SHAMANIC REVITALIZATION: Kyta Baaly, Shamanic Rituals, Practices and Healing

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Siberia is the classic shamanic place. In fact, the very word “shaman” is derived from the Siberian Tungus word, saman, meaning a person who has direct experience and repositories of specialized knowledge connecting to the mysteries of life and the universe. From a very young age shaman’s feel they have a spiritual calling to maintain the balance of the universe, spurred not only from being born with a special sensitivity about the nature of the world and interconnectedness of all things, but from being initiated through great hardship, illness or personal injury. If they are able to overcome being tortured and dismembered by spirits before being put back together again, they are apprenticed by other shamans, who pass on the knowledge of the culture’s shamanic traditions and sacred practices (Singh 1999: 131-132). The painful initiation and wisdom into a spirit world provides the shaman great benefits to empathetically share with others. One way may ask, “what are these benefits and how do contemporary shamans empathetically share them with their followers?” The answer to this question is the great benefit is health and prosperity. Contemporary day shamans facilitate meaningful healing experiences through rituals, words, poetry, language, as well as natural and symbolic landscapes. In this paper, I explore the revitalization of shamanism in the Sakha Republic, the case study of a white contemporary Shaman by the name of Kyta Baaly and finally break down how shamanic rituals and practices ultimately create a landscape and place of healing.

**Revitalization of Shamanism In the Sakha Republic**

The Yakut or Sahka (term used as the ethnic label for Turkic people associated with the Sahka (Yakutia) Republic) have been well documented in the field of ethnography by their shamanic tradition.The Sakha have an extensive knowledge of spiritual beings all while upholding the traditional of white shamans and black shamans. White shamans (aiyy oiuun), have been traditionally thought to invoke blessings for humans and livestock and serve the welfare of the people through the spirits of the upper world, *aiyy ichchi*. On the flipside, the black shamans *(abaahy oiuun*), have been traditionally thought to treat sickness and disease and also protect people from evil spirits of the underworld (Vitebsky 2011: 34-35). Respectively, the practices of the white shamans (aiyy oyuun) began to be forbidden in practice soon after the Christianization of the 17th century while those of black shamans remained until Soviet State policy began to oppose shamanic tradition. Since, the practices of shamans have been performed among the Sakha in secret.

Following the 1990, however, the spilt of the “Declaration of the State of Sovereignty of the Sakha Soviet Socialist Republic” and USSR, resulted in the State of Yakutia becoming the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) **(Nikolev; 1994: 67-68).** In effect, the official forbiddance of shamanic rituals and traditional healing was lifted, leading to a revival of traditional Sakha worldviews relating to Shamanic performances, curing illness and other shamanic healing methods. During the time of the former Soviet Union, Sahka people had been forcibly changed and Russianized under communist policy. Children were educated apart from their parents and less able to speak their own language. However, following the establishment of the Sakha Republic in the 90s, policy reorganized the education system in Yakut language, and promoted a greater of tolerance of ethnic cultures connected with shamanism and the languages of people in the Republic (Yamada; 1999: 95). In fact, the national government and several organizations including the Department of National Culture of Language, State University of Yakutsk, Research of the Sakha Republic, the Kut-sur (association for the revitalization of Sakha culture) etc. promoted and continue to promote the academic and educational activities/research for the revitalization of Sakha culture and cultural practices like dance, song, cuisine, festivals and other ritual performances. The cultural revitalization process amongst Sakha propagated a revival of place for shamans and their ethnic identity.

**Case Study of White Shaman Kyta Baaly in the Megino Kangalask ulus (region) of the Sakha Republic**

The revival of shamanic practices and healing after the break-up of the USSR and the establishment of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), as well as the reorganization of traditional culture in modern Sahaka, is demonstrated by the ecological reforms of a contemporary shamanic leader, by the name of Kyta Baaly. As Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer[[1]](#footnote-2) states, lack of “confidence in the public and private spirituality have characterized the past decade of post-Soviet religious life in Siberia…cultural roots rediscovery has given way to soul-searching… [and] in villages and towns of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), shamanic revitalization has taken place at many levels (134).”

This revitalization movement in particular is very compelling given the connectivity of individual and community healing rooted in “place”: in this case the Megino Kangalask ulus (region) of the Sakha Republic. Since the 1990s, Kyta Baaly, an individual who despite coming from humble beginnings as a “rural, poorly educated,[but] charismatic young man”, has captured hundreds of followers in this region through his white benevolent spirit shamanism [aiyy oiuun]. In being a “white” shaman, Kyta Baaly implemented his spiritual leadership over the territory by rejecting association with the “black” shamans, and communicating his powers to the people via the help of benevolent spirits, *aiyy ichchi* (Balzer 2002; 139).

In a trip to Kyta Baaly’s private annual summer festival (yhyakh), Balzer experienced the movement first hand. As he describes it, the ritual unfolded “naturally,” with spirit guidance, talking, eating and circle dancing, okhuokhai[[2]](#footnote-3). Following the sight of several symbols, including “a huge painting of the new Kyta Baaly movement symbol: a yin/yang clone of black and white swirling commas fit into each other, representing male and female origins” and a long set of rituals including Sakha prayers *(algys)* and the"feeding" the earth and spirits.[[3]](#footnote-4) Men and women of all ages testified to their gratefulness for the spirituality and communality they had found in Kyta Baaly's teachings. After some drizzling, a rainbow *(tustug)* formed, arcing out from the lake into the sky (137).”

Following this, was a therapeutic circle dance, which featured recitative improvisational poetry about the natural world, spirits, and Kyta Baaly. Soon thereafter, Kepsete, serious talk began which formed discussion about the threats of other religious movements in the republic, how the spiritual teachings of Kyta Baaly could be strengthened and spread into more regions through child educational programs as well as lecture tours by his team of healer-proselytizer. Finally, the ceremony closed out by Kyta Baaly saying prayer praising the spirits and asking for health and prosperity of the assembled group, while feeding the earth with more offerings.

**In Depth Analysis of Healing Rituals: Prayer, Symbols, Empowerment and Landscape**

As we see from Balzer’s brief account, Kyta Baaly and the people of the Megino Kangalask ulus (region) of the Sakha Republic have found incredible solace and healing in shamanic rituals. However, being unacquainted or unable to access this experience, may lead one to ask “how can “bizarre” rituals be therapeutic and result in cultural renewal and spiritual revitalization? To answer this, here is where we break down the shamanic rituals (connected to this specific place) including, prayer, poetry, words, symbol, and landscape and how each play an important role in healing the individual and community at large. First off, as Balzer elaborates,

“Shamans and shamanic rituals can mediate interconnectivity and radiate love. To do this effectively, shamans must speak in a language followers can understand, in a time and place that resonate. As masters at rickster-like creativity, shamans also push the limits of all culturally available metaphors, especially symbols of spiritual power (144).”

Rituals are “a form of repetitive behavior that does not have a direct over technical effect” (Helman; 1994: 224). In this context, shamanic rituals and practices express the basic values of the Sahka society in Megino Kangalask ulus and communicate these values, using symbols, words, prayer, to others. In this particular festival, rituals were to unfold “naturally,” with spirit guidance. In that, they bring a small proportion of the Sakha population, “whether an urban folklorist experiencing conversion from Soviet atheism, a former Communist leader-turned-politician, or a rural cleaning lady once cursed by a shaman in children,” together so that their collective life energies can be directed toward healing, ecological renewal, and community solidary. Most of these people have a great confidence in the mediator, Kyta Baaly, who states, “I want to purify, to bless this land and my family [of followers]. I want my family to know I am here, protecting them (Balzer 2002; 139).” As a white shaman, he also seeks provide or restore balance in nature and communicate with spirits of the upper world in order to have the knowledge and tools of healing. He continues, “Our first goal should be the stimulation of internal renewal, of healing ourselves to the point where reflexive energies radiate out from us, in a kind of sixth sense, *iniir.* Iniir is needed to spiritually reharmonize the earth (139).*"* Use of rituals, symbols, poetry, words and prayer not only allows him to create a cooperation and cohesiveness within the collective and in the environment. For instance, by feeding the earth, Kyta Baaly demonstrates his reflexive energy to reharmize the earth as a way of maintaining the balance of the universe and the interconnectedness of all things including spirits, people and nature.

Additionally, Kyta Baaly is able to help others discover the beauty of shamanism and vitalize Sakha cultural pride through festival prayers (yhyakh algys). As Gesler and Kearns (2002) declares “language and place have a reciprocal relationship (87).” During the yhyakh festival, several rituals give rise to specific types of prayers and dialogue. The language used in these prayers (Yakut) is also the language that helps to create place. Through language the shamanic site is given a name which makes it familiar, imbues it with power, and also associates it with myths that heighten the meaning of place (Tuan 1999). Furthermore, power is manifested in these places and language can be used as power in healing and spiritual encounters. According to Gesler and Kearns, power is restricted to a specific place or area through its action on individual bodies. In this case, the localized wielding of power is demonstrated by the healer (shaman Kyta Baaly) - community relationship (Sakha followers) (Gesler 2002; 88).

Similar to prayer, there is great aesthetic and linguistic power in chants of poetry at these festivals. Like prayer, poetry rituals,

“express the basic values of a society and communicate these values to others, using various symbols, including words. In the health context, rituals are used to heal suffers physically, mentally, spiritually and socially (Gesler 2002; 76).”

Moreover, through localized words and poetry there is a removal from intellectual trends of the urban Sakha intelligentsia. For example, many words spoken in rituals (e.g. *aiyy* which means benevolent spirit, *abaahy oiu,* which means black shaman, or *kut-siur* which meansearth's own heartmind-soul) have meanings that are specific to shamanic spiritual entities, nature or healing beliefs. In essence, shaman followers are socialized by the culture’s practices as well as ways of speaking and thinking. And even while sacred poetry is conceptualized on the basis of the type of spiritual function, overall involvement in these type of rituals, which are reinforced by language and place, result in a distance from modern Sakha trends – and the embracement of what is natural which is healing and therapeutic. Thus, despite the fact that shamanic influence has waned and the cosmology/belief system is being represented and nurtured in less comprehensive ways than it has in previous history, shamanic worldview, thoughts of healing and language remains vibrant and revitalized (Balzar 1994; 93-97).

Symbols also contribute to healing and cultural energy in this context. Through symbols, shamans like Kyta Baaly, express the basic values of society and communicate those values to others, using various symbols. Whether it be the "feeding" the earth, the "sacred world path" pins and pendants to denote association with the movement or the painting of the new Kyta Baaly movement symbol: a yin/yang clone, these signs allow the shaman to wield their authority for the healing of the community. All things together, through symbols, prayer, and other rituals, a hierarchy of value is created: with nature at the top, along with spirits, shaman’s expertise, and the patients account valued least.

As a mediator, Kyta Baaly's philosophy utilizes a cosmology of spiritual hierarchies and rituals similar to those of past Sakha shamans, to move and persuade his followers. Balzar describes an instance of this during the yhyakh:

“We proceeded to a slight rise overlooking the lake. First Kyta Baaly and then a few others sang or spoke algys, as the spirit moved them. The crowd was hushed as the soft light over the lake seemed to shimmer. Later Irina (Kyta Baaly's mother) and others proclaimed that they had seen bejeweled Sakha ancestors in 19th-century clothing, mirroring the splendor of the living, emerge from the lake in response to the prayers. Yuri Prokopiev[[4]](#footnote-5), who filmed the ritual, was more skeptical. Vitaly (A considerate local follower of Kyta Baaly) admitted that he had not seen it but that he believed that those more attuned to the spirits truly had (137).”

This situation is the epitome of how Csordas (1983) describes healing as a discourse that involves three tasks that all involve rhetoric or the art of persuasion. First is the rhetoric *of pre-disposition empowerment*, in which prepares the patients, in this case the community, to be profoundly moved when the spiritual resources are brought to bear on their affliction. Second is the *rhetoric of empowerment*, in which the Baaly’s followers are persuaded that they are seeing and experiencing the effects of divine power. Third is the rhetoric of transformation: where followers like Vitaly are persuaded to change their beliefs, or basic cognitive, affective and behavioral patterns to be in accordance with the rest of the community. In converting followers, these rituals combine sacred power and conventional therapy while helping people find order, meaning and control (Csordas 1983; 76)

The place itself – the landscape and the physical environment - affords healing powers within the society. As Gesler and Kearn suggest, “the landscapes we create are invested with symbols that express our beliefs and social relationships (121).” Obviously, shamanic culture (and attitudes towards land) is very different from Western culture. As opposed to Westerners who often take nature for granted, shamans greatly stress environmental interaction given its therapeutic effect. As seen in the case study, Kyta Baaly’s followers identify intimately with the landscape and take its power very seriously. Baaly’s stresses, “There is going to be a catastrophe, especially if people do not learn to protect the land (141).” Social rituals and symbols, as expressed earlier, establish a hierarchy and respect for nature and spirits. They also ensure that balance is also restored between the natural, symbolic and spiritual landscape in order to remove pain and suffering.

The Megino Kangalask ulus is a place of healing given the variouslayered landscapes of meaning within it that ultimately come together to create a therapeutic environment. The first important layer of meaning in this place is the *natural landscape,* which is instinctively noted for its potential for restorative powers. The second is the

*Symbolic landscap*e of mythic stories, prayers and other rituals that trace the journeys of supernatural beings and benevolent spirits that can bless the community with health and prosperity. A *landscape of belief* is created when concepts of sickness encounter effective treatment. Finally a *landscape of social relations* is created through social ties that are strengthened by the people who are involved in being healed. In sum, these landscapes works together in synergistic fashion and improvements in any of them is believed to lead to better health by the shamanic community (Gesler 2002; 134).

Throughout this paper, I discussed the revitalization of shamanism in the Sakha Republic, the case study of a contemporary white shaman and also broke down how shamanic rituals, practices and landscapes ultimately created an exclusive place of healing. The shaman and the shamanic rituals presented in this paper have proven to have incredible implications on the personal and community rejuvenation of people in the Sakha Republic, more specifically inthe Megino Kangalask ulus region.This concrete *place* of security has acquired great definition and meaning through the contemporary spiritual direction of Kyta Baaly. All in all, many in the Sahka population have found resonance in the messages of shamanic practices and an intensive, intimate and valuable experience that has ultimately been healing, therapeutic and radiating of love.

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1. Majorie Mandeltam Balzer is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Georgetown University. His first-hand accounts, inspired by the writing and example of Edith Turner, a professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia engaged in the study of ritual, religion and consciousness, explores the interrelationship between individual and community healing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Features rhythmic stepping to recitative improvisational poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. While praying Kyta Baaly tosses *kumys, a* fermented mare's milk and a hallmark of the yhyakh festiva at the base of the tree, "feeding" the earth.” Spirits are also fed kumys, oil, and horsehair through the fire. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. A friend of Balzar. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)