

# What If We Don't Know Our Clan? The City *Tailgan* as New Ritual Form in Buriatiia

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**Abstract:** “Traditionally” Buriat shamanism is clan-based. Ritual practice embedded kinship relations within a sacred geography, linking the living and the dead through a relationship to the landscape, reaffirmed at yearly *tailgan* ceremonies. In Buriatiia, Soviet modernization transformed the Buriat relationship to the land, and with it, the conditions of shamanic practice. As a result, many urban Buriats either do not know their clan affiliation, or no longer hold clan ceremonies. In response, two urban shaman’s organizations have begun to hold *tailgans* on behalf of the residents of the city. The new ritual form relieves anxiety at the loss of tradition and underscores that loss. However, by redefining the ritual community around the city instead of the clan, the ritual community becomes multiethnic.

**Keywords:** Buriatiia, modernity, ritual, shamanism, tradition, urban

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## “But What If I Don’t Know My Clan?”

A young woman walks around the edge of a group of people gathered for the spring *tailgan*, instructing people how to prepare questions for the *ongons* (ancestor spirits).<sup>1</sup> “Write down your name, your birth year, your clan affiliation, and the question. In Buriat, if you can. If not, write it in Russian, and we’ll help you translate it.” People beg sheets of paper off me, the anthropologist—the only person who can always be counted on to bring paper and pens to a ritual.

“But what if I don’t know my clan?” a woman asks, anxiously. Her question is echoed through the gathering crowd, most of whom do not



know their clan. "It's okay." The young woman answers, repeatedly. "It's okay if you don't know your clan. The most important thing is your name and your birth year. If you don't know your clan, write down where your family is from, and the *ongons* will know." See Figure 1.

Anxiety about not knowing your clan is a typical feature of post-Soviet Buriat shamanic revival. There is a general consensus among ethnographers, shamans and the general Buriat public in Ulan-Ude that traditional Buriat shamanism was rooted in traditional clan structures, and that the decline of these clan structures in modern post-Soviet life poses problems for the revival of traditional shamanic practice. This creates a dilemma familiar to indigenous people around the world. Modern liberal multicultural regimes of identity politics require indigenous subjects to demonstrate certain markers of 'traditional' identity in order to be recognized as legitimately indigenous (Lorentzen 2001; Povinelli 2002; Schein 2000; Sharp 1996). In order to gain access to government recognition, subsidies or protection, indigenous groups must demonstrate language, occupation of traditional lands or

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**Figure 1.** A Tengri member instructing participants how to prepare questions for the spirits, Verkhne Beriozovkhe, May 2005.

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maintenance of traditional subsistence activities and very commonly, maintenance of traditional ritual activities.<sup>2</sup> This places indigenous actors in a catch-22 situation, as the modernizing policies of most states throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while varying in details and logics, as a rule encouraged and often forced the elimination of such 'traditional' practices.

In order to achieve recognition as a traditional practice, and not as new-age neo-shamanism, Buriat shamans must assert the traditional nature of their rituals, while at the same time addressing the very non-traditional needs of their clients. Post-Soviet Buriat shamans are designing new rituals in an attempt to compensate for and restore lost clan identities, but these new rituals create unintended consequences and new ritual publics. One such ritual is the city *tailgan*. The *tailgan* is the most generic of Buriat rituals, in contrast to exorcisms, healings, and initiations, and is therefore the most flexible. In its most basic variant, the shaman calls spirits to the ceremony, makes an offering accompanied by a request for blessings.<sup>3</sup> The *tailgans* I witnessed were a little more elaborate, but the fundamental structure remained. Blessings were requested from spirits on behalf of a community, in response to offerings. A *tailgan* ceremony invokes and evokes a relationship between a group and 'its' spirits. Traditionally, this community was the clan. The city *tailgan*, a recent innovation, uses this traditional ritual form to evoke a new form of community. The city *tailgan* is a new form of an old ritual, which draws on the already existing potential for territorially-based ritual communities in Buriat shamanism. However in doing so, the city *tailgan* opens the door to reinterpreting Buriat shamanism as a multi-ethnic and potentially universal religion.

In 2005 I worked with the members of the Local Shaman's Organization Tengri in Ulan-Ude as part of a larger dissertation project examining post-Soviet Buriat religious revival. The founding members of Tengri are part of what Zhukovskaya (2004) calls a new, young generation of neo-shamans, many of whom previously worked in intellectual professions and received their calling late in life. As she notes, they are attempting to create an institutional form for shamanism. They would, however, take grave offense at the term 'neo-shamanism'. Tengri's mission statement is to revive 'traditional' Buriat shamanism because they believe that shamanic practices are essential to the well-being of the Buriat people and are an effective means of healing the social ills of the post-Soviet present. They believe that many social problems are caused by vengeful ancestor spirits, angered by decades of neglect during the Soviet period, who are blocking their descen-

dant's attempts to improve their lives (see also Buyandelgeryin 2007). Their goal is to reconnect the present to the past, re-forging ties that were broken during the Soviet period into a continuous tradition.

From an analytic point of view, however, tradition is something that exists only from the perspective of modernity. When I use the term 'tradition' here, I mean not the past as it actually was, but rather the past as it is described and invoked by the members of Tengri, their clients, and their critics. For the shamans at Tengri, determining what is 'traditional' has direct practical consequences. No religious practice is static, and shamanic practice, grounded in the trance experiences of individual practitioners and their clients, is especially fluid. More so than with any other religious practice, attempting to codify these ephemeral experiences into an "ism" is in some way, as Humphrey and Onon (1996) argue, to miss the point entirely. This adaptability is what makes shamanism uniquely effective in addressing the social problems of post-Soviet life. It also, however, leaves individual shamans especially vulnerable to accusations of charlatanry. Asserting the traditional nature of their practices is a way for shamans to claim legitimacy.

Traditional Buriat shamanism, as invoked by the Tengri shamans and as recorded by ethnographers, is grounded in a patrilineal clan kinship structure (for example see Vyatkina 1964; Galdanova 1987; Mikhailov 1990, 2004; Gerasimova et al. 2000; Tkacz 2002; Skrinnikova 2003). In the clan model of Buriat shamanism, each clan has a shaman who mediated the relationship between living and dead clan members, healed the sick, and made offerings on behalf of the clan at sacred sites. The shaman is chosen by the spirits of his or her deceased shaman ancestors (*ongons*) to fill this role. Clan spirits indicate their approval of a shaman by possessing him or her during the initiation ceremony, but living clan members must show their approval as well, by participating in and contributing to the initiation ritual.

However, as with any assertion about 'tradition', this model has been subject to debate. In the murky land of 'ideal types' Buriat kinship has a patrilineal and patrilocal exogamous clan structure. The English word clan is used to translate the Russian word '*rod*' which marks one or the other of a dual structure: either tribe and clan (*plemen/rod*), or clan and lineage (*rod/yasun*).<sup>4</sup> The broader category, such as Ekhirit or Bulagat, are divisions tracing descent back to mythic ancestors. These clan identifiers are subdivided into narrower clans or lineages of extended kin. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it seems that Buriat clan identity was primarily expressed through attendance at lineage *tailgan*

led by either shamans or Buddhist lamas (Humphrey 1971). According to Soviet ideology, clan identity was a 'survival' from the distant past perpetuated by the Russian imperial regime (see for example Dolgikh and Levin 1962). By eradicating clan structures, the Soviet regime was liberating the native peoples of Siberia from the feudal and unjust authority of clan elders. Suppressing clan *tailgans* was part of this modernizing campaign.

Although kinship networks remain important, formal clan identity became much less so, especially for urban Buriats, and those who consider themselves primarily Buddhist. Although most Buriats believe that one ought to be able to recite one's patrilineal ancestors for 10 generations, I have yet to meet anyone who can. In 2005 I found that the word clan (*rod*) is often used both to refer to the broader category (tribe/clan) as well as the narrower meaning (clan/lineage). The broader category can be invoked to find imagined kinship relations between strangers, whereas the narrower lineage meaning refers to patrilineal extended families, many of whom still participate in annual *tailgans*.

Buriat shamanic practices also have a territorial aspect (Vyatkina 1964:226–227; Mikhailov 1990:111). Patrilineal ancestors become protective spirits of their lineage, and are worshipped at shrines (*oboo*) in the territory inhabited by their descendents. As Humphrey notes, ideally the inhabitants of a particular territory and a particular patrilineal family group were "supposed to coincide" (1971:130). In practice, they rarely did. The more powerful the spirit, the wider the territory under its purview. Buriats recognize an elaborate hierarchy ranging from the spirits of immediate ancestor shamans (*ongons*) that are relevant to one clan or locality, to deities (*burkhan*) that are acknowledged by the entire nation and are considered to govern wide territories.<sup>5</sup> The existence of higher order, territorial deities allows for the possibility of different kinds of ritual communities: for example, residents of a village or members of a collective farm work brigade (Humphrey 1998:375, 408–409).

Shamanic ceremonies not only create a ritual community, they embed that community in a sacred landscape. All spirits are linked to particular territories and particular shrines (*oboo*), marked by rock cairns or fabric strips tied to a tree. It is important for clan rituals to be held in the appropriate place, even if the living members of a clan no longer live nearby (for examples see Fridman 1998; Humphrey 1971). Devotions can range in intensity from ceremonial complexes with bi-annual *tailgan* rituals (see Humphrey 1998:483–487) to drivers throw-

ing coins out of car windows as they pass an *oboo*. Buriat shamanic practices embed kinship and clan relations within a sacred geography, linking the living and the dead through a relationship to the landscape. Although some rituals, such as healings and exorcisms, can be held anywhere, the effectiveness of a *tailgan* is directly related to its geographic appropriateness. The power of the ties between clan and landscape is manifested by the fact that in some areas, where Buddhism has pushed out shamans, *tailgans* are still held at *oboo*, and are led by lamas instead of shamans.

During collectivization and the Soviet cultural revolution both Buddhism and shamanism were violently suppressed, and thousands of Buriats were purged. At the same time, the Soviet government invested a great deal of time and effort into 'developing' and 'modernizing' Russia's national minorities, and the success of these policies legitimized the Soviet regime (Martin 2001; Hirsch 2005; Slezkine 1992; Slezkine 1994; Grant 1995). Many Buriats thrived under these policies, moving to the city and making the most of Soviet educational quotas. Locals report with pride that, during Soviet rule, Buriats had the second highest rate of higher education degrees per capita of any nationality. Before the revolution, Verkhneudinsk had been a Russian trading capital; it was renamed Ulan-Ude in 1934 and became a center of Buriat intellectual life. Throat-singing nomads became opera singers, Buddhist lamas became doctors of philosophy. Despite, or perhaps because of the violence of collectivization and the purges, many Buriats embraced Soviet ideals, and valued the fact that, by these standards, the Buriats were a success story. Although Soviet modernity did not deliver most of what it promised, it did offer a feeling of equality, and the promise that indigenous subjects could be appreciated as modern subjects, as scholars, artists and citizens and not merely as bearers of the 'exotic' (see also Grant 1995). As everywhere, the price of 'modernity' was the abandonment of 'tradition', and clan affiliation was a sign of 'tradition' that modern, urban Buriats no longer needed.

In Buriatiia, as elsewhere in the post-Soviet world, people are now seeking to revive spiritual traditions lost during the Soviet years. The early 1990's saw tremendous enthusiasm for recovering Buriat traditions and language and a surge of nationalist activity (see for example Zhukovskaya 1995). By 2005, however, the economy in Buryatiia was stagnating, the promises of capitalist reform had proved illusory. In the new economy academic, intellectual and cultural professions, which Buriats dominate, are the least profitable. In addition, administrative reforms at the federal level were threatening the existence of the Buriat

Republic and people were increasingly frightened by stories of ethnic conflict, from Beslan to reports of Russian skinheads in Moscow. Buriatiia seemed like a small haven of ethnic and religious coexistence in an increasingly hostile world. Nostalgia for the stability and peaceful ethnic coexistence of the Soviet period was common. Although I think it is safe to say most Buriats enthusiastically embrace the new freedom to celebrate traditional holidays and attend religious ceremonies, I also think many find it difficult to translate practices from the nineteenth century into a sense of 'Buriatness' that is relevant to the twenty-first.

The interest in Buriat traditions plays out in two registers, both relevant to shamanic practice and the city *tailgan*. On the one hand, people turn to traditional ritual as a means of coping with the problems of the present. Shamanism explains the problems of the present by referencing the past, promising that if spiritual relationships neglected and destroyed during the Soviet period can be restored, the path into the future will be open (see also Buyandelgeryin 2007).

On another level, as peripheral areas of the Russian Federation increasingly engage with a global economy and global regime of identity politics through NGO interventions and tourism, Soviet forms of identity politics are increasingly engaging with a multicultural form of identity politics, and there is a sense that Buriat identity should be socially valuable and potentially economically profitable.

In both of these registers, the question of what is 'traditional' has very practical consequences. Shamans seek recognition on two levels. First, shamans, as one of the four 'traditional religions' recognized by the Republic, can be registered as an official religious organization, which offers some administrative benefits (such as the right to issue visa invitations and request land for construction projects) and a feeling of parity with Buddhism and Christianity. Secondly, recognition as a skilled shaman brings clients and the potential for economic stability. For both, demonstrating one's authenticity is essential to recognition, and authenticity is vested in tradition. But how do you revive traditions that your ancestors were once forced to abandon? More specifically, how do you revive clan-based rituals, if you don't know your clan?

The city *tailgan* is one of the answers offered by Buriat shamans in Ulan-Ude. In 2004 and 2005 spring *tailgans* (to open the summer ceremonial season) and fall *tailgans* (to close the ceremonial season) were held by two rival organizations, Bo Murgel, and Tengri. The city *tailgan*, as a new ritual form, was started by the shaman's organization Bo Murgel, under the leadership of Nadezhda Stepanova. Although

Stepanova remains the nominal head of Bo Murgel, she no longer takes an active role in the day-to-day running of the organization, and the 2005 *tailgans* were lead by one of her students. Since 2004 the Tengri organization, with which I was working, has been holding a rival *tailgan* on the same day. Although there are many differences between the two groups, what is important here is that both hold *tailgans* on behalf of the residents of the city, and both assert their authenticity by invoking tradition.

In the city *tailgan*, *oboo* are replaced by municipal spaces: the ethnographic museum and the hippodrome. The ethnographic museum is an open-air complex demonstrating the architectural styles of the different populations of the Baikal area: Evenki, Buriat, Semeiskie, Cossack and Russian. Cultural festivals are held there to mark the Russian holidays *Troitsa* and *Maslinitsa*. The hippodrome is a stadium and racetrack where the city holds the annual *Suukharban*, a sports festival celebrating the three Buriat traditional sports: archery, wrestling and horseracing. Permission to use both spaces is granted by municipal authorities.<sup>6</sup> Both are located in *Verkhne Beriozovkhe*, a semi-rural area outside the residential neighborhoods of the city (approximately a 20 minute bus ride from the center along the same bus route). Both *tailgans* were publicized in the city newspapers, in local television listings and with posters around town, but the proximity of the two spaces and the novelty of the ritual meant that many people were not aware that there were two separate events. People who attended by invitation, who were in treatment with one or the other organization, or were friends and relatives of shamans or patients, came to a specific ceremony. However, based on several conversations I had and overheard, it seems that most of the people who came out of curiosity ended up at one or the other by chance, which nicely illustrates the uncertainty with which many approach shamanic practices. The proximity of the two ritual spaces worked in favor of the Tengri organization, because the hippodrome is an earlier stop on the bus route, and, unlike the museum, is visible from the road.

The Bo Murgel *tailgan* was held at the city's ethnographic museum, and consisted of what Bo Murgel supporters call the 'traditional' form and detractors call the 'abbreviated Soviet form'. The spirits were called down by drumming and chanting, and vodka and milk tea were offered to them. I was told that the ritual took approximately an hour. The Tengri *tailgan*, held at the city hippodrome, offered a more extended version, which Tengri supporters call the 'authentic recovered Buriat form', and detractors call 'new-fangled nonsense borrowed from



Mongolians'. The Tengri *tailgan* also began by drumming and calling down spirits, but instead of vodka and tea, a sheep was sacrificed. Following the offering, the shamans drummed themselves into trance, embodying spirits to whom audience members could pose questions. This was followed by group blessings, where people were beaten with birch branches dipped in the water the offering was boiled in, and another where blessings were called down into the food and drink that the audience brought, and would take home to their families. The shamans closed the ceremony with chants asking for specific blessings, and thanking the spirits, after which the birch trees at the center were taken down and burned while the audience circumambulated the fire. The festivities began around noon and lasted over seven hours. See Figure 2.

Tengri supporters argue that trance possession is the 'traditional' form of all shamanic ceremonies, but had become less common in the nineteenth century due to pressure from Buddhism, and was discontinued entirely during the Soviet period in large festivals such as the *tailgan*, because of the need for secrecy. Although some Soviet era shamans retained the skills necessary for possession, they would only have risked performing a full possession in a private ritual. Tengri sup-

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**Figure 2.** Tengri shamans calling down the spirits at the spring *tailgan*, Verkhne Beriozovkhe, May 2005.

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porters consider the fact that many shamans no longer consider trance possession to be necessary to be a sign of how much of their traditional culture was lost during the Soviet period. This is a compelling argument. The size, length and complexity of *tailgans* did shrink during the Soviet period (Humphrey 1998:382). Bo Murgel shamans and other unaffiliated clan shamans practice trance possession in other ceremonies, but not during *tailgans*, arguing that traditionally *tailgans* did not include trance possessions. The fact that lamas and clan elders can also conduct *tailgans* implies that they may be right, but the discrepancy may also be the result of geographical or personal variation in practice.<sup>7</sup> The difference is not, however, interpreted as geographical or personal variation by either shamans, participants or the audience. Instead, the differences are interpreted by supporters and detractors alike within the register of the traditional, and thereby judged to be more or less authentic and legitimate. Just as Buyandelgeriyn (2007) found among Buriats in Mongolia, people with whom I spoke routinely attributed their inability to judge what is authentic to the loss of shamanic traditions during the Soviet period. This did not, however, stop them from searching for the 'authentic'.

Detractors accuse the Tengri shamans of cheap theatrics to raise popular support, a claim the Tengri shamans do not entirely deny. They see the city *tailgan* as an opportunity to educate the public about shamanism. Impressing the public through trance possessions is a way to get them interested in their heritage and their culture. The chance to ask a spirit a question at a city *tailgan* may be the first step toward recreating a lost relationship with clan ancestors or initiating a healing process.

The highlight of the Tengri ceremony, which lasts several hours, was the opportunity to pose questions to the spirits while the shamans were in trance. These questions had to be posed in Buriat, the language of the spirits, but were often awkwardly translated from the Russian, because most urban Buriats are more comfortable speaking Russian. Compounding the awkwardness, most of the questions are generated from everyday life, which is lived in Russian. For example, at one ceremony I attended a woman asked "How do you say hematologist in Buriat?" Her friend answered "just say you saw lots of doctors." "But doesn't it matter what kind of doctors?" Both were unsure about whether or not the spirits would understand the difference between kinds of doctors, but at the same time, unsure whether any answers the spirits could offer would be relevant if the description of the problem was abbreviated.

This kind of debate took place before and throughout rituals. At the beginning of the ceremony, people are asked to write down their name, clan and question so that the shamans' assistants can help translate and pose the questions, matching the question to the right spirit, reading the questions on behalf of frightened supplicants, and translating the answers from Buriat into Russian. See Figures 3 and 4.

Questioners fall into two categories: those who already have a relationship with Tengri and those who do not. Holding a personal ceremony can be very expensive, so in the hopes of avoiding it, sometimes people who have already visited the Tengri shamans will attend *tailgans* to ask questions of the spirits. Other people will come because they have heard that one can ask questions, or out of curiosity, and they will decide to ask on a whim. Questions usually focus on personal problems, such as help in diagnosing diseases that resist medical treatment, what course to take in a job search, or advice on an alcoholic relative. Answers are often difficult to interpret, and revolve around whether or not unhappy ancestral spirits are standing in the way of a particular course of action, or causing an illness. As Buyandelgeriyn (2007) found among Buriats in Mongolia, people who turn to spirits for

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**Figure 3.** Preparing questions for the *ongons* at the spring *tailgan*, Verkhne Beriozovkhe, May 2005.

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**Figure 4.** Once an *ongon* has entered a shaman, participants crowd around to ask questions. 2005.

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answers often find themselves with more questions. For example, the spirits cannot tell you how to find a job. All they can say is whether or not ancestral spirits are blocking your success, perhaps because they are angry at being neglected. The spirits can tell if a disease is caused by possession by an evil spirit, the malicious anger of an ancestor, or your neglect of a shamanic calling, but all of these answers generate further questions, to determine which spirit is responsible and how to

treat the problem. Since the spirits that block your path and cause illness are usually your own clan ancestors, angry over neglect, knowing the questioner's clan improves the chances that the answers will be useful. It was the request that the written questions be accompanied by a clan name that produced so much anxiety.

Anxiety about not knowing one's clan encapsulates and provides a focal point for other anxieties that swirl around the city *tailgan*. Participants are anxious about the economic and social problems that brought them to the ritual in the first place. They are often unfamiliar with the ritual and what is expected of them, wary and mistrustful of shamans, and at the same time fearful that they do not know enough to distinguish between a 'real' shaman and a charlatan. Although most are not sure whether or not to believe the answers they receive, they are driven by the hope that this approach will help, and that by clarifying their past they can clear a path to the future. They are fearful that too much tradition has been lost, that the relationships with the ancestor spirits can never be repaired, and that some essential 'Buriatness' has been lost, never to be recovered. At the same time, the possibility of success can be just as frightening. For many, if these answers do help, this means that ancestor spirits are real, and their anger at neglect is real, a frightening prospect. Success challenges their understanding of the world and their sense of themselves as modern and rational actors.<sup>8</sup> All of these anxieties seem to coalesce around whether or not the questioner needs to know his or her clan.

The Tengri shamans assuaged this anxiety in two ways. First, when asked directly, they assured people that the spirits would be able to recognize the right clan. Second, they very explicitly stressed that the *tailgan* was not a clan ritual. In opening speeches and in blessings they made very clear that the community on whose behalf they were making offerings and requesting blessings was the city of Ulan-Ude which is a community grounded in territory, not in kinship. This possibility has always been latent in Buriat shamanism's hierarchy of territorial deities. Territorial deities, as opposed to clan ancestors, can be appealed to by anyone who resides, or otherwise comes into contact with the territory. The city *tailgan* plays on this possibility in response to the needs of people who are no longer embedded in clan ritual structures.

The obvious criticism of the new ritual is that this is neo-shamanism, and not revived tradition. This objection is mounted by some local intellectuals, both Buriat and non-Buriat, who argue that the idea of a non-clan based form of shamanism is an oxymoron.<sup>9</sup> Rural, or urban

Buriats who have closer ties to their rural families, and whose clan holds an annual *tailgan*, also argue that the new form is not real Buriat shamanism. Several people from this group told me that they did not attend the city *tailgan* because they “had their own.” However, on the whole, I found that this group was far more tolerant of the new form than intellectual critics, often taking the position that it is fine for those who do not know their clan affiliation. The inauthenticity of the ritual is not the fault of the participants, but a sign of how much has been lost. The need for a question and answer period can also be read as a sign of loss. Ancestral spirits cause problems for their living relatives only when they have been forgotten and neglected. The Tengri shamans argue that in an ideal ‘traditional’ system, where the clan has been diligent with offerings, the ancestor and territorial spirits would help, rather than hinder the living, and the living would have little need to find out how they had angered the spirits. Whether this ideal ever existed is doubtful, and it certainly does not exist now, even for those who have maintained clan identity and rituals. Still, for those Buriats who have maintained their own relationships to the spirits, any relationship—no matter how flawed or non-traditional—seems better than none at all.

On this, the Tengri shamans would agree. They describe their own ritual, and the difficulty of so many of the participants in translating their queries into Buriat, as a “sign of our degradation.” They blame the sad state of Buriat shamanism not only on Soviet modernization, but also on tsarist oppression and Buddhist competition. The city *tailgan*, they claim, is a temporary form, explicitly designed to cope with this degenerate situation.<sup>10</sup> They talk about it as a publicity event, a public health initiative to raise awareness of shamanic traditions. For now, they argue, it is more important for people to be exposed to their traditions, to learn about shamanism, and to be helped. As the revival grows, they hope, the traditional clan structure will be re-established.

Some of Tengri’s practices underscore this assertion: They make an effort to match questions and requests for blessings with a shaman from the same clan or regional background as the supplicant. If problems cannot be resolved through the brief contact with the spirits during the *tailgan*, a private ceremony to ‘diagnose’ a person’s clan can be held, to identify the proper spirits. Their long-term plans also underscore these goals. Although Tengri currently has an office in the center of Ulan-Ude, the members have plans to build a ceremonial complex on the outskirts of the city. The planning sketch includes a central administrative yurt, smaller yurt ‘offices’ for each shaman, and a field for

public ceremonies where each Buriat clan will be represented by a pole around which clan ceremonies will be held. In all of these cases, however, the clan identity being recovered is the broader definition of the term, sometimes translated as tribe. Clan names can be recovered, and family histories reconstituted through discussions with the spirits, but this does not recreate the more intimate sense of kinship that comes from participation in clan/lineage ceremonies.

By presenting the city *tailgan* as a temporary form, a step along the path toward full restoration, and by asserting that 'the spirits will know your clan', the shamans at Tengri offer both the possibility of recovering lost clan identities, and more importantly, the reassurance that the spirits will understand and forgive that loss. The ceremony produces anxiety, and then relieves it. As a temporary replacement for the clan form, the city *tailgan* reminds participants of the loss of tradition, asserting that clan identities, instead of being archaic remnants (*perezhitki*) as the Soviets argued, are essential elements in the full functioning of Buriat individuals. The ceremony asserts that by forgetting their ancestors Buriats have given up a fundamental part of themselves, and made themselves vulnerable to the anger of neglected ancestors. The city *tailgan* reasserts the value of the traditional clan identity, implicitly rebuking all those who have forgotten or neglected it.

At the same time, allowing people to participate in a ritual despite the loss of their clan identity, reassures them that this loss is not irreparable. The ritual provides the opportunity for ancestor spirits to recognize their descendants, and for the descendants to recognize their loss, thereby beginning the process of correcting it. The city *tailgan* both relieves anxiety at the loss of tradition and at the same time underscores that loss. More practically, it offers a ready explanation for all kinds of ill fortune—illness, alcoholism, unemployment, accidents can all be explained as the result of neglected ancestors. Events that appear random within an atheist, scientific worldview are reinterpreted. For those who can accept the new explanations, there is a clear path of actions to take. Through the proper ritual actions, reestablishing relations between the living and the dead, people can take control of their fate and overcome these misfortunes. However, in doing so, they risk renouncing the logic of rational modernity and their sense of self as rational, modern actors.

The logic of the city *tailgan*, which both produces and eases anxieties about lost clan identities, is familiar in a post-Soviet context. Grant (1995), for example, writes of the deep ambiguity felt by many Nivkhi toward the Soviet regime. Like most Siberian natives, many

Nivkhi and Buriats deeply identified with Soviet civilizing ideals, and their sense of self was tied to their modernity. When the dream of Soviet modernity collapsed, they began to question why so much of their cultural traditions were sacrificed to a goal that no longer seemed valuable. Grant calls this a double irony: “the close of the Soviet period brought a bitter double irony, marking the loss of a distinctly Nivkh cultural tradition few could even know firsthand and the loss of the Soviet icons and symbols they had traded theirs in for” (1995:xii). By 2005 in Buriatia, I perceived a third bitter irony, namely that the ideals of the Soviet period had been traded in for the promised benefits of capitalism and democracy, most of which had proven illusory. The city *tailgan* offers answers to current economic and social problems, a rebuke of Soviet ideals and the opportunity to regain a lost sense of a traditional self.

However, the benefits offered by the city *tailgan* are infused with anxieties: the fear that too much tradition has been lost and the relationship with angry, neglected ancestor spirits can never be repaired; the fear that restoring these relationships and reclaiming a traditional ‘Buriatness’ will not be enough to solve the problems of the present, and finally, the fear that reclaiming this traditional Buriatness comes at too high a price – the loss of the modern, rational self.

In addition to its anxieties, this new ritual form has unintended consequences. Despite the explicit avowals of the clan basis of Buriat shamanism, in practice, the city *tailgan* supersedes the clan. Although ancestral spirits are invoked by individual shamans, the sacrificial offering is made to regional spirits, who are higher in the shamanic cosmology than ancestral spirits. Blessings are requested on behalf of the residents of Ulan-Ude, not on behalf of members of a particular clan, and most notably not on behalf of the Buriat nation. The ritual community is defined territorially, and this, by definition, includes non-Buriats.<sup>11</sup> See Figure 5.

The overall atmosphere of the city *tailgan* is inclusive—shamanic assistance, in this context, is open to all, regardless of clan or ethnicity. The participants respond to this inclusive mood. In Ulan-Ude, ethnic Russians attend both Buddhist and shamanic ceremonies, and the percentages are similar. Approximately 10 to 20 percent of the attending are visibly not Buriat.<sup>12</sup> However, the levels of non-Buriat ritual involvement are different. Based on my observations over a year of attending rituals, I estimate the percentage of non-Buriats who seek treatment or other assistance from shamans to be higher than the number of non-Buriats who seek treatment from Buddhist lamas, and much



**Figure 5.** The shaman in trance, wearing a cap with eyes, is visible at the center of the crowd of questioners. Questioners are advised to cover their eyes so as not to offend the *ongon*. The Tengri shamans encouraged photography, as long as the *ongons* did not notice. Verkhne Beriozovkhe, May 2005.



higher than the number of Buriats who attend Orthodox services. In general, Russians are more likely to turn to Buriat religious practices than vice versa. Although the vast majority of those attending the city *tailgan* are visibly Buriat, I also noted a higher percentage of people of mixed background and members of mixed families than at Buddhist rituals. The Tengri organization has three practicing shamans of mixed heritage. Since Buriat shamanic practice is focused on specific ancestors, based in biological kinship, treatment for problems is accessible to people of mixed ancestry without requiring them to fully identify as Buriat.

Participation in any ritual activity in Buriatiia, regardless of denomination, is theoretically open to all ethnic groups, and professionals of multiple denominations (Buddhist, shamanist, Orthodox, Old Believer Orthodox) assured me that they offer assistance to all who need it.<sup>13</sup> In public discourse and popular practice, however, religion is highly ethnically marked. Orthodox and Old Believer Orthodox Chris-

tianity are identified as Russian religions, Buddhism and shamanism are identified as Buriat religions. Russians often attend Buddhist festivals and visit the Buddhist temple to have wedding photos taken, but when asked, will assert that they are Orthodox. There are a number of Russians more deeply involved in Buddhist practice, including several young men studying at both the Ivolginsky datsan and with the Green Tara Society. They have, however, made the leap to identifying themselves as Buddhists. Due to the strong association between Buddhism and Buriat national identity, for most ethnic Russians, this leap is hard to make.<sup>14</sup>

Shamanic practices do not require a similar commitment to a new ethnic identity. Shamanic community is grounded in kinship rather than the nation, and therefore allows individuals of mixed heritage to acknowledge and establish relationships with Buriat clan ancestors without renouncing a sense of Russian identity. Shamanic concern with ancestors in general fosters an appreciation for the multiple ethnic backgrounds of participants. The shamanic calling is reinterpreted as a genetic mandate rather than an assertion of ethnic identity.

The ethnic flexibility allowed by both kin-based and territory-based ritual practice is exemplified in the city *tailgan*. The ritual invokes a community defined by territory, not ethnicity. Although both Tengri and Bo Murgel are explicitly trying to revive Buriat shamanism, the new ritual form enables the formation of a multiethnic religious community. The *tailgan* has always been tied to territory. As a clan ritual, it mediated the relationship between the clan and the spirits of their territory. In its incarnation as a city *tailgan*, a new ritual community is created, sanctified in urban space, and bounded by urban geography. When viewed as a solely Buriat ritual form, the city *tailgan* both underscores and relieves anxiety at the loss of Buriat tradition. However, by redefining the ritual community around the city, 'Buriat' shamanic revival seems to be bypassing the Buriat nation and providing for the possibility of a new, trans-Baikalian, multiethnic ritual community. The city *tailgan* still performs the same function as the clan ceremony, creating community by establishing a relationship to a sacred landscape. However, the landscape and thereby the community so created, has been transformed.

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## Notes

1. The term *ongon* is used to describe both ancestral spirits (*dukhi*) and the ritual objects used to represent them. Since most Buryats no longer keep ritual objects representing their origin spirits, the term *ongon* is increasingly used only to refer to the spirits. *Ongons* are usually the spirits of ancestor shamans. See Humphrey (1971) for a good English language description, and Humphrey and Onon (1996) for an excellent explanation of *onggor*, a comparable phenomenon among the Daur Mongols.

2. The most common examples of this would be an Australian legal requirement that aboriginal groups demonstrate an ongoing maintenance of ritual traditions in order to reclaim land (Povinelli 2002) or the United States Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act which enables Native American tribes to reclaim religious objects if they can show they are needed for ongoing ritual observances.

3. Humphrey defines the *tailgan* in the following manner: "The most large-scale 'shamanist' ritual was the *tailgan*, the massive sacrifice of livestock by a patrilineal lineage to its ancestors and spirits of the locality" (1998:373). However, she notes that she uses the term 'shamanist' because shamans do not necessarily participate in the *tailgan*.

4. Since many of the people I worked with also spoke English, they often used the English term clan. *Yasu* is a Buryat term meaning "bone", used in academic literature on Buryat and Mongolian kinship. I never heard it used in practice. The Russian language literature on pre-Soviet tribal and kinship structures is extensive and confusing as authors are recreating a system no longer in active use. Mikhailov (1990, 2004) is one of the most authoritative on

the relation between tribal and kinship structures and shamanism. See also Dorzhiev (2003).

5. There have been many attempts to catalog which deities and spirits are worshipped where and by whom. Mikhailov (2004) is a good summary.

6. Both ceremonies received official permission, but were not allotted extra buses or a police presence, as were the annual *Suukharban* and *Maslinitsa* festivals.

7. The leader of the Tengri organization is from the Aga Buriat Autonomous Region *okrug* (region), and I have been told that the emphasis on trance is characteristic of Aga shamans. Although this is a topic for another place, I suspect that the impact of geographic variation has been underestimated in the urban context. Ulan-Ude is the national capital of Buriatia, and as such is home to Buriats from different regions, with widely different shamanic traditions. It remains to be seen whether practices from areas with greater ethnographic documentation will become more prominent in the revival movement.

8. I have met both Buriats and Russians who will not attend shamanic rituals and dismiss shamanism for precisely these reasons. Many of the religious professionals I spoke to in my research, from shamans to Russian Orthodox priests, had struggled with resolving the conflict between understanding themselves as rational actors and embracing spiritual explanations.

9. Their argument is based within a local academic debate about the relative potential of Buddhism versus Shamanism to unite the Buriats into one nation. One position within this debate is that because shamanism is clan-based, it does not have the potential to unite the Buriats as a nation. Buddhism, as a universal religion, does, and those who have lost their clan affiliations are merely heading along the universal path towards modernization and nation building that all nationalities go through. From this point of view, the attempt to revive clan-based rituals in a non-clan form is a ridiculous anachronism. Other, less popular positions are that either religion can unite the Buriat nation, or that Shamanism is better suited to be a 'national' religion because it is authentically Buriat, whereas Buddhism was brought to Buriatia by Tibetan missionaries. See for example, Skrynnikova (2003) for a discussion of this debate. The debate over whether shamanism or Buddhism is the appropriate 'national religion' of the Buriats is extensive and a full literature review of the question will be reserved for another place.

10. These kinds of statements are quite common in a post-Soviet context, but they also overlap with a more general discourse of loss and degeneration that is commonly recorded by researchers of shamanism. For example, statements that "in the good old days shamans could fly but now no one is powerful enough...."

11. Although the city *tailgan* is new, multiethnic inclusion is not. In relation to *tailgans* held on behalf of kolkhoz production teams, Humphrey notes that "Russians and Ukrainians who happen to belong to the production teams in Buryat kolkhozy also may take part in them" (1998:409).

12. I use the phrase 'visibly Buriat' meaning that in general, people in Buriatiia tend to assume that Asian faces are Buriats and non-Asian faces are Russians. In actuality, due to exile, migration and intermarriage the ethnic heritage of anyone in Buriatiia is complicated and not immediately visible, even though most act as if it is. I recognize that this is a deeply flawed method of analysis and is in no way quantitatively accurate but I have, as yet, not found a more accurate one. As a fieldworker attending large ceremonies, I was not able to ask each participant about their family history and had to rely on the same racial assumptions most people made.

13. Participation in ritual is however, often limited by gender, in Orthodox Christianity and Buddhism as well as shamanism. My thanks to the anonymous reviewer who made this point.

14. Two of the young Russians studying at the Ivolginsky datsan are not local and came to Ulan-Ude from more western areas of Russia in order to study Buddhism.

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