

Echoes of Memory



A journalist and TV presenter Yulia Muchnik recollects that Andrei Sagalaev was “loved by the camera,” which managed to convey the caliber of his personality. “An exceptionally sculpted face: a high forehead; a serious, slightly gloomy look (“Andrei Mrakovich” (“Andrei the Dark”) was one of his nicknames, and that’s for a reason); a heavy lower jaw, coupled with an enticing, slightly ironic smile, hiding in his moustache. And a charisma, felt from the very first minutes of the conversation...”

This is how he remained in the memory of his family and friends, colleagues and students. Of the latter he had many as Andrei Markovich Sagalaev was a Doctor of Historical Sciences; researcher at the Institute of History, Philology and Philosophy of the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences; Professor of Tomsk State University and Tomsk Pedagogical Institute; Professor of the University of Illinois (1996–1997) and the University of Wyoming (2001–2002). He passed away before he even reached fifty; he died shortly after returning to Russia from the United States. This happened when he was giving a lecture at a branch teaching center of Tomsk Pedagogical Institute in the Siberian town of Kolpashevo

Mirror of Cultures: In Memory of Andrei Sagalaev, preface by K. A. Sagalaev (ed.), A. P. Derevyanko and A. Kh. Elert (resp. eds.); Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Siberian Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences; Novosibirsk: Inst. Arkheol. Etnogr. Sib. Otd. Ross. Akad. Nauk, 2019. 488 pp. ISBN 978-5-7803-2997-1

Obo, a place of spirit worship. Altai Mountains. 1981. A. M. Sagalaev's photography and archive

The statement that all human cultures are of equal value remains only a slogan, and for many, it lacks real meaning. Prejudice, born from the illusion of semiknowing, prevents people of different cultures from looking closely at each other... We need to recognize not only the equivalency of cultures but also the intrinsic value of every culture. Why should we confine our understanding of historical development paths to a single most successful one, relegating the others to the role of crossroads and dead ends?

Andrei Sagalaev, *Altai in the Mirror of Myth* (1992), p. 7.

The year 2019 saw the publication of *Mirror of Cultures: In Memory of Andrei Sagalaev*, a collected volume dedicated to the memory of the outstanding scientist. Now, five years later, we publish Sagalaev's essay “A String of Losses: The Fate of the Spiritual Heritage of the Altai Aborigines,” which was included in that book. The essay was written a long time ago, in 1989, and in a different country, literally at the turn of the new era. A few years later, in 1992, the legal status of the Gorno-Altai Autonomous Oblast was raised to a republic; the Soviet Union collapsed; and millions of people found themselves in a new social, political, and cultural reality. Since then, a lot has changed in the Altai Republic; legislative acts on national and cultural development are now in place. But even thirty-five years later, many of the observations, thoughts, and hopes expressed by the outstanding and empathic researcher are still relevant. In 1992, Sagalaev wrote, “... the life of Siberian peoples is neither the drafts of history nor its ‘unsuccessful versions.’ It is a different path, the only one possible in their ecological niche... Archaic culture needs neither protection nor justification; it calls for understanding.” The editors of the collected volume *Mirror of Cultures: In Memory of Andrei Sagalaev* managed to assemble not only selected journalistic works and letters written by Sagalaev himself but also the memories of his colleagues and students and the papers written by his colleagues on the traditional culture of the peoples of Siberia and the Far East, which were aligned with Sagalaev's research interests. Today these questions continue to be in the focus of researchers' attention, and every new generation of scholars is about to break spears, defending their own points of view on the inevitably changing realities

The editors would like to thank K. A. Sagalaev, A. Kh. Elert, O. B. Belikova, G. B. Sychenko, V. M. Muchnik, and E. V. Enchinov for their help in preparing the publication

A String of Losses

The Fate of the Spiritual Heritage of the Altai Aborigines

An entire era is fading away, imperceptibly yet quickly. It is leaving unrecognized. We have not even had time to look it into the face. This is the era of mythopoetic consciousness, which prevailed in Siberia for thousands of years. The question still remains to be answered: Why is it so that our century has become the bitter milestone? In the meantime, folklorists and ethnographers are putting together what they have managed to collect, learn, and write down, in an attempt to systematize materials and grasp the situation

When, past the town of Biysk, our expedition vehicle swerves out of a pine forest, a gray wall of rocks rises suddenly in the distance. Altai always comes unexpectedly, no matter if you drive a long-known route. Soon our UAZ reaches Chyorny Anui, the first Altai village on our way. Is there a point in describing dilapidated huts, interspersed with rare yurts and new buildings; an old church, transformed into a cultural institution; untethered Kirovets tractors at the gates; dogs rushing in our wake, losing their breath in hoarse barks? Who knows not the landscape of Siberian hinterlands, where time itself – although four hours ahead of Moscow – seems to have looped? An hour later, we are sitting in our old friend's ayil, drinking tea, sharing news. The stress of the long journey subsides. Altai moves from the category of "there and then" to "here and now." "Here" lives a traditional, respectful attitude towards the elderly. A younger man hurries up to an old man who has entered the ayil, carefully seats him at a low table, moves up a plate of meat towards him, pours him tea.

In the evening, we set off to drive further, slowly choosing a track, pressing all the wheels into the soil. The house master's question sticks in my memory: "Tell me, who are we now? The Tatars or the Russians? Or simply humans?" The question was asked with a grin, with a sly look in the eyes. But is it really that simple? The question of nationality awakens in the man either in days of great achievements or in times of adversity and discord with one's own self.

Our old acquaintances – shepherds and hunters – called upon us many times at the hut, hidden on a mountainside under giant larches. Each conversation invariably turned into one stand: What happened to the Altai culture, language, customs, and the people themselves? What could I answer to my interlocutors? And who, without hypocrisy, could say that they know the answer to these questions? They are now being asked in Khakassia, in Tuva, in Shor villages...

Proclaiming the "flourishing and rapprochement of nations," ethnography would always fall diffidently silent when it had to explain other aspects of national culture, the ones not considered reputable. For example, the so-called "vestiges" in social consciousness, i.e., beliefs and myths, ancient customs and rites. Forgetting that any

There are no debtors and creditors in world culture. The unity of world civilization fascinates by the diversity of manifestations of cultures, by their dissimilarity and discord. Culture is not a bottomless thrift box. In the process of evolution, a society loses, as well as gains, something from its previous states and values. Even writing (a seemingly indisputable benefit, an instrument for preserving culture) fetters, to some extent, the polyphony of culture; endows the language with uniformity; seeks to make language forms unshakable. Statehood brings into people's lives rigid structures and institutions. Religion fills their minds with canons and dogmas. Living culture, as an element, becomes formalized. Therefore, it is all the more interesting to look at the heritage of peoples who, until recently, were guided by fundamental values in their primordial form, so to speak. These are the cultures of Siberian peoples.

Andrei Sagalaev, Altai in the Mirror of Myth (1992)

Elderly Altai woman in traditional winter clothes. Yabogan village, Ust'-Kan district, Gorno-Altai Autonomous Oblast. 1982. A.M. Sagalaev's photography and archive



Altai is sick. It has been sick for a long time. Long before the year 1917, when the ailments that now beset it became apparent. Are you admiring the glittering bident of the Belukha Mountain? Look beneath it. Have you seen the miserable villages, rickety sheds, impassable roads, cut-down cedar forests? Have you felt this hostility towards visitors (merely to strangers!), this wariness and isolation? Haven't you seen (just by accident) a rider heartily whipping his horse, sending it into a wild race – so that both of them get exhausted? Children who do not speak their native language? Here people rarely think about the future and live as if in an eternally lasting today. The people have fallen out of the rhythm of time and space. They are tired of the game, the rules of which are unclear and the goal is unknown.

Andrei Sagalaev, Altai in the Mirror of Myth (1992)



Traditional Altai dwelling – an ayil made of logs. Balyktuyul village, Ulagan district, Gorno-Altai Autonomous Oblast. 1981. A.M. Sagalaev's photography and archive

deformation in an ethnic environment is a hundred times more painful, they shoot straight from the hip, recklessly dividing national heritage into “progressive” elements and “reactionary” ones. A typical title of an ethnographic work of that time was, for example, “Shamanism in Khakassia and its reactionary essence.” Earlier, a more formidable epithet was employed: “counter-revolutionary...” Neither Dzungar khans, nor Orthodox missionaries, nor police officers managed to succeed in fighting against the “immortal superstition of shamanism.” But six decades ago, it was done with.

Everyone is now well aware of the horrific lawlessness of *dekulakization*. The natives of Siberia faced yet another bitter trial. Think about it: not a single region of the country, except Siberia, knew such an outrageous, shameful phenomenon as *deshamanization*. If at the end of the 1920s, local newspapers were riddled with notices like “I hand over my shaman’s coat and drum to the village council,” a few years later these penances were no longer needed by those in charge of the transition to mass atheism. It was in those notorious years that the myth of shaman exploiters robbing their poor folk got ingrained in both common sense and scholarly literature.

Needless to say that even today, ethnographic literature is not free from a vulgar atheistic approach to assessing national heritage. Pick up a book about Buryat shamanism. A thorough analysis of the ethnographic material ends with defining shamanism as an “anticultural phenomenon.” What is this – an incantation or a habitual obeisance addressed to vigilant editors and reviewers? A tribute to the inner censor leading the author’s hand? Anyway, such an assessment lies as far from the truth as the assertion about the final victory of atheism. How can the history of one’s native culture be described with such definitions as “non-” and “anti-”? Yes, today a shaman would be an anachronistic and, perhaps,

At a halt on an expedition to the Mansi people. 1984. *The first one on the left is Andrei M. Sagalaev; the third one is Izmail N. Gemuev, an ethnographer. A.M. Sagalaev's photography and archive*

even absurd figure. Yes, among the spirits’ chosen, there have always been charlatans and crooks, reckless people and outright impostors. Does this circumstance justify the violent suppression of a tradition with thousands of years of history? By the way, books on the mythology and beliefs of Siberian peoples usually refer in subtitles to the “late 19th – early 20th centuries,” but for some reason, the editor’s pencil carefully twists the verbs, firmly putting the text in the past tense. Religion? Beliefs? Maybe, somewhere, sometime, a long time ago... Indeed, there is something

disrespectful about this renunciation. This is how one hastily, without looking back, says goodbye to an unloved relative from the provinces, whose very existence one prefers not to know about.

If only they fought with shamans alone... Someone came up with an idea that traditional female clothing reminded of the degraded position of women in the old society. Another decided to “ennoble” the Altai villages along the Chuya Tract by ordering the removal of log yurts. Seditious was even the memory of clan affiliation, which had regulated familial ties since antiquity, blocking the possibility of marriages between close relatives. Needless to speak about observing a number of ancient customs and rituals. They were automatically classified as harmful vestiges and, it seems, are still not subject to rehabilitation. Ethnographers working in Siberia know how difficult it is to talk to people about that; how deeply forbiddenness and fear are ingrained in their minds. Sometimes people are simply ashamed to think and talk seriously about old signs, beliefs, and customs. The spiritual quest of their ancestors has no value – what could be bitterer? And, remembering the past, we cannot judge people who withdraw into themselves when it comes to the sacred. When expelling antiquity from culture, did anyone think that they deprive people of their sovereign right to have one’s own worldview?

Is it then strange that militant irreligion is increasingly replacing the feeling of love for one’s lesser Motherland, the feeling of one’s place in history? The vast majority of people have no idea of their roots. All they get is skinny brochures that depict – willingly or unwillingly – the history of their native land as a peripheral place, a hopeless outback. The turn to a better life is usually linked with the transition under Russia’s hand. In so doing, dramatic episodes of history are replaced by blissful stories about a “voluntary entry.” The class struggle, of course, begins in Sayan Altai as early as the Iron Age. Meanwhile, “inconvenient” topics and storylines are hushed up. The bogeyman of the much-hyped “nationalism” remains much more frightening for local authorities than the actual process of people losing their face. In the land of the Sartakpai Hero, builders of the Katun hydroelectric power station claim to be successors of his deeds. But as to other mythological figures and stories – one prefers to shuffle them under the rug.



Andrei M. Sagalaev. On vacation in the north of the Tomsk region. 1980s. *Photo by A. Kh. Elert*

In a world created through titanic – and yet effortless! – work of social consciousness, ethnographers always feel themselves like strangers. At best, we get only reflections of the bonfires on which the amazing lines of shamanic poems were smelted. We overhear faint echoes of conversations that took place around the fires but see only the gray ashes. Having interpreted all the symbols and ornaments, explained all the rituals and myths, we nevertheless look at the picture and feel that something is missing. Let us assume we will put together almost all the fragments. What will we see? A mirror cannot reflect anything except the face looking at it. What has been lost forever – the information or the ability to experience their reality as our own? Be that as it may, the picture awaits animation and engagement, even at the cost of increased uncertainty and inaccuracy of the reconstructions. Ethnographic and folklore materials as such are apparently insufficient to breathe life into the schemes we are building. We need a responsive movement of a caring soul. In order to share the spiritual quest of our ancestors, our gaze, now turned to their heritage, must be complemented by a search for an answer within ourselves.

*Andrei Sagalaev,
Altai in the Mirror of Myth
(1992), p. 174*

Try to look up the official history of Altai for the truth about the events of 1904. You will read that the nationalist-minded Altai bourgeoisie, with the support of “Japanese agents” (!), orchestrated an anti-Russian religious movement known as Burkhanism. This version was once created by Orthodox missionaries who spread the light of Christ’s teachings in Altai. The zealots of Orthodoxy saw the spread of religious dissent as a threat to their far-reaching plans for Christianization and Russification. The leaders of Burkhanism were arrested and brought to trial, with someone apparently interested in adding a political overtone to the process. It did not work. But three decades later, the version of Japanese agents and accusations of nationalism surfaced again and for long.

Now the time has come – has it not? – to tell the truth about Burkhanism and thereby finally dismiss the ridiculous and offensive charges. First of all, Burkhanism was an indicator

of the emerging ethnic self-awareness of the very people who are now called the Altaians. At the beginning of the century, this process entered a qualitatively different phase, and the need for a new ideology arose. Shamanism could not play this role since it grew up in the depths of the clan system and served primarily its needs. Orthodoxy was rejected as a religion alien to the national spiritual values. The conflict with the new reality was growing inevitable. The dream of a golden age, of one’s place in the sun, sought to be fulfilled. And it found an embodiment in the legend of a white horseman-the-messiah, the news of whose arrival spread around Altai with the speed of lightning.

Ancient legends and traditions came to life, telling about a fair-minded heroic ruler, about the once powerful state of the Oirots. With the naive determination of renewed paganism, Burkhanism declared the rejection of everything that symbolized in the eyes of people their powerless and alien position, everything that was associated with

yesterday’s poverty and tomorrow’s blind lane. For the sake of the new, white faith, shaman’s drums fell silent and bloody sacrifices seized. The rejection also spread to Russian culture, whose influence on the aborigines many still wish to interpret as unambiguously positive. The sphere of interethnic relations has never been conflict-free, especially at the time of the Russification policy. Hence the passionate assertion of the Burkhanist song that “the shaggy Russian priest is not a man,” hence the demand for fellow believers to expel from their yurts everything associated with Russian life, even cats. However, the intolerance, typical of all religions during the period of their formation, soon gave way among the Burkhanists to a more sober view of life and even tolerance. Tellingly, the trial over the Burkhanists ended in their acquittal, with the Russian public opinion playing a crucial role in that outcome. When Grigory N. Potanin was asked about his attitude toward the persecution of the Burkhanists, the scientist said that public opinion in any country was always on the side of the weak and offended rather than the strong, powerful, and triumphant.

The history of Burkhanism shows up as an inextricable intertwining of tragedy and farce, ambitious plans and unfulfilled hopes. Be that as it may, deeply mistaken are those who believe that the legend of the white horseman has sunk into oblivion. The people’s memory keeps stories about the events in the Tereng log, where the praying Burkhanists were “scattered” by a crowd of peasants led by a priest and a police officer. Listening to those stories, reading old documents, one can vividly imagine the fear and confusion of the authorities, who first encountered the awakening sense of the national “self.” Meanwhile, two works dedicated to Burkhanism are still in manuscript: one is half a century old; the other is five years old. In the meantime, the actual events are overgrowing with speculation and becoming facts of a new mythology. Will the people get their history back? However tough and unflattering, it is a history of their own.

Altai has now become a place of pilgrimage. Raw-food lovers meditate on mountain peaks; tourists raft down the Katun River and soar on hang gliders. The more pragmatic ones take away heaps of golden root and goat fluff, and zealots of the all-Union scale have finally reached the Katun. The newcomers and discoverers have, mostly, no idea that they are walking on the soil of someone’s Motherland.

The mountains and valleys of Altai have been instilled with human thought for thousands of years. An ethnographer here is haunted by the feeling that time flows as if in two parallel, nonmixing streams. Near the Chuya Tract, on the mountain, you can see trees with textile ribbons hanging from the branches. People bring their children and elderly to *arzhans*, or healing springs, where, hidden away from prying eyes, they address their native land and water with a request for healing. There, one on one with Altai, everyday life rises to an existential level. Who would deny that over the past decades, the Altai people have come into possession of many practical, necessary things, the ones that make life easier? But neither would one deny the need for this deliberately nonpragmatic, ritual attitude towards life, nature, and fate.

What is the essence of the archaic worldview that had served as a support for the Altai aborigines? First of all, it lies in recognizing the primacy of Nature, before whom man felt himself an inferior. The sacred ancestral mountain gave life to the members of the clan, allowed them to hunt on its slopes, and acted as a guarantor of their well-being. People, as participants in contractual relations, had never allowed themselves an inhumane attitude towards nature. They did not hunt beasts beyond necessity; they sought not to cut down living trees... The most significant feature of the old worldview was its environmental friendliness.



The life of Siberian peoples is neither the drafts of history nor its “unsuccessful versions.” It is a different path, the only one possible in their ecological niche. The peoples of Siberia created everything necessary for a fulfilling life of a society under conditions that are still considered difficult, accumulated unique experience in the economic and spiritual exploration of space, and paid a full price for acquiring a homeland. Fate did not grant them a second chance, but they used their only one with dignity. We sometimes treat certain signs of their old ways of life as museum curiosities and subject their culture to a humiliating inspection: “This is a delusion... this is a vestige...” Archaic culture needs neither protection nor justification; it calls for understanding.

Andrei Sagalae, Altai in the Mirror of Myth (1992)

People lived with a sense of purpose and proportionality of the universe. If we remove the veil of mystery from the characters of the Altai pantheon, we will see that most of them personify Nature. It was to Altai that shamans addressed their heartfelt words of prayer, asking:

*The small nation lives in misery;
What should I do, my pure Altai?
My white-bearded fathers!
My exalted great Altai!
Will (Altai) give us well-being?
Will it be so that no dirt
will get in our umbilical cord?
Will it be so that no tears
will glisten on our eyelashes?*

The worldview of the Altaians – and this we should admit with certainty – did not have many elements that could be unambiguously defined as “religious.” By the way, isn’t it the respect for one’s native land that is now the main concern of our teachers, peppering their speech with scientific terminology? The old Altai culture fulfilled this task effortlessly because it appealed to the human soul. The old worldview was, first of all, the experience of a spiritual exploration of one’s living space and time and the social self-awareness of the inhabitants of mountains and steppes. Finally, it should be recognized that a small people regards its native land not as a background of existence but as its most important condition. A physical and spiritual alienation from the land leads to the degeneration of the people itself.



Celebrating Chaga Bayram, or New Year’s Eve according to the lunisolar calendar. Kosh-Agach district, Altai Republic. 2017.

Photo by K.A. Sagalae

Carl Jung once wrote that we inherit not the myths themselves but the predisposition to myth-making. Imagine, the philosopher said, that all the myths, traditions, and legends had suddenly disappeared, the next generation would recreate this spiritual heritage in full. I am afraid that our reality makes substantial adjustments to this statement. The very ability to create myths (in the broad sense of the word) is now disappearing in the absence of a caring attitude and delicate tutelage. People more often look at their native mountains through the eyes of temporary visitors rather than their sons, with an eerie confidence

FROM ANDREI SAGALAEV’S SPEECH ON THE TV PROGRAM LEXICON (NOV. 23, 1995):

I think patriotism is basically a biological feeling. A sense of belonging to a certain territory and to the community that lives on it. One can trace it very clearly in the world of higher primates and animals in general. Man has inherited this attachment to a certain habitat. In this sense, every nation, every ethnic group is a population not only consciously but also unconsciously connected to the place where it lives. Subsequently, patriotism gradually develops in humans in a different manner; it gains reflection and becomes conscious. But in the early stages of human history, it takes on bizarre forms. For example, in New Guinea, they practiced, until recently, the custom of pathrophagy, that is, either partial or complete consumption of the parent’s body. This is neither savagery nor a dislocation in the human mind. This is how the people of an archaic community expressed their affection for their ancestors. Therefore, pathrophagy is a primary form of patriotism and the highest one in that particular society.

I have not found a single example in any other culture worldwide of such a negative attitude towards one’s own country as in the 19th-century Russia. This self-blame. As in the writings by Chaadaev. As in the works of his younger contemporaries, the Slavophiles and Westerners. The love for one’s country through suffering. What later developed into self-questioning in the manner of Dostoevsky. Through self-scrutiny and introspection, through the denial and ridicule of this country. I cannot remember any other culture so demanding of itself. And, oddly enough, all this exactingness and strange love for the Fatherland turned out to be fruitless. It was in no way reflected in folk culture and, in my opinion, lead to no results. The lesson proved to be in vain



in the randomness and purposelessness of their existence as humans. What should we do – launch yet another campaign, this time to promote old myths and shamanism?

I wish to believe that the era of thoughtless labels, such as “vestiges” or “religious prejudice,” is now over. Of course, the new era should not be about rehabilitating religion, sacrifices, and other such attributes of the old ways. Treated as cultural history facts, they require understanding rather than justification. It is the presumption of innocence that the spiritual heritage of Siberian aborigines is now calling for. The worldview concepts of Siberian peoples should be considered – on an equal basis with others – in the context of the general history of human thought. What we have before us are neither the “side branches” nor “sources” of more developed philosophical systems but completely self-sufficient and self-valuable types of social consciousness of peoples who once embarked on a different path of development. To describe their intellectual history as a chain of continuous misconceptions and blunders and to treat their worldview as an ethnographic “curiosity” would, therefore, mean to humiliate an entire people and, by extension, to demonstrate our own fallacy.

Paradoxically enough, it is only today that we have grown up to adequately perceive and analyze shamanic poetry, a concentrated gist of the folk wisdom of past centuries. It turns out that the thought of Siberian peoples has come close to understanding the most complex dialectics of the interaction of matter and consciousness. And this thought is still alive in the art of *kaichi*, a storyteller; in the wise word of an old man; in the lines of a young poet. Yet we are increasingly pushing it to the periphery of culture, drown it with addressless information

“noise.” Meanwhile, the culture of an ethnic group cannot tolerate a vacuum. We know, unfortunately, what fills up an unexpected vacuum in folk culture and public consciousness. The string of losses is not endless. In the end, the man is faced with an alarming question: Who is he? The final outcome may be the irreversible destruction of the ethnic identity.

This process can only be stabilized by turning to the fundamental values of the people’s culture. These undoubtedly include the national heritage. The people must finally reclaim their own history, written in a comprehensible language, without boring truisms and schemes. They must reclaim a sense of pride in the deeds of their ancestors. This history must tell the truth about all the actors: about the *bais*, oppressors and patrons; about the shamans, poets and thinkers, bribe-takers and swindlers; about the members of the Karakorum Duma; and about the first *kolkhozniks*. About everyone who makes up the collective concept of a people. Only such a history could act as a spiritual support for the people, both as its staff and its pointing finger. In the meantime, the danger of losing one’s face exists and is clearly perceptible. You can hear this motif in the poems by the Altai poet Brontoï Bedyurov. Addressing the sacred mountain, a venerable elder says:

*The hats are off and so are the belts,
We pray while crimson is the sky:
Protect us from losing our face,
Ala-Babyrgan,
Ala-Babyrgan!*

...Returning to the peoples of Siberia a sense of place in the world and in History, maintaining and nurturing this feeling is a difficult task. But we need to give back to the people at least a hope of preserving their identity, that is, an independent life.

Elderly Altai woman near her ayil.
Ust'-Koksa district, Altai Republic.
1993. G.B. Sychenko's photography
and archive



This article was first published in Nauka v Sibiri (Science in Siberia), Novosibirsk. 1989. N 15 (1998), April 21. P. 4–5

Photo by K.A. Sagalaev