoing the process of religious revival? It is either impossible or extremely difficult to build any temporal scale of religiosity as the data from the Soviet Union on this account are almost non-existent. Therefore, the scholars who, either directly or passingly, affirm this observation (Ekeeva, 2013; Kushnerik, 2007; Sherstova, 2016) do it on the grounds of other indicators of religious revival, such as founding new societies, celebrating national and religious holidays, restoring and preserving language, religious rituals and beliefs and making people's religious a matter of public discussion.

After Perestroika, the mutual pledge of silence around religion has been broken, and people could openly discuss what they held sacred. That major societal shift resulted in a burst of business, civic activities and crime rate, as well as in a number of newly founded non-commercial organizations and

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<sup>244</sup> It is a common concept in the Altai Studies to distinguish between northern and southern Altai, for the sake of generalization.

religious groups. The fact that people started to assemble in groups and register them is not so telling in itself, as there were little to no ways of doing this in the early USSR officially and it was mostly scolded upon in the late USSR. What seems to be more meaningful in the light of religious revival is that the Altai Republic religious societies of the 1990s were organized in number (which shows that at least some people of that time must have thought that religion matters) and over such a wide variety of spiritual trends<sup>245</sup> (which shows that ideas on Altai Republic religiosity had to be nurtured and formed on the grounds of the diverse spiritual legacy).

My hypothesis was that religious revival is still going on in the Altai Republic, even though it might not be supported statistically due to the lack of relevant data. Now that I have introduced my understanding of 'religious revival' and supported the positive hypothesis about the process of religious revival in the Altai Republic, I will proceed to the methodology of describing religious revival that I found useful and promising in the context of the data I gathered – the methodology of '*persistent strategies*'.

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, religious revival is rarely explicitly defined; it is mostly studied through qualitative case studies research and quantitative generalized analysis. Moreover, in some works religious revival/participation is studied as a phenomenon, as a main research subject (Heimola, 2013; partly – Minarik, 2014; Need & Evans, 2001, Nasonov, 2009) rather than as one of the processes that occurs to the observed community. However, these approaches are either 'phenomenological' (the gist, the motives, and reasons of religious revival) or quantitative (the factors and outcomes of religious revival). I have not yet encountered a line of post-communist religious revival research that would concentrate on formulating persistent patterns that could be used in a cross-case scenario. Without doubt, such works exist, but they do not seem to have formed a respective trend, as it happened, for instance, with the democratization and authoritative state studies in the field of political science. I will employ this example - democratization and authoritarianism studies in political science – to demonstrate what I mean by formulating '*persistent strategies*'.

Democratization and authoritarianism studies are probably ones of the most well-known examples<sup>246</sup> of the easily replicative and therefore convenient to use research methodology. For example, authoritarianism research (Besley and Kudamatsu 2007, Dominguez 2011, Haber 2006, Wintrobe 2007) in combination with game theory and methods of statistical analysis<sup>247</sup> have provided political science with the stable constructs such as 'dictator game' and

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<sup>245</sup> For more information, please see chapter 1, Appendices 1 and 3.

<sup>246</sup> Examples only – by and large, it does not matter which social process is structured and analyzed in such a manner; it could be any (considering its nature and embeddability to this methodology).

<sup>247</sup> There was even a research on how religious rhetoric alters the 'dictator game' (Ahmed & Salas, 2011).

strategies of an authoritarian ruler (charade institutions, repressions, cooptation, and legitimization). Democratization studies, concentrated in two major directions: on *how* (Dahl 2002, Huntington 2003) and *why* (Almond, Verba 1997; Inglehart 1997)<sup>248</sup> states become democracies (or fail to do so), resulted in determining several types of democratization which depend on the initial political, economic, and social situation. The difference of this approach to comparative case studies is that this analysis of social processes includes multiple factors in a systematized form, which creates the possibility of subsequent generalization and cross-case comparison. In other words, the method that I demonstrate with the example of political science (authoritarianism, democratization) involves describing, systematizing, and analyzing pre-selected cases in order to generate stable patterns of the observed social processes, so that later these patterns might be applied to another case in further research. These generated patterns can be compared to sustainable code expressions within a particular theory or a formal language – they are easy to apply to cases and hypotheses, and, as every methodological reduction, they could be either effective or misleading in describing particular cases.

To sum up, the methodology of ‘persistent strategies’ that I apply to my anthropological findings is a variation of a wider category of ‘persistent patterns’ research. In my work, the patterns that I aim to uncover in the process of religious revival are strategies that the Ak-Burkhan leaders use to spread their version of Buddhism/Burkhanism and encourage communities’ engagement. Following my goal to analyze the Ak-Burkhan case as a strategy of revival of the post-communist religious community in an ethnic region, I aim at contributing to the attempts of unraveling the crucial decisions that made the Ak-Burkhan community what it is now, by categorizing them into more generalized strategies and mechanisms of legitimization that support these strategies. In doing so, I am following from the ‘ground’ of the primary observations to the ‘spire’ of more abstract analysis. The primary data I have collected and summarized provided me with a clue to the methodological framework of the ‘persistent strategies’<sup>249</sup>.

Much to my surprise, it seems that religious revival has not been explicitly described through a similar apparatus<sup>250</sup>. There seems to be no such a research trend that would consider religious revival from the angle of replicated patterns and strategies. One of the reasons for that might be that in political science, this methodology presupposes a choice of a certain course of actions in certain

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<sup>248</sup> Sometimes also on both *how* (processes) and *why* (reasons) at the same time (Karl & Schmitter, 1991).

<sup>249</sup> It is important to mention that since my observations are mainly focused on a short period of time and are confined to the Ak-Burkhan community alone, I cannot argue in favour of the strategies’ replicability. In other words, my research is aimed at defining strategies of religious revival performed by the Ak-Burkhan community rather than on determining how possibly stable and replicated in the other communities undergoing religious revival they might be.

<sup>250</sup> Quantitative studies, of course, provide formalized factors and outcomes, but those are quite situational and highly depend on the data collected. A piece of research close to the ‘pattern’ approach I suggest was made by Olaf Hammer (2016), but his attention was focused mainly on the mechanisms of transmitting tradition in religious communities.

environment. In other worlds, it is based on the vision and on the strategy of the political actors (be it an autocrat, a nation, an ethnic group, or a person). Religion and religious revival in particular are not, however, too often described in strategical terms. From the pieces of research on religious revival that I read, it seems that religious revival is what happens, rather than what people choose to happen. Even when considered in a functional and phenomenological way, religious revival, as well as participation, still seems to be described as a major process happening due to some situational factors, rather than a process being actively supported and maintained by its proponents.

It is not my intention to continue with the possible reasons of this observation; instead, I would like to discuss why I find this method of 'persistent strategies' suitable in the religious studies domain, and applicable to my particular case. Religion restored (or re-established) presupposes some extent of incorporation into existing social structures (even if a religious community maintains a 'negative identity'<sup>251</sup> towards the society they live in). Most often, this integration takes a form of religious organization or voluntary union, executing everyday managerial decisions in struggle for its expansion and prosperity. Thus, while religious communications provoke certain feelings that might be phenomenologically special, they are physically, bodily, mentally and socially integrated<sup>252</sup>. Religion is not just rituals and beliefs, it is also things, perceptions, experiences, institutions and, above all, people (Meyer, et.al., 2010). Therefore, it makes sense to consider processes that are happening in the sphere of the religious, from the point of view of the more generalized social and psychological apparatus<sup>253</sup>.

Moreover, religious revival is a process and at the same moment a result with certain social functions: it attracts followers and is propagated by its founders. My field experience left me no space to doubt that people can be extremely conscious both about their decision of joining religious organization and about the wish for their religious community to thrive and grow. Thus, from the interviews and experiences I gained in the Altai Republic I got an impression that the leaders of the Ak-Burkhan community have a clear vision of the desired future of their community, and they devise a sequence of actions that are, in their view, optimal under the circumstances they find themselves in. In other words, they *strategize*. These observations allow me to assume that the

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<sup>251</sup> By the 'negative identity', or, rather, 'negative self-identification' I mean not a psychological term of the identity crisis, but a sociological concept by Lev Gudkov (Gudkov, 2004, p. 156-157). Lev Gudkov used 'negative identity' to describe the process (and result) of Russian Post-Soviet self-identification which is characterized by consolidating around '*denial and demarcation*' rather than around '*positive symbols and ideas*'. In other words, according to him, Post-Soviet Russians are more attributing to *what they are not*, than to *what they are*.

<sup>252</sup> '*Belief itself, it seems to us, cannot be separated in clear ways from motivation and interest*' (Grieve & Weiss, 2005, p. 7).

<sup>253</sup> Craig Martin expresses the same opinion in the chapter on legitimacy (2017b, p. 106): '*...there appear to be insufficient reasons to emphasize a distinction between religious and non-religious legitimations, and, on the contrary, it will prove useful to compare them and study them side-by-side*'.

perspective of choice and strategy might turn out to be quite promising when applied to religious revival studies.

My main goal is to analyze the process of national post-communist religious revival on the case of the Ak-Burkhan community in Altai. Stepping up from observations to systematization and analysis, I try to show how the Ak-Burkhan religious community is navigating its course in the current Russian social and political situation. In doing so, I focus on the crucial *choices* the community made, taking into account their *motivations* and *interests*, as well as the surrounding social *environment*. While in the first three chapters of the thesis I have presented and systematized the observations I got first-hand, during my field work, and the data I inquired from the media, in this final chapter, I would like to focus on, first, the aims of the community (which are tightly interconnected with their beliefs and worldview) and to systematize their decisions (which, cumulatively, form their tactics) based on the actors/environment they are dealing with: authorities, audience, other religious institutions, their own positionality within the Buddhist Sangha of Russia. I will show how one of the most prominent religious communities in the Altai Republic, the Ak-Burkhan religious group is reviving Burkhanist rites and folklore and re-making what is known as 'Altai Buddhism', at this very moment.

## Choices that made the community

The Lamas of the Ak-Burkhan temple appear to be very conscious about what they are doing as leaders of a religious community. They have a vision of the desirable future, and they are working on tactical and strategical steps to reach it. For all I know from the interviews with the current temple clergy, the very same can be said about the circle of the Ak-Burkhan founders (Sergei Kynyev, Altaichy Sanashkin, Vladimir Kydyev and others).

However, since I have not been able to talk to them personally, my information and research is mostly based on the current members of the community, with whom I spent most of the time. Based on my field data, I can argue with certainty that their actions and thoughts are devoted to the Altai Buddhism/Burkhanism revival arrangements. They work in the already existing temples and shrines and promote them, while also expanding all over the Republic with newly founded sister organizations. They have a clear vision of Buddhism in the Altai Republic (albeit not a homogeneous one), and they make choices of both strategical and tactical character to bring this vision closer to reality. In this subparagraph I will briefly yet carefully describe the choices that seemed most important, fateful even, to my interlocutors. Most of the information below has already been mentioned in the previous chapters, so that my goal here is not so much to describe as to systematize.

One of the first choices (not only by the founders, but also by Ak-Burkhan regular members) was the one in favor of Tibetan Buddhism. It does not seem to be surprising, given the fact that the ethnic groups related to Altai peoples (native people of Buryatia, Kalmykia, Mongolia) are Tibetan Buddhists and that the Altai Republic had a distinctive yet largely forgotten Lamaist past. However, it is not entirely self-evident that Buddhism in the form of Altai Burkhanism outweighed other possibilities open to the Altai intellectuals circle – the revival of shamanism/Burkhanism, joining the Orthodox Church or Islam or other Buddhist schools were also viable solutions to the matter of ethno-religious identification. The alternatives of Orthodox Christianity and Islam, associated with the Russians and the Kazakh were, perhaps, comparatively more problematic<sup>254</sup>, but connections to Buddhism as one of the ‘world religions’ instead of Altai shamanism, and to Gelug Buddhism Traditional Sangha of Russia instead of other schools of Russian Buddhism do require some explanation.

As shown in the paragraph before, for the Altai intellectuals, as well as a considerable share of the Altai peoples in general, the problem of ethnic culture and language preservation stays pressing even three decades after the fall of the USSR, when the Altai were faced with a re-actualized question of positioning themselves as a minor ethnic group in a multinational state. Therefore, the choice of religion, especially in case of the freshly founded religious societies and

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<sup>254</sup> The Orthodox Church not only represents another, numerically dominant nationality (Russians), but it also has a history of

initiatives, was often tightly connected to ethnic identity. Both shamanism and Buddhism left traces in the Altai historical past, and the 1904 Burkhanism can be (and is) attached to the authentication stories of both Ak-Burkhan Buddhists and some of the self-proclaimed 'pagans' and shamanists. Strictly speaking, these two spiritual traditions are not necessarily rival ones: the case of the Buryatia, where shamans and Buddhists share significant common ground and audience, inspires the Ak-Burkhan Buddhists and some individual shamans on similar ideas and attempts. In Buryatia, both Buddhism and shamanism are integral parts of the ethnic revival – while shamanism functions as a mediator for the preservation of kin-family and local cultural elements, Gelug Buddhism connects Buryats to the world institutionalized religion as well as to the Mongolian and Kalmykian related ethnic groups. Thus, Buddhism as 'the main national integrating factor' (Amogolova, 2008) gives space to the local traditions which find their representation in the shamanistic rites and folklore.

This harmonious model has undoubtedly influenced the complex of ideas on Altai religiosity, expressed by the Ak-Burkhan community and the people around it. As one of the temple Lamas said, '*Buddhism will help the Altai culture to survive. Wherever Buddhism comes, local traditions stay. Nothing of the kind can be said about Islam and Christianity.*' In general, the Ak-Burkhan community is trying to present Buddhism as an alternative to other world religions (mainly in opposition to Orthodox Christianity) based on the idea that Buddhism is the only religion that will allow the local dwellers (the Altai peoples) to continue with their national traditions and to restore them rather than forget completely. The Orthodox Church and Islam are less likely to offer the Altai peoples such luxury (according to the Lamas).

This idea of Buddhism's principal inclusiveness was supported with examples of Buryatia, Thailand, Mongolia and Japan. The Lamas admitted that Buddhism followers might also behave too forcefully (on the examples of some unnamed Indian rulers, most likely, Ashoka the Great), but they also softened the statement with an appeal to the principle of historicity, '*times were different back then*'. Such a perception of Buddhism (as a tolerant religious system) is not only fueled by popular imaginary of a calm and peaceful religion, but also by the special attitude towards Buddhist ontology and system of beliefs. For example, I was told that Buddhists and shamanists can both connect with the spirits, albeit on different terms and for different reasons, and that on the local level, the level of lived religiosity, a person can very well be both shamanist and Buddhist, all at the same time.

Therefore, according to the Ak-Burkhan community members, shamanism and Altai culture and traditions ('lay' or 'profane' as those were called) can be consistently incorporated into the Buddhist universe. Thus, it is not surprising that they consider Buddhism to be a central point, a tool of Altai national unification and revival of what is left of the ethnic linguistic and cultural legacy. Khambo Lama Damba Ausheev, the Head of the Traditional Buddhist Sangha of Russia, also supports this idea and propagates it in his interviews concerning the Altai Republic. As he commented on the question about shamanism and

Buddhism in Altai in 2015, *'People do not need to be led into the future of a primitive society. I keep saying to shamanists, "You are cave communists". <...> Altai peoples of today should be armed with knowledge. When Russians profess Christianity, the Kazakhs profess Islam, the Altai should also be civilized, they should be Buddhists'*.<sup>255</sup> It is important to note, however, that Khambo Lama Ausheev's speech demonstrates more resentment towards shamanism than my Altai interlocutors ever expressed in their talks.

The image of the world-spread body of well-established religion, highlighted by Khambo Lama Ausheev, also adds much to Buddhism's overall attractiveness. Buddhism is recognized and institutionalized<sup>256</sup> in Russia as well, which gives slight hope for government support (or, at least, some guarantees of non-interference). In terms of the **power relations**, the Lamas of the Ak-Burkhan community clearly try to maintain a balance between staying in line with the federal laws and local government policy and ensuring their interests on the local religious arena. The same can be said about the internal Buddhist Sangha hierarchy: while pursuing their own independent course, the Lamas are eager to stay within the authority of the most wealthy and notable Sangha of Russia<sup>257</sup> (Gelug School, centered in Buryatia). The interception of these two vertical structures results in interesting combinations of power relations.

On the one hand, most of the Ak-Burkhan Lamas support the Russian government formed by Vladimir Putin, or, to put it more accurately, they express their public support of the current policy of the state. In the groups of big cities intellectuals siding up with the course of the current Russian president would bring much more reputational harm than dividends; In Siberia, however, and Altai as a part of it, federal and local authorities are not always perceived as parts of the very same political system. In other words, the office of the President Vladimir Putin might be considered as something only distantly related to the

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<sup>255</sup> To preserve their nation, the Altai people need to adopt one of the world religions. (2015). Retrieved from: [http://www.sclj.ru/massmedia/detail.php?SECTION\\_ID=432&ELEMENT\\_ID=6209](http://www.sclj.ru/massmedia/detail.php?SECTION_ID=432&ELEMENT_ID=6209)

<sup>256</sup> Buddhism is recognized as one of the four traditional confessions of Russia, and Sanhghas of Buryatia, Tyva, Kalmykia and Altai are actively developing international and federal communication (Putin promised Buddhists a "one hundred percent support". (2013). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/22613>; Badmaev, 2011).

<sup>257</sup> Why did not they choose Karma Kagyu or the Lotus Sutra?

The Karma Kagyu community develops mostly in European regions and worldwide, but without any significant ties to Mongolia and Buryatia (Gelug Buddhist regions). This was an obvious downside for the ethnic Altai Buddhists who were interested in highlighting their nationality through faith.

The Lotus Sutra could have been a decent option, because Japan is one of the possible vectors of the Altai ethnic self-identification. However, the Aum Shinrikyo terroristic attack and the overall distrust towards the foreign did not allow it to happen. My interlocutors told stories about the attention of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB RF) to the Lotus Sutra due to their Japanese origins, and about the founder of the Altai Lotus Sutra community, ethnic Japanese, who was either deported or sentenced for illegal proselyting. I do not know if these stories are true, but I am retelling them here to show the Ak-Burkhan community members' attitudes to the Lotus Sutra. They did not consider it as terroristic or unwanted, but they were feared possible complications with the legal attention to their activities that might have been brought as a side-effect of the proximity to the Lotus Sutra group.

local corrupt Governor of the Altai Republic. This is changing quite rapidly over the events of 2019-2020 and has been influenced after the Ukrainian crisis as well, but overall, as I have shown above, ethnic and religious minorities prefer Putin Russia to the total atheist Soviet ideology – even though they too do less and less consent with the economic and political situation in the country.

Siding with the government means a possibility of financial support and significantly lessens the threats for an organization to be banned or its members to be prosecuted. The Lamas are also careful to be diplomatic and tolerant enough while commenting on the local authorities and their competitors on religious field (the Orthodox Church and Ak-Jay) – not only because they care about their public image, but also because they deem themselves responsible for the fate and prosperity of the community. One of the Lamas told me, *‘Even if Khambo Lama Ausheev goes against Putin, which he does not, we would be the first to get him free of our support’*. He explained that it is not because he himself is a big fan of the current Russian policy, but because his personal likings matter little when he is speaking on behalf of the Sangha. *‘It is irresponsible to say whatever you want to say, one should always think about the people one represents’*, he added.

The vertical power within Buddhist institutional structures is also being assessed in terms of potential benefits and support the Ak-Burkhan community might get. *‘We could not but join Sangha (BTSR, - my remark)’*, the Lama tells me, *‘it was the only way for us’*. He does not seem displeased – on the contrary, the decision of becoming a part of the BTSR is something that he entirely approves. With BTSR being acknowledged on the federal level<sup>258</sup> and in the ‘Buddhist regions’ (Kalmykia, Buryatia, Tyva), the emerging Sangha of the Altai Republic has received not only the reputational support of belonging to a bigger organization, but also a possibility of financial help. Moreover, institutionalized yet not so much rigid power relations within the most well-known Russian Buddhist association provide the young Burkhanist organization with an indisputable advantage of finding its own course – the advantage which the current leaders of the Ak-Burkhan are using to (re)create Altai Buddhism/Burkhanism. They do not wish to copy everything from Buryatia, as they used to do at the very dawn of the Altai community existence; neither do they want to be entirely subordinate to Khambo Lama Damba Ausheev or the Buddhist authorities from Tibet and Mongolia. Thus, they negotiate within the power net of both ‘sacred’ and ‘lay’ authorities, trying to find mutually beneficial compromises on the way of making Altai a Buddhist region<sup>259</sup>.

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<sup>258</sup> Khambo Lama Damba Ausheev is a member of the Presidential Council for Interaction with Religious Associations, together with the other representatives of major religious communities of Russia.

<sup>259</sup> A ‘Buddhist region’ is a subject of Russian Federation where the majority (or, at least, a significant share) of population are Buddhists. This status is not formalized, it is not legally protected; I would explain it as a reflection of the status quo: the regions of Russia where, historically, a lot of people have been Buddhists (Tyva, Kalmykia, Buryatia) are called ‘Buddhists regions’. However, this collocation means much more to the spiritual hierarchies than it does to the common people: for Buddhists it means that they are less obliged to negotiate their public celebrations, worship and proselytizing with the other religious communities; on the contrary,

Mongolia, Buryatia and Tibet are not the only **centers of authority** within the reach of the Russian Gelug Buddhists. Chechesh Toboeva (Getsulma Songmo), a monk who took her vows and studied in Drepung monastery in India, together with her son (Gelong Yonten Phulzhung) and his colleague and co-author (Gelong Yonten Gendun) are building the first Buddhist retreat monastery for strict commitments in the Altai Republic. This undertaking is reported to be blessed by Dalai Lama and Kundeling Rinpoche, who has also promised to visit the monastery during his next visit to Russia<sup>260</sup>. Besides, the small community of three monks that has seceded from Ak-Burkhan can also count on the support from Saint-Petersburg Datsan Gunzechoinei<sup>261</sup>. Chechesh Toboeva's monastery represents a different type of Gelug Buddhist Sangha in the region – the one relying more on international support and authority than on the domestic vertical of Buddhism, and the one based on the compliance with Gelug Indian Buddhism (Tibetan Buddhism in exile) rather than on implementation of the Burkhanist elements from the Altai past. As can be derived from the interviews and from the book by Chechesh Toboeva, Burkhanism as a revived part of the contemporary lived religion is less important to the group of monks than it is to the Ak-Burkhan community, although they both use historical Burkhanism as an element of their **story for authentication and legitimization**. In doing so they (re)constitute their ethnic past, reconsider the present and envision the future.

Gelug Buddhism/Burkhanism's authenticity in Altai is mainly supported through claims of it being historically 'native' to the population of the region. The arguments in favor of this statement are the Buddhist past of the Dzungar Khanate (which is a common consensus) and the perception of 1904 Burkhanism as revived Buddhism (which is still debated upon). These arguments are supported by academic research and the findings of Buddhist sacred objects and suburgans ruins. The latter (archeological findings) also

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for ROC it means that its efforts in attracting people to the Orthodox Church should be more subtle and discreet. To sum up, for the Altai Buddhists the idea of Altai Republic becoming a Buddhist region is a hope for more freedom in terms of public worship and the further spread of Buddhism.

<sup>260</sup> Retreat monastery built in Altai. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://sanghainfo.ru/%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE-%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D1%8B%D1%80%D1%8F/>

<sup>261</sup> The Shiretui Lama of Datsan Gunzechoinei, Jampa Donyed (Buda Balzhievich Badmaev) has published the book on Buddhist philosophy by Gelong Yonten Phulzhung and Gelong Yonten Gendun (2020) – the monks who are now establishing the retreat Buddhist temple with Chechesh Toboeva (A new book by Yonten Gendun & Yonten Phulzhung. Vows on the path to awakening. (2020). Retrieved from: <http://savetibet.ru/2020/07/04/book.html>).

This does not mean, however, that the Ak-Burkhan community has lost its connections with Saint-Petersburg: Mergen Lama is the spiritual disciple of Lama Badmaev and spends almost half a year in Saint-Petersburg where he runs a healing practice (The abbot of the "Gunzechoinei" datsan in St. Petersburg, Buda Balzhievich Badmaev, will provide financial assistance in the construction of datsans on the territory of the Altai Republic. It should be noted that Buda Balzhievich is the spiritual teacher of the Khambo Lama of the Altai Republic. (2019). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_8013](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_8013)).

provide the Ak-Burkhan community<sup>262</sup> with additional layers of authentication: the eschatological and iconic ones. The eschatological level is only subtly sketched in the authentication discourse, it is tied up to Burkhanist prophecies about the return of Amyr-sanaa<sup>263</sup>. Thus, the relics found by the descendants of 1904 Burkhanists at the times of the Buddhism revival signify the countdown, in a sense, to the coming days of the Altai's future glory and prosperity. The iconic power of these findings is somewhat comparable to the role of Lama Itigelov's imperishable body (Quijada, 2012) for Buryat Buddhists: it is a symbol of Buddhism's strength, a physical evidence of its fulfilled promises<sup>264</sup>.

Academic texts in general play a vital role in the cultural and religious revival in Altai. One of my interlocutors hesitated to show me the book on Altai folklore (Muytueva&Chochkina, 1996), written in the Altai language, as she explained that academic book to be 'somewhat sacred' to her people. In the end, she decided not to show it to me, and I never insisted. Of course, it was not a problem for me to find that particular book. What I found most interesting was how an ethnographic endeavor of collecting folklore may be perceived as something related to sacredness. The significance of the academic research in supporting the Buddhist/Burkhanist story of legitimization is hard to be overestimated. The Ak-Burkhan Lamas took Altai Burkhanist texts for praying from an academic ethnography (Danilin, Anohin), and they chose to read an abstract from a historical paper to more than 100 people gathered at the Sagaalgan ritual culmination rather than devote this opportunity to other forms of preaching. Thus, Burkhanist texts (or, at least, the texts that are believed by the ethnographers to be Burkhanist) are used in the Ak-Burkhan rituals complementary to the Buddhist Gelug Orthodox texts. As the Ak-Burkhan members are more inclined to view Burkhanism as a meaningful and still-valid part of today's Gelug Buddhism, they (re)invent Altai Burkhanism as a type of local Buddhism, creating its historical image and folklore functioning in the current context.

This process of (re)invention is significantly implicated with the heterogeneity of the Ak-Burkhan congregation – to be more accurate, with its **desirable heterogeneity**. The Lamas of various ethnic origin express in their talks the same urge to welcome everyone regardless of nationality and beliefs as they do on the Ak-Burkhan public webpage in posts stressing that the community represents ethnic diversity (the Altai, Russians, the Khakas, the Tuvans). The Lamas are very careful to avoid any hints on the Altai as a minor ethnic group and try not to be too eloquent in blaming the Orthodox Church and Soviet authorities. In other words, they are implementing tactical means for a

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<sup>262</sup> I am not so sure about Chechesh Toboeva's and her son's opinions on the matter, therefore, I confine myself to the Ak-Burkhan temple Lamas only.

<sup>263</sup> Syul'de of Amyr-Sanaa found in Altai]. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://altaicholmon.ru/2018/03/26/syulde-amyr-sanaa-nashli-na-altae/>.

<sup>264</sup> Khambo Lama Damba Ausheev explicitly compares the Altai relics and symbolism of Lama Itigelov's condition (Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev: "I had to repay my debt to the Altai Buddhists". (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.infpol.ru/163067-khambo-Lama-damba-ayusheev-ya-dolzhen-byt-vernut-svoy-dolg-altayskim-buddistam/>).

strategic decision of being attractive not only to the Altai potential followers, but also the Russian majority in the region.

In practice, however, communicating to both Russians and Altai peoples poses quite a challenge. To begin with, the Altai congregation is overwhelmingly more numerous than the regular visitors of Russian origin<sup>265</sup>, while the Russians who come to the temple do so mostly for the healing practices, not for religious matters. Therefore, even though the middle-aged and elderly Altai would be more inclined to speak their native language more as well as to practice more of the Burkhanist rituals they remember from their childhood, the Lamas have to counter-balance it with explanations in Russian and ‘universal’ Buddhist rites in order to stay attractive for the Russian community which they desire to grow and to the younger members of the Altai congregation who are less interested in Altai language and culture than their parents and grandparents. Yet another thing is that Russian Lamas (both those who are visiting the temple and those who work there every day) are not keen to restore the Altai legacy of Burkhanism/Buddhism. Their ritual services are done in Tibetan and Russian only, because they usually do not enjoy a satisfactory level of Altai language. It cannot but alter the way they preach and explain Altai Buddhism to the temple visitors: the story of 1904 Burkhanism as well as Buddhism/Burkhanism folklore similarities are not being put to the fore, making way for the arguments of the Dzungar Buddhist past and Buddhism as ancient and global religion. Having talked to the Altai and Russian Lamas, I almost felt that the Ak-Burkhan community is simultaneously cultivating two Buddhisms – the one of the Altai and another one, of the Russians.

Another important observation is that the community is small, and its procedures have not yet been substantially institutionalized. Even though the ‘Centralized Spiritual Administration of Buddhists of the Altai Republic’ was established to grant local Buddhism legitimate status as a local authority institution, it only consists of four Shiretui Lamas and about 10-15 regular members with the status of Lama. Naturally, decisions such as the Altai Republic Khambo Lama election are made under the strong influence of the ‘human relationships’ factor. From what I managed to gather (the Lamas were quite vague in this regard), both Khambo Lamas and Shiretui Lamas are elected by the community based on ‘common sense’ factors – whoever had the best education, dedications, personal charisma and personal connections (either kin/family bonds or individually gained network). Also, such a small group formed by several individuals clearly signifies that the community is in the process of formation. It has been only three decades since the Ak-Burkhan group has been established, and the earlier ideas of Altaichy Sanashkin, Vladimir Kydyev and others are now giving way to the vision of a new generation (Chechesh Lama, Mergen Lama, Aram Lama, Andrei Lama).

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<sup>265</sup> As I have described in chapter 3, there were almost 100 people on the 2019-2020 Sagaalga celebration, and not more than 10 of them were ethnic Russians.

## Four strategies of religious revival: ethnic identification, 'sovereignty', makers of belief, legitimation

In the paragraph above I have presented several choices made by the Ak-Burkhan community that had formed its image and influenced its history. These choices were consciously made by the leaders of the community and reacted upon by its regular members. None of these decisions has been made in a social vacuum: each decision served personal convictions and communities' interests (in a way that the people in charge understood them) and was justified by the arguments derived from the surrounding social environment. In what follows, I will try to systematize the choices of the community described above, in the form of strategic patterns while taking into consideration most important factors of the social environment: internal (the Ak-Burkhan followers, the Lamas and their interests and values, the Buddhist power hierarchy) and external (the state authority, the Orthodox Church and other religious actors, political, social and economic realities of the Altai Republic).

### Strategy of ethnic identification without segregation

There are two most painful stumbling blocks on the thorny path of a small nation in a big Other-nationed and Other-religioned state. First is the **'national identification not nationalism'** problem. The Altai peoples are looking for their identity, but in doing so they are also trying to avoid nationalistic and anti-Russian/anti-Kazakh rhetoric. Nowadays, Altai natives speak Altai among themselves, but almost all public speeches are in Russian. Also, from every public scene one can hear slogans about the 'unique multi-cultural environment' and 'strong Altai-Russian friendship'. The Ak-Jaŋ community, for instance, is a vivid example of a counter-strategy – their nationalistic agenda has been mostly aimed against Buddhists, and after several notable destructive actions they were forbidden to gather as a religious group by the court. Even though the 'nationalistic' aspect is not so prominent in the everyday life of the people of the Altai Republic (I have spent enough time there to be sure of that), the government is strictly monitoring the situation to prevent any nationalistic hints<sup>266</sup>. Acting as a nationalist in Altai, as well as providing a slightest hint on being one is a risky strategy, as the Ak-Jaŋ example still demonstrates to anyone concerned.

Another stumbling block is **'ethnic identification not segregation'**, which is, arguably, a more problematic one. Currently, the Ak-Burkhan temple is visited mostly by the Altai. Russians come there rarely and usually for massage sessions. Also, the Ak-Burkhan leaders' vision on the role and aims of the

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<sup>266</sup> This is not to admit that the Russians and the Altai enjoy completely equal social status – the Orthodox Church still receives more governmental support than any other religion, and ethnic minorities are sometimes socially and culturally infringed (especially when it comes to native language, education and traditions). However, no one of the people I talked with seemed to be too worried about the questions of ethnicity. Despite its outstanding natural and recreational potential, the Altai Republic is a poor underdeveloped region, and both Altai and Russians are struggling to survive there. Overall poverty and unemployment bothered my interlocutors much more than possibilities of the multi-ethnic conflicts.

community seems to be more attractive to the Altai: Altai Buddhism is explained through proving its 'traditionality' (1) and through explaining that this religion can help preserving Altai customs in the global world (2). *'If you join Christianity, you will forget your own traditions, they will disappear. Only Buddhism provides small nations with opportunity of saving their culture'*, - the Lama explained to me. These arguments seem to find their way to the hearts of at least a part of the Ak-Burkhan community Altai members, but I have noticed them fade when being transferred to the Russian audience. Even though part of the Russian Ak-Burkhan members are sympathetic towards the idea of preserving Altai culture and language, they do not perceive it as a personal quest – which is, without doubt, the case of Altai Lamas and at least some of the Altai temple visitors.

Russian Ak-Burkhan Lamas are also less inclined to learn Altai language and adopt local customs, which makes them unable to serve in Burkhanist rites (as was described earlier, these rites are sometimes used as a substitute to Tibetan Buddhism rituals). Both Russian Lamas whom I spoke with confirmed that they are not particularly concentrated on Burkhanism in their teachings and personal convictions, being much more focused on Buddhism in its Tibetan form. Thus, the Altai Buddhism/Burkhanism is represented in a twofold manner: by the Russian Lamas – to the Russians, and by the Altai Lamas – to the Altai<sup>267</sup>. Of course, Russian visitors come to see Altai Lamas and the Altai visit Russian Lamas – with the ethno-national climate in the region being rather calm, not to say favorable, there is no strict ethnic segregation. Nevertheless, the situation of Russian Buddhists mostly preferring Karma Kagyu and the Altai Buddhists choosing the Ak-Burkhan community remains noticeable and not yet succumbing to the possibilities of change.

On the one hand, such ethnic-oriented policy goes in line with the self-proclaimed mission of the Ak-Burkhan community to protect and restore Altai culture. The Altai congregations are, in general, more interested in regarding Buddhism as a traditional and 'true' religion of the Altai and in preserving Altai language and traditions, than the Russian temple visitors. Moreover, a significant share of the Ak-Burkhan ideology is connected to the Altai folklore and history. By saying that I mean not only Burkhanist rituals and hymns in Altai language, but also ethnic-identification aspirations coming from some of the Ak-Burkhan Lamas: to remind Altai peoples of their unity and shared history, they refer to the Oirat past (the times of the Dzungar Khanate when various tribes were united in an Oirat Alliance)<sup>268</sup>.

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<sup>267</sup> I have observed this myself having spent some time in the temple and therefore having become less 'Other' to the community members. The Russian Lamas were explaining Buddhism differently than the Altai Lamas, and they were certainly doing rites strictly according to the Gelug school, not appealing to the Altai Burkhanism past.

<sup>268</sup> Aram Lama about the festival "Oyrad tumen" and the Altai people as a part of the Oirats. (2018). Retrieved from: <http://aginskoe24.ru/articles/645-aram-Lama-o-festivale-oirad-tumen-i-altaicah-kak-chasti-oiratskogo-naroda.html>; (Komarov, 2018).

The same is true regarding the noncommercial organization ‘Altai-Oirot’<sup>269</sup>, established by the Ak-Burkhan leaders. This organization has a public webpage ([https://vk.com/altai\\_oirot](https://vk.com/altai_oirot)) and is undoubtedly closely related to the Ak-Burkhan temple community. Through this non-commercial initiative the Ak-Burkhan leaders aspire to contribute to the Altai language and culture education and promotion. These goals, however, have little to do with the ‘Russian-only’ Ak-Burkhan congregation – both Russians and young Altai men and women are not so keen on sustaining language and customs of the ethnic minority. This is not to say that they go against this idea in the whole, but to state that they are, generally, not too eager to dedicate their time and efforts to this cause. Moreover, as the Ak-Burkhan community recently started to spread its influence over the mountain village regions of the Altai Republic (through building new temples and registering religious societies), they have reached out to the Altai peoples of the region’s countryside, who are also more likely to be interested in the speeches of Altai shared heritage than their Russian neighbors from across the village street.

Nonetheless, growth demands resources – human, financial, reputational, etc. Generally speaking, resources of various kinds come from congregation, personal earnings of the Ak-Burkhan leadership and from collaboration with the authorities. All the listed above means, in practice, dealing with the Russian part of the Altai Republic population – even though politicians of the Altai origin hold several posts in the region’s government and parliament, the power structures are predominantly formed by Russians. The reason for that is not only that the Altai are violated in their public rights, but also that there are simply more Russians than there are the Altai peoples, so that when it comes to elections to the local parliament, the Russians have an upper hand. The region’s demography of the predominance of Russian ethnic population also dictates the necessity for the Ak-Burkhan to reach out for the Russian audience. The Altai community of the Ak-Burkhan city temple that gathered on the most special occasion of the Buddhist ritual calendar – Sagaalgaṅ – was barely over a hundred people; plus, around 20 families from all over the region who visited the Lamas during the festivities week to receive blessings and help. With only 100 people getting to the temple for the biggest religious event of the year<sup>270</sup>, the flow of donations and reputational merits are bound to remain rather low. The Lamas, of course, find other ways to support their cause – as mentioned above, they earn money by healing and massage sessions, exorcism and purification rites while also getting donations from wealthy sympathizers<sup>271</sup>. However, in order to attract

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<sup>269</sup> The "Altai-Oirot" organization. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://www.rusprofile.ru/id/11810954>.

<sup>270</sup> In Buryatia, Buddhism is much more widespread, and events of such scale are truly well-visited. Moreover, as I have been told by the Lamas, some of the rich Altai businessmen willing to support Buddhist spiritual institutions are more inclined to do so in Buryatia, for the reasons of grandeur and prestige.

<sup>271</sup> Interestingly, one of the persons who donated a considerable sum on the new temple in 2019-2020 was an elderly Russian man, closely inclined to esotericism and eschatology. The Lamas were obviously not happy about him preaching about the end of the world, but as long as he was their guest of honor, they let him speak, if only for a moment.

more attention and – possibly – more donations for new shines and temples, the Ak-Burkhan leadership ought to turn to a larger Russian audience.

And so they do, even though it means altering their narrative in favor of their connection to the world and national Buddhism instead of focusing on the Altai Buddhism heritage. The Lamas also urge to support a compassionate and welcoming image of the community, staying open-hearted for everyone, no matter of their religious faith, and attracting Russian Lamas to treat visitors together with their Altai colleagues. They would also be eager to arrange more of a public approach, for example, celebrating Sagaalga and other occasions on the city square, if only they were not cautious not to trigger an unwanted attention of the Orthodox Church. Moreover, they are careful when talking to the Russian visitors, avoiding potentially dangerous topics such as ‘Russian occupation’, ‘Orthodox mission’ and politics.

Regarding politics, the Ak-Burkhan leaders achieved certain progress in this regard, – the community holds a chair in the Coordinating Council of the Ministry of culture of the Altai Republic. Thus, the Ak-Burkhan Buddhism is the only school of Buddhism and a third religion represented in the local government (the other two being Orthodox Christianity and Islam). Overall, cooptation with regional and state authorities is considered as a form of responsibility the Ak-Burkhan leaders are charged with, in favor of the whole community. The temple Shiretui Lama explained it to me like that: *‘Ausheev (the Khambo Lama of the Russian Gelug Buddhism – my note) is a member of the State Coordinating Council in Religious Affairs, and he stays in line with the government in major decisions; would he not, we would be the first to overthrow him. This is not to say that we all support the government and current policy, but that we are responsible for the people we lead. Being in an opposition to the authorities is problematic, and it is much less efficient than to be allies’.*

Alliance with the state and local government is, therefore, a means to support the community and defend it from possible threats. In other words, the possible merits from direct opposition to the state power are believed to be lesser than the outcome of a peaceful co-existence. In addition to that, the Russian religious policy of the 1990-s (and later on) was much more friendly and supportive towards religious societies than the course of the Soviet Union. This contrast has provided the Russian government with a ‘foundation’ of trust coming from religious organizations that were finally allowed to exist officially and proselytize – even though under a strict state control. Nowadays, this initial trust has already been substantially undermined, mostly due to the apparent favoritism towards the Orthodox Church demonstrated by the state spokesmen and courts, yet the Altai religious people (Buddhists and shamanists) whom I talked to were nevertheless grateful to the current state for letting them speak their language and practice their faith. As Shiretui Lama added, *‘We have been*

*given the means to communicate with the authorities; it is much wiser to use them than to undermine them*<sup>272</sup>.

### Strategy of 'sovereignty': positioning within Buddhist hierarchy

The Ak-Burkhan community is dealing with power not only in the sphere of public politics, but also within the framework of Buddhist authorities – both national and worldwide. The small Ak-Burkhan Sangha of the Altai Republic has many options of how to navigate itself in the waters of Buddhist hierarchies. To begin with, they position themselves within the most numerous and powerful national Gelug Buddhist structure: the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (BTSR). Another power axis is the Dalai Lama office, whose authority being significantly diminished by Tibet's current status<sup>273</sup>. The third major dimension for making contacts and establishing relationships is Buddhism worldwide – Sanghas from Thailand, Mongolia, India and other Buddhist regions.

These three sources of power and authority form a variety of possible combinations of Altai Sangha's self-positioning. Needless to mention, that the chosen vectors of power/subordination relations heavily depend on the community's goals and social surroundings. In other words, it is neither a decision based solely on the leaders' course, nor a choice made out of the parishioners' expectations or external factors such as government policy, but a combination of both (at the very least, in case of the Ak-Burkhan community), as I am going to explain further on.

The decision to join the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (BTSR) seems to be a logical step to make for any Gelug Buddhist Russian community. At the moment, BTSR is the most recognized and 'powerful' Gelug Buddhist community in Russia, with its Buryat and Saint-Petersburg Datsans and notable presence in the 'Buddhist' regions of Russia. The Shiretui Lama of the Maima temple, one of the current leaders of the Ak-Burkhan community, told me: *'It was absolutely inevitable that we have joined the Sangha [BTSR]. There was no other way around for us'*.

However, this choice - the idea of becoming a part of a hierarchical structure, - let alone the choice of institutionalized Buddhism as such, was not entirely pre-determined and self-evident. As described in the third chapter, 'Burkhanism as Buddhism' (more specifically, as Gelug Buddhism) was not the only viable option considered by the community founders'. Had they and their disciples chosen 'Burkhanism as shamanism' (very roughly said, of course) or 'Burkhanism as a native, Altai version of Buddhism', joining the Traditional

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<sup>272</sup> The similar observations were made by Doronin (2013) in his paper on contemporary Altai shamanism (also, by Pedersen (2011) – about Mongolian shamans). Doronin writes that shamans are often eager to engage in local politics and activate their passive election right because they already were 'elected', in a way. Through their gift they got their status: people who help, the trusted ones. It is important to keep in mind considering one of the Shiretui Lamas' proclaimed shamanist abilities.

<sup>273</sup> It is important to mention here, because this is how the Ak-Burkhan Lama described the Buddhist hierarchy to me, albeit in a less plain manner.

Buddhist Sangha of Russia would certainly have been more problematic – due to the reason that deeper integration with native religious and cultural practices might compete with the practices of traditional (Mongolian-Tibetan, in the case of Russia) Gelug Buddhism, which would be scorned upon by the already existing Gelug Buddhist institutions. Thus, the decision to be more affiliated with ‘traditional’ Buddhism rather than with the region’s Burkhanism past has opened to the community the way towards the national Buddhist institutions (the BTSR being the most notable).

It would be too hasty to assume that these choices (being a part of the Gelug Buddhist community and joining the BTSR) were made consequently, one after the other. Organizational decisions are not taken in a social vacuum, and those choices were not exceptional in this regard. BTSR’s influence as an accepted and wide-spread religious structure – as well as Buddhism’s international recognition and support - have undoubtedly influenced the process of decision-making when it came to ‘choosing sides’. Gelug Buddhism offered the community support and protection through both its ‘world religion’ status and established national institutionalized structure, which was considered to be helpful in the communication with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the government while simultaneously distinguishing the Ak-Burkhan from other local religious groups and charismatic individuals that preferred to stay non-institutionalized. The fate of the Ak-Jarj group, which slid into radical actions and was officially banned, and the active yet futile attempts of Akai Kyne to unite fractured shamans and shamanists might well have served as a warning for the Ak-Burkhan against paving their own way on a religious scene.

In other words, Buddhism is something that the majority of people know and are generally not suspicious about (making it easier to be spread) and also something that cannot be called ‘a sect’ and prosecuted as one. It is not only the government and ROC that jeopardize ‘sects’ well-being, but also the highly negative front of the public opinion regarding small and/or ‘non-conventional’ religious groups. In general, religious organizations of a national/world scale enjoy more public support and trust than local newly founded communities. In addition, Buryat and Saint-Petersburg datsans as forges of human resources and sources of hierarchical legitimization make it much easier for a community to establish its own structure.

Thus, *belonging* to an established and recognized religious community means prestige, managerial and possibly financial support, protection from the interests of ROC and the government. Joining an existing power structure rather than creating their own or existing outside of any, in case of the Ak-Burkhan community proved to provide more gains than losses. This is what the Lama meant with his words about ‘*inevitable decision*’. Yet there was another ‘*inevitability*’ that he had in mind. As I explained above, Buddhism as a religious choice is considered by the Ak-Burkhan leadership to be ‘the less of all evils’, as the Russian proverb says: it is believed to be a world religion that does not eradicate local culture and traditions. This is a second reason why the Lama was

referring to Buddhism as the only choice – it can help cherish and restore the Altai traditions and language while also supporting the community with its world-wide status. Thus, even though the Ak-Burkhan are integrated into the BTSR framework and speaking of themselves as traditional Gelug Buddhists, they are in fact balancing on the verge between Buddhism and Burkhanism. This idea of synthesis, the idea of a unique local type of Buddhism, nourished by the Ak-Burkhan early founders, eventually received development – not in the form of a stand-alone religious group striving to be recognized, but as a part of the wider Buddhist national community. Adding national features to the pre-existing Buddhist tapestry proved to be more fruitful than weaving a Burkhanist tapestry of their own.

The ‘Burkhanism is Buddhism’ formula is quite flexible in terms of the possible course of the community: it can either mean that the concrete historical period marked by Burkhanism was in fact an attempt to revive Buddhism, or it may also be understood through the prism of Altai Buddhism as a special local variety of Mongol-Tibetan Buddhism, influenced by shamanism and local animistic cultures. The image of the Ak-Burkhan community and its agenda has changed over the years, and the founders’ generation seem to have had more connections to the original Burkhanism than the Ak-Burkhan leaders of today. The initial idea was to restore local, Altai Buddhism/Burkhanism and was heavily grounded in the Burkhanism past and rituals. Those ideas, however, were hard to implement in the light of the community’s strengthening connections to the global Buddhism and to the center of Russian Buddhism – Buryatia.

The choice of Gelug Buddhism is also the choice of the Gelug Buddhist regions: Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tuva, Mongolia. This choice brings along a certain imaginary and cultural elements (the interior and exterior of the temples, the language of worship and types of practices, holidays and celebrations, etc.) and contributes to the sense of religious and cultural belonging to the imaginary unity of the ethnically and religiously related nationalities. Therefore, connections with nearby Buryatia are important not only to the Altai Gelug Buddhist who consider the Buryat experience in religious sphere as an example to follow, but also to those Altai people who are concerned about their ethnic identification.

Thus, the Ak-Burkhan community chose to exist within the Russian Gelug Buddhist network – namely, within the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia. This decision has opened the way to numerous opportunities (protection, positive public image, education, PR and human resources), but had also resulted in imposing certain implications – that of power affiliations and religious background.

Being one of the world religions, Buddhism offers a broad network of international contacts and communication, which the Ak-Burkhan community is certainly eager to exploit. They visit Buddhist conferences in Mongolia,

welcome guests from Thailand and India<sup>274</sup>, and make these activities known to the public by posting them on the temple's social network page. Taking into account the political situation in Russia and the government-sponsored prevalence of the Russian Orthodox Church, it might seem correct to hypothesize that the weight of the international support from religious authoritative figures in India, Thailand, Tibet and other Buddhist regions would be considered by the community to be more significant than the authority of domestic, Russian Buddhist hierarchies. Much to my surprise, I discovered that this is not entirely true.

The Lamas are more than happy about Russian Buddhist education (Buryatia, also Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, but to a lesser extent of excitement around it). In other words, they do not consider Tibetan schooling or Indian datsans as an ultimate source of authority. The part of the community gathering around Chechesh seems to share a different opinion on the matter, most likely because of her son's religious degree in an Indian datsan and her own internship there. In male Lamas' talks, on the other hand, there were no hints on the necessity of raising money to send someone to study in India – while they kept explaining to me the importance of the step the community had undertaken upon sending a group of first disciples from Altai to Buryatia. The fact that Chechesh Toboeva's son, Emil Kergilov (monastic name Yonten Phulzhung) studied in India, of course, provides him with an aura of authority in terms of delivering lectures and attracting visitors to the temple, but does not automatically guarantee him a decision-making voice in the community.

Without doubt, the Ak-Burkhan Lamas belong to Gelug Buddhism and follow its traditions to the best of their own design, but, as it seems, they feel comfortable inside *Russian* Gelug Buddhism - or, more precisely, within *Buryat* Gelug Buddhism. They do use the authority of Buddhism as a worldwide religion, and they have trips to Mongolia and even to India and Europe (not so often), but they lean neither on Tibet, nor on any other international support in their everyday life, preferring to maintain a constructive dialogue with the Russian Khambo Lama and with local authorities. But why is that? The Ak-Burkhan community had plenty of other scenarios of situating themselves in the world of Buddhism: they could have relied upon Indian and Tibetan Buddhism and seek

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<sup>274</sup> *An International Buddhist Conference is being held in Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia.* <...> *The representative of the Buddhists of the Altai Republic, Aram Lama Kypchakov, also takes part in the event.* (2019). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_8431](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_8431);

*В течении 3-х дней на автомобиле из Санкт-Петербурга до Горно-Алтайска ехали Хамбо-лама Республики Алтай и Андрей-лама, чтобы довести до Малой Родины бронзовую статую Будды, подаренную буддистам нашего региона тайским монахом Аджан Чатри [It took the Khambo Lama of the Altai Republic and Andrei Lama 3 days to drive from Saint-Petersburg to Gorno-Altaysk. They were in hurry to bring home a bronze statue of Buddha – a present to the Altai Buddhists by the Thai monk Ajan Chatri].* (2020). Retrieved from: [https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886\\_8683](https://vk.com/public65760886?w=wall-65760886_8683);

*Tibetan monks build a mandala in Gorno-Altaysk.* (2012). Retrieved from: <https://www.gorno-altaysk.info/news/16266>.

independence from Buryat dominance, or they could have been standing in mild opposition to the current Russian government and, again, stress their bonds with Buddhism world-wide. They have chosen another path. Why?

I have gathered pieces of an answer to this question from the conversations I had with the people in the temple, but, of course, one can never assert speculations like this with 100% certainty. The core reason behind the Ak-Burkhan course onto Buryatia and Russian authorities seems to be the one of sheer practicality. The Lamas I spoke with seemed rather pragmatic and straightforward when they explained that Tibet, India and Mongolia are too far away and not willing to help the small Altay community with any financial means. But of course, there is their authority, well-known and/or acknowledged throughout the Buddhist world. If the Dalai Lama was in his office in Tibet and if getting there was not so hazardous (speaking of Chinese presence in the region), the Ak-Burkhan Lamas would have at least considered maintaining closer relations to Lhasa. The situation be as it is, however, they find themselves bound by the responsibility for the Sangha and the temple well-being, which dictates, in a sense, their choice of allies.

The local government might help them raise funds – or, at the very least, might just leave them be without throwing a spanner in the works (quite literally so, when it comes to the building of the new temples). The Buryat Buddhist structures provide monastic education and institutionalized confirmation of qualifications while also being much closer ‘to the ground’ than the Dalai Lama’s position. In other words, the Khambo Lama of Russia who sits in Buryatia is much more likely to pay a visit to the neighboring Buddhist region (which he already did<sup>275</sup>) and to spread his authority and (possibly) financial support to the local Sanghas. It is also a matter of ethnic identity: as shown in the first part of this chapter, the Altai, and especially the Altai Gelug Buddhists, tend to appropriate Buryat experience in both religious and ethnic aspects. Even though the Buryat peoples and the Altai peoples do not consider themselves as one ethnicity, they are both small ethnic groups, and they are both situated within a larger Other-nationed state (Russian Federation). Therefore, the case of Buryats trying to save and restore their culture in the predominantly Russian environment finds sincere response in the hearts of the Altai intelligentsia.

As for the prestige of foreign/domestic education, it is a matter of both pragmatism and security concerns. Without doubt, the disciples who have finished the full course of the Drepung monastic education are respected, and the Ak-Burkhan leaders use these facts to attract public attention to the temple and strengthen its grounds<sup>276</sup>. However, as aforementioned, they do not consider Buddhist education in Russia to be less worth than the foreign one – not to

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<sup>275</sup> Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev will travel to Altai to revive Buddhism there – instead of Ilyumzhinov. (2015). Retrieved from: <http://asiarussia.ru/buddhism/8749/>; Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev laid a first stone Buddhist datsan in the Altai Mountains. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.infpol.ru/162805-khambo-Lama-damba-ayusheev-zalozhil-v-gornom-altae-buddiyskiy-datsan/>.

<sup>276</sup> By publicly announcing it on the temple webpage.

mention that it is much cheaper and closer to send disciples to nearby Buryatia than, say, to India. Another aspect is the concern about being considered a 'foreign agent' and receiving close attention of the national anti-terrorist forces. As I mentioned in the Introduction and in the beginning of chapter four, the attitudes towards 'the foreign' and 'abroad' are twofold: although people generally respect things coming from abroad (goods, education, medicine), they somehow tend to expect troubles coming with. The current policy of the Russian public authorities only makes this anxiety burn brighter by enforcing legal acts on the foreign contacts control<sup>277</sup>. Therefore, taking into account the legal problems which might occur while being financed from abroad – or, according to the latest law<sup>278</sup>, even though simply being educated abroad, – it is understandable why coming to terms with the national authorities, both local and federal, public and religious, is a safer and easier way of cooptation (if not strategically, then tactically).

*“Had it become known to us, that the Khambo Lama was cooking an opposition to the Russian government, we would have been the first to denounce him”*, – the middle-aged Altai Lama tells me fervently. *“Why would that be?”*, I ask him. He answers that this is not about someone’s personal convictions and political views<sup>279</sup>, but about the shared responsibility which they – the Khambo Lama, the Shiretui Lamas and him personally as a Shiretui Lama himself, – bear before the Buddhist Sangha members. Fighting the authorities will not end up well; much more gains can be obtained from co-existing with them.

Moreover, the current leadership of the Ak-Burkhan community consider being loyal to the Russian government as a form of responsibility before community, and they feel themselves in much better conditions comparing to the Soviet and Perestroika times. In other words, even though the Orthodox Church has a significant stance on the Altai religious scene, they try finding their niche – the Altai people seeking their identity. Thus, religious revival is trying to cover the urge for a cultural revival, the need of cultural and national identification. Also, the state has taken their side in their feud with the Ak-Jaj

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<sup>277</sup> The infamous act about the 'foreign agents' was implemented in 2012, when GosDuma (the Russian Parliament) adopted the corresponding amendments to the law "On Non-Commercial Organizations". Since that time, 14 media and 5 people associated with media were added to the 'foreign agents' list. The status of a 'foreign agent' imposes various restrictions on the organization's work, the most severe of them being reputational charges and heightened attention from the authorities (Safronova, 2021).

<sup>278</sup> The most recent amendments to the Russian Federal law "On freedom of conscience and on religious associations" require the clergy of any religion who have received spiritual education abroad to be certified by a Russian religious organization and to receive additional professional education before starting their activities in Russia (The government submitted amendments to the law "On freedom of conscience and on religious associations" to the Duma. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/authorities/legal-regulation/2020/07/d42688/>).

<sup>279</sup> Not all Lamas support V.V. Putin's regime – one of them was particularly hostile towards it. The others, however, quickly changed the topic – they clearly did not want to discuss such sensitive topics as politics with the people they hardly knew.

group, thus gaining some support and credit in their eyes, while Tibet and India are not so likely to offer anything apart from their authoritative support.

Combined, my interlocutors' opinions about Russia, Tibet, Dalai Lama and the Russian Khambo Lama have formed a peculiar puzzle: firstly, Russia (and the Russian Buddhist community in the whole) is considered as a 'state in a state', as a separate and to a larger extent independent body of 'Northern' Buddhism, and secondly, that within Russia, subjects of the BTSR may also be not so much obedient to the Khambo Lama who is considered as manifestation of highest national religious power. To put it differently, according to my interlocutors, there are certain circumstances under which the local Sangha can -and should - stop supporting the Khambo Lama. The pivotal status of Dalai Lama, on the other hand, while being undoubtedly recognized as sacred, is more a matter of respect and tradition than real power and authority. "*We have our own Buddhism here in Russia, and Dalai Lama – what? He is too far away*", - the Lama explained to me sipping his third cup of black tea<sup>280</sup>.

### Strategy of constructing a system of rituals and beliefs

Strictly speaking, this 're-constructing' is more of an imminent feature to religious revival than a strategy as a matter of conscious choice. With the living religious tradition being long intermingled and interrupted, there is little to do but to try to replenish it, preferably with some '*real practices*' and '*true folklore*' ('*работающие практики*' and '*настоящий фольклор*' - I am using my informants' wording here). Thus, when it comes to the Altai culture and lore, religious communities are not only presenting themselves with some already existing narrative but are literally constructing social reality around them. In a situation when the Altai people find themselves in a social reality of intersecting and sometimes opposing identification constructs, the ethnic Altai religious leaders<sup>281</sup> propose their solutions to shaping the Altai self-identification, combining contemporary common practices with the attempts to remember their origins. This is what I consider to be the core of the Burkhanism revival case: it is not Burkhanism alone that is revived, but the whole religious framework that is (re)constructed.

On the other hand, this process of re-constructing is, in essence, a continuous sequence of choices. Religious communities (more precisely, their leaders) are browsing ethnographic archives, gathering pieces of evidence - and choosing, constantly choosing, which practices to follow and which to forget, which beliefs to approve and which to claim as false. Although these choices are not always made with a long-term strategic planning in mind, most of them are

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<sup>280</sup> In Russian, there is a proverb about the power of the local bureaucratic government that aptly illustrates Lama's words: '*До Бога – высоко, до царя – далеко, я – близко, кланяйся мне низко*' [*The God is far above, the king is far to go, I am the close one, bow to me low*] (my translation).

<sup>281</sup> Although I dedicate this observation mostly to the Ak-Burkhan community leadership, past and present, some of the other religious leaders (Akai Kine, Vasilii Chekurashev) are, in fact, also constructing a religious system of their own.

– at least, in case of the Ak-Burkhan community I studied – conscious decisions supported be and followed with specific actions, such as events, social network posts, public announcements. Therefore, even though I do not claim it to be specific only to the Ak-Burkhan community, I still consider the acts of conscious religious (re)construction as a form of community-and-faith-building strategy.

As described above, the Ak-Burkhan leaders are eager to spread Gelug Buddhism among the population of the region, making Altai a Buddhist territory. They seek to establish their stance in the Buddhist community, to secure their position on the level of the local religious communities and authorities and to attract more followers with no unwanted legal attention attached. Some of them (Altai by ethnicity) are also counting on restoring and preserving Altai culture through affiliating it with a world religion, well-known for its tolerance towards the local traditions. How would ‘constructing a system of rituals and beliefs’ help the community leaders achieve that?

There are three major ways of tackling a strategy of constructing a system of rituals and beliefs which I recorded going on in the Ak-Burkhan community. The first one I called **making the religion** and it delineates how the Ak-Burkhan leadership actively constructs Altai Buddhism. The second strategy is **becoming ‘an influencer’**, and details how a Buddhist spokesperson establishes him/herself publicly as an expert on Altai Buddhism. The third strategy is using what Gudkov termed the practice of **‘negative identity’**<sup>282</sup> (Gudkov 2004, p. 156-157) by which the Ak-Burkhan leadership others the Ak-Tyang group as “sect” and thus points out what they themselves are not. The last two strategies are supporting the third one: while the process of ‘making the religion’ creates the Ak-Burkhan version of contemporary Altai Buddhism, the other two make it happen, ensure it is heard and acknowledged by as many people as possible.

The **‘making of the religion’** is a way in which the Ak-Burkhan Lamas develop the image of contemporary Altai Buddhism according to their personal likings and their ideas on what is better for the Republic and its people. Had the living religious tradition of Buddhism and/or Burkhanism been preserved intact over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they would have been likely either to follow it or disregard it – in any way, they would have been building their own path looking back on the existing practices and beliefs. In case of the prolonged religious rupture, however, there is no certainty in the question of which version of Burkhanism and shamanism is ‘old and right’ and which is ‘new’ (*‘новодел’*) and therefore, not ‘native’ to the Altai peoples.

Buddhism makes solving this case easier, in a way, as it offers an ancient, respected and institutionalized religious system while also remaining tolerant to the local ideas on the supernatural. Thus, some Ak-Burkhan leaders have

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<sup>282</sup> I would argue that in the case of the Ak-Burkhan community, this concept is apt and appropriate, because the Altai Republic is also a former part of the Soviet Union, and certain post-Soviet features seem to apply there as well (as I showed earlier in chapter 4), and because the process that I observed bears a strong resemblance to the way Gudkov explained his concept – even though on a scale of a single community, not the whole country.

chosen to integrate elements of Burkhanism (songs, hymns, rituals) to the Mongolian Buddhist practice. Even though they demonstrate firm appreciation of the BTSR's course on spreading traditional Gelug Buddhism, the actual religious activities the Altai Lamas are engaged in are a mixture of Buddhist and Burkhanist rituals. One of the Lamas (highly influential in the community) is also eager to consider shamanism as one of the ways of dealing with the spiritual world. Although hardly surprising on its own, taking into account the way how Buddhism co-exists with national beliefs in supernatural in Korea, Japan and Thailand, this attempt of the Altai Lamas to link together religion and ethnic revival is quite telling.

By and large, in the Ak-Burkhan leaders' thoughts and actions cultural revival and religion come as one, inseparably supporting each other. Shiretui Lama of the Maima temple, who is the driving force of the community's vision and image, selects certain materials from ethnographic academic records on Burkhanism and forms a pool of texts that is used alongside Buddhist practices – or instead of those. Through that, he is both formulating a new image of contemporary Burkhanism (as an Altai version of Mongolian Buddhism) and reviving the Burkhanist institute of jarlykchi, which is not necessarily built into to Buddhist hierarchy. However, he does so under the patronage of his official status in the Buddhist hierarchy. He and his followers are convinced that Buddhism is inherent and therefore, *true* to the Altai peoples, thus regarding Buddhism prosperity in Altai as their life's work. On the other hand, they also strongly support Altai culture and language, both with their speeches and deeds. The establishment of the Altai-Oirot community, the jarlykchi position in Ongudai considered as a 'local substitute' (if one may phrase it like this) of an institutionally accepted Lama in the region, the use of the Burkhanist hymns during Buddhist celebrations - those are one of the many example showing that the Ak-Burkhan Altai leaders not only assert that Burkhanism is Altai Lamaism, but also stretch their inspiration into reality through concrete – and planned – actions.

To support their vision of Burkhanism/Buddhism, the Ak-Burkhan Lamas and active parishioners coin an **'influencer'** branding strategy. Although they do not call it like that, their actions and goals in this regard are quite clear: by making social network posts, giving interviews, holding a chair in the region's religious council, and paying and receiving visits they make themselves visible and, simultaneously, claim to be a 'legitimate' structure to be reckoned with. What I mean by 'legitimate' is not only the fact that they are an officially registered religious organization (although this is also important), but the way this word is used in modern Russian in everyday speech: 'legitimate' as 'decent; in principal okay to deal with'. The Ak-Burkhan current leadership chose a path of co-optation with the authorities, both religious and secular, and a path of openness to a constructive dialogue. Whether they are indeed open to communication with certain individuals and groups, remains to be seen, but the overall scenario is the one stressing their willingness to maintain friendly and mutually beneficial relations with whoever is ready to respond accordingly.

The ‘influencer’ strategy means the process of becoming a recognized expert in a certain field. In case of the Ak-Burkhan, this field includes, but is not limited to, the Altai culture, Gelug Buddhism, Burkhanism and Altai peoples’ past. Without doubt, this field of expertise is multilayered: the local authorities are expecting different things from the Ak-Burkhan representative than the family from a far-away settlement that came to visit the temple on Buddhist New Year. However, in general, what they strive to do is to *be the ones* to talk to about Buddhism in the region. They also try to maintain an image of a well-educated group of intellectuals, scholars and people of arts – which does not seem to be the problem as many people within the Ak-Burkhan circle and its sympathizers naturally belong to this social stratum.

Moreover, this ‘scholarly’ image seems to benefit from the reputational gains which the Ak-Burkhan leaders are clearly eager to achieve from the dispute with the remains of the Ak-Jaŋ group. On the one hand, the Ak-Burkhan Lamas try to maintain the policy of ‘no speaking evil’, even with regard to those who caused them wrongdoings in the past. Thus, they did not blame the Ak-Jaŋ people specifically while talking to me about them; the harshest words they used were ‘*hooligans*’ and ‘*people led astray*’. This way, again, they demonstrate their principal readiness to stay open-hearted and to follow Buddhist ideals.

On the other hand, and especially in the light of the most recent news feed on the court case against the Ak-Jaŋ representatives started by the Ak-Burkhan<sup>283</sup>, the Ak-Jaŋ community is used as a means of ‘**negative self-identification**’. ‘*We are not them, we are different*’, - says one of the Ak-Burkhan Lamas to me, and continues with a list of what exactly makes the Ak-Burkhan different: ‘*we are not a sect, but they are*’, ‘*we are on good terms with the authorities, while they are banned*’, ‘*we restore true Altai traditions from the past, while they impose something they have created themselves, for questionable reasons*’. The Lamas also highlighted that what they do is restoring ‘*the tradition*’, finding and bringing to life what was forgotten, in its ‘*true*’ form, because they use academic literature and research in order to do so. The Ak-Jaŋ leadership, on the contrary, was characterized as ‘*fantasizing*’ something and claiming it to be coming from the higher entity; while the only entity that might instill such thoughts are lesser spirits. The fact that the Ak-Jaŋ were considered extremist by the court decision and legally prohibited has only served to strengthen the Ak-Burkhan’s self-righteousness concerning their attitude to a less fortunate ‘evil twin’.

The confrontation with the Ak-Jaŋ provides the community with two major lines of argumentation: first being the position of a merciful yet righteous victim and the second one - the aforementioned ‘negative identification’. The image of a victim is communicated by the Lamas implicitly through their talks; although I cannot state with an utmost certainty that they have coordinated their lines on

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<sup>283</sup> Altai Buddhists decided to sue pagans for libel. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/741323>

that matter, I definitely got an impression that at the very least, they have agreed on remaining very subtle and not so specific around the Ak-Jañ topic. Nevertheless, their main message is clear – ‘they attacked us numerous times, vandalizing stupas and harassing Buddhists; we have never been hostile towards them, but we are also capable of fighting back’. This twofold rhetoric echoes Martin’s (2017a) ideas on the functions of authenticity in religious communities: the authentic is shadowed by the inauthentic, thus othering the particular community from ‘them’, and making it united over certain ideas or practices that are considered to be prevalent over the ideas or practices of ‘the others’<sup>284</sup>. This is something that the Ak-Burkhan leadership is doing through the Ak-Jañ opposition narrative: the claims to be essentially different<sup>285</sup> from the Ak-Jañ (othering) are at the same time the claims of being superior to them (prevailing).

Most of the Lamas support the official ban of the Ak-Jañ community, saying that ‘*the law gave them justice*’, although it is not so simple – as I mentioned before, the situation is complicated by family ties - one of the Lamas has relatives in the village of Kokorya, where the Ak-Jañ disciples live<sup>286</sup>. Another prominent member of the community, a person with an academic background and political aspirations, mentioned in a private talk that ‘*Why would they (the Ak-Jañ) write all those extremist things in their papers (the papers that are used to be officially registered as a religious organization)? They could have asked us for help, they could have done it so that they would not have been banned*’<sup>287</sup>. These examples show that while the Ak-Burkhan core circle of leaders try to maintain one course, the community is not monolithic. It consists of individuals; their distinct opinions, their ideas and charisma, which might very well change according to the changing environment.

### Strategy of legitimation: scholarship and tradition

In the paragraphs above, I have described three strategies of the Ak-Burkhan religious revival: the strategy of ethnic self-identification, the strategy of dealing with power and the one of ‘making the belief’. These three lines of conscious actions are interconnected, of course, at least to the extent of sharing the same social environment. However, there is one more thing that they have in common. These three strategies are built on the same fundament – the Ak-

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<sup>284</sup> ‘So this strategy of talking about “real Christianity” is a handy rhetorical device for (1) claiming that your own views or practices are superior to those of others, or (2) separating or distancing yourself from others’ (Martin, 2017a, p. 147).

<sup>285</sup> Interestingly, this difference is explained not only by the arguments proving the righteousness of Ak-Burkhan claims about the Altai Buddhism, but also by the validity of the methods of argumentation they use.

<sup>286</sup> It was the very same Lama who asked me ‘to talk to everyone, to listen to what different people have to say’. He was clearly more doubtful about the Ak-Jañ than the other five male Lamas I met in the temple (I specify their gender because, unfortunately, I did not get the chance to ask the female Lamas, Chechesh and Galina, about their opinions on the matter).

<sup>287</sup> This quote on its own opens a door to yet another realm of questions: what does the procedure of registering exactly mean for the Ak-Burkhan members?

Burkhan community's chosen way of legitimation<sup>288</sup>. Whatever claim they make to clarify their imaginary of the Altai Buddhism and of themselves, they are supporting it with a line of argumentation that they find most convincing and suitable for their goals – in this regard, they act no differently than any other religious community (Hjelm, 2005). These arguments can differ depending on the variations of the social contexts in which the Ak-Burkhan leaders find themselves, but they can be summarized into two major groups: scholarship and tradition. I will, therefore, describe the strategy of legitimization through the lens of these two sub-strategies, starting with the **'scholarship'** one.

The Ak-Burkhan community leaders are trying to legitimize Buddhism in Altai through academic, historical, and linguistic research. They cite academic papers on common gatherings to prove that Buddhism (not shamanism) is native to Altai peoples while also using academic folklore records to restore bits of Altai culture. (Post)communist prestige of science and scholarship is certainly at play here – the academic 'truth' about origins of Buddhism/Burkhanism matters to the Ak-Burkhan community members not only as a valid argument in favor of their choice of religion, but also as a personal conviction and aspirations.

Questions of authenticity carry a deeply personal meaning to the people involved. When asked about his own story of conversion to Buddhism, one of the Lamas emotionally explained, that *'I was young and quick-tempered, just starting my acquaintance with Buddhism. And then an older friend (one of the Ak-Burkhan founders, - my note) tells me that Buddhism is not traditional to the Altai soil. We almost had a fight, I almost let him down the stairs. And it was then that I started digging academic literature and looking for the truth – what if he is right, while I am not?'* The idea of Buddhism as a religion inherent to the Altai dwellers is, therefore, not only a valid argument for gaining more followers and external support, but also an important personal belief of at least several of the Ak-Burkhan Lamas, the belief that they have been seeking to justify with science, the post-communist 'source of truth'.

The very fact that in the post-Soviet Russia, academic text and titles are widely used to bestow authenticity and legitimize one's claims has already been discussed by scholars (Quijada, 2012, for instance), but the idea that to be warmly welcomed and appreciated, religion must be 'innate' to this particular

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<sup>288</sup> It is but an open question, how consciously these ways of legitimization are chosen. Without doubt, for those willing to prove their point, it is natural to seek the most convincing arguments. However, to what extent are they conscious about the convincing power of these arguments? In other words, why do people consider some lines of reasoning particularly convincing in comparison to others? This question belongs to the psychological domain more than it does to religious studies, as it touches upon the fundamental aspects of decision making.

Craig Martin (2017b) is also uncertain about the (un)intentional nature of legitimation, albeit from a different point of view. He argues that religious legitimations replicate itself, coming from the people who adopted them from the like-minded community members: *'While legitimations might seem like intentional manipulations, this is not necessarily the case. Few scholars in religious studies argue that people intentionally manipulate others with talk about gods. On the contrary, appealing to gods comes naturally to people who are raised in communities where those sorts of appeals are normal'* (Martin, 2017b, p. 105).

region is something not entirely self-evident. For instance, Protestant pastors in the Altai Republic do not follow this path of authentication (for obvious reasons – Protestantism can only boast three decades of Altai presence), neither do some of the esotericists and followers of charismatic leaders. Thus, the Ak-Burkhan community leaders preferred the ‘native’ strategy of legitimization over other ways of making religion ‘legitimate’ and attractive.

The ‘native religion’ chain of argumentation seems to consist of three main postulates leading to a desirable conclusion: 1) that Tibetan Buddhism was the religion of the united Dzungar Khanate and that 1904 Burkhanism was in fact a revival of long-forgotten Buddhism; 2) that academic research, archeological findings and linguistical analysis of places and settlements provide plausible evidence to that, therefore, 3) Buddhism/Burkhanism is a traditional religion of the Altai population, - hence, it is a rightful duty to restore and worship Buddhism in the Altai Republic (conclusion). I will start unweaving this thread from its resulting assumption hidden in the third postulate and conclusion – that ‘traditionality’ of religion grants it authenticity.

**‘Traditionality’** or ‘nativeness’ of religion means in this context<sup>289</sup> that this or that religious belief has been cultivated in a region (or, more accurately, by an ethnic group) continuously for a significant period of time so that it could be called a ‘tradition’. Thus, to be called ‘traditional to some area/to some ethnic entity’ religion must be long-established and widespread among the people united by ethnicity, origin and/or place of living. This definition is rooted in the understanding of ‘tradition’ and therefore is likewise vague: for how long should religion be practiced, to be regarded as tradition? how many people should be involved? It seems, however, that such an elusive concept is nevertheless widely used in the Russian spiritual legislation and religious practice. ‘Traditionality’ seems to be one of the tools to demarcate religious grounds: whether this or that religion has a more solid right to be practiced by certain people than the others. This is most vividly observed in the regions of Russia populated by the ethnic minorities and nationalities other than Russians: the dominant religion is ‘assigned’ to a specific territory indicating that the Orthodox Church has no right to interfere too much. Tatarstan and Chechnya are Muslim; Buryatia, Tuva, Kalmykia are known to be Buddhist. The Ak-Burkhan community would be eager to obtain such a title for the Altai Republic as well.

Traditionality is not specifically covered by the Russian legislation, but it is implicitly defined through the possibility for a religious organization to use the title ‘Russian’<sup>290</sup> if said religion has been observed on the territory of Russian Federation for at least 50 years.<sup>291</sup> ‘Traditionality’ in a common sense is also

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<sup>289</sup> There are other definitions of traditional religion, such as pre-institutional spirituality (Shamanism, animistic beliefs, etc.).

<sup>290</sup> In Russian language, there are two words delineating affiliation to the state and to the nationality: ‘Росси́йский’ and ‘Русский’. Both words are translated as ‘Russian’, but they carry different connotations. In the case discussed above, ‘Russian’ refers to the connotation with the state, not with nationality.

<sup>291</sup> Federal Law of 13.07.2015 № 261-FZ (Amendments to the Federal Law "On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations"). (n.d.). Retrieved from:

sometimes used as a criterion in the official expert records of religious group registration<sup>292</sup>. Thus, successful claims on religious ‘nativeness’ are both a protective measure against other competitors in the spiritual sphere and a semi-defined tool of the contemporary Russian legal environment. There are, of course, other prerequisites to the idea that religion should be well-rooted in the local soil. The Lamas and some of the Ak-Burkhan members I talked to seemed to be personally interested in proving that Buddhist is inherent to the Altai; some of my interlocutors formulated it almost as an individual life-time quest or mission.

Such conviction to the discourse of traditionality does not seem to be stemming solely from the social benefits for the religious community that come with it. Rather, it is combined with two other powerful aspirations: the Altai self-identification (Burkhanism/Buddhism as the answer to the question of the Altai authentication) and the more general ‘desire for immortality’ (Grieve & Weiss, 2005, p. 3) as a part of the process of building a solidified religious community. The Altai ethnic identification was discussed in the paragraph on the strategy of ethnic identification, so let us address the second aspect – what Grieve and Weiss called ‘the desire for immortality’.

The narrative of tradition is deployed in relation to the particular group of people around certain chronological markers (‘someone always did something’, ‘someone used to do something in the past’, etc.). Therefore, tradition is closely connected to the flow of time (just as we saw at the beginning of the discussion about the Ak-Burkhan traditionality). On the other hand, – and this is the paradox of ‘immortality’ by Grieve and Weiss – in some situations, tradition acts as a legitimization marker for the behaviour/ideas that are believed to be ‘timelessly righteous’. The community transmits traditions to its members over time, and this process of seemingly agentless transmission which is larger than discrete acts of individual teaching and learning, makes tradition a marker of belonging to the ‘*imagined timeless community*’<sup>293</sup>.

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[http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_182634/3d0cac60971a511280cbba229d9b6329c07731f](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_182634/3d0cac60971a511280cbba229d9b6329c07731f).

<sup>292</sup> This is not to say that traditionality of religion is necessarily used by the experts of the Russian courts; officially, there is no such criterion. However, it can be seen in the religious organizations’ registration reports. For instance, the ‘Tengrism – Sky faith’ of Altai organization has not been registered for some bureaucratic matters, with the factor of its non-traditionality among the Altai peoples also being mentioned as one of the negative points (Religious expertise results. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <https://gornoaltaysk.bezformata.com/listnews/religiovedcheskoj-ekspertizi/4570606/>).

<sup>293</sup> As Grieve and Weiss explain it themselves, ‘*In other words, actors often consider their traditions to be timely, relevant in all times, and at the same time this attribute paradoxically becomes the grounds for a claim to the timelessness of tradition, its eternal essence. Adherence to tradition is an orientation towards an imagined timeless community, borne of the desire to submerge one’s personal identity into a larger community that transcends that individual. The desire for tradition is thus also a desire for immortality*’ (Grieve & Weiss, 2005, p. 3).

Another important observation made by them is the idea of a ‘*traditional action*’ as of ‘*always meaningful, if not always conscious*’. In other words, Grieve and Weiss (2005, p. 5) argue that the decision to support traditional behaviour coming from the past and being legitimised through an appeal to the past, is ‘*to a greater or lesser degree*’ conscious. Therefore,

In case of the Ak-Burkhan religious revival, the attribution to the desired traditions is comparatively more challenging as the process of transmission has been significantly interrupted. Due to this forced interruption, the community experiences troubles with the uncertainties of what is now believed to be Altai traditions. Moreover, the variety of dissimilar opinions on the matter makes room for competing religious communities (for example, the Ak-Jar leader and his followers). I suppose that this vagueness around the Altai ethnic and religious traditions is one of the main causes of the heightened attention not only to the search for a 'true' religious tradition of the Altai, but also to the methods of restoration of the chosen tradition. As we saw in the paragraph on 'scholarship' sub-strategy, the arguments in favour of the legitimacy claims can themselves serve as a basis for religious community's legitimation.

Two bright periods of the Altai peoples' history: the Dzungar Khanate (certainly pro-Buddhist) and the late 19 – early 20 centuries religious and cultural upheaval (undoubtedly influenced by Buddhism; the question is, to what extent), - serve as focal points to link together Tibetan Buddhism and Altai history. These statements are defended by the linguistic, historical, and cultural expertise of the various pro-Buddhist scholars in the field of Altai studies (Torbokov, 2017). By arguing that Tibetan Buddhism was the religion of the Altai peoples as a part of the Dzungar Khanate, and that 1904 Burkhanism was, in fact, Buddhist revival, and by finding the arguments to prove it, the Ak-Burkhan leaders appeal to tradition in order to legitimize the changes they implement. The 'making of religion' is thus being supported by the idea of a timeless tradition that is now being restored by a competent community. Looking back at religious traditions of Burkhanism and Buddhism in Altai, the Ak-Burkhan community paves a path for innovations<sup>294</sup>.

## Chapter conclusion

I analyse the anthropological and academic material on the Ak-Burkhan religious revival that I have collected through the four generalized strategies based on the fieldwork data. These strategical patterns are deeply interconnected with the socio-economic and political situation, the multi-national agenda, and the shadow of the post-Communist legacy. The latter has influenced many

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understanding the employment of tradition in time as a strategy of legitimation is a worthwhile endeavor (Grieve & Weiss, 2005, p. 4).

<sup>294</sup> I suppose that this type of innovations can be called 'structural', in a sense of the structural type of innovative mechanisms in religious communities suggested by Olaf Hammer (2016). This way of introducing change describes innovations that '*arise as adaptations to other cultural changes*' (Hammer, 2016, p. 728). These changes include, according to Hammer, the fluctuations of the social, economic, political environments, the changes in media, education and legislation. Although the Ak-Burkhan community has been led by strong-willed people with personal charisma, the policy of the community was at all times aimed at the constructive dialogue with the authorities and at the formulating appropriate responses to the challenges of the changing environment. This enables me to consider the Ak-Burkhan religious revival process as a structural innovation mechanism, not charismatic one, for example.

aspects of life in the Altai Republic, such as people's attitudes towards alternative healing, science, and religiosity.

Religious revival in the Altai Republic started with the fall of the Soviet Union and continues up till now, as various religious communities and individuals are arguing their place on the religious scene of the region. The leaders of the Ak-Burkhan community are highly concerned about spreading their faith over the Altai Republic and making Altai a Buddhist region, thus uniting the Altai peoples under common religion, and contributing to restoring the ethnic culture and language. They demonstrate quite a pragmatic approach to working towards their aims, and this observation provided me with an idea of a strategic approach to the community's activities.

On the basis of my anthropological experience, I identified four strategies of religious revival that the Ak-Burkhan community is implementing with a greater or lesser degree of awareness in their motivations. The 'strategy of ethnic identification without segregation' is a conscious search for the Altai ethnic identity through its connection to Buddhism; a search that is carefully avoiding nationalistic and ethnic segregation discourses. The 'strategy of sovereignty' is formed by a series of decisions aimed at positioning the Ak-Burkhan religious organization in the system of Buddhist power relations, both global and Russian ones. The 'strategy of constructing a system of rituals and beliefs' is a complex process of three interconnected strategies: 'making the religion', 'becoming an influencer', and 'negative identification', - all three of them aimed at strengthening the community's authority in the questions of Altai culture. Religion and traditions.

Finally, these three strategies are supported by the community's chosen ways of legitimation. Extensive appeal to Buddhism/Burkhanism as an Altai tradition serves to legitimize the Ak-Burkhan's claims on being the 'true' Burkhanist community that has access to the 'true' practices of the past. The academic argumentation that the Ak-Burkhan leadership uses to support their ideas, is a second distinct method of legitimation in the process of Burkhanist religious revival.

## Conclusion

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I started investigating Burkhanism after my academic internship to the Altai Mountains, quite unexpectedly for myself. The decision to engage in that internship was motivated by my keen interest in neo-shamanism and the Altai Republic being a perfect place for that kind of research. It was only in the process of the internship activities that I noticed a religious phenomenon happening right now, in front of me, which, however, went by different names and was attributed to different religious movements. At that moment, I knew almost nothing about the Altai Burkhanism, and I found the uncertainty in its definitions odd and intriguing. And I wished to learn more.

I keep looking back in time, but I think I can never be sure when exactly my curiosity about the unknown transformed into the idea for my Research Master's thesis. The same is true about the idea of a strategic approach – I took the advice of my supervisors and went to my Altai fieldwork without any particular theoretical framework in mind. Of course, one can never claim to be free of the preexisting knowledge and ideas, so what I mean is that I went there just to learn, participate, and observe, not to prove any theory or hypothesis. The idea of such theory came to me in the process. So, once again, my analytical approach to Burkhanism was something that I found in the Altai Republic, not something that I brought there. While I was working on this research, I would often catch myself feeling that, in a way, these ideas found me instead of having been found by me.

Burkhanism is a cultural and religious phenomenon resisting definition. There is a period in history, with relation to which Burkhanism can be 'historized' – the events of 1904 in the Tereng valley, when a new religious movement was prophetically announced into being as the 'White Faith', the Ak-Jaq. However, these historical affiliations are now being put to test by various religious and social groups, as Burkhanism is used as a source of tradition by several independent religious groups and individuals. The Altai Gelug Buddhists (the Ak-Burkhan community) claim Burkhanism to be a form of Altai Buddhism; a city shaman whom I met uses Burkhanist rituals in his practice; the Ak-Jaq movement seems to neglect the narrative of Burkhanism, albeit having adapted its Altai name.

There are two major sets of spiritual practices and beliefs that are claimed to be 'native' to the people of Altai: Gelug Buddhism in the form of Burkhanism, and shamanism. Both are drawing inspiration from the Burkhanist imaginary and practices that outlived the Soviet Union. This ambiguity of Burkhanism's status and origins occurred largely due to the disrupted transmission of cultures and traditions that happened in the Soviet times. During the last years of the Soviet Union and – especially – right after its fall, the number of various religious societies in the Altai Republic skyrocketed: people were trying to restore what they believed was 'truly national' and preserve bits and pieces of the Altai traditions they could find.

The Ak-Burkhan group was among those religious organizations of the 1990s. It was originally formed by a circle of intellectuals who wanted to revive Altai religion and culture, thus inspiring the Altai peoples to be united over the 'new' formula of national self-identification. Today, the Ak-Burkhan community is leaning towards Gelug Buddhism while also adapting Burkhanist practices that they got either from the ethnographic literature or from those few who remembered – or preserved - the 'old ways'.

In my thesis, I have considered the Ak-Burkhan religious organization as an actor on the political and social scenes, as a social institution in need of management. I find this methodology valid, because such type of analysis regarding post-Communist religious revival is not the most common one, and because even though the strategic decisions which I brought to light might seem obvious, I believe that it is important to trace and analyze them. These generalized patterns of the religious community's choices and actions might be applicable to other cases of religious revival in the ethnic minorities.

I have identified the following strategies employed by the Ak-Burkhan community:

1. the 'strategy of ethnic identification';
2. the 'strategy of sovereignty';
3. the 'strategy of constructing a system of rituals and beliefs';
4. the 'strategy of legitimation'.

The strategy of ethnic identification is aimed at suggesting a focal point for the Altai people's self-identification. However, the way to the ethnic identification is aggravated by the caution against the legally prosecuted nationalistic rhetoric (the 'national identification not nationalism' problem), as well as by the concern of losing the interest of the Russian population of the Altai Republic (the 'ethnic identification not segregation' problem).

By the strategy of sovereignty, I mean a set of power-related decisions. The Ak-Burkhan community has been built into the Russian Gelug Buddhist hierarchy, and its leaders chose to remain in a friendly dialogue with the local authorities and Russian federal government. These paths were not the only ones that the community could have taken. I have attempted to explain the reasons behind these choices in the corresponding paragraph of the fourth chapter.

The strategy of constructing a system of rituals and beliefs is a combination of several processes that contribute to constructing the modern Altai Burkhanism – in a way that it is understood by the Ak-Burkhan leaders. The first process is becoming 'an influencer' (an expert) concerning the matters of the Altai Buddhism. Through giving interviews, creating occasions for public discussions, receiving delegations, participating in government activities and posting on social media the community leaders not only receive their share of the public attention, but also make themselves visible as reliable religious actors and gain 'legitimacy'. The second process is using a form of a 'negative identity'

against the Ak-Janj group. By publicly denouncing it, the Ak-Burkhan leadership continues to stress how different they are from that 'sect' ('*cekma*'). The third process is, literally, the 'making of religion'. The Lamas of the Ak-Burkhan who possess the institutionalized authority gained from their education in Buryatia, Moscow, Saint-Petersburg and Indian datsans, shape Altai Gelug Buddhism as they see fit. It is they who decide what is eligible and what is not, them who carve practices from sources on Burkhanism ethnography and living evidence and regard some of them as relevant. They are not the only ones claiming the authority on doing so, of course. However, they are one of the few who support their religion-making efforts with the thoughtful creation of a public image.

The strategies of legitimation are the glue that ensures the first three strategies' stable implementation. The Ak-Burkhan leaders are mostly using two distinct ways of legitimizing their claims: the appeal to traditionality and the authority of academic research. As described in the last part of the fourth chapter, Burkhanism/Buddhism is regarded as the Altai peoples' traditional faith by the Ak-Burkhan community. This argument serves to justify the changes that the Ak-Burkhan Lamas implement in the process of constructing their version of modern Burkhanism. The authority of academia, on the other hand, is one of the arguments that differentiate the Ak-Burkhan from other religious communities. The Lamas often point out that their actions and ideas are supported by the academic conclusions, and that, therefore, are 'true'.

These four strategies are consciously used by the Ak-Burkhan community (to the extent that any human decision can be called conscious) to strengthen its stance and position itself within other religious movements in the Altai Republic. They propose their own version of Burkhanism that is taking shape right now, hand in hand with the process of community's development and self-realization. Thus, the modern Burkhanism of the Altai Republic is a social construct, deliberately collected and systematized during the years of religious revival on the basis of modern, Soviet and the Russian Empire academic ethnography and Orthodox missionaries' records.

I started this research because I had a desire to know; and I am pleased to conclude that, at least, this goal of mine has been meaningfully fulfilled. A month of the Ak-Burkhan community observation and twice as much time spent on investigating the discourse of Burkhanism in the media and academic community, rewarded me with sparkles of understanding of the modern Altai Burkhanism and its history. The interviews with shamanists, Orthodox Christians and Karma Kagyu Buddhists helped me estimate the role of Burkhanism in the life of other Altai religious organizations. Finally, the close communication with the Ak-Burkhan members and leadership provided me with a glimpse on their vision on the future of the community, and the concrete steps they take in order to make this vision a reality.

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## Fieldwork data / Interviews and activities

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### *In total:*

- 46 days in the Altai Republic.
- 50-55 interviews and activities with 25 different people (on average, more than 2 hours long).
- 4 full weeks observing the everyday life of the Ak-Burkhan temple (rituals, medical practices, small talks, participant observation, joint activities).

### *Three trips to the Altai Republic, Russia:*

1. **9 – 23 September 2019, academic internship** to the north (Gorno-Altaysk city), centre (Kucherla village) and west (Mul'ta, Uimon, Ust'-Koksa villages) of the Altai Republic.

#### Topic-related activities:

- a. 10 September 2019, Gorno-Altaysk - Group interview in the Burkhanist temple (Appendix 6/Photos 13), Group meeting with Svetlana Tuyhteneva (the former professor of the Gorno-Altaysk State University).
- b. 11 September 2019, Gorno-Altaysk - Group visit to the National Museum.

- c. 23 September 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk - Three interviews and a religious practice participation in the Ak-Burkhan temple.
- d. 21 September 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk - A walk with the Orthodox priest (Appendix 6/Photo 29).
- e. 22 September 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk - An interview with the Lamas in the Ak-Burkhan temple.
- f. 16 September 2019, Mul'ta village – An interview with an Altai shamanist.
- g. 15 September 2019, Kucherla village - Group meeting and interviews with Altai Pagans in a local museum.
- h. 12-17 September 2019, Mul'ta, Ust'-Koksa and Uimon villages - 4 interviews with the Roerich followers (at their houses and in a local exhibition hall; Appendix 6/Photo 32).

**2. 20 November - 14 December 2019, first fieldwork trip** to the north (Gorno-Altaiisk city) of the Altai Republic.

Topic-related activities:

- a. 23 November 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk – Participant observation of the purification ritual and the everyday routine of the Ak-Burkhan temple, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors; A meeting with Natalia Tadyshva (PhD in history, Deputy Director of the Research Institute of Altai Studies).
- b. 24 November 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk – Participant observation of the Ak-Burkhan temple Lamas' mundane activities, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors; A walk around the Gorno-Altaiisk city.
- c. 27 November 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk – A meeting with Archin Torbokov (an active member of the Ak-Burkhan community, a former scholar and government official).
- d. 2 December 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk – Observation of the Green Tara blessing and the everyday routine of the Ak-Burkhan temple, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors.
- e. 3 December 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk – Observation of the Green Tara blessing and the everyday routine of the Ak-Burkhan temple, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors; A second meeting with Natalia Tadyshva (PhD in history, Deputy Director of the Research Institute of Altai Studies).
- f. 5 December 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk – Participant observation of the everyday routine of the Ak-Burkhan temple, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors.
- g. 6 December 2019, Gorno-Altaiisk – Participant observation of the everyday routine of the Ak-Burkhan temple, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors; A visit to the theatre

performance (the national ballet 'Kan-Kerede'<sup>295</sup>; Appendix 6/Photo 28).

- h. 18 December 2019, Moscow – The academic seminar on the Altai religions (helped organize it and made a presentation on my thesis topic).

**3. 22 February – 6 March 2020, second fieldwork trip** to the north (Gorno-Altai city, Askat village) of the Altai Republic.

Topic-related activities:

- a. 23 February 2020, Gorno-Altai – Participant observation of the first part of the Sagaalga celebration («purification») in the Ak-Burkhan temple, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors; Taking part in the unofficial part of the ritual.
- b. 24 February 2020, Gorno-Altai – Participant observation of the second part of the Sagaalga celebration («benevolence») in the Ak-Burkhan temple, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors.
- c. 27 February 2020, Gorno-Altai – Observation of the healing practices in the Ak-Burkhan temple, talks with the Lamas and the temple visitors; A meeting with Sergei Kydyev's daughter.
- d. 28 February 2020, Gorno-Altai – A meeting with the local woman (not related to the Ak-Burkhan), a visit to Gorno-Altai national museum.
- e. 29 February 2020, Askat village – A trip to the Karma Kagyu center and retreat, talks with the Diamond Way Buddhism practitioners and the taxi driver.
- f. 1 March 2020, Gorno-Altai – A meeting with Rimma Kushnerik (PhD in history, scholar and traveler).
- g. 2 March 2020, Gorno-Altai – A meeting with Natalia Tadyshva (PhD in history, Deputy Director of the Research Institute of Altai Studies).
- h. 3 March 2020, Gorno-Altai – A meeting with Svetlana Tuyhteneva (the former professor of the Gorno-Altai State University); A meeting with Sergei Kydyev's daughter.
- i. 4 March 2020, Gorno-Altai – A meeting with Sergei Kydyev's daughter and the local 'Buddhist shaman'; Participant observation of several visitors' appointments in the Ak-Burkhan temple, an extensive talk with Aram Lama.
- j. 5 March 2020, Gorno-Altai – A visit to the office of the local female shaman.

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<sup>295</sup> Kan-Kerede is a good and powerful bird from the Altai myths, somewhat similar to the Slavic Firebird, but not quite the same.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Buddhist organizations of the Altai Republic (officially registered<sup>296</sup>), 2021

#### The map of contemporary Altai Buddhism

1 Kure "Ak-Burkan"

2 Kure "Ochyr"

3 Buddhist organization "Ak Syumer" (NEW)

4 Buddhist organization "Altyn Sudur" (Golden Sutra) (NEW)

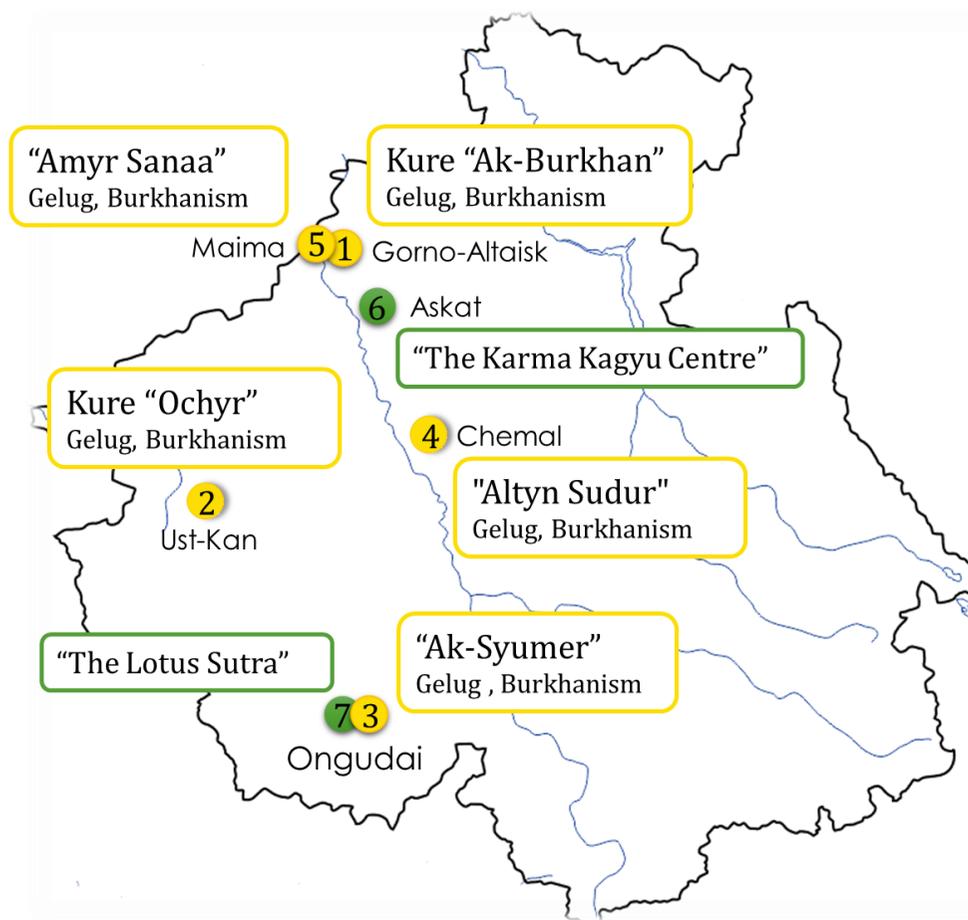
5 Buddhist organization "Amyr Sanaa" (Calm mind) (NEW)

6 Buddhist Center of the Diamond Way of the Karma Kagyu Tradition

7 Lotus Sutra Community

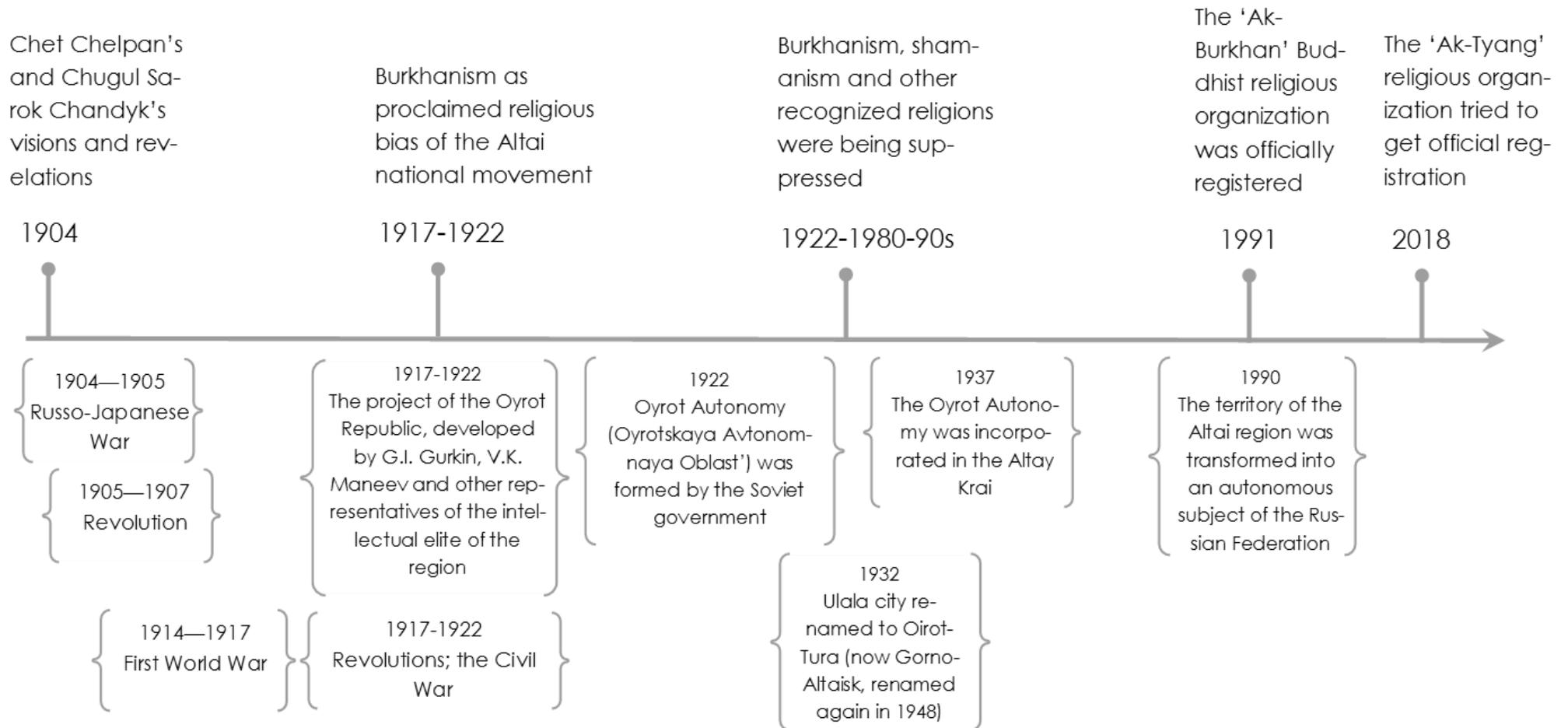
*\*The first 5 organisations (marked yellow on the map) are those relating to the Ak-Burkhan community (either sister Gelug groups or direct offsprings);*

*\*\*The last two groups, marked green, are not related to the Ak-Burkhan Buddhism.*



<sup>296</sup> As of April 20, 2021, 655 non-profit organizations are registered in the Altai Republic. (2021). Retrieved from: <https://altai-republic.ru/society/public-organizations/>

Appendix 2. Timeline of the history of Burkhanism (upper segment) in relation to the major Russian historical events of the respective period (bottom segment)<sup>297</sup>



<sup>297</sup> The events and personalities on this scheme are mentioned in the first and second chapters.

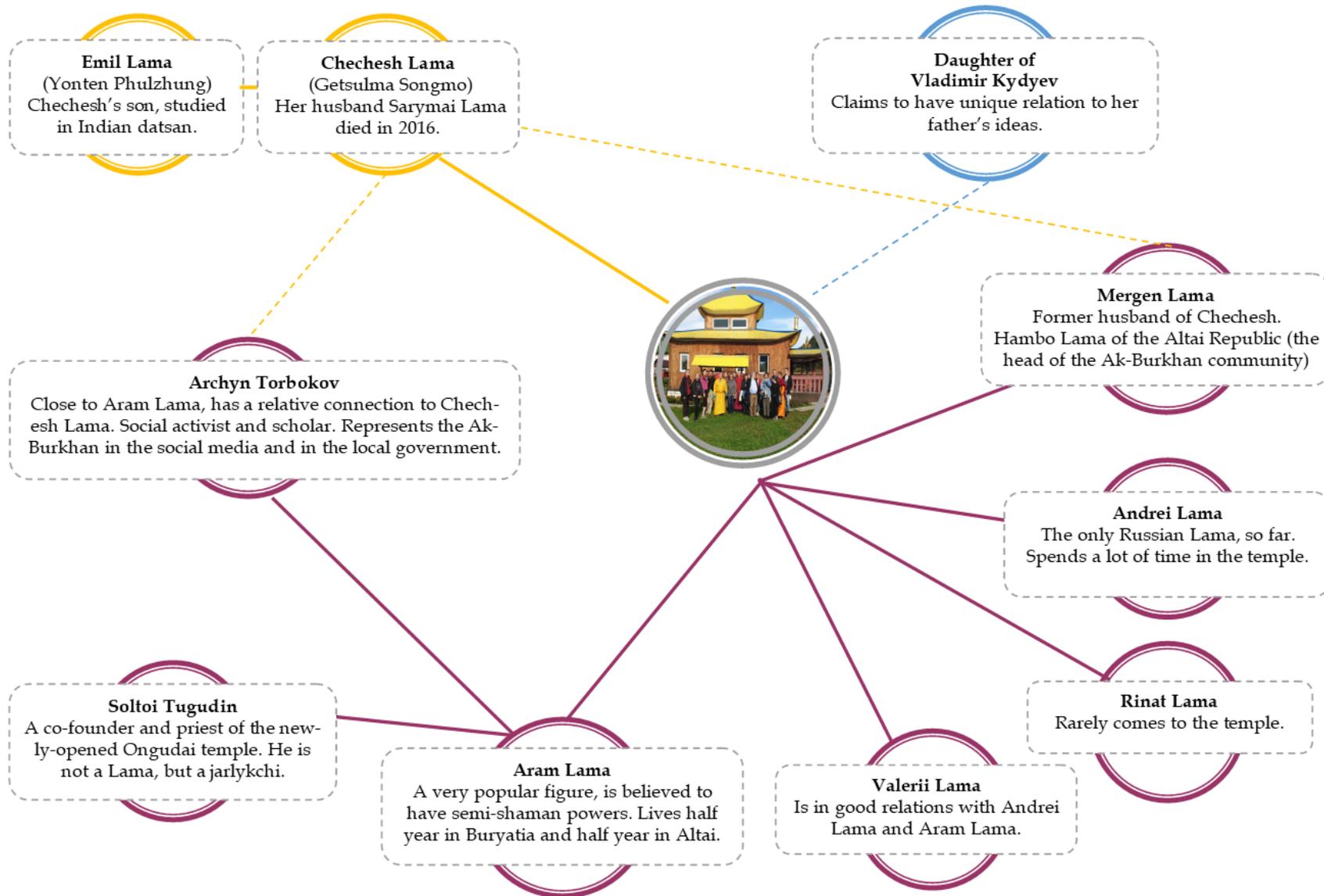
### Appendix 3. Social network accounts of the Ak-Burkhan and Ak-Jan related religious groups

<b>Name</b> <i>Name in Russian [English translation]</i>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Internet address</b>
<p><b>«ЖАҢҮ АЛТАЙ»-ДВИЖЕНИЕ</b> <b>[“ЖАНУ ALTAI” - MOVEMENT]</b></p>	<p>The Ak-Jan oriented public page in the Vkontakte social network</p>	<p><a href="https://vk.com/club47031643">https://vk.com/club47031643</a></p>
<p><b>«Общественная организация</b> <b>“Алтай-Ойрот”</b> <b>[The social organization ‘Altai-Oirot’]</b></p>	<p>The account of the "Altai-Oirot" organization devoted to culture, religion, history and nature of the Altai Republic (public page in the Vkontakte social network)</p>	<p><a href="https://vk.com/altai_oirot">https://vk.com/altai_oirot</a></p>
<p><b>“Ак-Буркан” күрее (дацан)</b> <b>[“Ak-Burkhan” Kuree (datsan)]</b></p>	<p>The Buddhist/Burkhanist temple public page in the Vkontakte social network</p>	<p><a href="https://vk.com/public65760886">https://vk.com/public65760886</a></p>
<p><b>Религиозная организация</b> <b>буддистов “Ак Сюмер”</b> <b>[Religious Organization of Buddhists</b> <b>“Ak Sumer”]</b></p>	<p>The "Ak Sumer" Buddhist/Burkhanist organisation public page in the Vkontakte social network</p>	<p><a href="https://vk.com/ak_sumer">https://vk.com/ak_sumer</a></p>

## Appendix 4. The list of the Ak-Burkhan community founders

<b>Name</b>	<b>Job and social activities</b>
<b><i>Kubashev Altaj Muklaevich</i></b>	Businessman, editor
<b><i>Shumarov Valerij Sergeevich</i></b>	Kaichy (Altai folk songs singer)
<b><i>Kortin Boris Vasil'evich</i></b>	Businessman, editor
<b><i>Kydyev Emil Kurdeevich</i></b>	World War II veteran
<b><i>Ekeev Nikolaj Vasil'evich</i></b>	PhD in History, Director of the Institute of Altai Studies, public figure
<b><i>Sanashkin Altajchy Mankyrovich</i></b>	Journalist of the State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company "Gorny Altai", public figure, Altai and Buddhist activist
<b><i>Sel'bikov Aleksandr Al'chinovich</i></b>	Businessman, President of the "Altai Republic Archery Federation"
<b><i>Samykov Vasilii Tordoevich (Paslei Samyk)</i></b>	Altai poet and translator, member of the Writers' Union of Russia
<b><i>Kinov Ivan Shatrovich</i></b>	Head engineer of the State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company "Gorny Altai", founder of the "Cultural-Historical Museum Center"
<b><i>Kukasov Rys Kukasovich</i></b>	World War II veteran

## Appendix 5. The Ak-Burkhan community: personalities



### **Appendix 5 scheme explanations:**

1. The scheme represents main figures of the Ak-Burkhan community: the Ak-Burkhan temple in the center, the circles with names around it.
2. Dash lines represent comparatively weaker connections, full lines – stronger ones.
3. The colors of the lines are arbitrary, their differences serve only to signify that there are two explicit groups in the Ak-Burkhan community: the one around Chechesh Lama, the other one around Aram Lama. Daughter of Vladimir Kydyev (in blue) is mostly associated with the latter but pursues her own agenda.
4. The people on the scheme are mentioned in the third chapter, and I have met them all, apart from Emil Lama.

## Appendix 6. My photos of the Altai Republic

### Photo 1. A list of rules for the laity on the temple grounds

#### The Ak-Burkhan temple, Gorno-Altaiisk

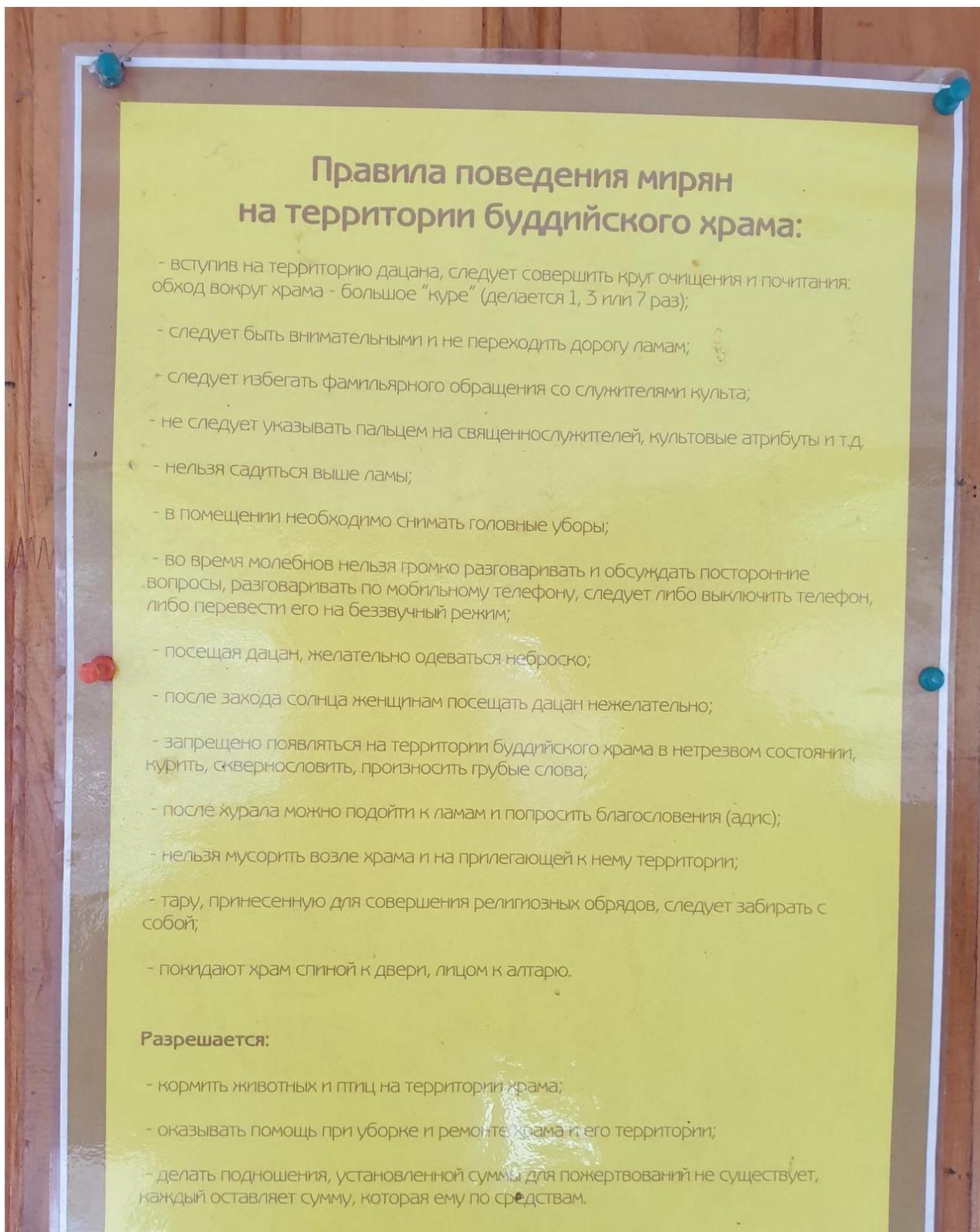


Photo 2. A list of sutras and rituals available in the Ak-Burkhan temple

The Ak-Burkhan temple, Gorno-Altaiisk



## ДЛЯ ВЕРУЮЩИХ И ПРИХОЖАН

**Мудрые и посылыде ламы говорили, что, приходя в дацан необходимо внутренне очиститься и посвятить свои добродетели. Возжигая лампадки, воскуривая благоволия, делая подношение, присутствуя на хурале вы должны посвятить добродетель и пожелать себе и другим счастья, здоровья, удачи и благополучия.**

**В наших проблемах и бедах есть две причины:**

### Внутренние

Внутренние причины - это кармические (причина и следствие), они неизбежны, если не очиститься (признать ошибки), они будут преследовать вас подобно тени или возвращающемуся бумерангу. Никто не сможет вам помочь, кроме вас самих. Когда-то в далекое время в Индии жил слепой мудрец. Ему как-то посочувствовал, и мудрец ответил: «Если я родился слепым, то это за недобродетели, совершенные в прошлых жизнях: то, что я слеп, это справедливо!» Карма - это суровый закон, кто бы то ни был (какую бы религию человек не исповедывал).

Сам Будда говорил: «Я смогу лишь показать праведный путь!».

Будьте людьми спокойными и добрыми.

### Внешние

Внешние причины - это приобретенные, насланные проклятия, беды, болезни и т.д. Могут сосланы людьми - черными шапанами, колдунами и т.д., а также не людьми - это тьме духи, оскверненные или обиженные хозяева земли, воды, огня и т.д. Относитесь к природе бережно.

Для устранения и умиротворения внешних препятствий существует много сутр и ритуалов:



## СУТРЫ И РИТУАЛЫ, ПРОВОДИЯЩИЕСЯ ЛАМАМИ.

**Сутры:**

**Пять отбрасывающих:**  
Бездоменная Тара - сутра отводит от зависти, ссор, устранивающих негативные факторы.

**Шерав Нишю** - сутра о пустотности бытия, нейтрализует вредные влияния, устраняет кармические препятствия.

**Зелёная Тара** - сутра дурноющая позитивство, устраняющая плохие сны, болезни, несчастия, аварии от многих проблем.

**Хамму Наво** - сутра устраняющая хаос музыки и сплетни. Когда конфликтные ситуации.

**Дорже Намжам** - сутра устранения вредных влияний насгов (хозяев воды, реки) и сабдоков (хозяев местности).

**Идо** - три божества долгой жизни, Аюна, Цусдар Намжизма, Белая Тара. Сутры Идо читаются для укрепления и продления жизни. Закаывается перед операцией, для больных, страдающих депрессией, апатией.

**Жалсан хэмор** - сутра для обретения уверенности, влияния. Закаывается начальством и руководителями, также спортсменами.

**Жанга гаддог** - сутра совместности мэнгэ.

**Лунигаз** - сутра раскаяния накопленных недобродетелей и очищение дурной кармы перед 35 Буддами. Необходимо самому присутствовать и совершать поклоны.

**Туи, мандал** - сутра накопления добродетели.

**Чогену мунсал** - очищение 10 сторон света (когда дорога закрыта, перед дорогой).

**Наймап гези** - совместность всего (звёзд, планет, недели, 12 годов, месяцев и т. д.).

**Дашин габба** - новый дом (семейное благополучие), свадьба, год визитой.

**Дорже Жодба** - отсечение надзержой (злых духов).

**Догсум** - Бездоменная Тара, Шерини, Зелёная Тара.

**Зустор Намжеслма** - если апатия, интерес к жизни пропал, да долготелье.

**Лхун олжумба** - для спонтанного осуществления задуманного.

**Нур олжумба** - для быстрого осуществления задуманного.



**Ритуалы:**

**Во время ритуала пушено присутствовать!**

**Подношение.**  
В давние времена наши предки подносили Буддам (Бурханам) самое лучшее из молочной и мясной пищи. Со временем появились мушное, фруктов и сладости.

**Сэрлэм** - подношение золотого кантика, амриты (молоко, вода, чай освещается ламой).

**Додба, махнал** - восхваление божества...

**Намсарай, Гонгор, Белый Старец** - этим сахжусам подносят мушное, молочное и фрукты.

**Намсарай, Гонгор сахжусан** - ритуал почитания божества бодхиты.

**Белый Старец** - ритуал почитания божества домашнего света.

**Жамсарай, Далха** - ритуал почитания Бога воинов.

**Говилхи** - ритуал почитания предков.

**Ритуал Сап** - подношение благоволия дымом.

**Даночаривесин** - подношение Идам, Сахжусам, Дамжамам, Сабвакам, Дингсаланисам.

**Ритуал Шидба: Торма** - подношение башни духу земли (местности).

**Ритуал: Лусад** - почитание хозяев вод (река, родничок, озеро). Подносят мушное, молочную пищу, сладости, фрукты.

**Ритуал: Мелха** - почитание хозяина огня. Подносят мясо, благоволия, травы (ай-санга, дашу, мажжесынык, сурзум...).

**Ритуал: Сэрлэм** - подносят молоко, водку, чай. Намсарай, Гонгор, Белый Старец, Лусад подносят молоко.

**Ритуал: Рапней** - освещение дома, автомобиля, хий морин (воздушный конь) то есть поднятие жизненной энергии человека.

**Ритуал: Жабтуй, Носан Дивсан** - ритуал очищения от порчи. Обязательное присутствие самого человека. Очищение дома (помещения).

**Ритуал: Хий морин сап** - ритуал успеха, удачи в делах, дальней дороге.

**Ритуал: Янсу** - призывание счастья. Необходимое...

Примечание:  
Сахжусан - Хранитель Учения Будды.

Photos 3 – 8. The Ak-Burkhan kuree exterior.

The Ak-Burkhan temple, Gorno-Altaiisk













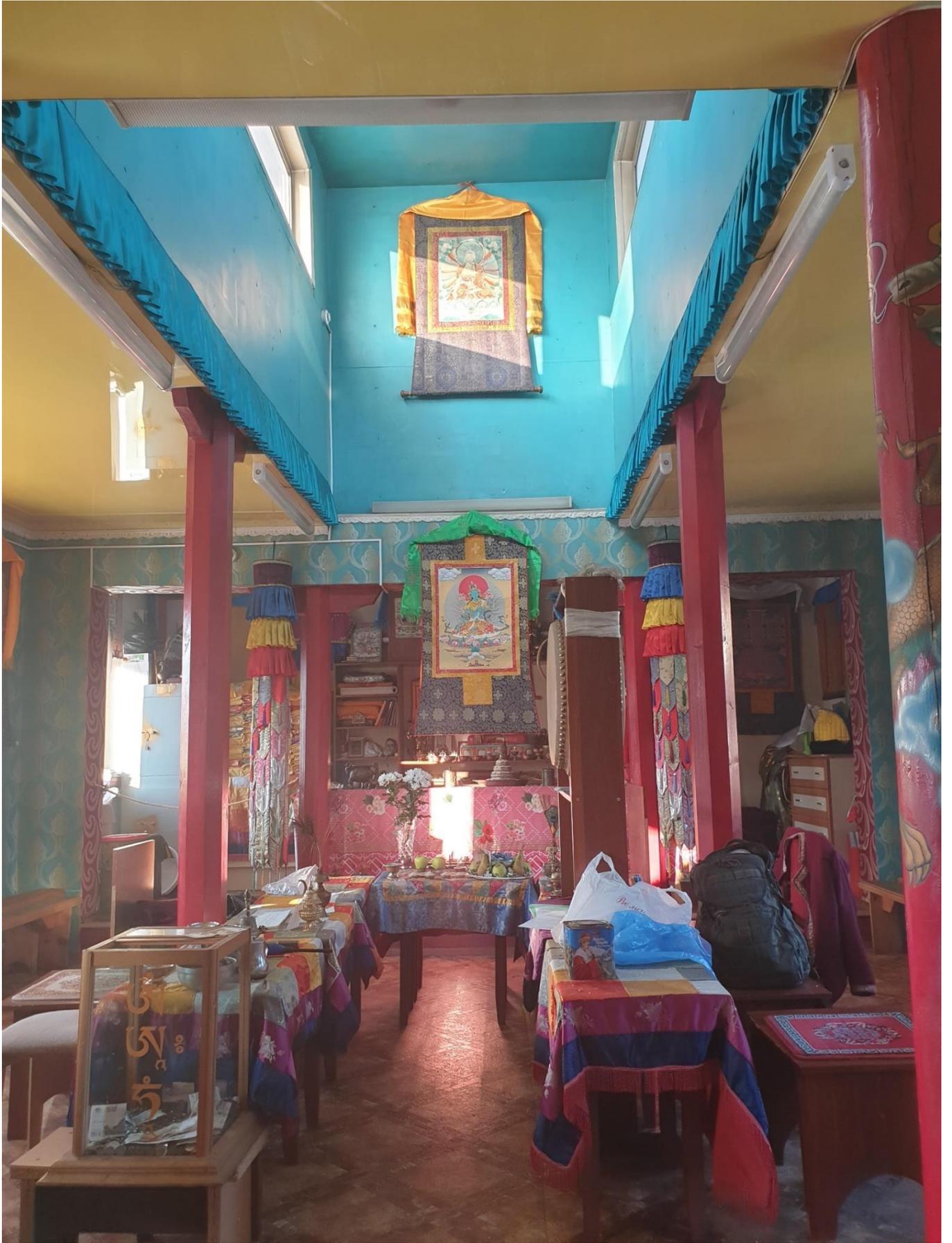
Photos 9 – 13. The Ak-Burkhan temple interior.

The Ak-Burkhan temple, Gorno-Altaiisk







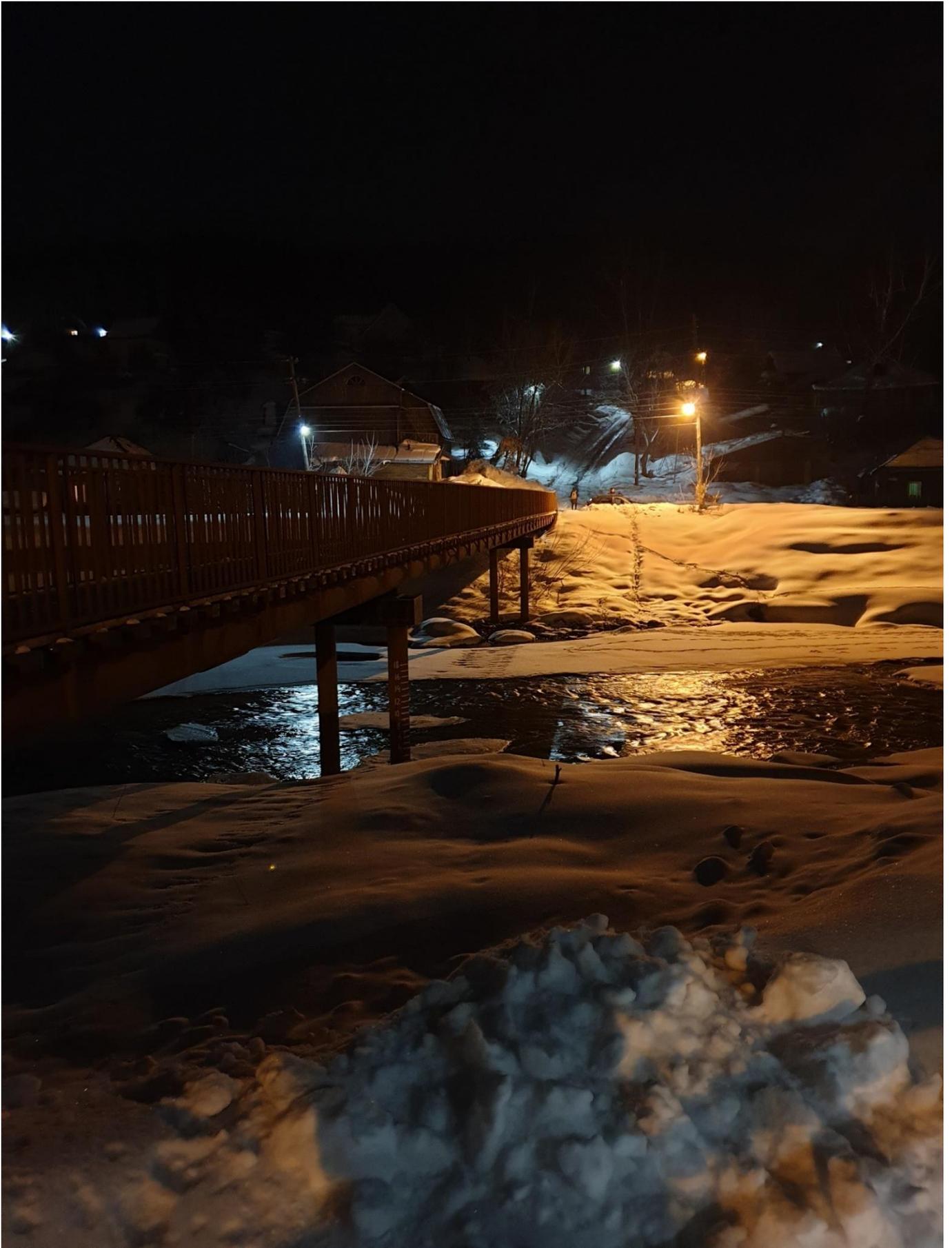




Photos 14 – 27. Gorno-Altaiisk city views.

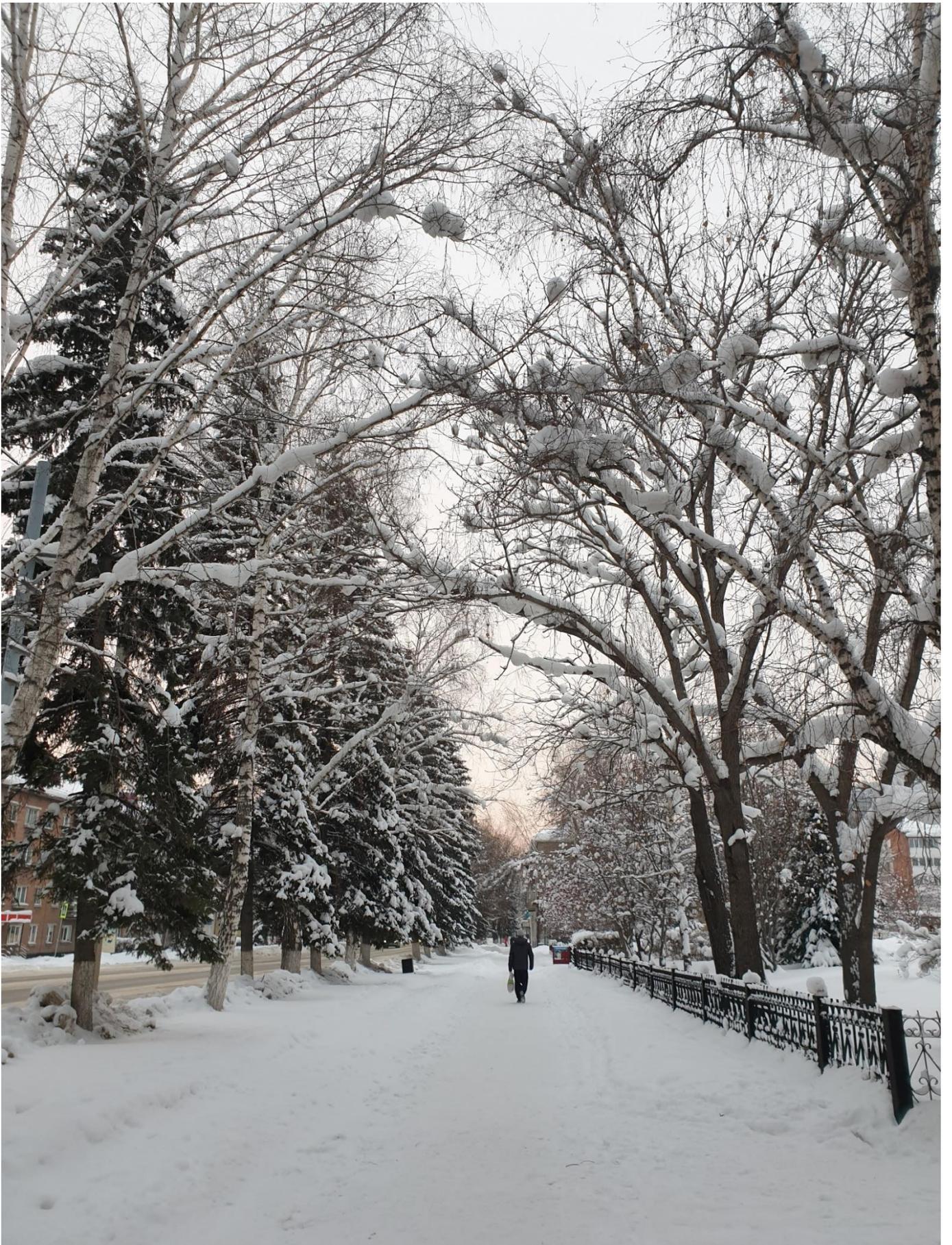
Gorno-Altaiisk.

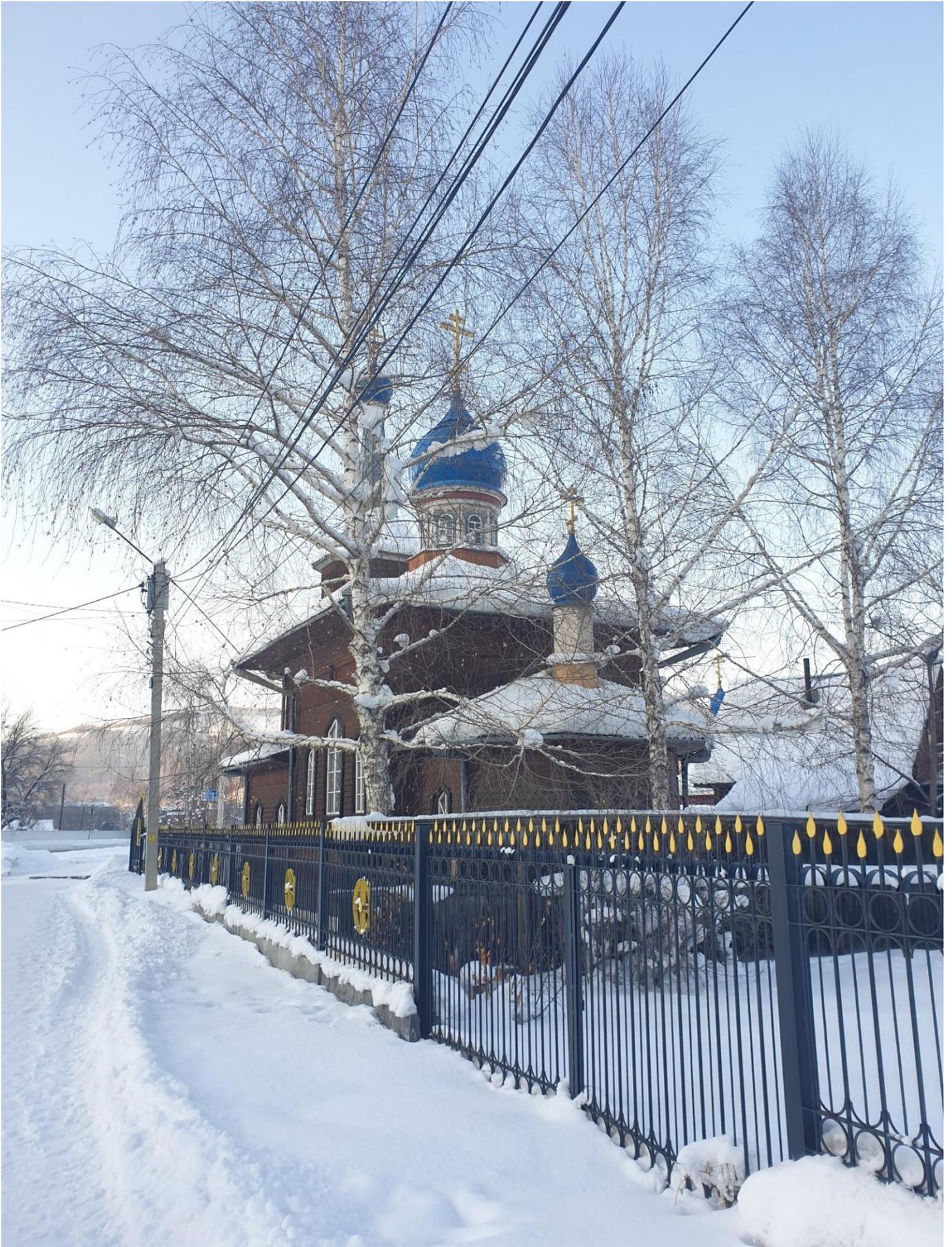












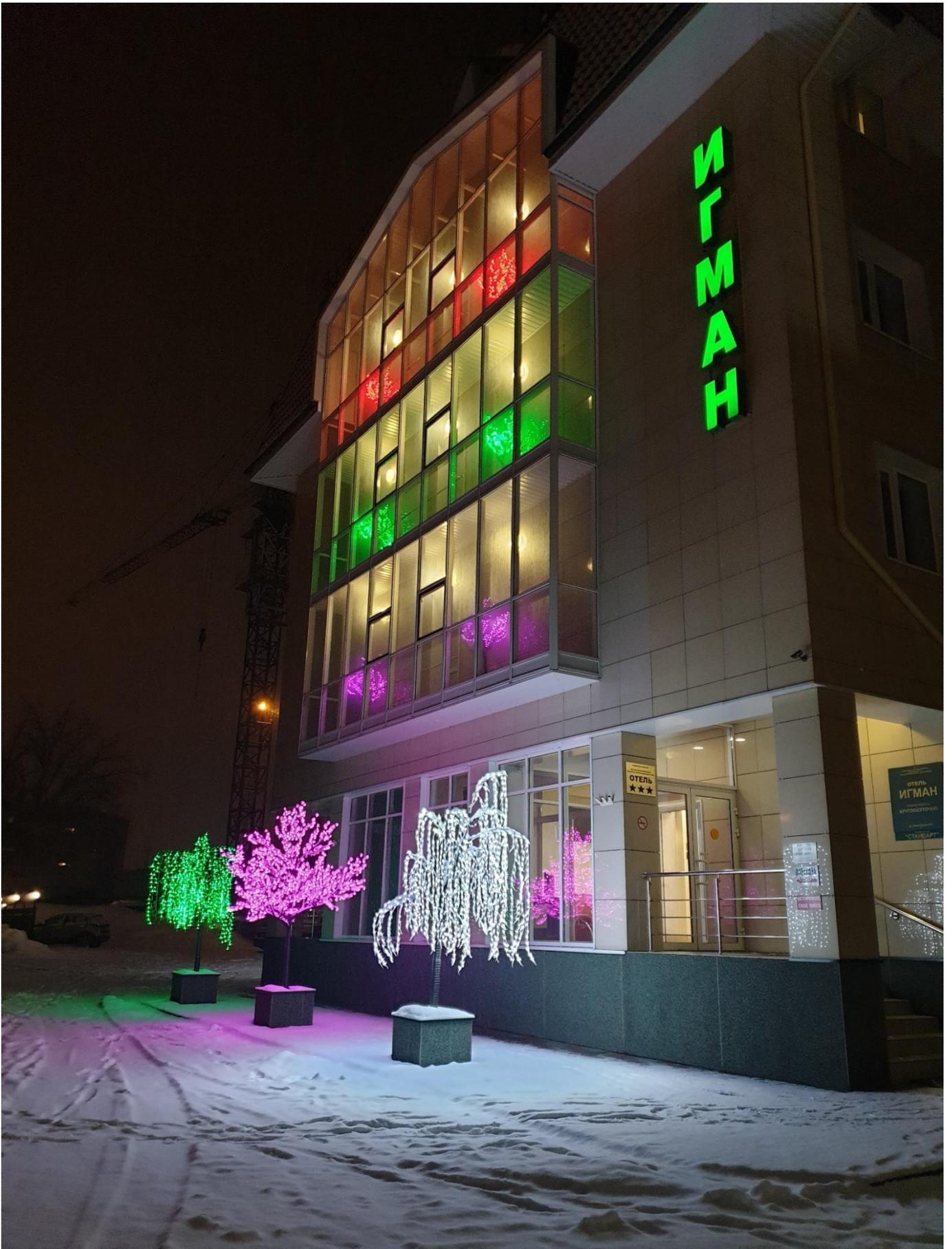
















Photo 28. Gorno-Altai city theatre hall.

The National Drama Theater n.a. P.V. Kuchiyak, Gorno-Altai.



Photo 29. Orthodox Christian Church of St. Macarius of Altai.

Gorno-Altaiisk.



Photo 30. The Prayer House of the Evangelical Christians.  
Gorno-Altaiisk.



Photo 31. Orthodox Christian Church of Mary's Canopy.

Ust'-Koksa village.



Photo 32. The Altai Museum of Nicholas Roerich.

Upper Uimon village.



Photos 33 – 34. The road from Barnaul to Gorno-Altai, in winter.

Чуйский тракт [Chuiskii trakt, the Chuya Road], Siberia. I traveled this road by car several times, to get to Gorno-Altai.



