

Sacred Sites and Objects of the Peoples of Altai Republic, Russia

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Sacred (sacred and cult) sites are areas (or territories) of land and water that have a specific spiritual meaning for people and societies. As a demonstration of humanity's specific worship of nature as well as a source of inspiration and spiritual values, sacred sites were recognized by people thousands of years ago, much earlier than the rise of modern environmental conservation movement.

Migrating through a large continental land area, Central Asian ethnic groups lived in a variety of landscapes, learning to survive in those natural areas and conditions. They learned to identify particularly important areas, for example, sacred sites and sites with electromagnetic (energetic) properties, adapting to and adapting the area to their way of life and religious, spiritual, and moral values. If one considers the toponymy of the many energetic sites in Inner Asia (Altai, Sayan Mountains, Tibet, and Mongolia) and Central Asia (Tian-Shan), one can observe the close cultural connections among Turkic-Mongolian peoples.

For example, mineral springs with healing properties are known in Altaian as *arzhans* (or *arashans*). In Altai Republic, the Manjylu Arzhan (near the Ulagan Rayon village of Balyktuyul') is a particularly revered and sacred place for native Altaians and Telengits. In Kyrgyzstan there is a sacred site with healing springs of the same name (Mandzhyly-Ata) near the village of Bokonbaevo in Tonskiy Rayon. The term "manjylu" has an interesting etymology. In Kyrgyzstan, a folk legend connects the Mandzhyly-Ata cult site with a kind of sacred Mongolian origin, hence "mongol" is "mandzhyl" (Krutikov, A., 2004, Kyrgyzstan). In Altai a number of Altaian epic poems refer to the heroic personage of "Ochir-Mand'I" (meaning "Symbol of Power," literally "Vadzbara Mandzhi"). The word "mandzhi" is of Sanskrit origin, by way of the Tibetan and Mongolian languages. Based on this, one could suppose that the word "Mandzhi" is the name of a powerful Buddhist god. In Turkic languages the suffix *-lu* indicates a possessive case, allowing "mandzhylu" to be translated as "source of the spirit Mandzhi" (Almashev, Ch. D., 2008). A clearly shamanic attribute or item used by *kams* (Altaian shamans) during shamanic rituals (*kamlanie*) in Altai is also known as a *manjak*. The origin of this word is unclear; possibly it too is borrowed from Mongolian and Buddhism and used in shamanic practice in Altai. It is also possible that the word can be defined as "the power of a deity" (Amanchina, M. K., 2008). Sacred sites with analogous names are found in Buryatiya and Mongolia (Khamaganova, E., 2008, Buryatiya).

Cult sites with similar place names spread over great distances across Asia are an indicator of the spiritual connection and commonality of the cultures of the peoples living there, in this case the

Turkic-Mongolian peoples. It also indicates their ability to interpret or “reclaim” natural landscapes and areas based on their own spiritual foundations, foundations that facilitated the formation of rich cultures, a unique philosophy, and sustainable forms of natural resource use.

It is also worth noting that the Altaian worldview developed with a great deal of influence from shamanism, the main religious and spiritual belief system in Altai. The Turkic peoples of Central Asia and Siberia had differing historical fates. Unlike the Kyrgyz, Altaian tribes were not brought into the Kara-Khanid state’s sphere of influence in the 10-12th centuries, as were the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. During the 12th-15th centuries, the peoples and languages of Altai were under the powerful influence of Mongolian languages and Buddhist tribes. Buddhism’s cult practices in Southern Siberia expanded significantly in the 16th and 17th centuries, although it was not widely practiced among Altaians at that time. Many of them were, however, adherents of shamanism, a fact affirmed by the presence of a large number of words describing religious shamanic cults and their priests. The first written sources to mention shamanism among the Turks can be found in Uyghur monuments dating to the latter half of the 11th century. Beginning in the 13th century, the term *kam* began to be applied to shamanic cult priests (Dyykanova, Ch. K., 2004, Kyrgyzstan).

Altai has been a cultural crossroads for many centuries. Although Altaians have absorbed many religious and philosophical perspectives from a variety of peoples and faiths, they have preserved an ancient type of shamanism, a fact seen vividly in their hero epics. These amazing Altaian epics, which artistically illustrate the life and history of Altaians, as well as their philosophical, aesthetic, and ethical worldviews, have been written down and published in book form. The epic “Altai Baatylar” (Altaian Bogatyr) was published in nine volumes (approximately 100,000 lines of poetry), and other as-yet-unpublished epic tales comprise another several tomes. In terms of artistic qualities, emotion, and monumentality, the Altaian hero epic stands alongside other world-renowned oral masterpieces. The Altaian epic is syncretic in that it contains plots, motives, and characteristics drawn from other peoples’ legends. For example, the Altaian epic “Alyp-Manash” is close in subject to the Kyrgyz epic “Manas,” “Kezer” is reminiscent of the Buryat “Geser,” “Janar” resembles the Kalmyk “Dzhangar,” and so forth. By absorbing Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and other Asian religions, the Altaian epic incorporated the spiritual and religious values of those religions, while remaining shamanic at its core. There are many words and concepts in the Altaian epic borrowed from Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Persian, and other languages, although in essence it remains a Turkic epic. Of all Turkic peoples, only Altaians have preserved their unique and ancient style of epic story-telling – *kay* (overtone throat singing), and it can take seven days to sing an epic of over 7,000 lines.

All of the aforementioned characteristics of the history and culture of the Altaians created particular philosophic, aesthetic, and ethical perspectives as well as a view of the surrounding environment through the prism of mythology and epic poetry. A scholastic or holistic view of the

world and nature around them is characteristic, as with many other Central Asian indigenous peoples. Strong nature conservation components as well as worship of sacred sites are found in the traditional spiritual beliefs of not just native Altaians, but also the indigenous minorities of other Turkic peoples (Telengit, Tubalar, Chelkan, Kumandin, and Shor), Altaian Kazakh, and Russian Old-Believers living in Altai Republic.

Residents of Mountainous Altai, as it is also known, have preserved certain knowledge thanks to which people still behave in particular ways at mountain passes, observing the mountain dwellers' ethics. The first Russian Old-Believer settlers adapted to the customs and traditions of the indigenous Altaian people. People living in the Uimonskaya Valley lived in the wilderness, near pristine forests, creeks, and springs. The valley's indigenous residents, members of the Kypchak and Todosh clans, viewed nature with reverence, deifying mountains, trees, and rivers. The Old-Believers did not oppose them. As followers of an old faith, they had preserved many pagan beliefs and rituals and also considered water, grass, and forests to be sacred. Water has always been regarded as holy (Kuchuganova, R. P., 2000).

The spiritual aspects of Telengit culture are broad, ranging from a distinctive local language with ancient origins to the preserved ancient ritual systems. Today, Kosh-Agach Kazakhs continue to recognize their partial Kazakh ethnicity and are adherents of Islam. In tribal terms, Altaian Kazakhs maintain a memory of their belonging to large tribal and clan groupings (nayman, kerey, samay, karatay, uak, and others). One can also observe the vestiges of past shamanism in specific instances of the Islamic tradition. Many worship ceremonies of ancient springs are documented in Kazakh ritual, rituals that were also common among the Telengit. The population has preserved many vivid examples of local folklore: myths, songs, stories, legends, and sagas (and all of their genre varieties). Of particular interest are the legends about mountains and stones and the totemic stories of place names and mountains. For both the Kazakhs and the Telengit, traditional culture covers a broad spectrum of realization in both its spiritual and material forms (Oynoshev, V. P., 2008).

The Altaians' distinctive worldview can be seen in their consciousness, character, and behavior and has been established with centuries-old traditions. It developed a unique ecological culture, including an entire spectrum of moral values and an unusual philosophical image of the world. Altai's mountains are sacred places to the clans and tribes of the indigenous population. Each clan (*seok*) has a sacred mountain – *yiyk tuu*. For Altaians, all nature is animate; the natural world around humans is full of spirits. Each valley, each mountain peak, each spring has its own spirits, or masters, known in Altaian as *eezi*. The Altaian tradition of worshiping mountain, river, and mountain pass spirits has deep roots and still plays a significant role in the people's worldview. The Altaian mountain cult has been well known for a long time. Mountains protect clans from evil spirits and facilitate prosperity and well-being. Each clan represented a mountain's spirit differently – *tuu eezi*. Mountain spirits figure

mainly in epics, myths, legends, and stories (Erlenbaeva, M. T., 2007).

The local population in Kosh-Agach Rayon has preserved a number of cultural and religious rituals that are closely related to the region's microcosm. These include:

1. "Glorification of Altai", a ritual that is conducted at the start of summer and autumn (*Jazhyl bür* – "green branch," *Sary bür* – "yellow branch"). At summer's start, those conducting the ritual ask the higher powers for more livestock, a good harvest, and prosperity. In the autumn, they ask for the protection of livestock over the winter and a good end to a difficult period. In Mongolian Altai there is a distinct style of music and singing known as "Altai maktaal" or "praising Altai" in Mongolian (Almashev, Ch. D., 2006);

2. Rituals worshiping clan places, i.e., members of various clans pray at their clan mountain or other location, which reflect parts of bigger rituals, although these are specifically addressed to representatives of the given clan;

3. Ceremony for visitation of healing springs (*arzhans*) that requires a broad range of religious, ecological, and healing rituals and procedures, including fasting, abstinence from smoking and alcohol, etc. In order to visit the *arzhan*, one doesn't have to be sick. On the contrary, it is best to conduct these rituals in order to support one's life force.

4. Cults worshiping mountains, localities, rivers, springs, animals, and birds, as well as stories about sacred places that are related not just to the ritualistic side of community life overall, but also the everyday life of each person.

Field research materials show that the mountain peaks of Sailyugem, Kokoru-Yiygy, Irbistu, Tobozhok-Bazhy, Tespen-Bazhy, Ak-Turu, and Maazhay-Bazhy are considered sacred to the entire local population of Kosh-Agach Rayon. Many sacred peaks are described with the term *yiyk* ("sacred," a label used as long ago as in ancient Turkic inscriptions). A mountain's sacred status requires the observation of a series of strict rules: no climbing the mountain unless ritually necessary, no hunting for animals or birds on the mountain, periodic consecration of the mountain using ritual actions, reference to the mountain among other sacred mountains, etc. One can turn to sacred peaks for sacred-magical aid not just at specific times according to rituals, but also at times of life's misfortunes or difficult periods for the entire people (war, earthquakes, drought). For example, Kosh-Agach Telengits still believe in the existence of wooden rafts on the mountaintops of Kokoru-Yiygy, Tespen-Bazhy, and one of the peaks above the Kurai Steppe. It is said that they have been there since the time of the Great Flood.

Similar ancient beliefs and ceremonies also include the interconnectivity of one's land and the surrounding world. It is believed that observance of these behavioral rules, developed over centuries, for relating to nature is the essence of a prosperous life for the entire community in this land; moreover, observance can extend the life-force of the clan and tribe for generations.

Field expeditions and literature reviews regarding the use of ancient archaeological sites in both the ethnographic past and today show that there is a historical continuum in the principles of natural resource use by the nomads of various time eras on the Ukok Plateau, a place sacred to many peoples of Altai. This is true not just of places suitable for habitation and farming, but also of sacred places – sanctuaries and burial sites. This underscores the special status of these lands in terms of great cultural and spiritual significance.

The nomadic architecture of Central Asia developed a defined system of natural landmarks. Particular attention was given to those landmarks whose silhouette, shape, or unusual divergence from the surrounding landscape lent them to human use. These landscape phenomena connected architectural structures to the locality (Tkachev, V. N.). Several possible factors influencing site selection have been identified: 1) burial mounds were erected near permanent wintering sites; 2) sites were selected based on the need for marking steppe pasture boundaries; and 3) landscape features of a given location were considered. These indicators are relatively discernable on the Ukok Plateau. A continuum of the Plateau's use for both agriculture and ritual purposes has also been discovered. It is particularly interesting that no specific type of religious thinking, no adherence to monotheism or polytheism, played a role in this situation (Akimova, T. A., 2008). One can see this in looking at Kazakh settlers, whose formation of a diaspora in Altai was complete by the start of the 20th century. One Kazakh migration route led from eastern Kazakhstan to Altai along the banks of the Kara-Alakha River at the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century. There was a pasture belonging to the Chingistai Kazakhs (Karatays) at the marker of the Kara-Alakha's confluence with the Ak-Alakha River, and it was in this same place that their clan burial grounds were established. It is unusual that the Kazakh Islamic cemetery (cob and wooden mausoleums) were built atop an ancient burial site, on the burial mounds of the early Scythian era. This is where the legendary Tokhtamys, leader of one of the first groups of settlers, is buried. The Kazakhs of Dzhazator village still revere him as a clan object of worship (Oktyabrskaya, I. V., Cheremisin, D. V., and others).

Local people view animal and plant inhabitants as a part or subject of Altai's natural spiritual landscape. Many Altaian clans have their own totemic (*bayana*) animals. For example, the Mayman have the roe deer, eagle, wood grouse, and wolf; the Mundus, the golden eagle, owl, and bull; and the Komdosh have the otter, and so forth. This belief traces back to ancient times and is connected to clan legends and myths about animals, Altaian forebears, and their clan and family totems (Yurkova, N. A., 2007).

Our ancestors viewed Altai as an integrated ecological system with many representatives of the flora and fauna blending into that system, living there into posterity. Each of these representatives of living nature finds its own niche. According to the religious and mythological beliefs of Altaians, each living being in the world is of divine descent and serves a divine purpose. Altaian beliefs suppose that our world is harmonious and beautiful because it was created by *Kudai* (God). All Altaians worship and bow before God – *Uch-Kurbustan* (the name is Sogdian by way of Uyghur – 33 *tengri* of heavenly gods named *Khorbustan*). It is believed that he is embodied in each particle of Altai, unseen

but all-seeing, unheard but audible to all, imperceptible but ever-present and all-powerful, found in each animal and plant. He is the earth and the cosmos (both micro- and macrocosms). The core traditional Altaian belief is that nature is a living being, *tyndu* (Altaian, literally “having breath and soul”). As a part of matter, the earth also has breath... and everything on earth is living (Yamaeva, E. E., 2007).

Few know that the Amur (or Ussurian) tiger, the largest animal in the cat family, is part of the biological *panthera tigris altaica* species and that these tigers (*bar* in Altaian) once lived in the Altai region. The last tiger in Altai was killed at the start of the 20th century... The other member of the cat family, the beautiful and grand *irbis* (snow leopard), may well meet the same fate. The Altaians, like all of the world’s Turkic peoples, consider the irbis to be a *baylu* (sacred) animal. Its destruction is occurring as a result of the loss of traditional values, a process that hit especially hard in Soviet times, leading to the mass extinctions of many animal species.

The traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous Altaians, alongside other cultural and spiritual restrictions (a taboo on hunting totemic animals), contains ethical regulations for hunting commercial species. Traditional Altaian beliefs dictate that all animals can be divided into two groups controlled by the **heavenly god** (*Uch-Kurbustan*) or the **underground master** (*Erlik-Biya*). For example, the *kish* (sable) is a creature of the heavenly god. One is only permitted to kill a specific number annually and only using the required rituals (interment of the body on a platform, etc.). Clothing and jewelry are sewn from the skins of heavenly creatures and then worn. At the same time, it is forbidden to wear clothing made from the skins of “underground” animals, for example, the *toogry* (musk deer), *boorsyk* (badger), and others. From a practical perspective, this traditional wisdom can be explained by the fact that their skins and fur contain substances harmful to the human organism. For example, a hat made from musk deer skin is harmful to human vision.

Totemism of the animal world is one of the ancient beliefs and lore that many peoples possessed. Its essence lies in the belief that specific groups of people are related to particular animals. In Altai this wisdom still plays a significant role in shamanic practices. As with many Turkic people, the Altaians revere *bay-terek* (a sacred poplar), *bay-kayyn* (a sacred birch), *mosh-agash* (Siberian pine), *archin* (juniper), and others. Each clan has a totemic tree as well as a unique *tanmu* (sign, stamp). Traditional knowledge of plants is useful when selecting herbs for cooking and healing. Old-timers in the Russian Old Believer villages of the Uimonskaya Valley still possess sacred wisdom of Altaian medicinal plants as well as the art of healing with plants. Some totemic plants are believed to have healing and sometimes even magical properties. For example, the alpine plant *ayunyn sagali* (Altaian, literally “bear’s whiskers”) is particularly valued by the Telengit of the Kosh-Agach Rayon. It is forbidden to collect large amounts of it. Local residents believe that a strong earthquake in 2003, occurred as a result, among other reasons, of a violation of this taboo. At that time, people had begun

to illegally gather “red brush” (popular name of a plant) in large quantities and in taboo locations (Erlenbaeva, M. T., 2007).

Unfortunately, the traditional knowledge possessed by Altaian local and indigenous communities is rapidly being lost due to a variety of societal changes over recent decades, as well as due to the passing of the older generation. Large-scale commercial exploitation of biological resources (both plants and animals) as well as poaching and illegal trade are, without a doubt, additional negative factors, especially as they occur without even a glance at the laws or cultural and moral norms and customs of the Altaian peoples. Many plant species have now become rarities in Altai. The totemic (to Altaians) and endemic alpine plant *arkaatay* (“common sawwort” in Russian, *Saussurea orgaadayi* in Latin) is an example of this issue. At the beginning of the previous century, the Telengit of Kosh-Agach Rayon gathered the roots of this plant near Sailyugem, drying it and using it for rituals and medicinal purposes. The Tuvans call this plant *orgaaday*, from the Turkic word *katay* (“woman”).

The very beautiful ritual for collecting this totemic plant’s roots remains only in the memories of elders: “In order to dig up the root, the man (women are forbidden even to approach the plant) prepares as if for a pilgrimage, fulfilling all the necessary rituals.” Upon finding the plant, the man prays, asking for permission from a higher deity, *tengri*, and then sets up a small felt *ail* (an Altaian yurt) over the plant (the yurt is miniature, no more than 50 cm in height). In this way, the entire plant is sheltered from *tengri* and *kuna* (“sun,” Altaian), and the stem with the flowers is on the *ochog* (“hearth,” Altaian). In the center of the micro-yurt, the opening at the top would be kept closed in order to prevent sunlight from reaching inside. The root is shaped like a woman’s body and is considered to be animate, so the root is carefully protected from sunlight and the sky. The unearthed “woman-root” is wrapped in a prepared piece of white material and carefully transported home, where it is dried in an honored place in the yurt, the *tör* (“altar across from the entrance behind the hearth,” Altaian), again covered and carefully protected from the sun’s rays (Erlenbaev, T., Erlenbaeva, M. T., 2008).

Sacred places are revered by people of many religions who have inherited those traditions from their ancestors. Sacred places are protected over millennia and serve as symbols of caring and spiritual connections to nature. Today, this wisdom is typically known as the traditional ecological knowledge of local and indigenous communities and is needed now more than ever. By combining traditional knowledge with modern scientific techniques, we can save larger landscapes, water bodies, animals, plants, saving, in the end, ourselves, as part of nature. The sacred places and objects (plants and animals) recognized by local and indigenous Altaian communities prove that the first environmental conservation and ecology movement arose many thousands of years ago, much earlier than the

appearance of modern nature reserves¹ and parks. The existence of sacred places illustrates the best side of humanity's relationship with nature.

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¹ Transl. note: A Russian "zapovednik" is a nature reserve that severely limits human activity and access.