

## Black Shamans of the Turkic-Speaking Telengit in Southern Siberia

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BUDAPEST

In September of 1995 two Hungarians, ethnologist Dávid Somfai Kara, who wrote the article and László Kunkovác, who took the pictures, visited the Republic of Altay (Russian Federation). The Republic of Altay, founded as the Oyrat Autonomous Province (in Russian *oblast'*) in 1922, has a population of around 200,000, according to the last census (2010). About 70,000<sup>1</sup> of the population (34%) are native Altaians, or *Altay kiži*, as they call themselves. The Altaians were officially called Oyrat (Golden 1992: 412) until 1948, because they once belonged to the Oyrat (Jungar *Zöün Tar*) Empire (1620–1758) (Atwood 2004: 622; Golden 1992: 341–342). But, unlike the Mongol-speaking Oyrats (Kalmyks), the Altaians speak a Turkic language, closely related to Kirghiz and Khakas. The Telengit is basically a sub-ethnic group of the Altaians, and they share the same language and customs. The Telengit started to separate from the Altay kiži during Oyrat times when they were placed under the Jaisang leaders of the Ööled tribe. Later the separation was strengthened by religious movements among the Altay kiži. Some other South Siberian Turkic peoples (Telenget, [or Russian

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnic name “Altaian” (Russian *altaets*) is quite dubious since it is a name of the major Turkic-speaking people in the Republic of Altay, but it is not accepted by other smaller ethnic groups: Telengit, Tuba, Kumandy, Chalkandu and Telenget (in Russian Telet). It was reflected in the last census (2010): 4,000 Telengit, 2,000 Tuba, 1,000 Chalkandu and 1,000 Kumandy identified themselves as a separate ethnicity from Altay kiži although they were still included to the official Altaian ethnic group. The Telenget (Telet) although included in the Altaians, live outside the Republic of Altay in Kemeroovo (Kömür) Region, with a population around 2,600. The majority of the Kumandy (around 1,500) also lives outside the Republic of Altay, in Biisk District in the Altay Krai.

Teleut], Kumandy, Tuba, Chalkandu) were also included in the concept of “Altaian,” although they do not live in the Altay Mountains and their languages compose a dialectical chain between Altay kiži and Khakas (Yenisei Kirghiz) languages.

We followed the route of Vilmos Diószegi (1923–1972), a famous Hungarian ethnologist who conducted research on shamanic traditions in the Altay Province in 1964. He visited the Kumandy living by the Biy River in August and September 1964, and then the Telengit of Kosh-Agash County in October of the same year (Somfai Kara 2003: 298). The Kumandy people have gone through a heavy acculturation in the last fifty years, so we decided to visit the Telengit of Kosh-Agash district. First we traveled to Barnaul (Altay Kraï) and then to Gorno-Altaiisk (formerly Ulaluu or Oyrot-Tura),<sup>2</sup> the capital of the Republic of Altay. Before we reached Kosh-Agash, situated 455 km from the capital, we traveled through the villages of the Kan-Oozi and Ongdoy districts, inhabited by Altay kiži (fig. 1).

## Burkhanism

Unlike the Telengit, the Altay kiži of the Western part of the Republic of Altay (Kan-Oozi, Köksuu-Oozi, Ongdoy, Mayma, Chamal and Shebalin districts) reformed their folk religion at the beginning of twentieth century. In 1904, an Altay kiži from Kan-Oozi by the name Čot Čolpon-Uuli (Chet Chelpanov) (Vinogradov 2003: 1–4) had a vision of an old white man (Ak Burkan, cf. Mongolian Tsagaan Öwgön), who predicted the return of a mythic hero, Oyrot-Kaan. One thousand Altay kiži gathered to pray to Ülgen, spirit of Sky (Üč-Kurbustan) (Potapov 1991: 245–246) for the return of Oyrot-Kaan, their savior. The preachers of the new religious movement (*Ak Jang*) (Halemba 2003: 168–169) were called *jarlıkči* (Baskakov and Toshchakova 1947: 49). They preached that people should turn away from shamans (*kam*), who were sacrificing animals (*jükeli*) (Potapov 1991: 252) to Erlik, the lord of the Lower World.<sup>3</sup> Instead of attending rituals performed by shamans, people

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<sup>2</sup> Ulaluu (Russian Ulala) was named after Ula, a small river. The settlement was founded by Russian settlers in 1824, and soon became the center of the mission of the Orthodox Church. From 1932 till 1948, it was called Oyrot-Tura.

<sup>3</sup> Verbitskii wrote (1893: 65) that people used to sacrifice a horse to Ülgen as well.



Fig. 1. Along the Chuy River from Gorno-Altaišk to Kosh-Agash (Republic of Altay). Photo: László Kunkovács, 1995.

started to worship the spirit of the Altay Mountains (*Altay eezi*). To worship Ülgen, they set up altars dedicated to the spirit Jayık (pl. 11),<sup>4</sup> who is a mediating spirit between Ülgen and the people. We even met a *jarlıkči* in the village of Kırılık (Kan-Oozi district), who showed us his Jayık altar and the former site for worshipping (*küree*). When we asked about shamans, he told us that when *Ak Jang*, the “White Custom,” was accepted by the Altay *kiži*, they chased away all the shamans, who practiced *Kara Jang*, the “Black Custom.” People do not even talk about shamans (*kam*), it is taboo. If still they mention them, they use the phrase *neme biler* “who knows something.”

However, the Telengit tribe living in the Kosh-Agash and Ulagan districts preserved the so-called *Kara Jang* “Black Custom,” and they still attend shamanic rituals. The Altay *kiži* believe that shamans practice black magic, e.g. stealing human souls (*kut*), or replacing them (*tolunta*

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<sup>4</sup> Some sources mention this spirit as Ülgen’s son (Potapov 1991: 248).

and *toluu*)<sup>5</sup> with somebody else's. During the revitalization of religious traditions of the Altay region, a new type of specialist emerged, who called themselves white shamans (*ak kam*) as opposed to the black shamans (*kara kam*) of the *Kara Jang*. These white shamans do not sacrifice animals to Erlík or to ancestral spirits (*tös*). Nor do they fall into trance to travel to the Lower World. They only conduct worshiping rituals to the spirits of the mountains (*tayga eezi*) and Ülgen. They heal people by burning (smudging) juniper (*arčün*) and by washing them in sacred springs (*aražan*). But some serious diseases, especially mental ones, are believed to be cured only by black shamans. In such cases, Altay *kiži* secretly still visit the "black shamans" of the Telengit.

So that is why Diószegi visited the Telengit of Kosh-Agash after collecting briefly among the Altay *kiži*, who lived closer to Gorno-Altáisk.<sup>6</sup> We also traveled to Kosh-Agash and I was really lucky, because on the bus I met a Telengit woman, who was about to visit one of the last traditional shamans (initiated before post-Soviet times). She agreed to take us to the village of Kók-Örüü, a place Diószegi also visited in 1964. Unlike the Altay *kiži*, who live in the forested Northern valley of the Altay Mountains in their birch-bark tents (*sodon* or *tos ayıl*), the Telengit are nomads of the steppe and live in felt houses, or yurts (*kiyis ayıl*) mixed among the Kazakh (fig. 2, pl. 12). The Kazakhs of Kosh-Agash are part of the Kazakh Middle Horde (Orta Jüz) tribes of Jungaria and the Altay, who migrated here after the fall of the Jungar-Oyrat Empire (1757) due to Russian colonization in the nineteenth century (Golden 1992: 342–342). They numbered around 12,000, 55% of the total population of the district in 2010.

## Various Terms Denoting the Soul (*Kut* and *Jula*)

The woman I met was suffering from a disease called *ürgen jula* 'runaway soul' (Somfai 2003: 299). Her mother died a couple of years prior to our visit. After her mother's death she fell into depression. She did not want to work or socialize. Older members of the community advised her to

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<sup>5</sup> I have more data on this in my still unpublished fieldwork material, and see also Anokhin 1924: 32.

<sup>6</sup> Diószegi (1970: 97–99) wrote only one article as a result of his fieldwork in the Altay; he published two libation songs (*čacılga*), collected by himself in September, 1964.



Fig. 2. A Telengit family outside their traditional felt house in the Kosh-Agash district. Photo: László Kunkovács, 1995.

visit Ariman, an old shaman from the village. Ariman immediately told her that her soul had been taken away by the soul of her dead mother. The Altay *kiži* and the Telengit believe—as do other Siberian Turkic peoples—that the source of life is breath (*tīn*) but humans and animals receive a soul (*kut*) that protects their well-being, luck and health (Potapov 1991: 63). After death, the *kut* leaves the body in seven days; this “leaving soul” is called *üzüt* (Anokhin 1924: 20; Potapov 1991: 31). It is very important that the *üzüt* leaves the place of the dead person in a proper way forty days following the death.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise it can turn into a harmful spirit, or can steal the soul of other people or livestock. So according to the shaman, something went wrong with the *üzüt* of the mother and it took the *jula* ‘soul’ of her daughter.

### Some Semantic and Lexical changes

It is interesting to observe how the meaning of *kut* ‘soul’ is changing among Turkic-speaking peoples. Among the Muslim Turks *kut* only

<sup>7</sup> See also *üzüt bayramı* ‘burial feast’ (Anokhin 1924: 20).

means ‘fortune’ and ‘good luck’, since their notion of soul changed fundamentally after the acceptance of Islam. The Turks of Southern Siberia are also losing the original meaning of *kut*, replacing it with other words. Tuva-Uriankhay groups prefer to use the Mongolic term *sünezin* (cf. Classical Mongolian *sünesün*). The Altay *kızı* and the Telengit use *jula* or *süne* and *sür* instead of *kut* (Anokhin 1924: 19–20; Potapov 1991: 30). Only some Khakas groups (Khaas, Khyzyl, Sagay, etc.) have preserved the word *xut* for ‘soul’, but *süne* and *sürün* are also in use as synonyms (see also Sakha *kut-sür*). All these forms (*sünesün*, *sür*, etc.) are the Mongolic variant of the concept of ‘soul’. Similar phenomenon can be observed with other important concepts of their traditional belief. The spirit of Sky was called *tengri* in Turkic, which simply meant ‘Sky’. It was also the one of the major spirits of Turkic mythology, or a sort of deity. Muslim Turks have forgotten the original meaning and they use *tengri* as ‘God’ along with Persian *Xudā* and Arabic *Allāh*. South Siberian Turks still worship the spirit of Sky, but use taboo names for it: Altay Turkic *Ülgen* or *Üč-Kurbustan* (Potapov 1991: 245), Tuva *Kurbustug* (Mongolic *Qurmusta/Qormusta* from Soghdian *Xwrmzδ* and Avestan *Abura-mazda*) (Nadeliaev et al. 1969: 637). Again, only the Khakas groups worship *tegir* ‘Spirit of the Sky’. So Muslim Turks preserved the word, but its meaning has changed, while South Siberian Turks preserved the concept, but use other synonyms due to the taboo of the sacred term. The same thing is true about the *kut* soul.

## One of the Last Telengit Shamans (*Kam*)

We spent a few days in Kosh-Agash, before the Telengit woman from Kōk-Örүү invited us to visit Ariman, because shamans in the Altay only conduct rituals during the so-called “New Moon” (*ay jangızı*), that is, the period between New and Full Moon. The Telengit woman agreed with the shaman that we could take part of the ritual conducted to “catch the runaway soul” (*iürgen jula*).

Ariman was born in 1928. He was a short man in his late sixties when we visited him. He was about twenty years old when he became a shaman by obtaining a shamanic drum (*tüngür*). The Telengit do not have any special initiation rituals, one becomes a shaman by receiving a drum. The shamanic drum was initiated by a certain ritual where it was dedicated to a spirit (*tös*), who after that becomes the owner of the



Map 1. The Republic of Altay and adjacent areas showing the geographical locations of some Southern Siberian Turkic-speaking ethnic groups.  
 Drawn by István Sántha and István Somfai, 2014.

drum (*tüngür eezi*) (Anokhin 1924: 53). The spirit of the drum is represented on the handle of the drum as a sort of idol (*čaluu*, Mongolic *čalig*) (Anokhin 1924: 53; Potapov 1991: 161–162) (pl. 13).

In Soviet times KGB agents searched for drums in the region. They confiscated them and prosecuted their owners, the shamans, for making anti-communist propaganda. When KGB agents started to investigate Ariman, he threw his drum into the river and wanted to give up his shamanic activities to avoid being arrested by the KGB. But soon after giving up his drum and shamanic practices, he began to have mental and physical problems. He developed a humpback and lost his consciousness

regularly. His invisible helping spirits (*körmös*) (Anokhin 1924: 1) made him ill and forced him to resume shamanizing. But this time he decided to make a drum that can be easily disguised from the KGB.

Although he allowed us to take part in the ritual, he did not permit us to take pictures during the shamanic séance (*kamdaari*). However, he agreed to take his picture with his shamanic dress and paraphernalia before the ritual started (pl. 14). He was wearing a traditional gown (*ton*) similar to Mongol *deel*. He was wearing a traditional hat (*börüik*) (Anokhin 1924: 48–49) made of wool but with special shamanic ribbons, called *čačak*. The ribbons were decorated with plastic pearls (*jinji*) of white, yellow and red colors (pl. 15 a). Traditionally shamans decorated their hats with cowry-shells (*jilanbaš* or *jilamaš*) (Anokhin 1924: 48) but they were replaced by plastic pearls during Soviet times. He also showed us his new “drum” but to our great surprise it was not a traditional shamanic drum of the Telengt people.

### The Drum Made of Cotton Cloth (*Bös Tüngür*)

Ariman’s drum was not an actual drum, but rather a device used to achieve the state of trance similar to the way shamans use their drums. It was a piece of cotton cloth (*bös*). The sacred cotton cloth that represented the drum was tied to a handle that was decorated with pearls (*jinji*) and had seven small rattles (*kongko*). Other ribbons (*jalama*) and nine braided strings (*manjak*, cf. Mongolian *manjilga*) (Baskakov and Toshchakova 1947: 108; Anokhin 1924: 29) were also tied to its handle, which was just a twine (pls 14, 15 b). Traditionally, strings represented the snake-like creatures of the Lower World and the shaman wore them on his shamanic robe (*kültük manjak*) (Potapov 1991: 85).

On a piece of cloth the shaman drew a red circle symbolizing the drum with red paint. The design was similar to the paintings we find on real drums depicting the three-fold layers of the World. Ariman also painted the Seven Daughters of Erlik Biy, the Lord of the Lower World (*altii oroon*) (Anokhin 1924: 2). There was also a man with an axe and a yak. The yak was the form in which one of Ariman’s helping spirits appeared to him. The axe was also some kind of sacred device.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Incidentally in 1996 I met a Kazakh shaman in the Mongolian part of the Altay Mountains, who used an axe when shamanizing.



The *bös tünggür*, that is, a “drum” made of cotton cloth, was a substitute for a real drum but in the Altay–Sayan region it is quite common to use small idols (Mongolic *ongyon*, Tuva *eeren*) for shamanizing. They do not replace shamanic drums completely, but shamans use them sometimes instead of drums, especially during daytime, when they are not allowed to invoke the spirit of the drum. Actually *ongyon* and *eeren* are not real terms for idols, they simply mean something ‘sacred’. The replacement of the shamanic drum (*tünggür*) by a similar hand-idol was, of course, also caused by the ideological and political situation in the region. Shamans needed a device that was easy to hide (Vajnástejn 1978).

### The Ritual of Catching the “Runaway Soul”

Kunkovács was not allowed to take pictures during the ritual, so he went back to Kosh-Agash. I stayed in Kök-Örүү with the woman and the shaman. The ritual started after sunset. First the shaman lit the fire and expressed his gratitude (*alkiś*) to the spirit of the fire, who protected his house. He also put some meat on the stones of the fireplace and sprinkled milk and milk-liquor (*araki*) on the fire to feed its spirit (*ot eezi*).<sup>9</sup> The ill woman had to sit by the fire gazing into the flames.

Having invoked the spirit of his idol or symbolic drum (*tünggür eezi*) the shaman started to call his helping spirits, the invisible forces (*körmös*), as Telengit call them. The *körmös* are usually the spirits of deceased shamans (*tös*), who mediate between the shaman’s soul (*jula*) and the spirits of the Lower World. The shaman stood by the fire and waved his idol as the pearls and rattles made special sounds that symbolized the conversation of the shaman with the spirit World. The *körmös* spirits took the soul of the shaman, who fell into trance. His soul traveled to the gates of Lower World, where he was stopped by the guards of the gates, the nine daughters and seven sons of Erlik (Anokhin 1924: 3–6). Each time he was stopped the shaman had to perform a drink-offering to the guards by pouring it into the fire. The spirit of the fire was mediating the sacrifices to the Lower World. Finally, the shaman found the spirit of the deceased mother who had “stolen” the soul of her daughter and asked her to give it back. Then he

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<sup>9</sup> Potapov (1991: 66) mentions it as *ot-ene* ‘Mother Fire’.

returned to the Earth and the soul was reunited to the body of the ill woman, who received it with great relief.<sup>10</sup>

Ariman was singing during the ritual, but I was not allowed to record, so understanding the words of the song was quite difficult. After the soul was retrieved, Ariman stopped singing and waving his idol. He put out the fire and the participants of the ceremony burnt some juniper (*arčīn*) to chase away harmful spirits. Then he put away his paraphernalia and thanked his helping spirits before seeing them off.

Later I found a similar “catching the soul” ritual song, recorded by Diószegi among the Kumandy of the Biy River in 1964. Finding stolen souls in the Lower World is well represented in the folklore in Siberia and its adjacent regions, including Mongolia or Manchuria). One of the most famous examples is the story of Nisan shaman, who also traveled to the Lower World to find the soul (*fayangga*) of a dead boy (Novak and Durant 1977: 85).

### Concept of Well-Being and the “Free Soul” (*Kut*)

In South Siberian Turkic belief, the concept of well-being and the cause of illnesses are tightly related to the so-called free-soul (*kut*) that can leave the body (Potapov 1991: 39–47). While in Central Asia Turks believe that illness is caused by external things (cursing, evil-eye, demons), in Southern Siberia it is an internal change that causes illness. People are rarely possessed by demons or illnesses, although spirits and demons can distort the “free soul” of a human being, which ultimately can cause death. “Souls” can be moved in and out of a body and between human and spiritual worlds. Only shamans are capable of manipulating these souls by the help of their spirits. They can make them return to the bodies they belong.

There is the “soul exchanging ritual” (*tolunta* or *toluu*) that we mentioned earlier. The Altay *kīzi* believe that some of the black shamans conduct rituals to replace the soul of a healthy person with a dying one. If someone is fatally ill, that person can offer a *jūkeli* (cursing sac-

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<sup>10</sup> A very similar text was collected by Vilmos Diószegi among the Kumandy in 1964, now kept in Diószegi’s manuscript legacy (unpublished), Archives of the Institute of Ethnology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

rifice) to Erlik. If Erlik accepts it, they can choose someone else's soul to substitute for their own. In that case, a healthy person dies, while the ill person lives on with another soul.<sup>11</sup> A similar ritual can also be found in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. When Ögödei was fatally ill, shamans replaced his soul with his younger brother Tolui's (Rachewiltz 1972: 163).

Religious specialists (such as *bakšī*) in Central Asia conduct rituals to chase away evil forces (*jīn*), while in Southern Siberia the shaman strives to regain balance, which means that the soul (*kut*) stays with the body. In the Altay–Sayan region, shamanic ecstasy also means that the shaman's free soul travels to the spiritual world. In the Buryat shamanic tradition the shaman is possessed by the helping spirit. Muslim spiritual specialists invoke spirits (*arwak*) in the rituals who can chase away the demons. So we can see that although Siberian or Inner Asian shamanic traditions are often treated as a homogeneous belief system, there are significant regional differences in the basic notions of these local traditions.

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<sup>11</sup> Data I collected from a 45 year-old informant from Kirlík village (Kan-Oozy district, Republic of Altay) in 1995.

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11 A so-called Jayik idol that protects the family from evil spirits (*kara töš*) in Telengit houses, Kizil-manï, Kosh-Agash district.  
Photo: László Kunkovács, 1995.



12 A Telengit family inside their traditional felt house in Kosh-Agash District. Photo: László Kunkovács, 1995.





13 A Telengit drum in the V. N. Anokhin National Museum in Gorno-Altaiisk. The handle of the drum has a human face representing an idol (*čaluud*), the spirit of the drum (*tüngür eezi*).  
Photo: László Kunkovács, 1995.



14 Ariman, the Telengit shaman from Kök-Örүү holds his *bös tüngür* in his left hand, before performing the ritual “chasing the runaway soul” (*ürgen jula*), Kök-Örүү, Kosh-Agash district.  
Photo: László Kunkovács, 1995.





15 a Arimañ, wearing his headwear (*börük*) decorated with some ribbons (*čačak*) and plastic pearls (*jinji*), Kök-Örüü, Kosh-Agash district. Photo: László Kunkovács, 1995.



15 b Arimañ shows his *bös tūngür* with some barely visible red drawings on it, Kök-Örüü, Kosh-Agash district. Photo: László Kunkovács, 1995.