HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Power of Myth : Popular Ethnonationalism and Nationality Building in Mountain Altai, 1904-1922
Author(s)	Znamenski, Andrei
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 22, 25-52
Issue Date	2005
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/39440
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	ASI22_002.pdf

Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers : HUSCAP

Acta Slavica Iaponica, Tomus 22, pp. 25-52

Power of Myth: Popular Ethnonationalism and Nationality Building in Mountain Altai, 1904-1922*

Andrei Znamenski

On June 5, 1904, tsar Nicholas II read a cable sent by the Russian Telegraph Agency that reported that in the Altai, a remote area in southwestern Siberia on the border with China and Mongolia, a group of nomads known to the Russians as the "Kalmyks"[1] did not want to obey orders of local authorities to quit gathering in large groups and claimed that soon they would have their own tsar "Oirot-Japon." Viewed throughout the entire nineteenth century as strategically insignificant, the Altai was the least protected section of the Russian oriental domain.[2] Considering this and especially the expanding war with Japan, the "arrogant" behavior of the nomads made officials nervous. The Interior Minister N.V. Pleve instructed Konstantin Starinkevich, a Tomsk governor, who supervised the Altai area, to "provide more details about the situation and adopt the most radical measures to eliminate the troubles if they exist."[3] The authorities felt relieved when Starinkevich reported that the whole incident was just a religious gathering of Altaian natives who suddenly "went crazy" expecting a messiah, chief (*khan*) Oirot, who was to return ancient prosperous life. Moreover, the governor stressed that the rumors about "Japon" turned out to be a product of the rich imagination of local Russian settlers, who felt insecure about their presence on the lands they took from the Altaians. Central authorities, who did not see anything harmful in native religious activities, soon dropped the whole matter and forgot about it.

---

* I am grateful to two *Acta Slavica*'s anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, some of which I incorporated into this paper. I also want to use this opportunity to thank Professor Roberte Hamayon, Centre d'Étude Mongoles et Sibériennes, École Pratique des hautes Études, Paris, for her helpful comments on this article that is part of a larger ongoing project.

1 The nineteenth century Turkic-speaking population of the Altai was divided into northern hunters-gatherers ("Black Forest Tatars" in the contemporary Russian jargon) and southern Altaians who populated the Mountain Altai and who were nomadic pastoralists. This article deals with the second group, who in old Russia were usually labeled as the "Altaian Kalmyks." This usage created a considerable confusion. The Turkic-speaking "Altaian Kalmyks" hardly had anything to do with the Mongol-speaking Volga Kalmyks except the fact that both were nomadic and nominally parts of the Oirot (Jungaria) "state" in the past. For more about the relationships of the Russian empire with the Kalmyks proper, see an excellent study by Michael Khodarkovsky, *Where Two Worlds Met: The Russian State and the Kalmyk Nomads, 1600-1771* (Ithaca and London, 1992).

2 M. Veniukov, *Opyt voennago obozreniia russkikh granits v Azii* (St. Petersburg, 1873), p. 210.

3 I.D. Kuznetsov, ed., *Natsional'nye dvizheniia v period pervoi revoliutsii v Rossii* (Cheboksary, 1935), pp. 60-61.

Yet for the local officials the incident became a large headache. The expectation of the messiah by the natives and the movement it stirred scared the local Russian population and disrupted the routine cycle of provincial life.[4] What surprised and terrified the settlers, missionaries and officials was that so many natives in such a short span of time had suddenly stopped behaving as "normal savages," banned their old shamanic ideology, and eagerly embraced the new prophecy. To put an end to this disarray, on Starinkevich's orders, a group of more than 1,000 Russian peasant volunteers and loyal natives headed by police marshals attacked and clubbed 400 Altaian natives, who had gathered in the Karlyk River valley to pray and to wait for the messiah. Persistently searching for a foreign (Mongol, Chinese, or Japanese) connection, police were at first happy to report a "precious" trophy: a "treatise" in Mongol language. To their frustration, later it was revealed that the "treatise" represented a manual about planting potatoes, which natives used as an amulet.[5] Nevertheless, the most active participants of the movement were arrested, spent two years in detention, where they learned about existence of Japan for the first time. In their 1906 trial, they were completely acquitted because the court did not find anything subversive in "such a primitive cult."[6]

Fig. 1. Chet Chelpan, the founder of Burkhanism (White Faith) (1914). Andrei Anokhin Papers, Archive of St. Petersburg Museum of Ethnography (Künstkamera), f. 11, op. 1, ed. khr. 120, l. 6.

The major culprits were Chet Chelpan, an illiterate native shepherd, and Chugul, his twelve-year-old adopted daughter. Both claimed to have seen, in

4 "Kopiia telegrammy Tomskago Gubernatora na imia Ministra vnutrennikh del ot 10 iiunia 1904 goda": RGIA (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv), f. 1328, op. 2 (1904), d. 1, l. 19ob.-20.

5 N.A. Maidurova and N.A. Tadina, ed., *Burkhanizm: dokumenty i materialy,* vol. 1 (Gorno Altaisk, 1994), p. 300.

6 James Forsyth, *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony 1581-1900* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 187.

July 1904, a rider on a white horse, dressed in white, who announced the return to earth of the legendary Oirot, who would free the Altaians from the Russian hegemony and restore the old way of life. Chet prophesied that the legendary chief was sent by Burkhan, another character from the Altaian folklore, whom Chet considered the Spirit of Altai or the Master of Altai, and who then became one of the chief deities of the new movement. In contrast to traditional shamanism that was labeled as "black" faith, the followers of the prophet called themselves proponents of *ak-iang* ("white" or "milk") faith because in Altaian traditional spirituality white color and milk were symbols of purity. In scholarly literature the ethnoreligious movement ignited by this prophesy became known as Burkhanism after its chief deity.[7]

Burkhanism belongs to the class of so-called prophetic or revitalization movements observable among many preliterate tribal peoples confronting Western modernity. Among the most famous examples, which were widely covered in literature, are the Handsome Lake prophecy among the Seneca Indians in eastern United States at the turn of the nineteenth century, the "Ghost Dance" movement among the Native Americans of the western United States in the 1890s, the Maji-Maji movement in eastern Africa in 1905, the revivalist movement "Kugu Sorta" that developed among the Chuvash and Mari natives in Russia in the end of the nineteenth century, and "cargo cults" in Melanesia in the middle of the twentieth century. Sudden changes in indigenous lifestyles caused by the forces of modernity, and associated psychological stress, often produced eschatological dreams about a return to the good old days. Yet, the history of these movements shows that, in reality, the "good old days" message was more concerned with cleansing traditional culture of elements that were not able to cope with change.[8] In some cases involving relevant folk my-

7 In Western scholarship there is no literature on Burkhanism except one article, which, on the basis of a few secondary sources, gives a good brief review of the basic concepts of Burkhanism. Lawrence Krader, "A Nativistic Movement in Western Siberia," *American Anthropologist* 58:2 (1958), pp. 282-292. For more detailed descriptions of Burkhanism in Russian, see Lev P. Mamet, *Oirotiia: ocherk natsional'no-osvoboditel'nogo dvizheniia i grazhdanskoi voiny na Gornom Altae* (Gorno-Altaisk, 1994, first published Moscow, 1930) and Andrei Danilin, *Burkhanizm: iz istorii natsional'no-osvoboditel'nogo dvizheniia v Gornom Altae* (Gorno-Altaisk, 1993). The manuscript of the latter work was shelved at the end of the 1930s for political reasons. For the only comprehensive discussion of Burkhanism in modern scholarship, see Liudmila Sherstova, "Altai-kizhi v kontse XIX – nachale XX v. (istoriia formirovaniia etnokonfessional'noi obshchnosti)" (Cand. Hist. Sc. Diss., Institute of Ethnography Leningrad Branch, 1985). Incidentally, Sherstova was the first to suggest that this religious movement spontaneously ignited the formation of the Altaian ethnicity. She also published a short popular account of Burkhanism (Liudmila Sherstova, *Taina doliny Tereng* (Gorno-Altaisk, 1997), which, unlike her excellent dissertation research, romanticizes Burkhanism to cater to current ethnonational sentiments of her Altaian audience).

8 The seminal work in this field belongs to anthropologist Anthony Wallace, who coined the very definition of revitalization (Anthony Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58:1 (1956), pp. 264-281) and also wrote a brilliant book on the Handsome

thology, these religious prophecies launched the process of consolidation of tribal peoples into ethnic groups. My paper explores the effect of tribal religious prophecy on the formation of Altaian ethnonationalism. I suggest that the Burkhanism movement (the "white-milk faith") not only spontaneously sparked the ethnicity formation in the area but also moved the Altaian population toward nationalism, and eventually affected the ethnonational projects developed by educated native elites, including indigenous Bolsheviks. My historical insights might be relevant for the study of the current ethnonational situation in the area; since the end of the 1980s, with the gradual demise of communism and after, the Altai experiences the revival of Burkhanism. More heavily peppered with Tibetan Buddhism than its historical predecessor, the "white faith" has again been included into the toolkit of Altaian nationalism.

Examining the history of ethnicity and nationalism in the mountain Altai, I turned at first to such familiar methodological tools as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm's "invention of tradition" thesis.[9] In a nutshell, their approach, which for convenience I will call the constructivist interpretation, centers on the crucial role of educated elites who work out various ethnic and national doctrines, instill them into popular minds, manipulate masses and essentially use ethnonationalism to their own benefit. From the angle of such interpretation, ethnonationalism looks like a cultural artifact that should be unmasked and deconstructed. Still, the more I researched available published and archival materials dealing with the Altai, the more I realized that primary sources drew me in a different direction. I noticed that in this region native tribal "masses" began to shape protonational bonds spontaneously engaging existing prophetic and folklore metaphors without any educated elites and print culture. It also became clear that, in building Altaian nation-

---

Lake revitalization movement. Idem, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972). For the general characteristic of revitalization movements, see: Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults*, trans. Lisa Segio (New York: Knopf, 1963); Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest Among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (London: Heineman, 1975). For the discussion of religious revitalization among specific tribal groups, see Alice B. Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization* (New York: Holt, Rinehard, and Winston, 1989); Marcia Wright, "Maji-Maji: Prophesy and Historiography," in David M. Anderson and Douglas H. Johnson, eds., *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History* (London: James Curry, 1995), pp. 124-142; Paul W. Werth, "Big Candles and 'Internal Conversion': The Mari Animist Reformation and Its Russian Appropriations," in Robert Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky, eds., *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 144-172; Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1992); idem and Terence Ranger, eds., *Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York, 2000).

ality and autonomy between 1917 and 1922, native intellectuals, including the ones who associated themselves with the Bolsheviks, relied heavily on the same popular mythologies and symbols. This prompted me to explore in detail the connection between popular mythology and ethnonationalism. Such insight eventually shifted my methodological focus.

I am well aware that there is a powerful scholarly tradition to treat ethnicity and nationalism as social constructs shaped by educated elites and print cultures. At the same time, there exists a minority scholarship that questions, mostly on a theoretical level, this interpretation.[10] In his critical assessment of the Anderson-Hobsbawm interpretation, Anthony Smith reminds us, that taken to the extreme their approach leads to the neglect of the "poor and unlettered," which reeks of the old Hegelian idea of "historyless people." Indeed, reading, for example, *Imagined Communities* or *Nationalism Since 1780s* one receives an impression that activities of "masses" carry no political relevance. Since they are acted upon, the "masses" have little choice except being mobilized by their leaders for various ethnonational agendas, the products of elites' imagination.[11] Although Hobsbawm does recognize the existence of protonational bonds, he essentially treats them as stillborn and irrelevant. Pointing to the same drawback of the constructivism thesis, Miroslav Hroch, another prominent student of ethnonationalism, stresses that elites can exercise their imagination only on the ground that was already fertilized by objective pre-conditions.[12]

It appears to me that the purpose of Smith, Hroch, John Armstrong, and a few others, who point to the unwarranted theoretical claims of the constructivism thesis, is not to replace the Anderson-Hobsbawm framework but to underline the significance in ethnonationalism of popular social, cultural and spiritual bonds reflected in myth, ethnic landscape, and folk historical memory. Stressing that people cannot invent or imagine *ex nihilo*, critics of the constructivism indicate that ethnic and national elites base their "invention" and "imagination" on pre-existing folk materials, which Alexander Motyl calls "lifeworld."[13] Under favorable circumstances, which could be a war, a natural calamity or modernity for that matter, this latent "lifeworld" might stir the minds of people and eventually lead them to the development or ethnicity and nationalism without educated elites, whose participation is, so to speak, conditional. With their

---

10 Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London and New York, 1998), p. 12; John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982); Alexander J. Motyl, "Inventing Invention: The Limits of National Identity Formation," in Ronald G. Sunny and Michael D. Kennedy, eds., *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 57-75.

11 Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, pp. 117, 127.

12 Miroslav Hroch, "From National Movement to the Fully Formed Nation: Nation-Building Process in Europe," *New Left Review* 198 (1993), p. 4.

13 Motyl, "Inventing Invention," pp. 59, 61-62.

research grounded in particular cultural and time contexts, historians and anthropologists might contribute to this debate that is conducted, as I mentioned above, mostly on a theoretical level. The story that follows is centered on the emergence of popular ethnonational bonds that later became a foundation for nationality making. In my attempt to "unpack" the identity formation among a tribal group on a Russian eastern borderland in inner Asia, I try to show that the "unlettered" folk and leaders with their mythologies are far from being minor players in ethnonationalism, whereas educated elites are limited in their imagination by the existing folk metaphors and symbols.

Altaian Tribes: From the People of Oirot to the Subjects of "White Czar"

Until the 1860s, the Turkic-speaking nomads who populated the mountain (southern) Altai were relatively isolated from contacts with the Russian empire and its population. For a long time this area served as a buffer zone between the Russian empire and the Western Mongol/Chinese domains. At the same time, until the middle of the eighteenth century, the Altaians were formally affiliated with the Jungarian "state," a loosely organized tribal confederation of Western Mongol tribes who are known in literature as the Jungarians or the Oirot, after the name of the tribe that dominated this structure. In the 1750s, torn apart by internal conflicts, the Oirot "state" disintegrated under attacks of the Qin dynasty. The latter dynasty unleashed genocidal warfare against its population as punishment for the disloyalty of some of its chieftains, who constantly changed the sides. In the course of the warfare, Chinese troops annihilated almost ninety percent of the Oirot along with their subject populations and literally wiped out the Jungarian confederation from the face of the earth. Fighting for their physical survival, several communities found refuge in the Altai mountains in the vicinity of Russian borderland forts, asking agents of Russian empress Elisabeth, whom they knew as "maiden tsarina" (*baala-kaan*), to accept them as her subjects. An Altaian saying that goes "I do not know whether I came to this land dead or alive"[14] captured well the mind set of the crumbling groups that had to go through numerous tribulations.

The nomadic communities that later became known as the Altaians represented depopulated splinters of tribes and supratribal units, which tried to shield themselves from continuing warfare by taking refuge in the Altai. It is natural that later the Altaian Mountains and the Altai became to them not only a geographical definition, but also a synonym of a motherland. Although originally these groups spoke different languages that can be traced to the Turkic, Mongol, and Finno-Ugrian families, the dominant Turkic-speaking majority of the Altaian population eventually absorbed and assimilated them. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, this ethnic and linguistic "cocktail" gave rise to

14 *Grammatika Altaiskago iazyka*, comp. by members of the Altaian Orthodox Mission (Kazan, 1869), p. 253.

two large geographical groups in the area: northern Altaians (the Tubular, the Kumandin, the Chelkan, and the Shor) and southern Altaian (the Altai-kizhi and the Telengit), the primary object of the present article. One of the Altaian groups, the Teleut, culturally and geographically occupied a transitional place. Northern Altaians ("Black Tatars" in old Russian jargon) were hunters and gatherers, who lived in dense "black" forests on the margins or beyond the Oirot confederation. The southern tribes (the "Mountain Kalmyk" in old Russian usage) were nomadic stockraisers who resided in the mountain Altai, and were formally the subject of this confederation until the middle of the eighteenth century. There were also a few neighboring Turkic-speaking groups such as the Tuvinian and the Khakass, who were linguistically related to the Altaians. Still, neither the population of the Altai nor their neighbors developed a supratribal identity.

Despite pain and destruction that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' tribulations inflicted on the Altaians, by the middle of the nineteenth century the Oirot period became printed in folk memory in ambivalent terms. On the one hand, the Altaian oral tradition portrayed military conflicts, tribulations and persecutions of shamans by Oirot chiefs. On the other hand, throughout the nineteenth century folk memory increasingly glorified this period as a golden time, when people enjoyed freedom and prosperity. Some epic stories recast West Mongol chieftains, who involved Altaian tribes in political and military troubles, as indigenous legendary heroes and protectors of people. Several of these characters could be traced to real historical fugues, for example, Amyr-Sana, Shunu and Galdan-Tseren, who recruited Altaian communities to their side during internal warfare and in their wars with China.[15] Other characters did not have exact prototypes. Thus, famous chief Oirot was a legendary personification of past Oirot chiefs and the Oirot confederation. Like a distorted mirror, these legends literally whitewashed the picture of the sufferings the "Kalmyk" experienced as subjects of the Oirot "state." It is notable that in addition to traditional self-definition as people of the Altai (Altai-kizhi), between the 1860s and 1870s, the southern nomads sometimes called themselves people of Oirot (Oirot-kizhi).[16] The appropriation of the Western Mongol semi-legendary heroes by the Altaians is a peculiarity of myth-making one can observe among so-called "historically impoverished peoples," who practice the identity transfer that enables them to leave through major social upheavals. Relegated by history to the "fringe," having little to glorify, and at the same time feeling the need for construction of their golden age, such groups readily appropriate parts of heritage of neighboring groups.[17]

15 I.Ia. Zlatkin, "Russkie arkhivnye materialy ob Amyr-Sane," in G.D. Sandzheev, ed., *Filologiia i istoriia mongol'skikh narodov* (Moscow, 1958), pp. 289-313.

16 *Grammatika Altaiskago iazyka*, p. i; Grigorii Potanin, *Ocherki Sievero-zapadnoi Mongolii,* vol. 4 (St. Petersburg, 1883), p. 654.

17 Anthony Smith, "The 'Golden Age' and National Renewal," in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin, ed., *Myths and Nationhood* (New York, 1997), pp. 52-53; George Schopflin, "The Functions of Myth and Taxonomy of Myths," *Myths and Nationhood*, p. 22.

Fig. 2. An Altaian shamaness. Photograph by S.I. Borisov (1908); an old Russian color postcard from author's personal collection.

When Russia integrated the southern Altaian tribes as new subjects, it admitted them along with the remnants of their "Oirot" administrative system, which included tributary units named *duchins* and traditional leaders called *zaisans*. In early modern times, all Altaians were separated in kin-related communities that traced their origin to specific half-mythological ancestors. Yet in the nineteenth century, this structure began to disintegrate. At this time, society of the mountain Altai represented a collection of nomadic camps (*ails*) that included representatives of different clans. Ideologically, native communities in the Altai were shamanists despite their long-time interactions with the Oirot state, which had embraced and forcefully promoted Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism) since 1616. The chief trait that places shamanism aside from so-called world religions is polytheism, the existence of a large pantheon of spiritual forces, which tribal people usually associated with various natural phenomena, localities, and ancestors. These spirits could be benevolent or harmful, depending on people's behavior. It was usually the duty of a shaman as a spiritual mediator to appease these deities on behalf of his or her community to help maintain the prosperity and well-being of a clan and its individual members.[18]

Given this stance, it was natural that natives, especially prior to the second half of the nineteenth century, viewed shamans as protectors of interests of their specific clans. It was natural for shamans to ground their spiritual power

18 For the best comprehensive accounts of Siberian shamanism in English, see: Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, ed., *Shamanism: Soviet Studies of Traditional Religion in Siberia and Central Asia* (Armonk, NY, 1990); idem, *Shamanic Worlds: Rituals and Lore of Siberia and Central Asia* (Armonk, NY, and London, 1997); Anna-Leena Siikala and Mihaly Hoppal, *Studies on Shamanism* (Helsinki, 1992). For Altaian shamanism specifically, see: L.P. Potapov, *Altaiskii shamanizm* (Leningrad, 1991).

in clan-based deities, who helped them to travel over the universe to converse with other spirits to resolve various problems experienced by their kin relations. Shamanism was a very fluid impromptu religious system, devoid of any standards characteristic for so-called world religions. In addition to having their own guardian spirits and hosts of auxiliary spirits, all shamans were free in choosing or composing their chants, prayers and rituals.

Fig. 3. Attire of the Altaian shaman, c. 1920s. Biisk Local Museum exhibit, photograph by the author.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, after their admission to the Russian empire, the Altaians found themselves at relative peace and even saw economic prosperity. In the mountain Altai, Russian authorities reserved for them a loosely defined territory of about 77, 000 square miles, which was defined as the "Kalmyk encampments." As in the case of other Siberian tribes, Russians authorities rarely interfered into the internal life of Altaian communities, restricting their relations mostly to the collection of tribute that native chieftains themselves delivered to collection points. However, after the abolition of serfdom in Russia in 1861, the land shortage among the peasantry in the European part of the empire prompted the government to consider the agricultural settlement of the Altai. The sudden advance of Russian colonization after the 1860s became a challenge to the "nomadic paradise." The population movement reached its peak during the 1891-1892 famine in European Russia. Soon native nomads, whose number never exceeded 26,000 people, felt threatened by Russian settlements. In 1904, apprehensive about uncontrolled population movement and a possible decline of the Altai as a tribute-paying area, authorities placed indigenous lands under its temporary protection.[19] Still, the insecure status of native territories caused much stress and tension among the "Kalmyks."

19 N.B. Ekeev, "Agrarnaia politika tsarizma i zemleustroistvo v gornom Altae nachala XX veka," in F.A. Satlaev, ed., *Materialy po istorii i etnografii gornogo Altaia* (Gorno-Altaisk, 1993), p. 113.

Fig. 4. Ritual animal sacrifice during a shamanic séance, the practice that repulsed Chet and his followers. A drawing from the Russian illustrated magazine *Niva* (1904).

It was not only the threat of land dispossession that concerned the nomads. In 1880, with the general modernization drive in the empire and at the insistence of missionaries, officials issued a circulation that prescribed Altaian natives to switch from the system of hereditary leadership to the election of their chiefs. What the native population feared most of all was that the land and administrative reform might bring them from the category of the nomadic tributary natives to the rank of peasants, which would mean greater financial burdens and participation in the military draft.[20] In the mountain Altai popu-

20 Until 1880s, the Russian administration hardly interfered into Siberian natives' domestic affairs, preferring an indirect control through traditional leaders of nomadic groups. This "indirect rule" originated from the 1822 administrative regulations that count Grigorii Speranskii specially developed for Siberian natives. The law singled out Siberian indigenous population into a special group of the subject population called *inorodtsy* ("aliens" or "people of other kin"). The statute also classified native Siberians into three large categories ("wandering," "nomadic," and "settled" people), which in many respects defined obligations of Siberian natives as subjects of the empire. Each year, the first two groups were to deliver a fixed amount of fur and monetary tribute. In addition, "nomadic" natives paid several local taxes; the Altaians were relegated to this latter group. According to the statute, these two groups of natives also continued to enjoy their traditional administrative rule. Although, like all indigenous Siberians, the natives from the third category were relieved from the most hated duty, a military draft, in other respects their status did not differ from the conditions of the Russian "state" peasants. The Speranskii's statute implied that gradually, when they were ready for "civilization," the first two groups would join the "settled" natives. Financially, "wandering" and "nomadic" tribes carried less duties and obligations in contrast to the "settled" natives and the Russian peasantry. This explains why the Altaians and many other indigenous Siberians so fiercely resisted any attempts to

lated by the nomadic pastoralists this general state of anxiety under the pressure of the Russian authorities stirred the awareness of their territorial unity, which later set a background for the unfolding ethnoreligious revival.

The pressure of colonial hegemony prompted the "Kalmyks" to reassess their present and future status within the empire. They began to invoke vague epic images of the past more frequently, when according to folk memory all of them were subjects of the legendary Oirot chiefdom. Shamans, who were expected to serve as natural protectors of specific local communities, were unable to cope successfully with the challenges of modernity. In the eyes of many natives, traditional spiritual practitioners lost much of their power and credibility. Some nomads concluded that there were no more "strong shamans" left and started to treat those who still practiced their séances as deceivers. As Siberian regionalist writer Nikolai Iadrintsev put it, shamans' "feverish drumming" did not help change the situation. At least one of them in desperation threw himself from a cliff into the waters of the Argut River.[21]

POPULAR "POETICAL FAITH": EMERGENCE OF ETHNIC SELF-AWARENESS

Seeking a spiritual remedy, the Altaians turned to their epic tales and stories, especially to those that praised the "golden" Oirot past. As in many similar situations with other peoples, the Altaians found not only psychological comfort and security but also spontaneously began to unify themselves along ethnic lines by engaging epic folklore, which dwells on the nostalgia for a "golden past" and myths about powerful ancestors.[22] Folk memory gradually erased reminiscences of the Altaians' sufferings before their admission into the Russian empire but preserved and inflated their semi-autonomous status in the Oirot tribal confederacy. At the turn of the twentieth century, mythologized and polished, the Oirot past and Oirot chiefs became more attractive than contemporary Russian hegemony.

Unlike shamanism, which drew its spiritual support from clan-based spirits, Altaian folklore was populated by deities and semi-mythological heroes that were familiar to all people irrespective of their kin affiliation. Moreover,

---

change their status. For more about the stipulations of the 1822 Speranskii native statute, see Marc Raeff, *Siberia and the Reforms of 1822* (Seattle, 1956); Helen Sharon Hundley, "Speransky and the Buriats: Administrative Reform in Nineteenth-Century Russia," Ph.D. diss. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1984), pp. 21-62; Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russian and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca and London, 1994), pp. 81-92; On the evolution of the *inorodtsy* category, see John W. Slocum, "Who, and When, Were the Inorodtsy? The Evolution of the Category of 'Aliens' in Imperial Russia," *Russian Review* 57:2 (1998), pp. 173-191.

21 N.M. Iadrintsev, "Altai i ego inorodcheskoe tsarstvo," *Istoricheskii vestnik* 20 (1885), p. 626.

22 For more about the role of epic stories and legends in ethnicity and nation building, see Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 191-208; idem: *Myth and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford and New York, 1999).

with few exceptions, epic characters did not duplicate the shamanic pantheon.[23] Altaian epic tales and songs mostly deal with the deeds of mighty legendary heroes (Oirot-Khan, Amyr-Sana, and Shunu), gods (Uch-Kurbustan, Tengere, Erlik, Burkhan) or warriors known under different names. These stories are also full of references to the native land, which is described as wonderful "golden Altai" with an eternal summer.[24] Epic storytelling traditionally encompassed evenings, especially in summer when people had more leisure time, or complemented such events as long journeys and hunting expeditions. Special storytellers, called *kaichi*, recited many epic tales in the form of guttural songs.

Fig. 5. Altaian storyteller (*kaichi*) playing traditional musical instrument *topshur*. Drawing by K. Maksimov (c. 1920s), Andrei Danilin Papers, Archive of St. Petersburg Museum of Ethnography (Künstkamera), f. 15, op. 1, ed. khr. 26.

Although the *kaichi* usually lacked the medicinal and ideological power associated with shamanism, they occupied an important place in the Altaian culture and belonged to a rank of much respected people. Moreover, some of them did stand close to spirit world. The most prominent *kaichi* were called *eelu kaichi*, which means storytellers who were close to the spirits, who supposedly had sent epic stories to people using storytellers as their transmitters.[25] It is appropriate to suggest that at the turn of the twentieth century, when the ideological power of shamanism was undermined, the tradition of storytelling and its carriers endowed with *kaichi* skills were propelled to the center of spiritual life. This made the "epic wisdom" a dominant element of the developing ethnic ideology of the Altaians.

The chief messenger of Burkhanism, Chet Chelpan, centered the core of his prophecy on the most popular epic story devoted to chief Oirot, a mythological and Moses-like figure, whom the Altaians traditionally viewed as a potential protector and a liberator. There are many versions of the Oirot legend.

23 S.A. Tokarev, *Dokapitalisticheskie perezhitki v Oirotii* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1936), pp. 132-133; V.A. Muitueva, "O kosmogonicheskikh predstavleniakh Altaitsev," in *Problemy izucheniia kul'turno-istoricheskogo naslediia Altaia* (Gorno-Altaisk, 1994), p. 90.

24 E.E. Iamaeva, "Altaiskii geroicheskii epos" (Cand. Hist. Sc. Diss., Institute of Ethnography Leningrad Branch, 1986), p. 37.

25 A.P. Derevianko, ed., *Altaiskie geroicheskie skazaniia: Ochi-Bala, Kan-Altyn* (Novosibirsk, 1997), p. 18.

The most generic one goes as follows. Many years ago, there was chief (*khan*) Oirot, who ruled the Altai. Oirot defended everybody, and there were neither poor nor discontented people in his domain. Then the Oirot people became surrounded by enemies who destroyed this idyllic life (a clear reference to the tribulations the Altaians experienced in the middle of the eighteenth century). Being frustrated about his inability to protect his own people, Oirot left (a possible allusion to the humiliating request the Altaians forwarded to the Russian empress to accept them as her subjects). Before his departure, Oirot did two things: he cut the tail of his horse to the root, and he also cut a larch tree down to the level of his stirrups. After that, the chief declared that he would come back to the Altai only when his horse's tail grew again and the larch tree grew so big that it would cover with its leaves a whole army. Another important element of this prophetic tale is Oirot's statement that the news about his return would be announced by a twelve-year-old girl and marked by the shifting of a glacier on Belukha, the highest Altai mountain.[26]

Challenging the spiritual power of shamanism with its kin-oriented spirits, Chet placed at the center of the Oirot prophesy Burkhan, another Altaian epic character, which came from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, in which "Burkhan" means the image of Buddha. Later Russian missionaries applied that word to name the entire "white faith" revitalization movement in the Altai. Chet declared Burkhan the chief deity who sent Oirot to save people. This stance shows that Burkhanist pantheon clearly evolved into the direction of monotheism. Burkhan as well as several spiritual and ritual traits of Burkhanism indicate that Chet and his followers had at least a rudimentary knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, whose elements they used for the construction of the new faith. A few ideological tenets of the "white faith" clearly carry a Buddhist spin, like, for example, Chet's utterance – "do not swallow the blood of animals." In addition, during their worship services, many Burkhanists used small bronze bells and copper incense-lamps, which are popular in Tibetan Buddhism. Although the Altaians existed on the very fringe of the Buddhist tradition, their southernmost bands did occasionally interact with Mongol Buddhist preachers. Moreover, the natives sometimes invited these preachers to their nomadic camps for healing purposes. Some proponents of the "white faith," and probably Chet himself, visited Mongolia, where they observed or might have apprenticed with Buddhist teachers.[27] Still, acknowledging the presence of the Buddhist elements in Burkhanism, one has to exercise a certain caution. Both contemporary missionaries, whose records provide much of our information about the "white faith," and, later, Soviet ethnographers were ideologically motivated to blow up the "Lamaist connection" in the "white faith" in order to demonize Burkhanists as agents of a Mongol, Chinese, or Japanese influence depending on writers' preferences. For example, missionaries presented such ambivalent evidence as the use of herb incenses and a reverence of the sun and

26 Maidurova et al., eds., *Burkhanizm: dokumenty i materialy*, vol. 2, p. 295.

27 Vera P. Diakonova, *Altaitsy: materialy po etnografii Telengitov Gornogo Altaia* (Gorno-Altaisk: Iuch-Sumer, 2001), p. 157.

the moon by the Burkhanists as the proof of the Buddhist influence. I would like to stress that those elements of Buddhism that Chet and his associates appropriated into their spiritual practices they filtered through their indigenous shamanic tradition. In many respects, elements of Buddhist symbolism helped them to move indigenous shamanism in the direction of a greater spiritual unity of the Altaians, especially during the first radical stage of the movement. One should also note that Tibetan Buddhism never grounded itself in the Altai as it happened, for example, in neighboring Mongolia or Tuva.

A large place in Burkhanism ("white faith") belonged to so-called *iarlikchi*, traveling preachers of the new faith who originated either from the ranks of former shamans and traditional storytellers or spontaneously emerged from the people who felt a necessary revelation. Operating with images from native folklore, *iarlikchi* clearly capitalized on the respect the "Kalmyks" usually paid to the abovementioned traditional *kaichi* storytellers. Acting as eloquent storytellers and singers, "white faith" preachers replaced shamans as spiritual leaders in many communities. Burkhanist preachers traveled over nomadic camps, erected praying shrines (*kure*) from rocks, purified people and dwellings with the smoke of burning heather, sprinkled milk in all four cardinal directions, and shared their improvised hymns, which were drawn on folklore topics and praised the beauty of the "golden Altai":

> Oh, my Altai with cold water!
> Oh, my Burkhan with a rainbow!
> Oh, my Altai with healing springs!
> Oh, my Burkhan with white flame![28]

Russian Orthodox missionaries, who worked in nomadic camps, immediately noted that it was the "poetical" nature of the new faith that made it so appealing to nomads. The Archbishop of Tomsk Makarii stressed that Burkhanism lured masses of people with its "poetical" and "symbolic" language. A team of clerics sent to the "Kalmyk encampments" in 1908 to preach against Burkhanism also had to admit the "rich poetical content of this faith."[29]

Burkhanist songs and chants not only praised the "golden Altai" and lamented over alien intrusions in the native land, but also propagated the unity of all Altaians, which enhanced ethnic self-awareness of nomadic residents:

> Four-cornered rich Altai
> You gave pastures to our stock.
> Do not quarrel, live in peace!
> Golden-silver people,
> Shed off hatred.
> Let us live in harmony
> Like children of one father

28 Danilin, *Burkhanism*, p. 79.

29 Bishop of Tomsk Innokentii, *Altaiskaia missiia v 1907* (St. Petersburg, 1907), p. 8; *Burkhanizm: dokumenty i materialy*, vol. 2, p. 264.

Let us live!
Like the herd headed by one stallion,
Let us not quarrel
We will live a good life![30]

Many Burkhanists sang their songs with a deep inspiration, daydreaming, sometimes with tears in their eyes.[31] An Altai Orthodox Mission report describes the psychological effect the prophesy produced on Altaian minds: "The Kalmyks look like they have awakened from long sleep. Although their life now came back to normal, their sense of self-awareness undoubtedly rose. Now they represent a more consolidated mass of people that is capable of withstanding outside influences."[32] The Oirot prophesy became what Armstrong calls *mythomoteur*,[33] the spiritual device that began to generate awareness among the nomadic Altaians of their common identity through constant recitals of Burkhanist songs and hymns. In addition to spontaneous ethnonational sentiments contained in those poetical messages, Chelpan preached the spiritual and cultural unity of all people of

Fig. 6. The view of the Belukha mountain; Burkhanists believed that the shifting of a Belukha glacier would signal the coming of chief Oirot. Photograph by V.V. Sapozhnikov (1897), Archive of the Russian Geographical Society, St. Petersburg, razriad 112, op. 1, ed. khr. 957.

Fig. 7: A group of Burkhanists with their preacher dressed in a white robe (1908). An old Russian postcard from the personal collection of Yu.I. Ozheredov.

30 "Molitvy i pesni burkhanistov," AMAE (Arkhiv muzeia antropologii i etnografii), f. 15 [Fond Danilina], op. 1, d. 42, l. 3.

31 "Molitvy i pesni burkhanistov," l. 67.

32 *Otchet Altaiskoi dukhovnoi missii za 1905 god* (Tomsk, 1906), p. 6.

33 Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, pp. 8-9.

Fig. 8: Praying Burkhanists. Drawing of a Burkhanist (1925), Andrei Anokhin Papers, Archive of St. Petersburg Museum of Ethnography (Künstkamera), f. 11, op. 1, ed. khr. 131, l. 10.

the mountain Altai, children of Oirot, irrespective of their clan affiliations, to all who visited him in his "headquarters" in the Karlyk River valley.

The religious prophecy clearly reinforced ethnic sentiments that moved Altaian tribes toward a distinct ethno-religious community. After the rise of Burkhanism in 1904-1905, the nomadic Altaians started to drop various local self-definitions such as Bayat-kizhi (the southern Teleut) or Chui-kizhi ("double-tribute payers") and more frequently used a common definition of "Altai-kizhi" or "Oirot-kizhi."[34] This points to the connection of the myth, territory and developing ethnic identity. As a matter of fact, in Burkhanism we observe rudiments of all the necessary elements of ethnonationalism, usually singled out by social scholars: a common proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, elements of common culture, a link with homeland, and finally a sense of solidarity.[35]

Chelpan and his followers devoted much attention to the reform of the traditional shamanistic ideology. In order to enter the renewed "tender-blue Altai," which chief Oirot would establish on this earth, people were expected to part completely with the compromised shamanic faith. It is notable that proponents of the "white faith" were more lenient to their baptized fellow-tribesmen and Russians than to their kin who still clung to old clan-based faith, which was denounced as a harmful ideology responsible for people's misfortunes. Participants of the "white milk faith" treated shamanists ("black chests" in the Burkhanist jargon) as outcasts, supporters of evil "black faith." The prophet leveled the most severe critiques at bloody sacrifices, shamanistic sessions,

34 Andrei Anokhin, "Aborigeny naseliaiushchie Altai: kratkii ocherk (1925)," AMAE, f. 11 [Fond Anokhina], op. 1, d. 186, l. 27-28.

35 Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*, p. 35; John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, "Introduction," in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Ethnicity* (Oxford and New York, 1996), p. 7.

Fig. 9. A Burkhanist camp in the vicinity of the Karakol River (1908). An old Russian postcard from the personal collection of Yu.I. Ozheredov.

and shamanistic artifacts. Proponents of the "white faith" chased away shamans and burned their drums, other ritual outfits, and the skins of sacrificed animals. One of the popular Burkhanist songs at this time went on like this:

Fig. 10: A home shrine of a Burkhanist (1925). Watercolor by V. Lizukov, Andrei Anokhin Papers, Archive of St. Petersburg Museum of Ethnography (Künstkamera), f. 11, op. 1, ed. khr. 131, l. 3.

> Galdan-Oirot will come.
> The black chests [shamanists] will disappear!
> The black chests will go down into the earth!
> The black chests will run to the sunset.
> Golden Oirot, our chief, will come.
> The black chests will go to the twilight of the Moon.[36]

The major reform brought by the "milk faith" to the Altaian religious life was the rejection of animal sacrifices, which Burkhanists replaced with sprinkling of milk toward the sun and the moon, as well as the ritual burning of heather. Despite its originally negative stance toward shamanism, the "milk faith" eventually became involved in a creative dialogue with shamanism and eventually borrowed a large number of "positive" elements of the traditional reli-

36 "Molitvy i pesni burkhanistov," l. 148; Danilin, *Burkhanism*, p. 99.

gion, including the use of birch trees, ribbons, and the symbolism of white color and milk as markers of purity. Sometimes the way individual natives became initiated as "milk faith" preachers (*iarlikchi*) also indicated the impact of shamanic ideology.[37] By the early 1910s the founder of the "milk faith," Chet Chelpan, himself demonstrated a more tolerant stance toward shamanism.[38] The middle ground that was eventually established in the Altai between the "white faith" and shamanism points in the same direction. This suggests that while the break appeared to be very radical, "in the sphere of culture it is not as all-encompassing and penetrative as was supposed."[39]

Oirot Prophecy and Ethnographic Fantasies of Siberian Regionalists

The unfolding popular prophesy that stressed territorial and spiritual unity of the Altaians as children of legendary chief Oirot caught the attention of Siberian regionalist writers and ethnographers and their associates who came from

37 The case of an initiation to the Burkhanist preacher (*iarlikchi*) vocation shows how the old shamanic tradition was used to transmit the new ideology. Anna Shaburakova, "a secret iarlikchi and magician" of Burkhanism among the Teleut, had shamans in her lineage and periodically experienced nervous fits. Obviously, in the old days these fits could have been interpreted as necessary signs of her shamanic vocation. However, in the new circumstances she seemed to have reread her "disease" as the initiation for the *iarlikchi* profession. Shaburakova was a treasure trove of Altaian legends and epic tales. Moreover, according to Danilov, who interviewed her, this "nervously unbalanced" and at the same time "intelligent" woman, was very worried about the future of the Teleut people. A. Danilin, "Burkhanizm sredi Teleutov," AMAE, f. 15, op. 1, d.15, l. 5, 7.

38 To the ethnographer Anokhin, who met him in 1914, Chelpan did not look so resistant as earlier. Thus, the "prophet" stunned the ethnographer by offering traditional pipes to him and to his travel companions, who were shamans. This was an obvious violation of restrictions imposed by early Burkhanism on smoking. Anokhin was even more surprised when Chet treated his visitors to alcohol, which was totally against the radical Burkhanist tradition. Moreover, next day the "prophet" even shared with the ethnographer a drink of homemade alcohol. In another episode, when one of the shamans accompanying Anokhin performed a session over a sick man, Chet silently watched and did not leave. Responding to the ethnographer's question about the essence of Burkhanism, Chet downplayed differences between Burkhanism and shamanism and simply said that "his faith is the same as shamans' one with only one exception. He [Chet] decided to eliminate körmös [evil spirits], which he does not like." Anokhin, "Dnevnik, zapadnii Altai," l. 8ob., 10-10ob., 12.

39 Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*, p. 13. Many scholars who study tribal revitalization prophecies similar to Burkhanism usually place much emphasis on these movements' radical break with the past. For example, Anthony Wallace, who coined the very definition of revitalization movement, brings up such an argument in his discussion of the Handsome Lake prophesy that spread among the Seneca Indians at the turn of the nineteenth century. Wallace, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. Yet the materials of his own book clearly show that the "creative will" of the prophetic leader and his "new message" were channeled through such popular traditional media as dreams and visions before native community embraced them. Therefore, along with a radical break one can trace an obvious continuity. James R. Lewis, "Shamans and Prophets: Continuities and Discontinuities in Native American New Religions," *American Indian Quarterly* 12:3 (1988), p. 226.

the ranks of indigenous intellectuals educated at local Russian Orthodox schools. In their desire to overcome the inequality between the center and the periphery, and because of the lack of credible Russian "antiquities" in Siberia, Russian regionalists eagerly sampled native spiritual and material culture to demonstrate that Siberian heritage could match or even surpass that of European Russia. Studying native mythology of southern Siberia (the Altaians, Tuvinian, the Buryat, the Mongols), the leader of regionalists, Grigorii Potanin even coined a peculiar "Oriental hypothesis," which traced the origin of the entire Judeo-Christian spiritual heritage from an indigenous inner Asian tradition. Drawing wide and arbitrary parallels between Hebrew, Russian, early Christian and European medieval mythologies, on the one hand, and epic legends from Mongolia and southern Siberia, on the other, his Asiocentric theory insisted on their genetic similarity.[40]

What is important for my discussion here is the profound influence of regionalist ethnographies on indigenous intellectuals. Potanin and several of his friends established long-time friendly relations with such educated Altaians as artist Grigorii Choros-Gurkin and teachers N. Nikiforov and G.M. Tokmashev, who collaborated with the Russian colleagues in collecting and publishing Altai epic stories.[41] Choros-Gurkin, whom regionalists simultaneously advertised as the first genuinely Siberian landscape artist, not only wholeheartedly worked to record traditional Altaian religion but also idealistically dreamed about building among the Altaians a common "national cult." He viewed this "cult" as an earth-based ideology that embraced

Fig. 11: Grigorii Potanin, the leader of Siberian regionalists and the author of the Oriental hypothesis with Grigorii Choros-Gurkin, an Altaian artist and the head of the first abortive Oirot autonomy. From *Grigory Choros-Gurkin: Catalogue of Pictures*, comp. R. M. Erkinova (Amsterdam, Moscow and Novosibirsk: Sluis Publishing, 1994), p. 7.

40 For the analysis of Potanin's views, see Andrei M. Sagalaev and Vladimir M. Kriukov, *G.N. Potanin: opyt osmysleniia lichnosti* (Novosibirsk, 1991).

41 These works include G. Potanin, "Kazak-kirgizskie i altaiskie predaniia, legendy i skazki," *Zhivaia starina* 25:12-13 (1916), p. 188; N.Ia. Nikiforov, comp., G.N. Potanin, ed., *Anosskii sbornik*: *sobranie skazok altaitsev* (Omsk: tip. shtaba Omskago voennago okruga, 1915).

the "pagan past, when human beings were free and worshipped only invisible forces of nature."[42]

There is no doubt that Potanin's "Oriental hypothesis" and other regionalists' ethnographic constructs with their broad generalizations fed ethnonationalist dreams of Altaian intellectuals. The demise of the Russian empire in 1917 and the subsequent temporary "release" of Russian borderlands from a centralized control provided a rare opportunity for practical application of some of these fantasies. In Siberia, regionalists established provisional Siberian government. Controlled by socialist revolutionaries, many of whom came from Potanin's circle, this government was ready to accommodate indigenous requests for sovereignty.[43] It was also helpful that such Siberian socialist-revolutionary leaders as M.B. Shatilov and V.I. Anuchin were simultaneously prominent ethnographers. In the summer of 1917, Choros-Gurkin, Potanin and Shatilov, who became a minister in the Siberian government, sponsored the establishment of the autonomous Altaian Mountain Duma that brought together regionalists, disillusioned missionaries of native origin and a few Burkhanists.

In the spring of 1918, when the republican Provisional Government in St. Petersburg had already been replaced by the Bolshevik regime, the Mountain Duma decided to take advantage of the new government's slogan of national self-determination. At a special congress the Duma reconstituted itself as the autonomous "Karakorum-Altaian Soviet district" with Choros-Gurkin as its leader. In popular usage, this autonomy became known as Karakorum.[44] Although for all practical matters Altaian intellectuals and their Russian regionalist friends carved the new autonomy within the limits of the mountain Altai, which roughly matched the ethnic sentiments of the Burkhanist movement, on the wings of their fantasy Karakorum leaders flew farther. Implying that the "Oirot state" that "united these tribes [Turkic-speaking tribes of southern Siberia] had already existed and disintegrated under the pressure of the aggressive policy of China and czarist Russia,"[45] Choros-Gurkin along with his native and Russian associates viewed Karakorum as a temporary measure that would eventually lead to the large "Republic of Oirot" within the borders of the seventeenth-century Oirot confederation.

Ironically, to a large degree, this far-going utopian project was the product of ethnographic imagination of a Russian anthropologist, V.I. Anuchin (1875-

42 G.N. Gurkin to Ia.Kh. Dovtian, 5 July 1924, in "Prilozhenie k delu 18255 po obvineniu Gurkina G.N," AMHAR (Arkhiv noveishei istorii respubliki Altai), f. R-37, op. 1, d. 579, vol. 14, l. 14ob.

43 By the spring of 1917 Socialist-Revolutionaries were the only party in Russia that advocated establishment of federation based on broad national and regional autonomies.

44 Karakorum is the name of a legendary capital of the Chengis-khan empire. Choros-Gurkin and his Russian associate V.I. Anuchin apparently chose this word to convey the geographical and historical extent of their ethnonationalist aspirations, which had certainly nothing to do with either the Altai or historical Oirot confederation for that matter.

45 Gurkin to Dovtian, l. 15.

1943), a radical regionalist, socialist-revolutionary, and professor of the Tomsk University, who also wrote a classic ethnography of Siberian shamanism.[46] In January of 1918, Anuchin became the head of the non-Bolshevik Siberian government's national council. A passionate proponent of federalism, the ethnographer threw the idea of the broadly defined Oirot autonomy to Tokmashev, a member of the national council. This Altaian intellectual immediately embraced the idea and passed it on to Choros-Gurkin and other members of the Mountain Duma.[47] Invited by Choros-Gurkin as an expert-ethnographer, Anuchin delivered the program speech at the 1918 meeting that constituted the Oirot autonomy. The scholar encouraged the delegates, among whom there were a few Burkhanists, to go fast forward "fearing nothing" and to "shape history in a revolutionary manner."[48] Pushing delegates to move beyond the autonomy limited by a district level, in his utopian dreams the ethnographer boldly "painted" with wide strokes on a large geographical canvas ignoring history and cultural variety: "The population of the Russian Altai, Mongolian Altai as well as the Khakass, the Uriankhai [the Tuvinian], and the residents of Jungaria compose one tribe and one kinship family. They have the same language, manners, and customs. All of them are 'kizhi' [people]. Formerly they represented one great nation Oirot. To bring them together again into one family and into one state is crucial because all these tribes that crave for unification are now neglected by everybody. These tribes will give rise to the great Asian republic which will occupy the area that far exceeds Germany and France together."[49]

Although the powerful message of Anuchin captivated the emotions of the delegates, in fear of possible reprisals from the Bolsheviks, they began debating how far the Altaians could extend their self-determination. Reconstructing the atmosphere of these debates, Choros-Gurkin remembered that the delegates faced a dilemma. If they had limited themselves to a lower regional (*uezd*) level, they still would have been controlled by the Russian-dominated Soviet in Biisk, the former administrative center of the Altai. On the other hand, if they had established a republic right away they would have been immediate-

---

46 V.I. Anuchin, *Ocherk shamanstva u eniseiskikh Ostiakov* (St. Petersburg, 1914).

47 Emphasizing the role of Anuchin in development of this project Tokmashev wrote, "Almost all work in the national council is conducted by V.I. Anuchin. He gives us ready-made drafts of laws for our consideration. About administration of the Altai Vasilii Ivanovich reasons thus: the Altai should be a self-governing state (*shtat*) that will include the Minusinsk natives [the Khakass] and the Uriankhai [the Tuvinian]. When he offered me this idea, I thought that indeed it is not impossible to bring all these people together. Anuchin is very knowledgeable about all republican institutions and cites numerous examples. He can easily arrange everything because he has many ideas and resources. He would not mind to move to our region to accept some position [in the Mountain Duma]." Mamet, *Oirotiia*, p. 69.

48 Ibid., p. 79.

49 Ibid., p. 79.

ly crashed by the Bolshevik power.[50] Hence, as a stop-gap measure, the delegates decided to establish a district (*okrug*) autonomy named Karakorum and to begin to move immediately toward the "Oirot Republic" as part of the Russian Federation. Appointing Anuchin the "kagan" (chief commissioner), delegates commissioned him to work out the details of this Pan-Turkic republic.[51]

The Altaian intellectuals and their regionalist friends used their "imagination" to creatively romanticize historical past (the legendary Oirot confederation), whereas the preceding popular Burkhanism was centered on the myth (the Oirot prophesy). By secularizing the myth, native intellectuals transformed the ethno-religious prophesy of the "white faith," widened its geographical borders and turned it into the utopian project of the "Oirot Republic." While in their imagination the participants of the "white faith" never extended the borders of the prophetic Oirot chiefdom beyond Altai, leaders of Karakorum began dreaming about bringing together Turkic-speaking tribes of Russian and Mongolian Altai, Khakassia, Tuva, and even Chinese Jungaria.

To be exact, Karakorum leaders represented by Altaian intellectuals and their Russian advisors never enjoyed real power in the Mountain Altai, which soon became a battleground between the "red" Bolshevik forces and the "white" armies fighting for the restoration of the old regime. Choros-Gurkin desperately maneuvered between the "red sickle" and the "white eagle," which only inflicted on him the animosity of both sides. Eventually, by 1919 the civil war in the Altai turned into the "national war" between Russians and the Altaians. On many occasions, "red" guerrilla groups represented by local Russian settlers were more interested in fighting Karakorum than the "whites." These paramilitary units frequently reinterpreted the slogans of struggle for Soviet power as a crusade against the "Kalmyk domination." The "white" forces, who were on defensive by 1920, on the contrary, revisited their slogans and chose to successfully manipulate the prophetic sentiments of indigenous population. Trying to turn the Altaians to his side, a local anti-Bolshevik war lord captain Satunin, set up a special "punitive native division" and widely exploited Burkhanist symbols by riding a white horse, wearing a white uniform, and deliberately spreading the word that he was returning chief Oirot. Quite a few natives did side with this new "white messiah."[52]

Initially, with the defeat of the most of the "white" army in 1919, the Bolsheviks abolished Karakorum, stripped the Mountain Altai of any autonomy and placed the entire area under the direct control of a Bolshevik revolutionary committee. A large segment of native population, exhausted by the settlers' terror and by Bolshevik food requisitions, moved southward beyond the Rus-

50 "Biiskii okruzhnoi otdel OGPU: delo po obvineniu Gurkina Grigoriia Ivanovicha v posiagatel'stve na otdelenie Altaia v samostoiatel'nuiu respubliku, 1918-1922," OSD (Otdel spetsial'noi dokumentatsii upravleniia arkhivnogo dela administratsii Altaiskogo kraia, Barnaul), f. 692, op. 1, d. 1, l. 98.

51 "Biiskii okruzhnoi otdel OGPU," l. 124.

52 Mamet, *Oirotiia*, pp. 89, 95.

sian border to Mongolia. The revolutionary committee was worried not only about stagnant economic life and increasing depopulation, but also about the ugly Russian-native dimension the civil war took in the Altai, which set a negative example for the neighboring "Oriental" neighbors, particularly Mongolia and China.

PROPHECY DRAPED IN RED: TOWARD OIROT AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE

In the early 1920s, the policy of national and cultural autonomy the Bolsheviks began to pursue in their relations with the nationalities of the former Russian empire helped to partially correct the situation. Recent research of the Bolsheviks' nationalities policy shows that despite the cosmopolitan message of social emancipation, their regime did not suffer from "ethnophobia" and hardly acted as the "breaker of nations."[53] Instead, it quickly mastered the art of *Realpolitik*, successfully integrating various ethnonational causes into its agenda. In fact, early Bolshevism considered domestic national liberation a part of the social emancipation message and took seriously the issues of ethnic sovereignty, seeking to enhance an ethnic identity in Russian borderland periphery areas.[54] To address problems of nationalities, the new regime established the Narkomnats (National Commissariat on Nationalities Affairs), which was entrusted with the work of ethnic and national building among non-Russian population of the former empire.

Among its various "affirmative action" measures, the Narkomnats brought back the abortive regionalist project of the Pan-Turkic "Oirot Republic" advocated by Anuchin.[55] Yet to the Bolsheviks, Anuchin was not the right person to build autonomy for the "people of Oirot." In addition to being an ethnic Russian, this ethnographer greatly compromised himself by his active participa-

53 For the ground-breaking research in this field, see Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA, 1993), pp. 84-126; Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53:2 (1994), pp. 414-453; Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Questions, 1917-1923* (New York, 1999); Francine Hirsh, "Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities," *Russian Review* 59:2 (2000), pp. 201-226. For the most relevant study in the context of my discussion, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1938* (Ithaca and London, 2001).

54 By building ethnic groups and nationalities, Bolsheviks believed that eventually, if given a chance to "flourish" ethnically and if lifted technologically and socially to the level of European Russia, the problem of national inequality would be resolved by itself. Essentially, this approach to indigenous periphery was a Bolshevik version of the "white man's burden" as seen by Kipling. Timo Vihavainen, "Nationalism and Internationalism: How Did the Bolsheviks Cope with National Sentiments?" in Chris J. Chulos and Timo Piirainen, eds., *The Fall of an Empire, the Birth of a Nation: National Identities in Russia* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000), p. 80.

55 V.A. Demidov, *Ot Karakoruma k avtonomii* (Novosibirsk, 1996), pp. 123-124.

tion in the socialist-revolutionary movement. Soon his voice was muted. The major work of promoting and advocating that project was laid on the shoulders of indigenous leader Leonid Sary-Sep Konzychakov, a member of the Bolshevik party since 1920 and the chief of the nationalities department of the entire Altai district (*guberniia*) that included the northern and southern (mountain) Altai.[56] Konzychakov belonged to the category of people who became known as "national Bolsheviks" and whose voices were articulated in Narkomnats by Mirsait Sultan-Galiev, who was one of its leaders.[57] In many respects, Konzychakov was a perfect candidate. Though coming from the ranks of acculturated natives, he had some knowledge of native spiritual culture. Furthermore, Konzychakov was exposed to the intellectual debates about the Altaian autonomy. Finally, he quickly grasped the basics of the Marxist jargon popular in the 1920s.

Appointed as a special representative of the Altaian people in Narkomnats' central bureau in Moscow in 1921, Konzychakov was entrusted with the shaping of the future Oirot autonomy.[58] Unlike Anuchin and Karakorum leaders who centered their "imagination" exclusively on the restoration of the seventeenth-century Oirot "state," Konzychakov enhanced his autonomy project by linking this history to the existing popular Oirot prophecy.[59] In fact, Konzychakov directly suggested that the Bolshevik regime take seriously the prophetic sentiments of the Altaians. He stressed that among his "unlettered" fellow-tribesmen the idea of social and national liberation was closely associated with such images as "Oirot" and "chief Oirot." To an extent, it was natural that Konzychakov came up with this idea. After all, he was not only a native Altaian but also a Bolshevik official who was expected to show that he took into consideration popular sentiments. Since Burkhanism represented the only major social movement in the native Altai, the "white faith" was almost by default qualified to the status of a spontaneous national liberation against Russian colonialism.[60]

---

56 Prior to 1917, Konzychakov (a Teleut Altaian) graduated from a missionary catechist school, and worked as a teacher and a song leader, assisting missionaries in their proselytizing trips to the Altaian natives. Before and after 1917, he also associated himself with regionalists enjoying the patronage of ethnomusicologist Anokhin, the famous student of Altaian shamanism. Then he briefly worked as a minor Karakorum official, and eventually joined the Bolshevik party.

57 For more about Sultan-Galiev see, Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Questions*, pp. 213-238.

58 "Doklad ob organizatsii Oiratskoi respubliki," GANO (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Novosibirskoi oblasti, Novosibirsk), f. 1, op. 1 (1922), d. 800, l. 15.

59 It is notable that in 1922 Anuchin, who drew his ideas from contemporary ethnographic books and who never did any field research among the Altaians, publicly rebuked such connection dismissing the Oirot prophesy as a "beautiful fairy tale" that has nothing to do with native history. V.I. Anuchin, "K voprosu ob Oiratskoi respublike," *Sibirskie ogni* 2 (1922), p. 197.

60 This assessment of Burkhanism was popular in the 1920s, when the Bolshevik regime courted indigenous borderlands. See, Leonid Edokov, "Gotovtes' k 5-letiiu avtonomnoi Oirotii,"

Konzychakov centered his 1921 official memorandum for Narkomnats about the establishment of the "Republic of Oirot" on the popular prophetic eschatology: "Liberation of the Oirot will happen when a glacier from the Belukha mountain falls down. That summer, on that day of all days, the glacier shifted. According to a legend, this natural phenomenon marks the liberation and revival of the Oirot state. This is not surprising if one takes into account the independent statehood existence of the natives in the past. The question is quite clear here. The population wants to get rid of misfortunes and death, which, according to the people's legend, is only possible through revival of Oirot."[61] Pointing out that the Altaians attached "prophetic meaning to legends and tales" and comparing native mindsets with messianic aspirations of ancient Hebrews and early Christians, Konzychakov concluded that it would be unwise to neglect this prophesy: "For us, representatives of the RSFSR,[62] such mindset of the people is quite appropriate."[63] Thus, the popular prophesy became directly linked with the sovereignty of the "Oirot people." Although, like his native and Russian regionalist predecessors, Konzychakov could not resist stretching out the proposed Oirot autonomy beyond the geographical borders of the Altai, he did capture the sentiments of the indigenous population, at least in the mountain Altai. By the 1920s, the tendency to screen all major social and natural events through the eyes of the existing eschatological prophecy indeed became an established cultural pattern in this region.

In November of 1921, facing resistance of local Siberian communists to his broadly-defined project and to strengthen his position, Konzychakov wrote a letter to Stalin, then the head of Narkomnats, seeking his personal support of the Oirot republican autonomy that would include all Turkic-speaking peoples of Siberia. Stalin appended his short agreement, "I approve."[64] Still, despite this support, the borders of the proposed Oirot Republic that went beyond the mountain Altai and covered a large area of southwestern Siberia populated by the Russian majority aroused objections of a few members of the Bolshevik Central Committee. As a result, by the spring of 1922, the Konzychakov project was reconsidered. At first, the "Oirot Republic" was reduced to the level of a province that encompassed only the Altaians and the neighboring Khakass people ("Oirot-Khakass province"). Finally, in the summer of 1922, the Bolshe-

Oirotskii krai (5 February 1927), p. 1; Nikita Medzhit-Ivanov, "Dokladnaia zapiska Sibrevkomu, 1922," GARA (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Altai, Gorno-Altaisk), f. 5, op. 1, d. 340, l. 7ob.; Mamet, *Oirotiia*. Later in the 1930s, during the period of "high Stalinism," Soviet ideologists and historians declared Burkhanism a "bourgeois-nationalist separatism" instigated by Chinese and Japanese agents.

61 Leonid Sary-Sep Konzychakov, "Kratkaia dokladnaia zapiska: Oirat," GARF (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moscow), f. 1318 [Fond Narkomnatsa (Natsional'nyi kommissariat po delam natsional'nostei)], op. 1 (1921), d. 175, l. 333.

62 Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the name the Bolsheviks attached to their country before it constituted itself as the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

63 Konzychakov, "Kratkaia dokladnaia zapiska: Oirat," l. 333.

64 Demidov, *Ot Karakoruma k avtonomii*, p. 127.

vik government ended up by establishing the Oirot Autonomous Province (OAP) within the borders of the formerly abolished Karakorum district, which roughly matched the mountain Altai area, the stronghold of the Burkhanist movement.[65]

Accounts about the attitudes of the "unlettered" Burkhanists to the manipulations of the national Bolsheviks with their prophetic symbols are ambiguous. It seems that some of them became frustrated about this growing monopoly over the indigenous epic heritage. Thus, practitioners of the "white faith" made pilgrimages to the province capital Oirot-tura in hope of exposing an "Oirot pretender," native communist Alagyzov, who was one of the leaders of the new autonomy. Fellow tribesmen rebuked this graduate of a Russian Church catechist school and a former missionary assistant with a phrase, "Why did you declare yourself chief Oirot? We all know you very well."[66] Alagyzov, who became frustrated about such visits, once delivered an anti-religious lecture to the Burkhanists. Yet at the end he felt obliged to capitalize on the ancient Oirot legend and simply declared that "great earthly Lenin" was the "Oirot of all the oppressed."[67] Still, another account provides a different picture. According to I. Shatskii, the crowd of natives, which visited Oirot-tura, came to see with their own eyes the "resurrected Oirot." The natives also asked Alagyzov about his blood line in attempt to establish his relation to chief Oirot.[68] Most probably, both versions are correct.

In the relaxed atmosphere of the 1920s some Burkhanist preachers tried to accommodate the "white faith" and its rich folklore to the new regime. For example, Argamai Kul'djin, an influential Burkhanist and formerly one of the Karakorum leaders, readily embraced the cliché about Lenin as "the Oirot of all oppressed." In his conversation with ethnographer Danilin, Kul'djin stressed that there was actually no contradiction between the Soviet and Burkhanism eschatologies because the expected chief Oirot already manifested himself in the shape of Lenin.[69] Reporter Zinaida Richter similarly observed in the 1920s that "Oirot mystics" associated chief Oirot with the image of Lenin and viewed representatives of the Soviet power as his prophets.[70]

First Altaian national Bolshevik leaders (Nikita Medzhit-Ivanov, Pavel Chogat-Stroev, and Konzychakov) could not reconcile their ethnonational dreams to the limits of the mountain Altai and still envisioned the new autonomy in far wider borders. Like Karakorum ideologists, ethnographer Anuchin and artist Choros-Gurkin, they considered OAP as a temporary measure on the way to a large republican unit, including the Khakass, Shor, and even Tuvinian, who were not part of

65 Konzychakov nevertheless arranged that a few small Turkic-speaking groups from the northern Altaian (the Tubalar, Chelkan, and Kumandin) became part of the new autonomy. Incidentally, until the present day these communities, which were "dragged" into OAP, do not consider themselves the Altaians.

66 L. Ovalov and A. Shapovalova, *Iul' v Oirotii* (Moscow, 1933), p. 3.

67 Dmitrii M. Stonov, *Povesti ob Altae* (Moscow, 1930), p. 63.

68 I. Shatskii, "Poezka v Oirotiiu," *Nastoiashchee* 5-6-7 (1929), p. 6.

69 Danilin, "Burkhanizm sredi Teleutov," l. 4.

70 Zinaida Richter, *V strane golubykh ozer: ocherki Altaia* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930), p. 157.

the newly established Soviet Union. The continuing debates within the thin strata of the educated Altaians about the unification of the Siberian Turks not only went against popular aspirations of the "Oirot people," but also against the officially recognized territorial ethnicity. In 1923, Soviet secret police (GPU) intercepted a letter, which the leadership of the Tuvinian Republic sent directly to Medzhit-Ivanov, then the head of OAP. The letter, which raised the issue of unification, bypassed the central authorities in Moscow. The suspicion of the secret police increased when in 1924 the Khakass, Shor and Altaian students sent to Moscow for schooling set up a friendly association where they occasionally indulged themselves into hypothetical speculations about an umbrella republic for all Siberian Turks. The next year GPU decided to place all natives who still advocated supra-tribal Oirot Republic under surveillance and opened an operative case.[71]

Fig. 12: Nikita Medzhit-Ivanov, one of the first leaders of the Oirot Autonomous Province (1922-1924), who advocated the extension of the autonomy's borders. Petr Gordienko, *Oirotiia* (Novosibirsk, 1931), frontpiece.

Conclusions

The development of the Altaian ethnonationalism after 1917 indicates that constructing the Oirot autonomy, regionalists and national Bolsheviks appropriated several popular ideas of the "white faith," which spontaneously developed from below in the mountain Altai. At the same time, in their intellectual fantasies regionalists and national communists were ready to go farther than the "unlettered" masses. The educated elite dreamed about bringing into the large "Oirot Republic" all neighboring Turkic-speaking tribes whose ancestors allegedly belonged to the loosely organized seventeenth-century Oirot tribal confederation. However, this project was to remain a fantasy unless supported by the Bolshevik authorities. We may hypothesize that the Bolsheviks could have easily imposed such supra-tribal project if they had chosen to do so. However, that is precisely what they did not want to do, because in the early 1920s, their goal was the opposite. Building their "affirmative action empire" and

71 This case under the code name "Pan-Turkists" was closed in 1934, when all major proponents of the broadly defined Oirot republic were eventually tried and imprisoned. For records of the interrogations, see "Delo po obvineniu Maneeva V.K., Edokova L.M., Tokmasheva G.M., Ziablitskogo I. i Kumandina G.N., Oiratskogo otdelenia OGPU," OSD, f. R-2, (1934), [no op. number], d. 18110, vol. 1.

courting indigenous periphery, the Bolshevik leadership was ready to go far enough to give nationalities an opportunity to make their case. The official policy was to identify more or less visible ethnographic groups that could be safely "locked" within their administrative autonomies and allowed to "flourish." Despite its original support for the broadly defined Oirot autonomy, the Narkomnats could not find in southwestern Siberia any tribal entities that manifested popular ethnonationalist sentiments except the nomads of the mountain Altai. At the same time, to the frustration of the Altaian indigenous elite, native residents of this area did not view themselves as part of a supra-tribal entity and did not feel spiritual unity with their Turkic-speaking neighbors, which regionalist Anuchin or national Bolshevik Konzychakov tried to ascribe to them. Therefore, supporters of the pan-tribal Oirot autonomy failed to make their case. To be exact, they did make the case but only with regards to the mountain Altai. This vividly shows how intellectuals involved into "construction" of ethnicities and nationalities were limited by the existing "ethnic material": cultural myths, symbols and memories.

The insights into the history of the Oirot people during the first two decades of the twentieth century also point to powerful cultural continuity one can observe in ethnonationalism.[72] Unleashed as the spiritual and cultural critique of old clan-based shamanism, the Oirot prophecy, which evolved into the ethnoreligious movement Burkhanism, eventually engaged and blended with this "black faith" it earlier attacked. Furthermore, the prophetic mythology politicized from down below since 1904 became a popular metaphor that Altaian tribal "masses" began to use to screen major social and political events such as revolutions, wars, invasions, epidemics, and a famine. Educated native elites that came to the political picture after 1917 had to adjust their ethnonational projects to these sentiments. To some extent, the 1922 Oirot Autonomous Province became the product of the eschatological dream, which originally sprang up from below and then became secularized, historicized or, to use the popular expression, "imagined" from the above. Nobody doubts that indigenous elites constantly "invent" and "reinvent" their nations and ethnic communities. Nevertheless, it is the "mute" and "unlettered" who feed the imagination of these elites with historically-rooted "organic" materials. The Anderson-Hobsbawm thesis does contain a powerful "deconstructive" message, which serves especially well for unmasking various ethnonationalist agendas. Still, this interpretation frequently portrays ethnic and national mythologies as a fictitious window-dressing, which is certainly not true. Pointing to the rise of popular ethnonationalism among the "people of Oirot," I wanted to stress that the presence of educated elites and print culture in identity formation is not mandatory, whereas the role of folk worldview is crucial.

72 As late as 1955, native historian P.E. Tadyev, in his review of Burkhanism, prepared for the Altaian regional branch of KGB (then the Ministry of the State Security), pointed to the durability of the Burkhanist mythology, especially in the Ust-kan aimak. Tadyev, "Spravka o vozniknovenii Lamaizma na Altae v Burkhanistskoi forme," AMHAR, f. R-37, op. 1, d. 579, vol. 14, l. 139.