(Re)Claiming Religions in Post-Soviet Siberia: The Case of the Sakha Republic

Liudmila Nikanorova

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education
Institute of Archaeology, History, Religious Studies and Theology
What is the (traditional) Religion of Sakha people?
Critical study of religion

There is one common statement in the critical study of religion, which is the acknowledgement of the impossibility of defining religion in one universal and agreed upon way (Talal Asad 1993, Tomoko Masuzawa 2011, Dressler 2018, Sam Gill 2018, Jonathan Z. Smith 1988, Edward Said 1978, Brent Nongbri 2013).

Instead, the focus is directed towards the usages of the words such as ‘religion’ or ‘religious’ (Dressler 2018: 28).
Michel Foucault:

«The state is not a household, a church, or an empire. The state is a specific and discontinuous reality» (2008:3)
Sakha sire (Sa. ‘Sakha land’) 

• Fort Lensky (1632–1708) 
• A part of the Siberian Governorate (1708–1782) 
• A part of the Irkutsk Governorate (1782–1805) 
• Yakutsk Oblast’ (1805–1922) 
• Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1922–1991) 
• The Sakha (Yakutia) Republic (1991-now)
Creative encounters (Sam Gill 2018)

«Russian conquest of Siberia»

1632

«Colonization and exploration of Siberia»

«Voluntary incorporation and unification of Siberia to the Russian Empire»

Bjørn Ola Tafjord: “to define is to exercise power” (2006: 374)
Religionization of Sakha practices

• European travellers from the 17th – 18th centuries (e.g. Eberhart Isbrand Ides, Philipp Johan von Strahlenberg and Gerhard Müller) write about Sakha ‘gods’, ‘devils’ and ‘sorcerers’.

• Christian missionaries, political exiles and ethnographers the 19th and early 20th century (e.g. Khudyakov 1890, Sieroszewski 1896, Troshchansky 1903, and Jochelson 1906) write about Sakha oyuuns as ‘shamans’ and Sakha practices as ‘shamanism’.
The term ‘shaman’ is not domestic to the Sakha language. It was a Sakha practitioner called *oyuun*, who was – along with the Sami *noaidi*, the Manchu *sama*, the Buryat *böö* and the Khanty *ńajt* – compared to the Evenki *šaman*. Based on these comparisons, the Evenki *šaman* was transformed into the analytical term ‘shaman’ by European ethnographers (Znamenski 2003: 1, Sundström 2012: 356).
Шаманы – переводчики богов на земле. Они толкователи божеской воли, податели здоровья и болезни, изобилия и голода, добра и зла. Потому они и делятся на добрых (святых) шаманов и злых (едунов, сиэмэх ойуун), которые шаманят только на дьявола. Очень редко бывают еще колдуны-шаманы (аптах-ойүүн) и колдуньи шаманки (аптах-удаган). Однако и простые шаманы – страшные люди: из них есть такие, у которых тени не видно (күлүгө көстүбөт баҕады), и другие, у которых две тени: одна их собственная, а другая их дьявола (Khudyakov 1869: 306).

Shamans are the translators of gods on earth. They are the interpreters of gods’ will, givers of health and diseases, abundance and hunger, good and evil. Therefore, they are divided into good (holy) and evil (siemekh-oyuun), who shamanize for the devil. Very occasionally there might be a sorcerer-shaman (aptaakh-oyuun) and a sorceress-shaman (aptaakh-udagan). Even the regular shamans are dangerous people: there are some who do not have shadows, while others have two: one of their own, and the other of their devil (Khudyakov 1869: 303–306).
• Troshchansky labelled Sakha practices as ‘black/dark faith’ and dedicated an entire book to the discussion of “primitive religion (Ru. pervobytnaia religiiia)” among Sakha. *The Evolution of Black Faith (Shamanism) among the Yakuts* (Ru. Evolutsia chernoi very (shamanstva) u yakutov) published in 1902.

• Sakha ethnographer Gavrill Ksenofontov (1929): “Siberian shamanism is a religion just like Christianity” from *Khrestets: Shamanism and Christianity*. 
The problem is not necessarily in the terminologies that were used by these authors or their colonial attitudes, but in the way they are broadly treated today as the authoritative unbiased descriptors of «Sakha traditional authentic religion».
Religion in USSR

• The constitution of the RSFSR from 1924 had an article 4 that guaranteed “religious freedom”, as well as “freedom of anti-religious propaganda”.

• Anatoly Lunacharsky (People’s Commissar for Education): “Religious freedom could be suspended "when it is abused for the direct CLASS struggle against the proletarian dictatorship".

• New laws were adopted in 1929 on "Religious Associations“, which forbade all forms of missionary activities.
Sakha oyuun
Shamans
Class enemies

Total eradication
Religious revival in the Sakha Republic

Soviet citizen

- Internationalism
- Korenizatsia (Yakutizatsia) (Ru. Nativization)
- Atheism

Post-Soviet citizen

- Ethnic identity
- Religious identity
• In 1990, freedom of conscience is officially re-introduced in Russia.

• In 1996, the first president of the Sakha Republic, Mikhail Nikolayev, founded the Akademiya dukhovnosti (Ru. Academy of Spirituality)
Religious organization that claim to represent Sakha religion

• Aar Ayuu Itegele (2011), initiator is Vladimir Kondakov.
  • Us Tumsuu (Sa. Gathering of the Three)

• Ayuu Itegele (2015), initiator is Lazar’ Afanas’ev-Teris.

• Tengrism (2019), initiator is Lazar’ Afanas’ev-Teris.
Vladimir Kondakov (Aar Ayuu Itegele)

Professor, doctor of medicine, researcher of shamanism (Ru. *issledovatel’ shamanizma*) and *aiyy oyuun*.

Marjorie Balzer met Kondakov in 1991 and writes about him as *aiyy oyuun*, which she translates into ‘Sakha shaman’ (Balzer 2016: 21)
“According to the scholarly literature, historical roots of religion Aar Ayuu Itegele is in pan-Turkic religion – Tengrism (Ru. Tengrianstvo). Aar Ayuu represents the ancient religion of the Sakha people […]”

[…] Aar Ayuu can be categorized as paganism (Ru. yazychestvo) considering its polytheistic system, attention to the world of spirits (Ru. dukhov), sacrifices for appeasement of spirits, and attribution to all things qualities of living entities. Due to the exceptional role of ayuu oyuun (translated into Ru. shaman), religion Aar Ayuu can also be called shamanism” (Ministerstvo Yustitsii 2011: 5).
Aar Ayuu Itegele

“Is it possible to teach religion and train its followers without formalized and published sources of teaching?”

To this question the applicants answered:

“Religious dogmas and norms of Aar Ayuu do not have written expression but are kept in folk memory on the genetic level (Ru. v pamyati naroda na geneticheskom urovne), as well as in oral folk culture such as stories, songs, poems and legends (Ministerstvo Yustitsii 2011: 12).”
“Religion Ayuu is a modern Tengrism (Ru. tengrianstvo). Many scholars considered religion of Sakhas surprisingly organized and systematized. The religion of Sakhas is based on the belief in Ayuu. His full name is Urung Ayuu, which in translation means the White Creator (Ru. belyi tvorets) […]

[...] Children of Ayuu together with the White Creator form nine heavens. In other religions, there are also similar notions, such as Jacob’s ladder from the Old Testament. […]

(Ministerstvo Yustitsii 2015: 6–7).
The Sakha historian Valeriy Vasil’ev, who was a member of the expert committee appointed by the Ministry of Justice, has written a special opinion about Ayuu Itegele, where he made the following comments:

- calendar celebrations and rituals of Ayuu Itegele seem to be rooted in Christian celebrations and are following the solar calendar, whereas Sakha have been historically following the lunar calendar;
- according to Gernhard Muller, the Sakha people were divided into various ‘sects’ and their religious system has not been as systematized as Ayuu Itegele claims;
- there are no sources about nine *chakras* among Sakhas. This element has been borrowed from the Sanskrit terminology (Vasil’ev 2015: 1).
Tengrism – Tangara Itegele

Ayuu Itegele, Afanas’ev argues that Tengrism (Ru. tengrisnastvo) is the traditional monotheistic religion of the Sakha people with Tengri as the one and only God-Creator (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii 2016: 3*). To this, the expert committee concluded that:

“The practice of this religious community is nothing but an artificial reconstruction based on the fragments of Sakha traditional beliefs and compilation of elements of the religions of Turkic peoples, Buddhism and Christianity (*Ministerstvo yustitsii 2016: 4*).”
“At the moment, the scientific theory about Tengrism as a common religion of Euroasian peoples, on which Tangara Itegele is based on, cannot be either approved or disapproved because of the lack of research and scientific sources.

Ceremonies and rituals of this organization are not independent and overlap with the religious practice of Aar Ayuu and Ayuu religions, which both claim to represent the traditional religion of the Sakha people.”

The expert committee concludes that Tangara Itegele does not fit the criteria of a religious organization (Ministerstvo yustitsii 2017: 5).
A committee member, Nikolaev A. A. wrote a special opinion concerning the application of Tangara Itegele:

“The application is written by non-competent “office theorists”, who do not even differentiate the concepts of “religious community (Ru. religioznoe ob’edinenie)” and “religious organization (Ru. religioznaya organizatsia)”.

The application is based on the research of various scholars, which contradicts to the basic condition of any religion, which is the belief in the Absolute (Ru. Absolut).

There is no proof in the application that Tangara Itegele is the successor of the ancient belief of the Sakha people in Tangara (Tengri).

It is clear that Tangara Itegele used Christian and Islamic religious organizations as the template for their own practices (Nikolaev 2017: 1–2).”
Concluding remarks
There is too much focus on research. Scholars come and mess things up. They are only concerned about proving others wrong (Algys Uibaan 2018).
There are 158 religious organizations in the Sakha Republic, which means that Sakha people can be affiliated or not with any of these organizations.

Michel Foucault: “Lets suppose universals do not exist. What kind of history do we have then and what kind of history we can do?”