

Central Asia

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It was in Central Asia that the shamanism of the Turko-Mongolians and the Islam of the Arabo-Persians were to meet. This zone is bordered by the Caspian Sea, Afghan Turkestan to the south, Hindu Kouch, the Pamirs, the Tian Chan and Altaï to the east, and southern Siberia to the north. Today, several states, in part or in whole, are found in this quadrilateral: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan and Afghanistan. The ancestral shamanism of the Central Asians had to, after the Muslim take-over (8th century), progressively compromise with Islam. The result was an Islamized shamanism generally known as *baksylyk*.

The term *baksylyk* can be translated as 'to do the *baksy*'. Its officiant is in fact, most often, called *baksy*, *bakhshi* or *bakshi*. The latter are local variants of a common root. The theories which attribute a Turkish or Chinese origin to *bakshi* (this form of the word is used henceforth) are insufficiently sustained. The term, in fact, is derived from the Sanskrit term for Buddhist monk, *bhikshu*. *Bakshi* did not always refer to the Central Asian Islamized shaman as it does today. It has designated the Buddhist priest, the secretary to Turk chancelleries, the wandering bard and even a dignitary of the Mogul army. However, from the 13th and 14th centuries, *bakshi* took on, in Central Asia, the sense of shaman, while conserving some of the preceding meanings elsewhere.

Two types of *baksylyk* coexist.* One, northern (nearly all of Kazakhstan, certain regions of Kyrgyzstan and Chinese Turkestan), results from an environment marked by nomadism. The other, more southern (Uzbekistan, certain regions of Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghan Turkestan), is the expression of a sedentary environment. The 'nomadic' *baksylyk* has a paroxysmic character, more evocative of traditional shamanism. This type of *baksylyk* is less Islamized, the Muslim influence exerting itself more strongly in the sedentarized zone. The 'sedentary' *baksylyk* allowed a number of the characteristics of the original shamanism to fade.

Generally, men officiate in the 'nomadic' *baksylyk* and women (*baksha*) in the 'sedentary' *baksylyk*. The reason for this stems from the greater presence of Islam in the urban zones of Central Asia. Shamanism, even if it was more or less impregnated with Islam, was placed in the periphery of social life and was recuperated by the women. It otherwise went beyond Syr-Daria where the incessant movement of the populations prevented Islam from profoundly penetrating the society. Shamanism thus remained masculine there. However, the exceptions are not rare of the *bakshi* officiating in the 'sedentary' *baksylyk* and the *baksha* in the 'nomadic' type.

The ritual

The *bakshi* continues to intercede with the Invisible but carries out, as does the northern Siberian shaman, rituals that interest the entire community. He intervenes only upon the request of individuals or small groups. The most important affair of the *bakshi*, who does not wear a specific costume, is the healing session during which he combats the Evil Spirits responsible for the illness. In order to do so, he is aided by his Tutelary Spirit; itself often assisted by Auxiliary Spirits of inferior rank. The *bakshi* receives these spirits by various means: inheritance (for example, gift of an ascendant), voluntary quest (for example, by sleeping close to a tomb of a saint) or by the decision of spirits that appear in a dream or in 'reality'. The election of the *bakshi* is accompa-

Baksylyk: A Muslim Declination of Shamanism

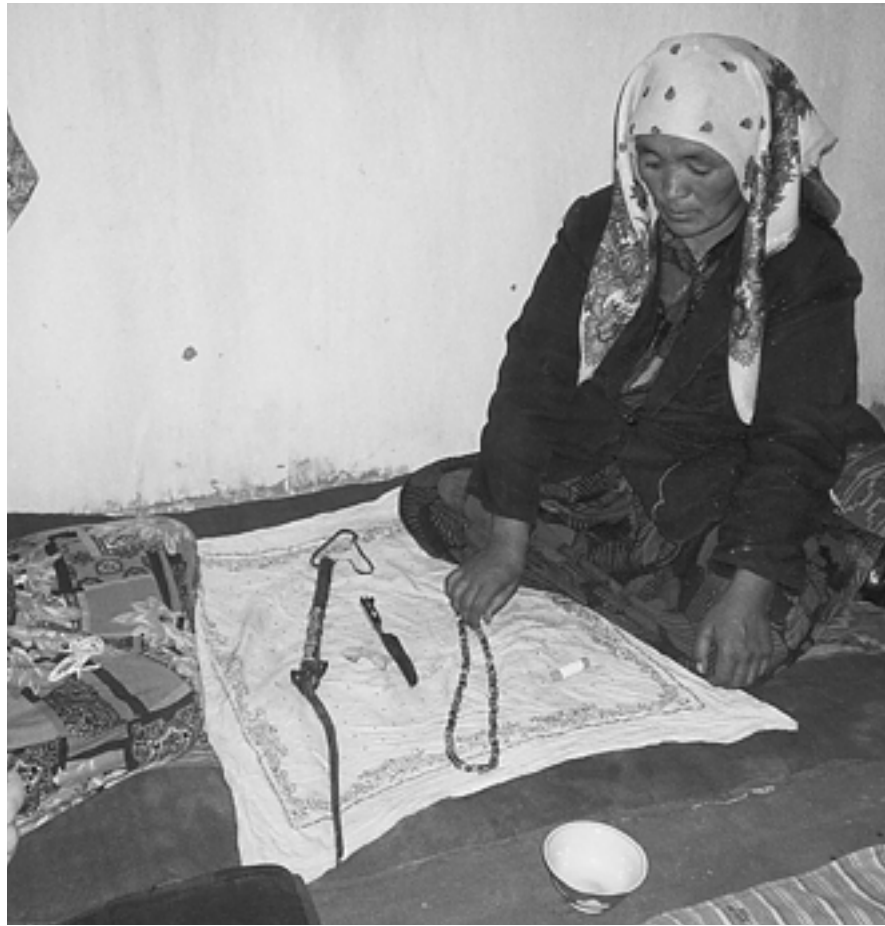


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nied by an illness or an accident which occurs before, during or sometimes after the status has been conferred. Theoretical instruction of the Elected one then calls for the intervention of an experienced *bakshi*.

For each of the two *baksylyk*, a structure type can be deduced. In the 'nomadic' variant, divination – prerequisite for establishing a diagnosis – habitually consists in playing the *kobuz*, a sort of rudimentary violin, in order to call upon the spirits and be informed by them. The *bakshi* can also burn the shoulder blade of a sheep or execute numerical combinations of rocks and deduce teachings by observing them. Divination is in principle separated from the session as such. The latter generally takes place during the night, inside of a dwelling (tent or house) and an offering to the spirits in the form of an animal sacrifice (often sheep or goat) is necessary. The *bakshi* and the ill person are in the middle of the audience. Playing the *kobuz*, the *bakshi* invokes the figures of orthodox and popular Islam as well as spirits. He describes the arrival of the latter and captivates the audience by recounting the stories of the Invisible. He urges his spirits to combat the forces of Evil. He lets his *kobuz* fall, swirls around, gesticulates, covers the Evil Spirits with his imprecations and, at the height of the trance, he testifies, by such exploits as walking on razor blades or by licking incandescent fire, to his condition as superior to that which is profane. Screaming and imitations of animal cries succeed one another while he hits the ill person so as to expulse the Evil Spirits. In order to do so, he may only use his hands or one instrument. One of the most widespread techniques consists in utilizing one part of a sacrificed animal (often the lungs) to beat the ill person and then disposing of it, for it is held that it is then charged with bad influences

(the ideal model of this expulsion is that which is effectuated by the 'hole of smoke' of the tent, opening to the Invisible). The session ends with feasts regulated by diverse proscriptions.

Sedentary and nomadic variants

The *baksylyk* of the 'sedentary' type is much less violent and paroxysmal than his 'nomadic' counterpart. Islam has left a more visible mark on this type and the ritual is far more codified and formalistic. Divination here also constitutes a necessary precondition, clearly separated from the actual ceremony. The *bakshi* (or the *baksha*) interrogates his spirits by invoking them through chants supported by playing his *dojra*, drum consisting of a circle of wood set with chimes over which animal skin of a specially sacrificed animal (goat) is stretched. The skin is spangled with drawings made with the sacrificial blood (e.g. sun, moon). Reflective surfaces, such as a mirror or a glass of water in which one throws cotton, sometimes serve in divination. Once the diagnosis is established, the *bakshi* can envisage a cure session.

The above assumes a character less public than that of the 'nomadic' *baksylyk*. The reason for this discretion stems from the pressure exerted by Islam. The session can take place day or night, the two types being equally attended. The women generally aid the *bakshi*. They have to be in a state of ritual purity with respect to Muslim prescriptions and 'know the *namâz*' (prayer). The ill person – blindfolded, head covered with a white cloth, certain parts of the body anointed with the blood of a sacrificed animal (often a goat) before the ceremony, and the *bakshi* up against his back – is placed in the centre of the room in which the partici-

pants occupy three sides. The open side principally indicates the direction of Mecca. Placed in front of the ill person, on a carpet, are a bowl filled with the 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, bouquets of lit candles are placed momentarily, being removed at the beginning of each ceremony. Herbal fumigation is conducted as well.

The session consists in repeating, until the ill person is healed, the ritual models called *khalqa*. During a *khalqa*, the *bakshi*, beating his *dojra*, invokes his spirits by beginning songs of a Muslim character. His aids signal the arrival of the spirits by belching, yawning and gurgling. In order for the course of treatment to be successful, during a *khalqa*, a trance must seize the ill person and the aids of the *bakshi*, the latter doing nothing more than simply accompanying. The ill person (to whom several symbolic hits are given) and the aids then improvise a sort of *dhikr jahri* (chanting out loud) that the *bakshi* leads. At the closing of the *dhikr*, the group exits the room after the ill person takes hold of a coloured fabric from among those laid out near him. The colour of the cloth should correspond to that of the Evil Spirit that appeared to the ill person during the trance. Once outside, one removes the cloth and thus the Evil Spirit. All re-enter the room and the *bakshi*, as always, accompanied by the *dojra*, sings in order to dismiss the Auxiliary Spirits and render the ill person his freedom. He then purifies those who have assisted by depicting circles around them with his *dojra*, rustling the chimes. He sometimes practices divination in their honour. The evening closes with feasts where the part of the sacrificed animal that was not disposed of or that would not be taken by the *bakshi* is eaten.

The two types of sessions that have just been succinctly evoked have various local variants and have only been presented here in general terms. In certain zones, even hybrid forms of *baksylyk* can be found to take part in two models simultaneously. To treat these aspects would have been beyond the scope of this article, but they are well worth further reading as they comprise part of the extraordinary wealth of Islamized shamanism in Central Asia. ◆

Note

* Apart from *bakshi* and its variants, one principally finds, designating Central Asian Islamized shamanism: *porhan*, *parhon*, *parihon* (Persian *pari khwân*, *pari*, 'fairy, spirit' + *khwândan*, 'to read, to call'), *tabup* (Persian *tabîb*, 'doctor'), *hodzha* (Persian *khwâja*, name of a lineage of honour), *folbin*, *falchi*, *palchi*, *palbin*, or *palbun* (*fâlbin*, from Arabic *fâl*, 'destiny, oracle' + Persian Tadjik *bin*, from *didan*, 'to see') *darger* and *kinnachi* (Uzbek *kinna*, 'bewitchment' + *chi*, indicating activity). Despite several particularities, these differently named shamans reveal as essential that which one would say of the *bakshi*.

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A female *bakshi* using the whip and the knife for healing; Alta Valley area (on the border between Tadjikistan Pamirs and Kyrgyzstan).