

# Sensing “Place”: Performance, Oral Tradition, and Improvization in the Hidden Temples of Mountain Altai

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Dedicated to Arzhan Mikhailovich K z r kov (1978-2012)

## 1. Introduction: Altai’s Ear

The snow-capped Altai Mountain range runs from southern Siberia in the Russian Federation, southwards through West Mongolia, eastern Kazakhstan, and the Xinjiang autonomous region of Northwest China, before finally coming to rest in Southwest Mongolia. This essay is based on fieldwork undertaken in 2010 in that part of the Altai Mountains that in 1990 became the Republic of Altai, a unit of the Russian Federation.<sup>1</sup>

The Altaians, known previously as Kalmyks and Oirots, engage in a complex of spiritual beliefs and practices known locally as Ak Jang (“White Way”)<sup>2</sup> and in academic literature as Burkhanism. Whether this movement was messianic, nationalist, or spiritual and whether it was a continuation of indigenous beliefs and practices or a syncretic mixture of local beliefs (Altai Jang), Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Orthodox Christianity have been argued

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<sup>2</sup> The term “jang” (*jan*) refers to authority, belief, custom, law, principle, and canon or rules (Baskakov 2005 [1947]:47). It also has a broader meaning of “way” or “method” (Yamaeva 2010a:5). Ak Jang is sometimes translated as “White Belief” but since it includes both belief and practice, we use the broader sense.

When the Altaian literary language was created during the Soviet period, the Russian Cyrillic alphabet had to be extended to embrace non-Russian sounds, for instance, the velar nasal sound usually transliterated as “ŋ.” Although noting the velar nasal, we have simplified the orthography here for easy readability by non-linguists. *Ak Jan* is therefore rendered as Ak Jang, *Janar* as Jangar, *Enmek* as Engmek, *Tenri* as Tengri, *Teŋit* as Telengit, and so on.

elsewhere (Krader 1956; Znamenski 1999; Vinogradov 2003; Halemba 2006; Yamaeva 2010a). Altaians argue that Ak Jang was the established religion during the reign of the seventeenth-century Jungarian prince, Oirod Khan, and that it has its roots in Tengrism,<sup>3</sup> a Turko-Mongol religious system that shares some of the same pantheon. From Pegg's experience, Ak Jang appears to draw elements from a number of Turko-Mongol belief systems, including animism, Shamanism, Tengrism, and Buddhism. However, these elements are transformed in Ak Jang practice. For instance, Üch Kurbustan ("Three Kurbustan"), a transformation of Khormusta (Sogdian Ahura Mazda) and widely recognized in Inner Asia by the thirteenth century,<sup>4</sup> has become the main Burkhan—Ulu Byrkan—and all spiritual phenomena of the Upper and Middle domains are believed to be its emanations or "burkhans." This is quite different from the rest of Inner Asia, where "burkhan" refers to "Buddha" or "Buddhist deity" (Shinzhina 2004:140).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Yamaeva (2002) suggests that Scythians in Altai during the Pazyryk (eighth through sixth centuries BCE) and post-Pazyryk (fifth through third centuries BCE) periods included Kurbustan as part of a Zoroastrian spiritual complex that embraced worship of fire, thunder and lightning, and the "Blue Sky" (Kök Tengeri) (2002:3) but in Ak Jang has additional characteristics (see §3.2 below).

Ak Jang practitioners acknowledge the Upper, Middle, and Lower levels of the shamanic universe but do not have dealings with Erlik, Master of the Underworld, or any of his spirits. For this reason, Ak Jang has been contrasted with shamanism ("Kara Jang," ["Black Way"]). Usually characterized by its concentration on spirit-beings of the Upper domains, Ak Jang also gives major importance to the "spirits of place" (*ee*, pl. *eeler*)<sup>6</sup> in the Middle Domain (Earth). In addition, it elevates figures from Altaian heroic oral epics and tales into its pantheon, reveres Altaian epic-tellers, and, as we shall see below, in contemporary practice sometimes adopts heroic epic performance modes into its rituals.

Ak Jang arose as a revitalization movement among nomadic southern Altaians<sup>7</sup> who had struggled with Russian agricultural colonization, land dispossession, and loss of traditional Altaian leaders during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The trigger was the vision of a White Rider, later to be called Ak Byrkan ("White Burkhan"), experienced in 1904 by a 12-year-old girl, Chugul Sorok, while herding. The rider instructed Altaians to cast off foreign Russian and Christian influences and to await the imminent arrival of Oirod Khan (Danilin 1993 [1932]: 86).

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<sup>3</sup> Also sometimes called "Tengrianism."

<sup>4</sup> Khormusta (Qormusta), for instance, occurs in many ancient Mongolian shamanic fire-prayers (Heissig 1980 [1970]:5).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, in Mongolian folk religion Burqan Tengri is used to refer to Buddha (Heissig 1980 [1970]: 52).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of the spirit-owners of place is widespread throughout Inner Asia.

<sup>7</sup> Soviet researchers distinguished hunter-gatherer northern Altaians (Tuba, Chalkandu, and Kumandy) from pastoral nomadic southern Altaians (Altai Kizhi, Telengit, and Teleut).

Two annual rituals held in hidden open-air mountain temples (*küree*)<sup>8</sup> are central to Ak Jang. Jazhyl Bür (“Green Leaves”) is held in spring when “Altai’s ear opens” and the mountains’ spirit-owners awaken (Chachiyakova 2010)—an event heralded by the first “sound of the sky,” thunder (Chechaeva 2010). Sary Bür (“Yellow Leaves”) is held in autumn when requests for “blessing-fortune” (*alkysh-byian*)<sup>9</sup> are made for the approaching difficult winter before “Altai’s ear closes” and the mountains’ spirit-owners sleep. These rituals are referred to as *mürgüül*,<sup>10</sup> a term which in its broad sense embraces the ritual performance practices described below and in its narrow sense refers to the way the body is bowed to show respect to phenomena of the Upper domains.



Fig. 1. *Küree* temple above Lower Talda, Kuroty Valley, Altai Republic, 2010, showing *tagyl* altars, *maany* banner, *kyira* ribbons, and three participants kneeling at the “hearth.” Photo: Carole Pegg. All rights reserved.

The discussion that follows will focus on creative practices within contemporary Ak Jang in the central region of Ongudai. They are based on participation at a mountain temple Sary Bür ritual in Lower Talda, Kuroty Valley (Fig. 1), and are supplemented by recorded interviews and performances in 2006 and 2010 of those who had participated in another such ritual held at the temple above Kulady<sup>11</sup> in the neighboring Karakol valley (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *Küree* temple above Kulady, Karakol Valley, Altai Republic, 2006, showing Ak Jang officiant Kumdus Borboshev and anthropologist Carole Pegg performing *mürgüül* prayers. Photo: Carole Pegg. All rights reserved.

<sup>8</sup> Spelling for this term follows Tybykova 2005:124. The colloquial form is *küre* (Shinzhina 2004:140).

<sup>9</sup> Oirat *alkysh* means “blessing,” “benediction” (Baskakov 2005 [1947]:17), and eulogy (Yamaeva 2010b). *Byian* is a powerful concept in Altaian meaning “good-fortune.” In Altai, the pairing *alkysh-byian* is frequently used.

<sup>10</sup> Spelling for this term follows Tybykova 2005:136.

<sup>11</sup> Place names are transliterated from Altaian rather than Russian.

We argue that three inter-related dimensions of “place” are created with respect to these rituals. The first dimension draws on that outlined by the philosopher Edward Casey; it is a place in the local landscape that, in a phenomenological and topographical sense, “gathers” together different entities, including experiences, histories, and space-time (Casey 1996:24-26). The second dimension is a place of power and transformation activated when connections are made during the performances of the ritual participants. And the third dimension is the participants’ sense of “being-in-place,” which occurs through fulfillment of those connections. It is this accumulated sense of “connection” or “relation” that is important for personhood. Anthropologists have argued that personhood comprises a series of relations that varies between societies and also historically (for instance, Strathern 1988; Morokhoeva 1994; Gell 1999). For contemporary Altaians, personhood includes relations to kin, landscape, and other energies within the world (Halemba 2006:145). The current essay suggests that these relations, already gathered in the *kiiree* temple, are activated by performances and experienced by participants, thereby strengthening personhood. In ritual contexts with heightened senses, these performances include ritual bodily movements, songs and oral poetry that include epic and spiritual imagery and motifs, and practices that root participants historically and situate them within the cosmos. In addition, textual improvisations link them to contemporary local and global worlds.

## 2. Purifications and Preparations

Sary Būr rituals, which mark the passage of time from autumn to winter, fall into a tripartite structure: a pre-liminal phase (separation from society), a liminal phase (transition), and a post-liminal phase (reincorporation into society) (van Gennep 1977 [1909], Turner 1969). During the pre-liminal phase, participants purify their bodies, a state they maintain until after the post-liminal phase. This purification includes abstinence from sexual activity and alcohol, food restrictions (for example, no salt or meat), and refraining from disturbing spirits by digging in the ground (Yamaeva 2010b). Taboos surround preparation of food, *archyn* juniper (a revered bush of the Altai Kizhis), and sacred *kyira* ribbons to be used in the ritual. This same process of abstinence and purification had also been followed in the Sary Būr ritual at Kulady.

Before our own ritual party left the house in Lower Talda, those women wearing trousers tied a broad scarf around them to simulate a skirt, one of several actions during the ritual process that enabled participants to sense a connection with early Ak Jang practitioners. We then set off around the base of the mountain in the path of the sun (clockwise). We followed a stream through birch woodland and washed our heads (males) and faces (females) in the icy water of its spring. As an act of reciprocity for the purification received, we left behind two branches of juniper, red and white bead necklaces, green stones, and buttons, also purified, for the young girl who is the spring’s *ee* spirit.

We paused on the mountainside beneath a birch tree for the men to carve figurines (*shatra*) from soft, white *byshtak* cheese, which would encourage the spirit-owners of the mountains to descend to the *tagyl* altars to eat. Advised by spirits, Arzhan Kōzōrōkov, who was to act as the ritual leader (*jarlyk*), enunciated the name of the form of each figurine before it was carved and, in doing so, enlivened it. Certain figurines are mandatory—for instance, a wild and domesticated

animal, mountain, traditional dwelling, horse, and hitching post. Ours also included a human figure, wedding chest, hearth, and cooking pot. Such figurines connect to tradition, rooting the participants in terms of history and location. They also influence the oral poetry included in the ritual. The ritual participants hope that these offerings will be eaten by the spirits of the place in reciprocation for a mild winter (Chechaeva 2010; Mandaeva 2010).

After the figurines were prepared, the food was carefully arranged on trays: sheep’s head and meat, meatballs, *lepyoshka* bread, rounds of fried *boorsok* pastries, Altaian butter, biscuits, sweets, and fruit juice. Arzhan tore two white cloth ribbons for each participant. Afterwards, the men led the way up the mountain to the temple, carrying the offerings (*tepshi*) of figurines and food. They moved from the place of everyday life in the valley below to a place on the threshold between worlds, where a difficult transition between autumn and winter must be accomplished and their own sense of “being-in-place” reenergized.

### 3. Ritual Participants

#### 3.1. The Living Küree Temple

In Altaian belief, every aspect of nature has its own spirit, including the architecture of the *küree* temple, which is perceived as a living participant in the ritual process. The temple, altars, and event itself are all able to grant favors and feel emotions such as enjoyment (see §4.2 below).

The temple is deliberately constructed to gather indigenous knowledge (*bilik*) and past experiences, and to facilitate connections. In a high place, usually on a mountainside, it is aligned with sacred sites on the earth below and with clear views of the planets and constellations above. As the site of the liminal phase of the ritual, it also situates the participants both physically and imaginatively on a threshold between earth and sky. It is important that the temple is not separated from surrounding landscape and sky by walls, windows, and roofs, as in most institutionalized world religions. Ak Jang participants need to interact with energies of the Upper and Middle worlds.

The *küree* temple comprises a complex of altars (*tagyl*), wooden poles (*süme*), hitching posts (*chaky*), a pair of birch trees (*bai kaiyng, jaiyk*), and sometimes a perimeter wall or fence (*cheden*) (Yamaeva 2010a:4).<sup>12</sup> The hitching post and birch trees are perceived as the *axis mundi*, or cosmic axis, the point of connection between Upper, Middle, and Lower domains of the universe. Since Ak Jang practitioners look primarily upwards, these—together with columns of smoke and fire—provide conduits along which communications with spirit-beings travel to different vaults of the Sky, and by which spirit-beings, good fortune, and benefits travel to Middle worlds. Because of these potential arrivals, the complex is sometimes referred to as *kündü-küree*, “reception” temple (Tybykova 2005:124).

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<sup>12</sup> In the early twentieth century, *küree* referred to the whole ritual site and to its main altar. Z. Khabarov’s 1908 journal, an extract from which is published in *Shinzhina* 2004:138, noted that “in old belief,” other altars were called *sang* or *shiree*—both Mongolian words. In some areas of Gornyi (Mountain)-Altai, the term *sang* is used instead of the term *tagyl* (Yamaeva 2010a:4).

One meaning of *küre* is “circle.”<sup>13</sup> Yamaeva (2010a) has proposed a possible link with the term *kur*, which also means “circle” and is used to designate “people united by relationship or common deed,” “people of one circle” (*bir kura ulus*), and “relatives” (*bir kura töröön*). In both Kulady and Lower Talda, the altars form two semi-circles, with large altars on the inner and smaller ones on the outer.

The temple and altars are oriented in relation to cosmic and earthly landscapes. Of major importance are the Sun and Moon, *foci* of Ak Jang worship as commanded by the Oirod Khan’s messenger, Ak Byrkan. The temple always faces East, the direction of the rising sun, and some altars are circular or moon-shaped. The other altars are oriented toward particular mountains, with spirit-owners that will be invited to participate in the ritual. In Ak Jang, Altai is represented as two triangles, based on three mountains in “Small Steppe Altai” and three mountains in “Great Mountain Altai.” Each triangle has three corners, together comprising the “six corners” of Altai. Stones brought from other Altaian regions are incorporated into the altars (Shodoev and Kurchakov 2003:79).

Participants in this arena have indigenous knowledge about the history of Ak Jang, their migrations, and the significance of the temple. Yamaeva stressed (2010b): “We Altaians feel ourselves to be part of unbreakable space-time.” The temple’s design connects with the deep past of pre-socialist history, with possible influences from Manichaeism temple architecture (*idem*). Perhaps more importantly, the temple gathers within itself two periods of major suffering for Altaians. The first occurred at the fall of the Jungar State in 1756, when many Oirots—including Altaian clans—fled the bloodshed inflicted by Chinese-Mongolian troops in West Mongolia, moving to their current homeland. The first *küree* temples and *tagyl* altars were built upon their arrival (Borboshev 2006). The second period was during the suppression of Ak Jang in its early years, when participants were attacked, some killed, and Ak Jang leaders arrested then brutally repressed in the early 1930s as hard-line communism and collectivization took hold (Ekeev et al. 2004).

Out of respect for this suffering, and because of belief in the power of words and the energy of sound, the names of leaders from this period as well as major deities and certain ritual terms are considered taboo (*bailu*) and deliberately not sounded. Prohibited terms include “Ak Jang” (replaced by Altai Jang), *shüüten*<sup>14</sup> (replaced by *mürgüül*),<sup>15</sup> and *archyn* juniper (replaced by *jazhyl*, “green”) (Erokhonova 2010). Chugul is called Aky Keree or “White Light,” her adoptive father Chet Chelpan is referred to as Abai or Abaiys (meaning “Grandfather” or “Uncle”) (Shinzhina 2004:140), and Barnaul Mandaev (b. 1869), who was arrested and exiled to Kazakhstan in 1936, is called Ada (“Father”) (Yamaeva 2010b).

Also gathered in the placement of the stones is a relation between temple and clan. All clans have their own sacred mountain which is referenced in the temple’s topographical location.

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<sup>13</sup> The classical Mongolian word *küriye(n)*, which means “encircling” or “monastery,” was used in the thirteenth-century *Secret History of the Mongols* to mean “Great Circle” (Da Khüree, also the pre-Soviet name for Mongolia’s capital, Ulaanbaatar [Jagchid and Hyer 1979:68]) (Lessing 1982:841).

<sup>14</sup> Sometimes spelled *shüiten*.

<sup>15</sup> *Mürgüül*, sometimes spelled *mürgül*, is of classical Mongolian (Mo. *mörgül*, Lessing 1982:549) and Oirod origin (*mörgü-*, Baskakov 2005 [1947]:111).

There is similarly a direct visual connection with the clan’s village that lies in the valley below the temple. In addition, among the large flat stones, built to a meter high to form an altar, are stones brought by clan members from their pre-migration homeland. Altar construction also varies according to clan. For instance, the Tölös clan members put white stones on top.

The temple, then, perceived as “living” by participants of Sary Būr, is already the location of multi-dimensional gatherings that connect sky and earth, cosmic and earthly alignments, and shapes and materials that relate to ancient beliefs, the histories of the clan, and Ak Jang. In this arena, ritual participants activate those gatherings through performance in order to create for themselves a sense of “being-in-place” in the contemporary world. The circular shape of the temple arena and its implications for personhood are evoked in performance by ritual circular movements and gestures all made in the direction of the path of the sun. Circular movements encourage the circulation of energy among different dimensions of the universe as do offerings of animal sacrifice and food with ritual significance as “life” (Éliade 1971 [1949]: 98, 163). The clan and that “other” dimension of lineage, the ancestors, are similarly the *loci* of circulating energy since ancestral souls are reincarnated through descendants. Circular movement therefore also expresses the circularity of death and birth. Finally, circular gestures “turn the world” by moving on the seasons.

### 3.2. Cosmic Substances, Deities, and Burkhangs

The Ak Jang pantheon includes many deities, burkhans, spirit-protectors, and spirits of place, but here we include only those who participated in the Sary Būr rituals under discussion. They participated by receiving requests for blessing-fortune (*alkysh-byian*), sending messages, and visiting the temple complex to eat, sit, and circulate as forms of energy experienced by human participants.

For Altaians, the Sky (Tengeri) does not constitute monolithic space but a series of eight levels or vaults (*chaikamakh*), which are landscaped and provide homes for particular spirits (Shodoev and Kurchakov 2003:73-77; Shodoev 2009:201). This number contrasts with the seven levels typical of Shamanism and relates to the Ak Jang preference for even numbers. At the top is located the Pole Star (Altyn Kazyk), which holds all vaults together. Above that lies Milk Lake (Süt Köl) and around it, in Üch Kurbustan, grow white and yellow flowers that govern an individual’s destiny (Yamaev 2006). Tengeri, a concept common to the spiritual complexes of Shamanism and Tengrism, is the repository of spirits, celestial beings, and special powers that, when conferred upon humans, endows them with strength and gives them protection.

In contemporary Ak Jang, Üch Kurbustan has become a complex notion interpreted in different ways. Yamaeva describes it as follows (2010b):

Üch Kurbustan is a cosmic substance of the Upper World that created everything. It is the cosmos or universe and circulates freely. Üch Kurbustan can come in the form of lightning and light, and can punish guilty people by lightning. It is a Creator [*Jaiiaachy*, “source”] that is all-seeing and all-knowing. It is also the substance within each person. While Orchylang Ochilang is the physical cosmos, Üch Kurbustan is the cosmos imbued with spirit.

During the Sary Būr rituals, messages are sent to Üch Kurbustan through the smoke from fire and juniper, the praises, prayers, and blessings of the *jarlyk* ritual leader, and spirits in receptacles (*jaiyk*) that intercede on behalf of the community. Üch Kurbustan communicates with the participants through his “messenger,” the *jarlyk*. Burkhans also descend onto the large *maany* flag mounted separately on a tall hitching post or birch tree (Fig. 1).

In nineteenth-century Bible translations, orthodox missionaries used the monotheistic notion of Kudai as an Altaian equivalent of “God.” Early Ak Jang practitioners wanted to replace Kudai with the concept of Burkhan. Burkhans are present and predominate in rituals and in the Ak Jang worldview. However, Kudai also continues to be used, sometimes interchangeably with Tengeri and sometimes as a general name for deities (*kudailar*).

Ak Jang practitioners have also adopted the shamanic deity Ülgen (Anokhin 1994 [1924]:9) but use it as a generic name for *aru tös* (pure ancestors, or clan spirits) (Vinogradov 2003:118). At the same time Ülgen is personified. His sons form the seven-star constellation Jeti Kan (“Seven Heroes,” corresponding to Ursa Major or the Big Bear), white spirit-protectors from whom are taken the foundations of Altaian clans (Shodoev and Kurchakov 2003:75). His daughters are called Ak Kystar (“White Girls”) or Mechin (“Monkey”), a constellation we call the Pleiades. These daughters are also white spirits that strengthen good deeds and give support at the beginning of life.

The *eeler* (“spirits of place”) have major importance during Sary Būr and Jazhyl Būr rituals since they are specifically invited to dine at the *tagyl* altars. In particular, the spirit-owners of surrounding mountains, including the clan’s mountain, are addressed. Ak Byrkan, who is equated with the spirit-owner of Altai, Altai Eezi, is invited to sit in a special place.

The system of “unsounding words” is applied to this spiritual complex during requests for blessing-fortune. For instance, Üch Kurbustan is replaced by phrases such as “Upper Jaiaan” or “Upper Staying Jaiaan” (*Öröö Turgan Jaiaan*) (Mandaeva 2010) or, together with other spirit beings and burkhans, called “Respected One” (*Kairakan*) and “Elder” (*Örökön*). More extended metaphors are also used. For instance, in the request for blessing Buramailu Ödükti, the traditional white felt boot references the fall of the Jungar state, how Altaians joined the Russian state and became poor, and how Altai helped them to survive (Yamaeva 2010b).

### 3.3. *Epic Heroes and the Epic World*

The epic world and its heroes permeate Ak Jang rituals and Altaian epic-tellers are familiar with the Ak Jang worldview. According to the renowned *kaichy* epic-teller Aleksei Grigor’evich Kalkin, for instance, there are eight burkhans in the Sky and seven in the Lower domains (Shodoev and Kurchakov 2003:73).

Epic heroes, part of the Ak Jang pantheon, are not mentioned by name for the reasons explained above. *Foci* of worship, such as Üch Kurbustan, Ak Byrkan, and Jer-Ene (“Earth-Mother”), occur widely in Altaian heroic epics as characters who undertake specific tasks. Üch Kurbustan, for instance, may give a hero-child to an elderly couple or a magical horse to the hero. Tengeri Kaan is also a character, whose daughter is able to resuscitate the dead.

It was the nineteenth-century Russian missionary V. I. Verbitskii who first noted that Ak Jang warrior protector-spirits were also present in epics (1993 [1893]:117, 120). Three heroes are

important: Oiroot-khan or Galdan-Oiroot, Shunu, and Amursana (Danilin 1993 [1932]:59), all of whom have links with the Western Mongol Jungar State (1630-1756).<sup>16</sup> Two of these—Galdan Oiroot<sup>17</sup> and Amursana—are historical figures, while the identity of Shunu, who features in many Altaian epics and contemporary tales and songs, is uncertain. They occur as an interchangeable “triple-hero” motif in Altaian oral literature and have been compared to Mongolia’s Genghis Khan and Tibet’s Gesar on the strength of sharing kinship with Kurbustan (Vinogradov 2003:122-26).

Standing apart from the triple-hero is the Oiroot epic hero Jangar, whose tale was widespread in the former territories of the Jungar State and found among those who migrated from those regions. The Altaian version of this epic is 38,000 lines long and embodies the main tenets of Ak Jang as well as many Ak Jang praises used in Ak Jang rituals (Yamaeva 2010b). Üch Kurbustan creates the warrior Jangar, who is raised under the protection of Jer-Ene (“Earth-Mother”). Jangar’s mission is to eliminate evil, punish wrongs, and establish world peace (Yamaeva 2010a:6).

The *jarlyk* leader of the Upper Talda ritual, Arzhan Kۆzörөkov, addressed the hero of the Pole Star (Altyn Kazyk). More research needs to be done on the connection of heroes and stars in this context.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.4. Human Participants

Several ritual specialists may participate:

*jarlyk/jarlykchy* (“messenger”). This central figure may be male or female. The *jarlyk* leads the ritual event, having traditional knowledge of its order, formulae, and movements. These movements include feeding the fire, circumambulating while sprinkling milk (*süt ürüstep*) or milk-vodka (*araky*) from a sacred bowl, and purifying participants and place with juniper. S/he may also read the sacred text, utter praises (*maktal*), and request blessing-fortune. The *jarlyk* should be spirit-charged (*eeliü*), thereby having the ability to see the past, predict, exorcise, and heal, as well as see and hear spirits. Most importantly, the *jarlyk* calls burkhans and spirits to the temple to participate in the ritual. In the early years of Ak Jang, the male *jarlyk* wore a milk-white coat (*ak süt ton*) and cap (*kalban börük*) and wore his hair in a plait (Sagalev 1992:158). He used a whip (*kamchy*), “thunderbolt” (*ochyr*), copper or brass knife (*kylysh*), sacred bowl

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<sup>16</sup> The Jungar State (Mo. *Züün Gar Uls*, “Left Wing Nation”) encompassed most of West Mongolia, part of Tyva, Jungaria (southwest of the Altai Mountains), eastern Turkestan (present-day Xinjiang in China), and Buryat Mongol territories around Lake Baikal.

<sup>17</sup> Galdan-Oiroot could have been one of two historical Galdans. The first is Galdan (1644-1697), son of Karakula Bogatyr Kontaisha, who became khan of the Jungars in 1677 (Danilin 1993 [1932]:59). During Galdan’s khanship, the Dörvön Oirat (“Four Oirat”) tribal alliance was formed between Koshuts, Torguts, Jungars, and Dörbets (and their subjects, Khoits) (Fang 1943:265). The second is Galdan-Tseren, whose father Tseveen Araydan was Galdan Kontaisha’s nephew and the possible brother of Shunu (Fang 1944:757-59). According to Jungar genealogies, Galdan Tseren, who died in 1745, became *kongtaichi* of Jungaria after murdering his father in 1727.

<sup>18</sup> See Pegg 2001:116-18 for the relation of Altai Urianghai epic heroes to the seven-star constellation, Doloon Burkhan Od (“Seven Star Burkhans”).

(*aiak*), sacred text (*sudur*), small pipe (*ayus*), and juniper (*archyn*) (Ukachina and Yamaeva 1993), and he sometimes played a shamanic drum (Chachiyakova 2010).

*alkyshchy*. This is a specialist in the performance of *alkyshes*, rhythmically organized and unaccompanied poetical quatrains that are imbued with the ideological bases of Ak Jang. They both offer praises and request blessing-fortune. The *alkyshchy* is also “with spirit” since, whether ancient or improvised, the words come from the “other world” (Borboshev 2006). S/he makes aspersions and purifies with juniper. In contemporary times, a single person may perform both *jarlyk* and *alkyshchy* roles.

*shabychy*. A person who performs jangar songs (*jangar khozhong*) that praise Burkhan. During prayer-meetings in the early twentieth century, these jangar songs were performed by “clean” (virginal) girls in special costumes (Kleshev 2004:267), which included white, yellow, and blue *kyira* ribbons, buttons, and plaits (Ukachina and Yamaeva 1993).

*koitukchy*. A “helper,” whose duties include carrying food to the temple, making the fire, and refilling the sacred bowl.

Clan members participate in preparing and offering food, hanging sacred ribbons, and making ritual movements and gestures. They support the requests for blessings by uttering “Lord, let it be! Lord, let it be!” (“*Bash bolzyn! Bash bolzyn!*”) and make gestures of prayer, genuflect (*chege*), and prostrate themselves fully on the ground.

#### 4. Kulady: Kaleidoscopic Connections

##### 4.1. Cosmos, History, and Homeland

During rituals held at the Kulady mountain temple, gathered kaleidoscopic connections are activated in the following ways. In 2006, Erke Kakhinovich Yamaev, hereditary leader (*jaisang*) of the Tölös clan, demonstrated how these connections radiate out by reciting the following verse of his *alkysh*:

With Moon-Sun White-Sky,  
Altai Eezi Ak Byrkan,  
With Sun-Moon Blue-Sky,  
The Sun’s light, Ak Byrkan.

The ritual leader and participants connect the Moon and the Sun to the temple’s architecture by calling the largest and most easterly of the eight altars “Sun-Mother” (*Kün-ene*) (Mandaeva 2010) and the second largest “Moon-Father” (*Ai-ada*). The word pairings “Moon-Sun” and “Sun-Moon” not only connect these altars to the physical planets but also to the cosmic substance Üch Kurbustan. Yamaev explained how this connection is achieved through fire:

On this “fire *obo*” (*ot obo*),<sup>19</sup> sacrificial offerings (*sang*) and fire rituals are made to Üch Kurbustan. Branches are used to make fire in the round part.<sup>20</sup> Juniper, butter, and sheep are added. When the fire is high, it greets Üch Kurbustan.

Ritual participant Valentina Chechaeva elaborated:

They put food into the fire to Upper Jaiaan [Üch Kurbustan], arrange a celebration in honor of the fire. Sheep’s head, *sang*—everything is put into the fire.

In addition to linking them with the Upper Domains, the epithets “Moon-Sun” and “Sun-Moon” connect the participants to their Ak Jang history since the original messenger of Oirat Khan, Ak Byrkan, commanded them to abandon Orthodox Christianity and worship again the Sun and the Moon. As an epithet of Altai, it simultaneously connects them to their current homeland.

Ak Byrkan (“White Burkhan”) has similar kaleidoscopic properties. As one of Ak Jang’s main objects of worship, Oirat Khan’s original messenger is embodied by the *jarlyk*, who dresses in white and transmits messages to the participants (Vinogradov 2003:129; Sagalaev 1992:158). According to Yamaev, the above verse invites the original Ak Byrkan to the temple to sit on a small, white felt carpet during the ritual. This dual messenger presence in the temple ritual connects past Ak Jang events with contemporary ones, collapsing space and time. Yamaev also couples Ak Burkan with Altai Eezi, the Spirit-Owner of Altai.

#### 4.2 *Jangar Songs*

Contemporary Ak Jang rituals vary according to the skills of the participants. Not all communities are able to include *shabychy* as in Kulady. Valentina Todoshevna Chechaeva and Elena Tölösövnä Mandaeva, who were both born in Kulady, fulfill this role by performing *jangar songs* (*jangar kozhong*) in rituals at their village temple. Elena explained what happened in the ritual after food offerings had been made and before they sang their songs (2010):

First, the *alkyshchy* uses a branch of juniper to purify all present. At this point, all are standing. Afterwards, that person makes *alkysh* praises. Then he circles two sacred *kyira* ribbons over the fire to purify them and ties them to a line stretched between the birch-tree poles in front of the altars. The men do the same, followed by the women and children. We tie sacred ribbons, which must be white, and make requests from Upper Jaiaan in our thoughts. We circulate the altars in the path of the sun (clockwise) and then stand. Everyone is presented with milk to drink and then we sing.

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<sup>19</sup> An *obo* is a pile of stones containing the spirit-owner of the place. It is located in numinous places in landscape—for example, at the beginning of a valley, in a high mountain pass, or by a powerful river—and offerings are made to the spirit-owner for safe passage. Here, Yamaev draws a parallel with the offerings to Üch Kurbustan.

<sup>20</sup> He is referring to the “hearth altar,” which at the Kulady temple is rectangular at the back but is shaped as a horse-shoe at its front.

Styles and texts differ according to occasion and ethnicity. Here, we look only at ritual jangar song performance in relation to the Sary Bür rituals in Kulady. As the epic-teller Yalatov said (Yamaeva 2010b): “Jangar praises Burkhan in song form.” The songs connect the participants to Ulu Burkhan (Üch Kurbustan) and to Ak Jang ideology. When we met up in the Museum in Kulady in 2010, Valentina and Elena demonstrated a jangar that they had performed at Sary Bür in 2010 (Fig. 3) in chest (*kögüs*) style, which again connected the participants to Burkhan:

In order to put into a golden bridle,  
 Burkhan created a horse,  
 In order to live on the White-Earth [Altai],  
 Burkhan created us,  
 Burkhan created people.



Fig. 3. Valentina Todoshevna Chechaeva and Elena Tölösövnä Mandaeva singing a ritual *jangar* song, Kulady, 2010. Photo: Carole Pegg. All rights reserved.

During the ritual, they had praised Altai using important Ak Jang motifs, including flowers, which are often laid on altars, and horses, important for all nomadic peoples:

Blue grass head, blue flower,  
 If my blue horse eats [it], it will become silky,  
 Blue valley’s head, sky-blue,  
 If we hold a ritual, our mood will lighten.  
 White grass head, white flower  
 If my white-grey horse eats [it], it will become silky,  
 White valley’s head, white sky [color],  
 If we hold a ritual, our mood will lighten.

Other connections were also made. Standing facing the direction of sunrise, they first created associations with Kulady village and Karakol river valley singing:

With flaming maned [horses],  
 Created place Karakol,  
 Since childhood,  
 Played-in place Kulady.  
 With light-blue maned blue-grey [horses]  
 Coddled place Karakol,  
 Growing well since childhood,  
 Our joyous place, Kulady.

Afterwards, they asked for blessing-fortune from the Spirit-owner of Altai and the places they had praised:

They say to Altai Eezi: help us, look at us. Then they praise the mountain Üch Engmek, source of the river Karakol, and ask for blessing-fortune from these places.

In addition, the mode of performance encourages a sense of community. Elena explained that first she sings a line, which is repeated by Valentina, followed by all present. “It becomes like a choir,” she said. “Even if people don’t know how to sing, this way they can join in.” Following these songs, milk was sprinkled in the four cardinal directions, and the community again came together to say “*Bash bolzyn!*” After bowing to the altars and making praying gestures, they had sung at this autumn ritual:

Brown-stoned temple,  
 May our temple like them.  
 Our brown-flowered Altai,  
 May our ritual like them.

At the spring ritual, this becomes:

Sky-blue struck stone,  
Our altar liked [it],  
Our blue-flowered Altai,  
Our ritual liked [it].

Both versions highlight the participants' perception that the temple, altars, ritual process, and Altai are living and capable of emotions.

## 5. Lower Talda: Improvising the Tradition

### 5.1. Ritual Actions

At Lower Talda, after climbing the steep, snowy mountainside, our group of twelve people paused below the temple complex. Two distinct rocks marked the eastern end of the performance place, and away from them curved three main altars. The most easterly altar, the “hearth” (*ochok*), looked down to the valley below where the clan's village nestled. Before the second, two lines were strung between three birch poles and, at the western end a large white banner (*maany*) fluttered from a sturdier, taller, birch pole. In front of the third altar stood five small altars, ending in a single rock, marking the western end of the arena.

The men entered first and made fire with wood in the hollowed-out altar, the *ochok* hearth. When the fire was lit, women and children entered the ritual space. Arzhan, who acted as *jarlyk* ritual leader and *alkysh* blessing-fortune specialist, then circled two sacred ribbons in the purifying smoke as he circumambulated clockwise around the hearth and tied them to the line between the first two birch poles. The men then tied up their ribbons, stroking their heads backwards with the right hand to connect with the plait worn by male practitioners in the early days of Ak Jang. The women followed. Valentina Bachibaeva tied her sacred ribbon to the second line and knelt deeply. After tying, each person processed between the big and small altars (Fig. 4), around the final stone, to form a semi-circle at the back of the ritual space, where they sat with one knee raised in traditional poses: the left knee raised by women and the right knee by men. Arzhan advised which figurines to put on the first large altar and which on the second.



Fig. 4. Female participants circumambulating between outer and inner *tagyl* altar crescents after purifying and tying up a *kyira* ribbon. Lower Talda *küree*, 2010. Photo: Carole Pegg. All rights reserved.

A helper knelt to fill the sacred bowl for Arzhan *jarlykchy/alkyshchy*.<sup>21</sup> Using a wooden spoon, Arzhan sprinkled milk liberally over the hearth-altar and large altars, including figurines and sacred ribbons, while quietly asking for blessing-fortune. All that could be heard was “*Jakshy bolzyn, jakshy bolzyn, jakshy bolzyn. Chöök!*” (“May it become good, may it become good, may it become good. *Chook!*”<sup>22</sup>) (Fig. 5). Valentina opened the white cloth bearing juniper branches. Arzhan took one, lit it, and waved it around, purifying the whole ritual space.



Fig. 5. Arzhan *jarlyk* reciting blessing-fortune (*alkysh-byian*) verses while sprinkling milk, his “helper” stroking his head. *Shatra* offerings are on a *tagyl* altar, *kyira* ribbons are tied on lines between hitching posts, and the clan village lies below. Lower Talda *küree*, 2010. Photo: Carole Pegg. All rights reserved.

Next, Arzhan added bread to the fire, then picked the sheep’s ribs and head from the bowl held by two male helpers, and added them while reciting a request for blessing. Valentina Bachibaeva knelt low on one knee to each altar. Then, connecting to early female Ak Jang practitioners by stroking two imaginary plaits, she bowed and touched her head to the floor before each large altar. The men added more food to the fire, taking off their hats and stroking

<sup>21</sup> See §3.4 above for explanations of these terms.

<sup>22</sup> Radlov translates *chöök* as “kneeling” or “genuflection” (1893:2034) and Baskakov as an exclamation during sprinkling for idols (2005 [1947]:180).

their heads as they did so. Valentina, taking a plate of food, knelt and circled it four times above her head before adding it to the fire (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Valentina Bachibaeva making food offerings to Üch Kurbustan via the fire in the hearth, Lower Talda *küree*, 2010. Photo: Carole Pegg. All rights reserved.

Arzhan’s performance, which lasted for about an hour, combined a deep knowledge of traditional beliefs and practices with personal creativity and improvisations.<sup>23</sup> His traditional practices included milk-sprinkling, carrying juniper in white cloth, using *jaiyk* receptacles as intercessors, requesting blessings in unaccompanied verse, incorporating Altaian cosmologies into his texts, practicing sound-avoidance, and using epic motifs and concepts. His own creativity included his use of *kai* throat-singing and accompanying himself with the *topshuur*<sup>24</sup> lute. Let us look at how he used these practices to help the participants to sense “being-in-place.”

<sup>23</sup> This was not a ritual “staged” for recording but a community ritual to which we were invited. Arzhan moved around the temple altars unpredictably and, trying to remain unobtrusive and not disrupt the ritual for the participants, I recorded as much as I was able. Sometimes, even when within recording distance, Arzhan whispered or turned his head away. Oral literature is notoriously difficult to translate, and Arzhan used ancient, specialized, and obscure terms. The sections I have translated, then, are those that were recorded clearly and translatable.

<sup>24</sup> Russian: *topshur*.

### 5.2. Blessings and Place

In order to orientate the participants in traditional cosmological terms, Arzhan’s first request for blessing in traditional verse form (*alkysh*) was addressed to the hero of the “Golden Stake” (Altyn Kazyk) or Pole Star which, according to traditional Altaian knowledge (*bilik*), acts as a hitching post for the eight vaults of the Sky and connects directly to Earth through its mountains. The hero protector spirit, who is able to bestow blessings, sees from the Pure White Sky (Ak-aias Tengeri), the fourth vault, where celestial souls await reincarnation (Shodoev and Kurchakov 2003:76). Arzhan used “Kairakan,” a respectful referent of a deity or spirit-owner in the Middle and Upper worlds (Radlov 1893:22):

My Pole Star,  
Earth-Altai protected,  
Pole Star hero,  
He is with blessing,  
Sees from Ak-Aias,  
Kairakan, Bash Bolzyn!

As Arzhan continued his blessing, he referenced the Altaian belief that the Golden Stake provides balance, stability, and protection for the Earth (Jer-Altai) and its inhabitants. If this star were to shake, then so would the Earth’s axis, and disasters would follow. The Altaian perception is that Altai connects to Altyn Kazyk in the same way that the child and mother are connected by the umbilical cord and the mother’s navel. Two dimensions of life and reality co-exist, each dependent on the other. Altai, therefore, is frequently called “Umbilical/Navel” Altai (Kin Altai):

May Earth’s people live peacefully,  
Earth not diminish,  
Earth not shake,  
Six-cornered Navel Altai,  
Bash Bolzyn!  
May your strength-armor<sup>25</sup> be strong.

In order to maintain this stability, Arzhan needed to ensure peace among the spirits of the Upper and Middle worlds. He asked, therefore, that the ancestors not fight (“*Öbökölör, Öbökölör tartyshpazyn*”) and:

May Talai-Khan not become angry . . .  
May the spirit-owners of sacred springs  
Not to be angry,  
Quarrel. . . .

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<sup>25</sup> *kuiak* (“strength-armor”) is a quality of inner power believed throughout Inner Asia to be received from spirits or the Sky and detectable through the eyes.

Referring to all life as generating from Kudai (“God”), Arzhan asked:

Our people,  
 May they be with strength-armor.  
 God-given life,  
 May it be peaceful.

Throughout, Arzhan’s requests were addressed to Altai Eezi, Üch Kurbustan, Ülgen, and burkhans—avoiding their names directly. He also specified the particular cosmic vaults his requests must reach. For instance, this ritual took place in conjunction with the new moon so that its bright energies would have maximum effect on its success, rather than during the growing old moon, when dark energies are abroad. Arzhan therefore asked that his milk-sprinklings reach the home of the moon, Ai Byrkan, which is in Pure-Blue Sky (Kök-Aias), the fifth vault or level of the eight-layered Sky:

May white milk aspersions,  
 Reach the Pure-Blue Sky.

In order to reach these spiritual energies and places, Arzhan used several forms of intermediaries that intercede with gods, spirits, and burkhans.

### 5.3. *Spirit-intercessors*

The white ribbons, made by Arzhan then purified and hung up by all present, were offerings that became spirit-intercessors as Arzhan sprinkled them with milk and whispered requests for blessing-fortune. Each person also silently addressed their own sacred ribbon with their own hopes and needs.

The juniper, which Arzhan lit in order to purify the people, temple complex, and offerings, is said to be *eeliü*, that is, to contain *ee* spirits. These spirits can both hear the words of Ak Aias, the fourth vault, and converse with Üch Kurbustan. Moreover, they can use the juniper to cure people—the juniper becomes “medicine juniper”:

May the strength of our spirit-charged juniper with spirit-owners  
 Not diminish,  
 May people’s minds  
 Not be captured by black thoughts,  
 May the strength of our sacred juniper  
 Not diminish,  
 May it grow.  
 Saw good-bad things in people,  
 Hearing Ak Aias’ talk, heard,  
 Talked with Üch Kurbustan,  
 Medicine juniper,  
 May it grow, not diminish.

Arzhan addressed the large white banner (*maany*)<sup>26</sup> fluttering on the birch pole positioned at the far end of the lines of ribbons, seeking to keep this banner strong and maintain its capacity for bringing good-fortune and gaining blessings:

May people live with good-fortune,  
 May people live with blessing,  
 Sacred taboo banner,  
 Spirit-charged banner with spirit-owners,  
 Kairakan, Lord let it be!

This large banner can only be erected by the ritual leader since gods may sit there. Later, Arzhan continued its enlivenment with spirit-owners, addressing the “Koroty-Source” (Koroty-Bazhy), the mountain origin of the River Koroty running down below us in the valley:

Sacred taboo banner,  
 Become a spirit-charged banner with spirit-owner,  
 May it bless Altai,  
 May that spirit-charged cloth with spirit-owners not suffer,  
 Koroty-Source,  
 Kairakan Lord!

#### 5.4. *Epic Motifs, Throat-singing, Topshuur Lute*

Throughout his performance of oral poetry, Arzhan drew upon traditional epic imagery and motifs. He began by situating the ritual participants at the base of the “world tree,” a quintessential feature of epic landscapes that allows the hero access to other levels of the universe. Rather than making its base in the Lower World, as in shamanic cosmology, he placed it in the Middle World (where the participants were seated), as appropriate to Ak Jang. Arzhan localized it by choosing the Altaian cedar as the tree, rather than the “iron poplar” or birch tree usual to epics:

May the cedar tree  
 With nuts keep swinging,  
 People at the base of the tree  
 Take strength-armor.

Later, when referring to leaders in Altai and the world, Arzhan used 60 and 70, numbers that often occur in epics. For instance, in the famous Altaian epic *Maadai Kara*, the hero, noticed that (Marazzi 1986:38):

. . . the 60 kaans of the Altai had started to move.  
 The 70 kaans of the Earth had become agitated.

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<sup>26</sup> Also called *bairy*.

Arzhan sang:

In six corners, 60 khans, may they not fight,  
On Earth, 70 khans, may they not make war.  
Lord, let it be!

Arzhan adopted the classic Altaian performance mode of spirit-charged epic-tellers for his final lengthy communication with spirits: *kai* vocal tone<sup>27</sup> accompanied by the two-stringed *topshuur* lute (Fig. 7). No reference to this kind of performance occurs in early Ak Jang literature, but among contemporary Altai Kizhis of Ongudai region it has been embraced as integral, as the following verses from Erokhonova 2002—acknowledged as containing quintessential doctrines of contemporary Ak Jang—illustrates (2002:320, 322):

*Kai*—the people’s breast,  
The people’s road,  
The heroes’ voice,  
The heroes’ spear,  
With black [forces] struggling,  
With help from Upper Jaiaan.  
Great epic-teller—difficult roads,  
Tabooed epic-teller—honoured roads,  
The gift is deep—the hand is white,  
The gift is pure—the mind is white.



Fig. 7. Arzhan *jarlyk* playing *topshuur* lute and performing blessing-fortune verses using *kai* throat-singing before the hearth, Lower Talda *küree*, 2010. Photo: Carole Pegg. All rights reserved.

After calming his “truculent” *topshuur*, as he later put it, by warming it next to the fire, Arzhan began his accompanied requests for blessings using the rasping vocal quality of *kai*. Once more, he situated himself: “From the base of this cedar-tree . . .” and appealed for blessing-fortune from the two essential phenomena of both Ak Jang and epics—the Altai and Üch Kurbustan:

Our spirit-charged Altai,  
Üch Kurbustan, our Protector!  
Making *kai* with pure thoughts  
I ask for blessing-fortune.

<sup>27</sup> *Kai* refers to a declamatory throat-singing style used by spirit-charged epic-tellers, enabling their descent to the Underworld.

He then asked the largest altar to give voice to his *topshuur* lute and *kai* throat-singing:

May my carved *topshuur*,  
 Decorated with gold and silver,  
 Make *kai* to this seated group,  
 Give a voice to my *topshuur*,  
 My great Altar.

The next verse began with another epic formula. Although the ritual took place in the morning, Arzhan used the epic phrase “the blue evening” when asking that he might make inspirational *kai* in order to spread the “song of Sary Bür” throughout Altai:

Soften people  
 In the blue evening,  
 [May I] make inspirational *kai*,  
 Kairakan!  
 Alongside young tree(s),  
 [We go] to our Altai, golden-silver with flower(s),  
 Created [by] our Father.  
 The song of Sary Bür is spread,  
 Our Altai.

Now let us see how, throughout his performances, Arzhan used improvisation to root the participants in their contemporary geographical and societal place. First, he situated the family at the temple complex:

These people’s blessing-request is in the flames,  
 In the surrounding altars.

Then he placed them in Koroty Valley and their political state:

That people’s living place,  
 In Koroty [valley],  
 This people’s living place,  
 [In the] State-Universe.

And finally, he situated them in their village by asking for “Good fortune for Lenin Road”—Lenin Road being the name used during the Soviet period for the village now called Lower Talda.

He then placed them in contemporary space-time by addressing current problems on local, Altaian, and global levels. With the high accident rate in mind, he asked the spirit of roads:

May the road to Koroty be softened,

and later:

May the many surrounding roads not become harsh,  
Our iron horses [cars] have no accidents.

He also asked for relief from attacks by wolves and bears on livestock and people, using the Altaian practice of word avoidance for these respected creatures. Instead of the prohibited name “wolf” (*börü*), he uses *kokoio*<sup>28</sup> and instead of “bear” (*aiu*), Maajalai Öörökön (“Respected Elder”):

May the tabooed *kokoio*  
Not attack livestock,  
The spirit-charged Maajalai Öörökön  
Not attack livestock,  
May these people not be attacked.

A further problem for Altaian country-dwellers is that their children have to travel a long way to study or find work (for example, to Gorno-Altai, Novosibirsk, or Moscow), or to go fight (for instance, in Chechniya). Arzhan asked, therefore:

May the children going far away  
Travel peacefully,  
May the boys in the far army  
Return peacefully.

In general, he asked that the minds of participants remain light, illnesses and pains of the heart lessen, relatives live peacefully, and children prosper. He also asked for trees not to suffer from diseases, that animals, birds, and fish should increase, and that there be abundant milk.

On the global level, he requested:

May the northern people [Europeans]  
Not have closed minds . . .  
May the ruling people  
Not confuse people’s minds,  
Among large folk,  
May small folk live . . .  
May our people  
Not create war-blood  
Among each other. . .

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<sup>28</sup> In Turkish *kokoio* designates a type of frog. It may be used here as an Altaian combination of endearment or respect.

In addition to his mixture of tradition and improvisation, Arzhan’s creativity also manifested itself in his personalization of texts. He showed concern for talent, requesting that “people with talent increase.” Moreover, as a man who enjoys a joke, he hoped that his blessings would make Altai Eezi and Respected Elders (Örökön) “hear and laugh.”

Often Arzhan’s improvisations followed the rules of Altaian poetry, using alliteration at the beginning of lines and half-lines, and playing with or pairing words. Words are sometimes paired to embrace broader meanings, such as blessing-fortune (*alkysh-byian*) or Moon-Sun. Sometimes they enable the words to flow rhythmically. For instance, the “road to Koroty” becomes “*Koroty jolgo jol.*” *Jol* means “road” and its repetition as *jolgo* is not necessary for meaning. At other times, words are paired simply to please the ear. Arzhan’s own favorite rhythmical word-pairings cropped up regularly; for instance, *bailu* (“with prohibition”) was frequently paired with *chümdü* (“beautiful”), even though the literal meanings sit uneasily together: *bailu-chümdü*,<sup>29</sup> and *eelü* became *eelü-chüülü*.

Towards the end of the ritual, Arzhan poured the liquid into the sacred bowl for his two helpers to sprinkle. Each person present drank either milk or *araky* vodka from the cup. They sat quietly as the fire crackled. A crow flew overhead and cawed. Valentina bowed to Arzhan and to the fire.

## 6. Post-ritual Celebrations

In the third phase of the ritual process, the participants descend from the *küree* temple complex and sit at a lower point on the mountain or return to the host’s home if the weather is bad. There, they eat food including mutton and barley soup, and drink a little Altaian milk-vodka. They relax and, depending on who is present, may make music, performing jangar songs and epic tales (*kai chörchök*), accompanied by the *topshuur* lute and *komus* jaw’s harp. If they are still on the mountain, they play games to take away disease and pain—for instance, rolling on the ground or performing somersaults (Mandaeva 2010). If indoors, they discuss the proceedings, what they had felt and seen, and whether the ritual had been successful. Prohibitions continue for at least a further three days.

## 7. Sensory Experiences

Ritual participants in the “place of gatherings,” the *küree* temple complex, used their bodies to perform actions and sounds that activated those gatherings, stimulating those connections to produce a sense of a powerful, numinous, second dimension of “place.” Experience of this second dimension of place enabled feelings of the third dimension, “being-in-place.” The liminality of this fulcrum of knowledge, histories, and space-time—the first dimension of place—was essential to the sensorial process of triggering the subsequent dimensions.

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<sup>29</sup> I have been unable to establish the meaning of this word.

The senses of taste, smell, feeling, sound, and touch—already heightened by fasting, prohibitions, and other purifications—were stimulated further by the beauty of the mountainous *taiga* forest and sky; the touch of Siberian autumnal coldness, soft snow, and breeze with the contrasting warmth of sunlight and fire; the smells of burning wood, food, and juniper; the taste of milk and milk-vodka; and the sounds of birds, fire, breeze, poetry, and music. Together with these sensory experiences, visual connections with the sky, clan mountain, valley, village, river, and temple architecture aroused feelings of connection to the cosmos and its spirit-beings, Altaian history and the spirits of landscape.

The body's engagement in ritual practices—creating connections through smoke, fire, milk-sprinklings, food-offerings; bowing to fluttering ribbons and flags; and the production and reception of musical and poetical sounds—all combined to trigger other sensory experiences not yet fully researched, such as feeling and seeing invisible energies. Participants at Kulady, for instance, experienced the arrival of energy and good fortune encircling them as a constantly rotating belt (Chechaeva 2010; Mandaeva 2010), and performances at the temple changed the participants' sense of their own bodies and the everyday world in which they live (Mandaeva 2010):

After ritual, everyone feels internally purified and becomes vigorous. Jangar songs are a form of meditation and afterwards, if I feel bad, I remember that there is parallel Altai, an upper Altai.

At Lower Talda, Arzhan *jarlykchy/alkyshchy* clearly exhibited signs of changing consciousness at certain points. For instance, towards the end of the ritual, he saw and addressed beings that others present were unable to see as he shook a branch of juniper:

Respected ones,  
Spirit-owners sitting around!

And during the post-ritual celebrations, he explained that he had seen a man in white clothing high on the mountain watching and that had made him fearful. Arzhan's final *alkysh* request had therefore been:

When people of Tengeri come as guests,  
May they not steal people.

## 8. Conclusion

The Sary Bür rituals at Kulady and Lower Talda followed the same structure, involving a pre-liminal phase of separation from society, a transitional phase in a concealed mountain temple removed from everyday life, and a post-liminal reincorporation into society. The rituals in the two temples also contained the same elements: an officiant (*jarlyk*) to make offerings to Üch Kurbustan, *shatra* figurines placed on altars to invite the spirits of place to eat, sacred white ribbons hung between birch poles, gestures of prayer (*mürgüül*), and *alkysh* praises and requests

for blessings. Such rituals are now in competition with the needs of young people to leave the countryside to find work and with the encroachment of global forces. Each ritual necessarily varies in its mixture of tradition and improvisation according to the availability of participants. In the two cases examined here, Kulady is fortunate in having jangar singers, an essential element of early Ak Jang rituals, and Lower Talda in having had a ritual leader with extra-sensory abilities who also performed epics.

We have suggested that both Sary Bür rituals were creative sensory experiences involving three inter-related dimensions of “place.” In both rituals, a phenomenological, topographical place was created that was physically and imaginatively “betwixt and between,” or liminal. Before entering this place, which had been constructed intentionally to gather together indigenous knowledge and experiences, the body had to be purified. In a universe in which all of nature is alive, the architecture and stones of the *küree* temple complex—as well as gods and spirits, the sky, planets, and mountains—became living participants in the rituals. Bodily movements within the ritual process—including gestures of prayer and respect, circular movements of renewal, and performances of oral literature, music, and song—transformed the temple into a second dimension of “place” in which relations between participants were sensed and activated, and which became spirit-charged and numinous through performance.

We have shown how ritual specialists combined traditional performance modes and understandings of the world and also the characters and poetry of ancient Altaian heroic epics that connected the participants to historico-mythical space-time—with performative and textual improvisations that rooted them in contemporary life. Multi-sensory aspects of the ritual performances included sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste but also the extraordinary, such as intuitive feelings and visions. As a result, a sense of a third dimension of “being-in-place” was engendered as energy was increased and the multiple relations among humans, the spirits of sky and landscape, ancestors, epic heroes, kin, and community that constitute Altaian personhood were renewed. In the face of an approaching hazardous winter, the combination of these three dimensions of “place” enabled personal transitions to be accomplished that strengthened the participants’ negotiation of the approaching difficult season and ongoing changes of post-Soviet modern life.

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