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Shamans at the Centre of the World

A Brief Introduction to the Shamanism of Kazakhstan and Central Asia

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Central Asia is made up of several countries - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan Afghanistan and a part of China, which used to be called Eastern Turkmenistan but is now called Xinjiang

The area has an ancient history. The trade routes, known collectively as the Silk Road, ran through it, and the area has a rich legacy of spiritual traditions too, including Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Islam and it's original animistic-shamanic spirituality Tengerism[1].

From about the C8th onwards Islam made considerable headway into the area because of an Arab invasion, and many of the peoples became converted, but despite that, much of the original shamanism still remained, either as folk traditions, or as actual shamanic practices. Actual shamanism survived best in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and it is mostly Kazakhstan that this article will focus upon.

Kazakhstan is the largest landlocked country in the world. Technically part of it is actually in Europe, as part of the country lies West of the Ural River, which marks the border between Asia and Europe. It lies due West of Mongolia, although the two countries don't actually touch because of the way the Russian border runs - the most extream part of Eastern Kazakhstan is only around 15km from the most extream part of Western Mongolia.

Because of it's Islamification, much of Kazakhstan's shamanism has a definate Islamic colour - but despite that, its shamanism shares much with Mongolia to the East, and Tuva and Southern Siberia to the North

We often tend to think that Islam eradicated all the previous spirtutal systems, and presently we are innundated with images of radical Islamistic groups - such as Daesh (Islamic State) - systermatically destroying minority religions in the region, such as the Yazïdï, Mandeans, Zoroastrians and Druze - many of which contain traces of the Tengerism. But actuality, Islam has, historically, often been very tollerant of other religions, and in many Islamic countries around the world there are still ancient animistic spiritualities surviving, such as with the Tuareg of the Sahara, the Gnawa of Morocco[2], and some parts of South East Asia such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

In Kazakhstan, Sufism - a form of mystical Islam - became very popular during the conversion, and that had major effect on way shamanism developed and created an interface with Islam.

We know little about the details of pre-Islamic shamanism in and around Kazakhstan, because it was not recorded, but without doubt it would have been a form of Tengerism, which can still be found in the non-Islamic Altai mountains which border the country to the North East. Tengerism is infact still so emmeshed in Kazakh culture that many Muslems will call God 'Tenger' instead of 'Allah', and there has been growth of a popular movement in recent years calling to re-establish Tenergism as a state religion - fueled by a sense of national insecurity after the crash of the Soviet Union and as a way of fostering a sense of state identity after Soviet overshadowing.

SHAMANS AND SAINTS

Shamans in Kazakhstan are often called *baksi,* and the shamanic path is *baksilyk*. Some people say that this word derives from *bikshu*, a Sanskrit word which means a Buddhist monk, but other say it comes from the Turkish word *baqmak*, which means 'to look after' or care for somene. They also have other names, such as *tabïp* (Arabic, for healer) and *közü achïk* - 'the one with the open eyes.'

There are two forms of shamanism in Central Asia, although where exactly one ends and the other begins is hard to determine. One is 'sedentary shamanism,' practiced by those who are settled in towns and villages, and the other is 'nomadic shamanism', practiced by rural nomadic herders, who live far from urban areas in their yurts. Nomadic shamanism is generally less Islamic and more 'free-form' than sedentary shamanism, which is often more codified and formulaic.

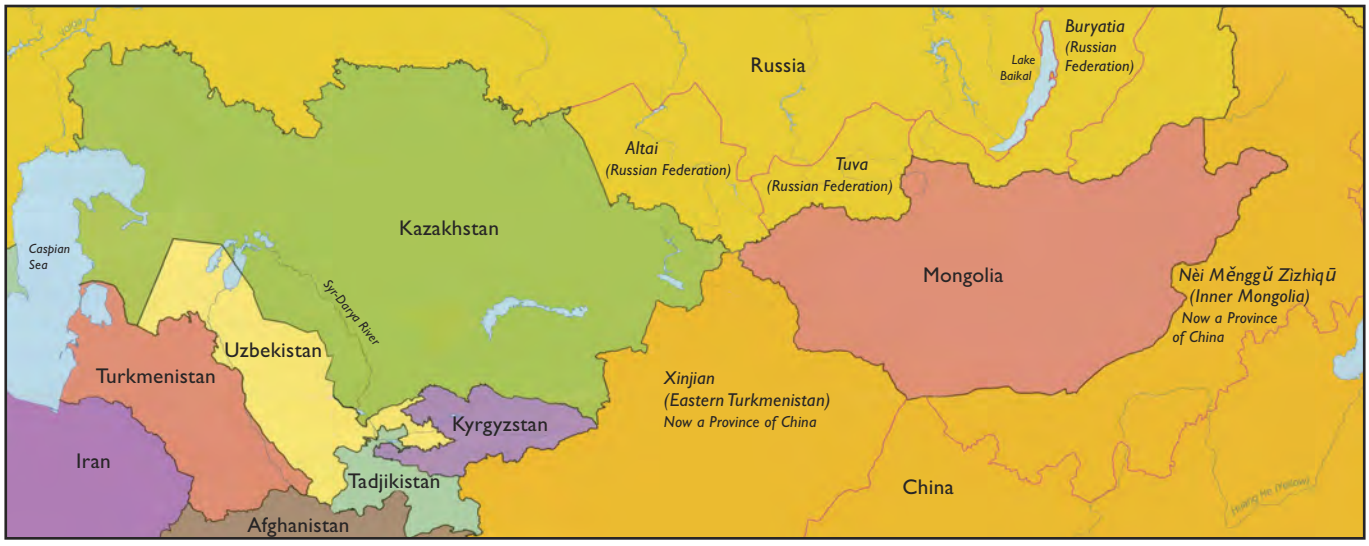
Both forms of shamanism have much in common with the shamanism of nearby Mongolia, Tuva and Southern Siberia, but the influence of Islam has created an additional 'colour' which can, at times, be quite apparent.

For instance, it is not uncommon for sedentary women shamans to teach Islamic practices to the young women in their villages, and promote Islamic

Opposite: traditional nomadic yurts in Kazakhstan

Inset: a shaman sits with her drum in front of an altar with food offerings

Below: Central Asia with a map of Southern Britain at same scale



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Below: Muslim graveyard in Turkmenistan. Despite it being Islamic the graves are decorated with ram's skulls which have been sacrificed to the deceased.

The skulls are said to drive away harmful spirits and enable the dead to have a safe road to heaven

religious piety. They might also teach them how to correctly pronounce Quranic verses in Arabic, and yet these shamans will then pick up their drums, call to their spirits and perform healings.

During Soviet times - when both Islam and shamanism were heavily prohibited - these women were often the people who held on to the traditions of both shamanism and islam, and maintained knowledge of the local sacred sites - called mazars - which are often associated with Muslem saints and holy people, but which are also associated with nature spirits and the powers of nature.

These mazars - which are found all over Central Asia - are still very important to the people, and people gather at them to celebrate holidays and family events, often sacrificing rams or sheep to honour the spirits.

Ancestor worship is very common in shamanism, but is prohibited under Islam, so another important role of the shamans is to look after burial mounds, called *obalar*. Prayers are said at the mounds to the honour the *aruaks* (spirits of dead ancestors). In Islam this is never done, the Quran is never read to the spirits of the dead, as according to Islam, prayers are only said to ask for forgiveness, and to ask for protection and peace. However, such is the desire to look after the ancestors, Islamic mullahs and imams in Mosques will sometimes read prayers for the dead themselves during Friday prayers.

Islam plays an important part in shamanic healings and ceremonies. Verses from the Quran will be spoken over patients and some of a shaman's helper spirits might be Islamic ones - either djinn or Sufi saints.

THE PRACTICE OF SHAMANISM

One difference between Islamic influenced Central Asian shamanism and Siberian shamanism is a rather stripped down approach to ceremony and the use of ritual objects.

Central Asian shamans generally do not have any form of ritual costume which they put on - although this is not always the case - instead dressing just like everyone else. They also do not use so many ritual objects, ongons, fetishes and charms found in Mongolian and Siberian shamanism, although they do use some of the same ritual objects as Siberian shamans - a drum, healing whips, mirrors and some amulets.

Central Asian shaman's drums, which are called dojra or dayereh, are generally much plainer than Siberian shaman's drums, without the Siberian's rich symbolism. They are smaller too, and often take the form of a frame drum, with no handle, played by holding the rim. they often have a series of round metal rings attached to the inside of the frame, which jingle and rattle as the drum is played. The skin of a drum is sometimes painted with the blood of sacrificed animals in simple designs such as a sun and moon.

Just as in other parts of the world, a person will often come to shamanism after a mysterious 'shamanic illness,' one which is only cured when the person has agreed to become a shaman. These illness can happen at any age, to both men and women.

Malika-apa, a female shaman experienced both an illness and a profound family crisis, and sought the advice of a local shaman who told her she was had to accept the

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call to become a shaman. Around the same time, during a vision, she saw four moons with human faces in the sky, and a spirit voice told her she had to be a shaman, telling her that suffering was a necessary step on her spiritual path.

After that she learned traditional shamanic healing and began to see patients, but apparently this was not enough for the spirits, who wanted more from her, so she eventually became a wandering beggar - a dervish - combining Sufism and shamanism. She described herself as a Sufi poet and dervish, and uses many verses from Sufi religious song lyrics in her shamanic prayers.

During healing sessions, Malika-apa would call to a spirit she called the Fourth Khalif, who was the master of all her other helping spirits, and she would recite ancient epic poetry which told stories about the exploits of these spirits. These stories were written down in a book, which she placed facing Mecca upon a prayer rug while she did her shamanic work.

Another woman shaman from the north of Kazakhstan recounted that she began to heal people when she was twenty-seven, when she came to her husband's village. She would often get sick for no apparent reason and would not know what to do about it, so she consulted many healers, but nothing helped.

She refused to become a shaman for as long as possible because it is a difficult path, but eventually she had to give in to the spirits, and started with one of the easiest shaman practices - which she said could be done by almost anyone - called 'lifting children's heart', which is, comforting them after they'd had a fright.

Later she began to visit mazars, making sacrifices at them and staying by them overnight to pray and dream, and after this she began to do other shamanic practices.

As in Siberian shamanism sometimes transgenderism is found in Central Asian shamanism. On shaman from Uzbekistan, a man called Tashmet Khodmetov, was told to wear women's clothes by the spirits - something generally very frowned upon in Islamic cultures, but in spite of this he was a respected member of his community and the father of several children, including a number of sons to whom the residents of his village were keen for their daughters to marry.

Above: the wild landscape of Kazakhstan

However, sometimes a tension between shamanism and more orthodox Islam can arise. Malika-apa recounted a time when she stood up for herself and expelled an Muslem imam[4] from her house with a whip, after he had tried to stop her practicing shamanism because he considered it to be un-Islamic.

ISLAMIC-SHAMANIC HEALING

Shamanic healing in Central Asia generally starts with some form of divination to assess the problem. This is clearly separated from the actual healing ceremony and can be done by means of casting stones, putting a sheep's shoulder blade in a fire to make it crack - the cracks then being read - or other methods specific to the shaman.

Healings can take place day or night, and normally the baksi has a number of assistants, generally women. Everyone taking part has to have ritual purity, as laid down by Islam, so people will wash just as they would before entreing a Mosque.

The actual form a healing takes can vary from shaman to shaman, but here is an account of a fairly typical ceremony.

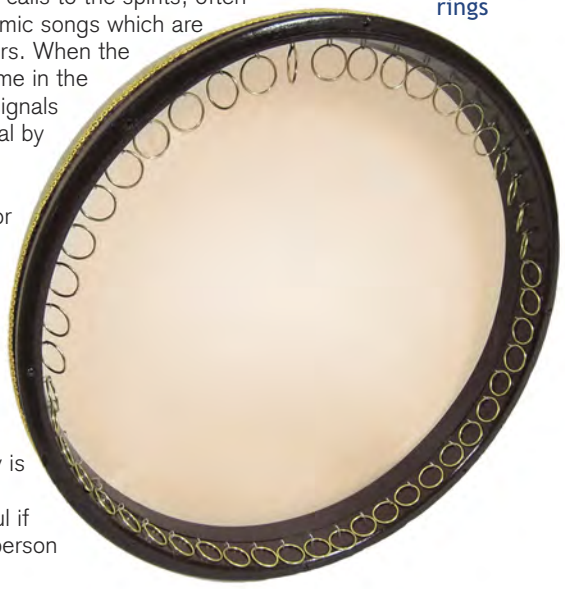
The baksi starts by contact their spirits by singing songs while playing their dojra drum, while the sick person is often blindfolded with their head covered by a white cloth. Parts of their body may be painted or splashed with the blood of a sacrificed animal (generally a ram or a goat) before the ceremony, and the baksi will then stand close to the sick person in the centre of the room or yurt, while the other people present sit around three sides. The fourth side, left empty, faces Mecca.

Often - but not always - the sick person has a rug placed before them, on which is a bowl of sacrificial blood, a glass of water, a plate of flour, a couple of bills of money and lit candles. In each of his hands, as well as on his head, lit candles are placed for a moment, and then removed, and smudging smoke from various herbs is burned and the smoke used to wash all present.

The shaman then plays their drum and calls to the spirits, often using Islamic songs which are like prayers. When the spirits come in the shaman signals their arrival by belching, yawning, gurgling or in some other way.

In some forms of healing the ceremony is only successful if the sick person

Below: a shaman's dojra drum with the inner band of iron jingle rings



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Above: a shaman divining with playing cards. On her table sits a set of prayer beads and a shaman's whip

Below: the shaman calls to the spirits and recites Islamic prayers and then performs a healing

falls into a trance. The shaman stand by them and hits them with his power-filled hands or with his drum while singing.

At the end of the ceremony the sick person takes hold of a piece of coloured cloth, choosing one at random from several. The colour of the chosen cloth should correspond to one known to be associated with the spirit of illness that has been driven out.

Then everyone leaves the yurt or the building and goes outside. Once there, the cloth the sick person holds is removed from them - which represents the spirit of illness being removed, and then everyone goes back inside again.

The shaman then sings and drums again to thank their spirits, and circles everyone attending in turn with the drum while rattling the frame - so as to make the jingles ring.

The ceremony ends with a feast of meat, using all the parts of the sacrificed animal that were not used in the healing ceremony. Parts of a sacrificed animal are often used for healing - the animal being blessed before the sacrifice - are sacred; the body parts are used to draw out, or at times beat out, the spirits of illness. The portions of meat used are then burnt and disposed of, thus eliminating the spirits of disease.

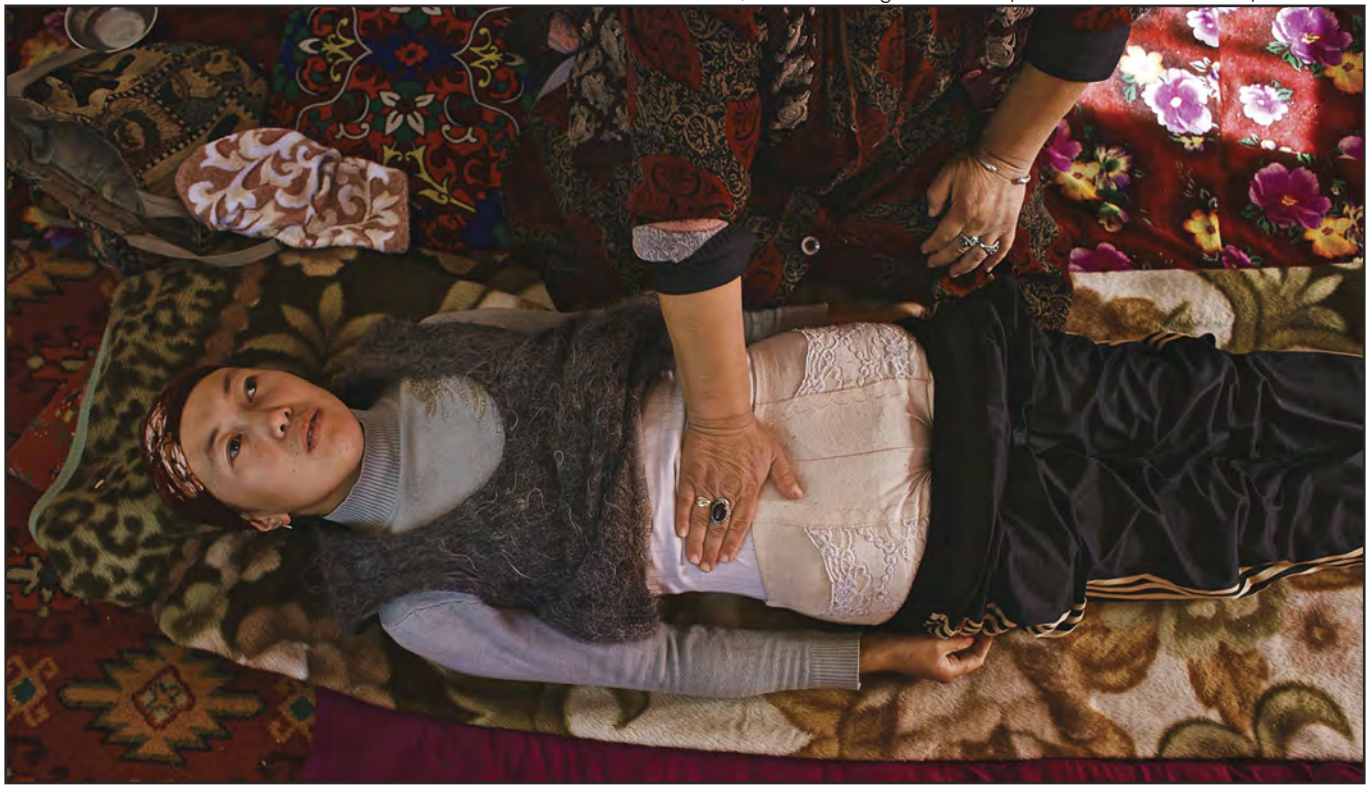
However, not all healings are that prescribed.

Here is an account of a Kazakh shaman called Tumembay performing a healing session to cure a person with snakebite. Tumembay became a shaman during an encounter with a snake when he was younger, after which he slept for seven days and nights and he always said he received his shamanic powers through this encounter.

During the healing, the man who had been bitten was laid down in the North of the yurt, with his head directed towards Mecca. The other people present at the healing sat down in a semi-circle in the East also facing Mecca (which is to the West of Kazakhstan).

The shaman then drew two lines in a circle on the ground along the wall of the yurt, and then a second which encircled the other people in the yurt. Then he invited all the snakes of the same species that bit the man to come inside the yurt.

After a while, several snakes entered the yurt and crossed the outer line drawn by the shaman. Only one snake crossed the inner line to where the other people sat, and this was caught by the shaman, who hung it up in the centre of the yurt above the head of the patient. The other snakes staying back at the entrance to the yurt, but the one above the patient's head swelled up and



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finally burst apart.

The patient recovered within a week after this ceremony, but everyone said that they would have died within 24 hours without any treatment, due to the powerful venom of that species of snake.

Other healings can be less dramatic than the one given for the snake bite. Here is an account of one performed for a small child by a woman shaman in the 1990's...

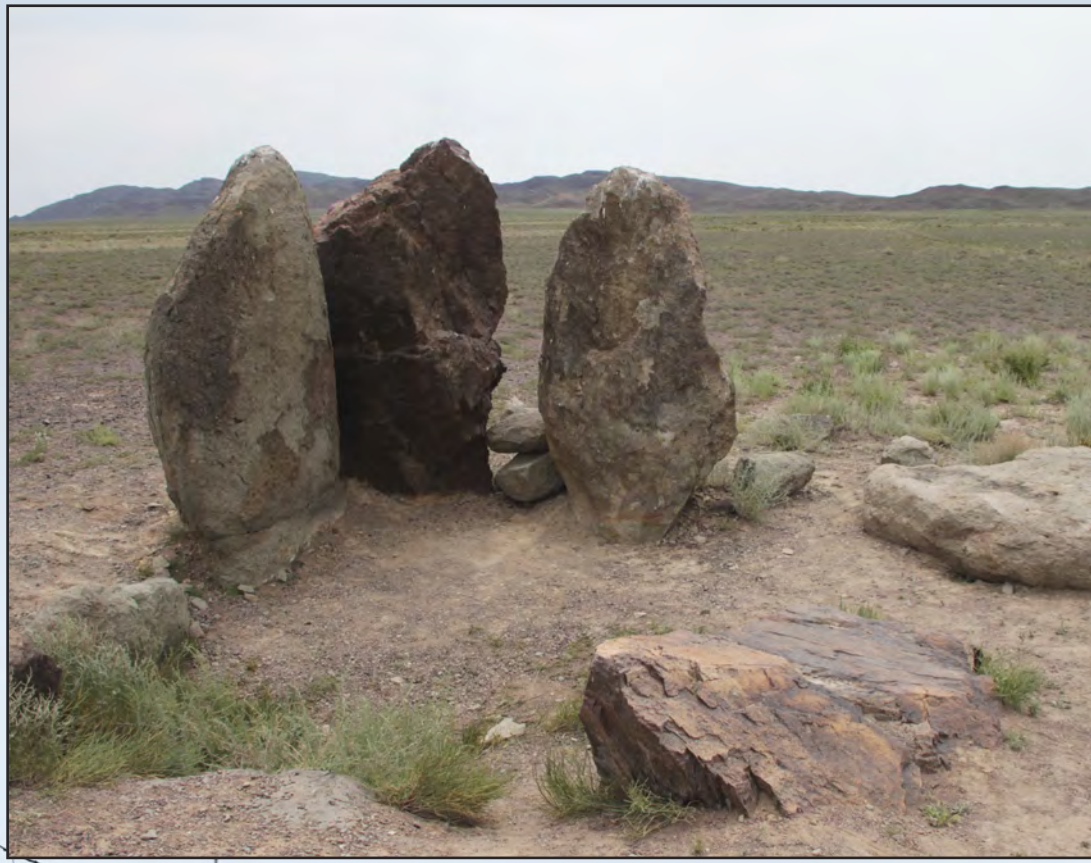
The child's mother brought him to the shamans because the child had not slept for several nights in a row and had been constantly crying. The shaman painted the child's face with a paint used for colouring felt rugs, saying that the bright colours would lure the spirits aflicting the child out of its body; they would then lick the paint and leave the boy alone. This is a fairly common belief in the power of colour amoungst Central Asian cultures.

The shaman then filled a cup with some ashes and covered it with a piece of cloth. Then, holding it upside down, she touched it to the body of the child from head to toe. When she uncovered the cup - which was now only half full of ash - she poured the remaining ashes onto the child's jacket and left it next to the wood burning stove, where it was supposed to sit for seven days.

The boy, who had been crying constantly before the healing was now quiet and the shaman handed him back to his mother.

Sometimes healings are small, simple ceremonies, while at other times they involve the whole community. Here is an account of a night-long healing in a Kazakh village where the whole village took part.

All of the villagers sat in a circle close to the shaman while the shaman's assistants read passages from the Quran aloud. Then the shaman told everyone to get up and dance in a circle, while he played his drum. While they danced, the



Above: remains of an ancient burial mound called an obalar.

Central Asia and Southern Siberia is strewn with many ancient sites and standing stones, many carved in human form, left by the Turkic people in the Bronze Age

Below: shrines to Muslim saints called mazar, in close-by Xinjian province, China. Mazar vary in size from tiny to very large - and are very similar to Mongolian ovoo shrines, sacred natural places where offerings are left to the sacred beings

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Above: Kazakh baksi shaman playing a kobyz fiddle hung with iron amulets and power objects. Photo early C20th

villages chanted "There is no god but Allah".

As the shaman played his drum, he danced and moved like various animals - a running horse, a hunting wolf, a flying eagle and a bear - in the centre of the circle and the whole ceremony became increasingly ecstatic.

Then the drumming stopped and a knife was made red hot in a fire, which the shaman placed on his tongue to show his power to the villagers.

Next a ram - provided by the sick person - was brought in and it was turned to face towards Mecca. The shaman then - while in trance - spoke to the animal and the two held a conversation about the sick person, after which the ram was killed. The heart of the ram was then put on the patient's head and breast while it was still beating to draw out the spirits of illness.

SHAMANISM AND MUSIC

Another feature of Kazakh shamanism is the role music plays within it.

There are two national musical instruments, a long necked lute called a dombra, and fiddle-like instrument callled a kobyz or qobiz. Both are associated with shamans, but this is especially true of the kobyz.

The kobyz is played not only to bring spirits into this world, but also as a way of bringing in healing energy and for the shaman to go into trance so as to speak with, and get advice from, the spirits.

The legend of the origin of kobyz is about Korkut, who was both the first musician and the first shaman.

When Korkut was 20 years old he had a dream, and in that dream a man dressed all in white appeared and told Korkut he was only going to live until he was forty years old. Frightened by this, Korkut decided to search for immortality and mounted his fastest she-camel Zhelmaya and started on a long journey.

Soon on while on his journey he met people digging a hole in the earth, and when he asked them what they were digging for they answered that they were digging a grave for him

Frightened even more by this Korkut kept riding until he came upon more people digging in the earth, who again told him they were prepairing his grave. Now terrified, he travelled on until he had travelled to all of the four corners of the world, but everywhere he went he found people a grave for him.

And so, realising there was no escape he returned to his native home, on the banks of Syr-Darya River, in the centre of the world.

And once there he sacrificed his she camel Zhelmaya and made the first kobyz fiddle, by fixing her skin over the wooden frame, and making strings from her tail hairs. He then placed a carpet down on the ground, by the side of the river, sat down upon it and played his kobyz, day and night for a long time.

And as he did time changed, nature stilled, the flowing waters of of Syr-Darya river slowed down and the animals and the birds all around became silent. All the people who heard the music stopped whatever they were doing, and even Death - under the spell of the music - froze and could not approach Korkut.

At long last, Korkut became tired and fell asleep, and when his kobyz became silent Death, disguised as a snake, finally took hold of him.

And now, after his death, Korkut is the ruler of the underwater Lower World - the world of the dead, but he helps all living shamans. And all shamans have inherited his sacred instrument - the kobyz - and by playing it, they help to guard people from premature death by playing the instrument.

The kobyz is a very ancient

> *One day there was a horse race, but a shaman wanting to enter had no horse, so he called to his spirits and his kobyz turned into a fast horse. He tied his kobyz horse to a tree, but it pulled the tree from the ground, dragging the tree behind it in a cloud of dust*

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instrument - said by some musicologists to be the oldest bowed instrument on earth.

It is made from a solid block of wood carved to give it its shape, with animal skin stretched across the front, making an obvious relationship to the drum. The shape of the kobyz has three distinct areas; the neck and pegs represent the Upperworld, the open middle area of the instrument - which is in effect a wooden bowl - represents the Middle World, and the lower, skin covered section - which is where the power of the sound is generated - represents the Lower World. Another aspect of the Lower World is a shaman's mirror kept in the instruments bag or case, and which is sometimes hung in the open central section.

Often the head where the pegs are has metal hangings, often in the form of ram's horns, and there may well be iron jingles and amulets suspended from the bowl-like middle section as well. This middle, bowl-like section is described as being like a 'an open ladle, from which the spirits rush out' when the shaman plays the instrument.

The kobyz - like a shaman's drum - is said to be alive:

One day there was to be a horse race, but a shaman, who wanted to enter the race, had no horse, and so he called to his spirits and his kobyz turned into a beautiful fast horse.

But he was a fair minded shaman who didnt want to upset his fellows, so, to give them a sporting chance he tied his kobyz horse to a tree so the other horses could start the race first.

Away they went, as fast as the fastest horses could go, while his kobyz remained tied to the tree. until the shaman told his kobyz to race too. And off it went, so fast it pulled the tree from the ground and chaised after the horses, and at the finish point, all the people gathered and watched in amazement as the kobyz lead the race, dragging the uprooted tree behind it in a cloud of dust.

The other instrument, the dombra lute is less associated with shamanism, but is still used as a ritual instrument by some shamans. Like a kobyz is has two strings and a body traditionally carved from a single block of wood - often mulberry - although modern instruments are often made from several pieces of wood, with thin strips forming the bowl-shaped back like a modern day mandoline or a lute.

The baksi then, kobyz in hand, is not only a healer, but also a performer, a musician, story teller, a keeper of epic tales and traditions, and possibly a Quranic scholar.

THE FUTURE OF THE BAKSI

Shamanism has survived in Central Asia for thousands of years, and is probably going to remain there for the foreseeable future. However there are great changes happening in Kazakhstan and so nobody can say for sure what the future holds.

At the moment there is a rise of Islam in Central Asia. Islam in the region is the moderate Sunni form, and much of the Islamic teachings come from the mystical Sufi form, so there is less extremism in the country that perhaps in other places. As under Communism all religions were prohibited Muslims in Kazakhstan were unable to travel to Mecca on the Hajj, but this is now not the case and so there is greater interaction with the rest of the Islamic world.

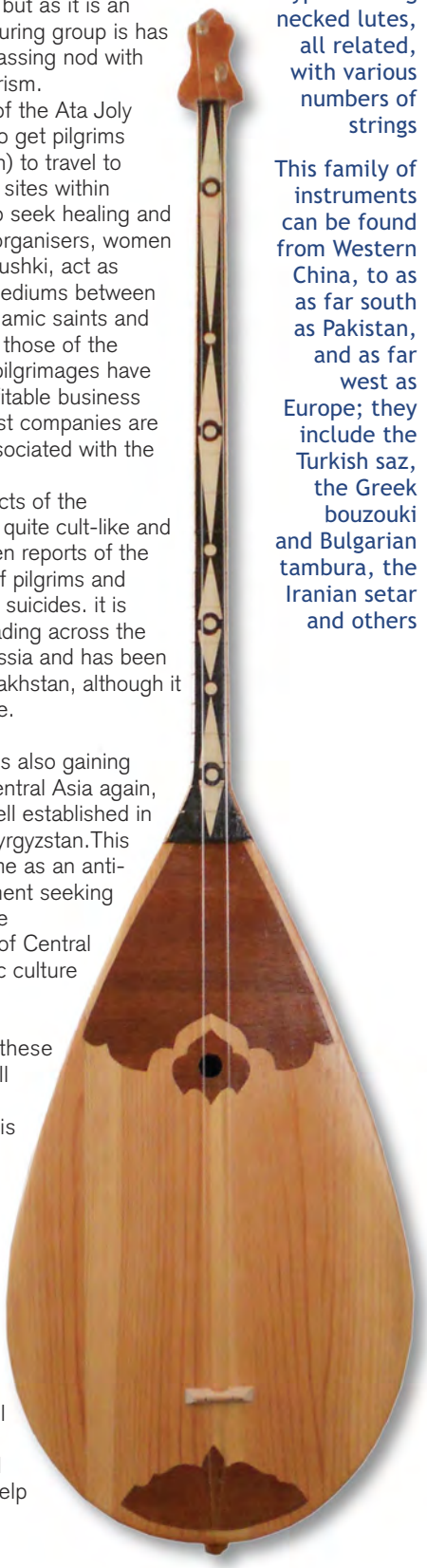
There is also a movement gaining great popularity called called Ata Joly (the Road of the Ancestors). This preports to be an Islamic group, but as it is an ancestor honouring group is has more than a passing nod with ancient Tengerism.

The focus of the Ata Joly movement is to get pilgrims (mostly women) to travel to Islamic sacred sites within Central Asia to seek healing and insights. The organisers, women called the Akkushki, act as shaman like mediums between the souls of Islamic saints and ancestors and those of the pilgrims. The pilgrimages have became a profitable business and local tourist companies are keen to be associated with the movement.

Some aspects of the movement are quite cult-like and there have been reports of the manipulation of pilgrims and some reported suicides. it is currently spreading across the border into Russia and has been banned in Kazakhstan, although it still exists there.

Tengerism is also gaining followers in Central Asia again, and is quite well established in neigbouring Kyrgyzstan.This is seen by some as an anti-Islamic movement seeking to establish the fundamentals of Central Asian Nomadic culture once again.

How all of these spirit roads will develop in coming years is hard to say, perhaps they will form a synergy or create strife and conflict, but whatever happens the spirits will still be there and people will still communicate with them and ask them to help heal the sick.



Left: kobyz fiddle

Below: two string dombra lute

Central Asia has many different types of long necked lutes, all related, with various numbers of strings

This family of instruments can be found from Western China, to as as far south as Pakistan, and as far west as Europe; they include the Turkish saz, the Greek bouzouki and Bulgarian tambura, the Iranian setar and others