

## “Ata Zhol” in Kazakhstan: Spiritual Revival through Neo-Shamanism

Arna Saparkalievna Sarsambekova\*, Botbaybekova Saltanat Karibaevna and  
Sarsambekov Ermek Saparkalievich

L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Mirzoyan str. 2, Astana,  
Republic of Kazakhstan, 010000  
\*E-mail: sas55@mail.ru

**KEYWORDS** Islam. Neo-shamanism. Kazakhstan. Shamanism. Folk Islam

**ABSTRACT** This paper explores “Ata Zhol,” a spiritual trend. Shamans (*sunkars* and *akkus*) have been mediators between disappointed spirits (*aruaks*) and people. They have given a blessing (*bata*) from a spirit to a person, have healed and brought people to sacred places. Sufis established a tradition of going on trips to sacred places. While Sufis were spreading Islam, they accepted ancestor worship of nomads, although Arabian Islam denies ancestor worship. Thus, shamans have been involved in the revival of Folk Islam, Kazakh Islam or Sufi Islam. Shamans of the “Ata Zhol” are not traditional shamans (*baksy*). In contrast to traditional shamans, they are not connected with the lower level of spirits (water, woods, jins or *Albasty*). They can give *bata*, keeping clarity of mind (not faint and do not roll eyes). In addition, there is a revival of spiritism at a personal level, because participants cannot deny all the words of shamans.

### INTRODUCTION

In contrast to Mongolia, where the revival of shamanic practices is linked to economic reasons (Buyandelgeriyn 2007), in Kazakhstan the growth of shamanism is associated primarily with political reasons. The collapse of the USSR led to shamans (*baksys*), and healers (*emshis*, *taups*) “going out of shadow” (healing people openly without fear before government). Many new spiritual trends have begun to appear in Kazakhstan (Penkala-Gawêcka 2014). It is difficult to understand about a spirit possession and to divide real healers from frauds. However, this question is still intriguing for researchers. The study of shamanism is one of the most difficult in the history of world religions (Zhelobtsov 2014; Leistle 2014; Scott 2014; Harner 2015; Henry 2015).

This paper explores “Ata Zhol”, a spiritual trend. The political processes in the USSR influenced different parts of the society; in particular, spiritual values were completely altered. So, disappointed saint spirits (*aruaks*) appeared, to return people to the human spiritual heritage. Shamans (*sunkars* and *akkus*) have been mediators between disappointed spirits (*aruaks*) and people. They give blessings (*bata*) from the spirit to a person, have healed and brought people to sacred places. Thus, they have restored Sufi Islam (folk Islam) and ancestor worship, but not deliberately.

Citizens of Kazakhstan (not only the Kazakhs) attribute their health problems to Kazakh saint spirits (*aruaks*) who have returned to raise the people’s spiritual consciousness, putting them on the “Ata Zhol” (the grandfather’s way). Coming across the “Ata Zhol”, people consider this spiritual direction or trend and shamans (*sunkar-man*, *akku-woman*) as a sect, therefore are fearful. Seeing advances in health recovery, some people become believable and change their attitudes towards the “Ata Zhol”. Also, they follow the religious rituals and work themselves. Thus, spiritual revival at a personal level is becoming inadvertent. In this paper the researchers attribute spiritual revival at a personal level to neo-shamanism.

### METHODOLOGY

The researchers’ data is based on a 6-month exploration of the “Ata Zhol”. Researchers have used a participant observation method and an emic approach. They were a part of the community with shamans, their clients and audience in the capital of Kazakhstan (Astana) and Russia (Omsk city). Also, one of the researchers initiated to become a neophyte. In this paper, researchers have explored the spiritual revival at a personal level through neo-shamanism because they have been observing one particular client since his first meeting with shamans.

The researchers' test person is a man (named *Arman*) who has been suffering from depression for 11 years. In Kazakhstan and Russia, doctors treat the disease in psychiatric hospitals, which has a negative consequence on the people. Post-socialistic society, unlike western countries' society, has not been tolerant of these people. People with this diagnosis become marginalized, so they are trying to find shamans who can help them.

The researchers' field materials are called, FM, shamans: man-*sunkar*, woman: *akku*, blessing: *bata*.

## OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

The first step of the experiment was to analyze if the shamans (*sunkars* and *akkus*) could diagnose *Arman* rightly. Two out of three did so like doctors, but the third one claimed that *Arman* has a *kasiet* (a gift from God, so *Arman* has a shaman's disease). All of them diagnosed while giving a *bata* (blessing) from a Kazakh saint spirit (*aruak*).

Firstly, *Arman*'s sister met *akku*-Asselin Omsk city. *Akku* Assel has an *Orda* (a specially equipped room) and has given a *bata* (a blessing from *aruak*, a saint spirit). Shaman Assel cannot give the *bata* in Kazakh, because she lives in Russia. Currently, the Kazakhs of Russia have a linguistic assimilation (Sarsambekova et al. 2014). *Akku* Assel has diagnosed *Arman* through his sister (*Arman* has not been to the *Orda*, because he lives in Astana). *Akku* Assel has given the *bata* from Suinbayata. He is a Kazakh saint.

She talked to *Arman* and said that having a “dark head (jinn's possession) and with his tangled legs, a man could not do anything because he does not have a way” (FM). She has recommended *Arman* to go to the mosque and read *namaz*.

Secondly, *Arman* went to the *Orda* by *sunkar* Ruslan in Astana. This shaman is not familiar with shaman Assel but he has diagnosed *Arman*, like shaman Assel. He has given the *bata* from Toktybayata, a Kazakh saint and was a great *baksy* (shaman) in Kazakhstan. He recommended *Arman* to do Muslim ablution for one week (Toktybayata said to come and heal *Arman*). *Sunkar* Ruslan also warned *Arman* about his wish to sleep all week.

After a few weeks, *Arman* went to the *Orda* by *akku* Mereke (she lives in a village near As-

tana). She gave the *bata* from Aisha bibi. She lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, a patron of lovers. *Akku* Mereke diagnosed *Arman* with having a *kasiet*, so he needs to go to sacred places (Turkestan city, south of Kazakhstan).

Thus, all shamans can diagnose diseases. Two of them have done it like official medicine; the third one has claimed it to be a shaman's disease.

A *bata* (blessing) is given for two or three minutes and includes 4 parts:

**Part1:** *Akku* or *sunkar* give usual compassion to person.

*Kinalypbalamsende de*

(Son, you had suffered enough)

*Boyndabalamseninauyrtpalyk bar eken*

(Son, you have had difficult moments)

*Oz-ozindikinalypkeidebirkinalganda*

(You torture yourself)

*Ne isterindi bile almaiketkentuiyaktynbirsin*  
(FM)

(You are the one who doesn't know what to do)

**Part 2:** *Akku* or *sunkar* have been talking about the events from the past life of a person. Shamans have to say the truth, otherwise the person will not believe them and as a consequence, will not trust them. Usually, this part cardinally changes a person's perceptions and attitudes to the shamans. The person begins to believe.

*2003 zhylsalaiyn*

(In 2003)

*Eskertudisalaiyn*

(I want to warn you)

*Birkazanaiyndakyspagynboldyn ma?*

(In one October there was a problem)

*Urpagymdepsonynda*

(Descendant there)

*Aitypketeiintagyda*

(I can say again)

*Tagydabirtagydakynalystaboldynba?*

(Were you in trouble again and again?)

*Anauturgantemirtulpardandep*

(From this iron horse)

*Ozinealikungedeiinbultanynda*

(For you now) (FM)

**Part 3:** *Aruak* “scolds” the man for his sins.

*Urpagymadasypkaldynba?*

(My descendant, are you lost?)

*Adaspaganpendezhokosyduinede*

(Everyone can be lost)

*Sony saganaitayn*  
(I'm telling you) (FM)

**Part 4:** shamans give facts from the future. Therefore, many people in Kazakhstan consider the *bata* as a divination. Shamans usually talk about godly events. Also, in this part *aruak* promises someone to provide support, if he/she follows certain requirements (he/she has to do Muslim ablution, not drink alcohol, and take a trip to sacred places in Turkestan or this region). The reaction's of people, to this is different: Some of them begin to believe, while some people consider "Ata Zhol" a sect.

For the second step of this experiment, Arman has gone to the sacred places in Turkestan. Some people in Kazakhstan consider "Ata Zhol" to be a sect because the majority of *akkus* and *sunkars* force people to go to sacred places and do Muslim's ablution. For instance, a trip to the regional sacred places is available, but trip to the one in Turkestan is expensive.

A significant role of these places revived in Soviet Union's time, when people could not go to Mecca (Mustafina 2010). They did *hajj* to Turkestan where burials of Arystan baba and Hodja Ahmet Yassau (main Muslim saints) are. The Soviet's Muslims called this trip a small *hajj*. This practice was established by the Sufis in Central Asia when they were missionaries.

Personal aims for taking the trip are different and depend on demands of the people. The majority of them would like to be healthy and they are disappointed with traditional medicine. In opinion of shamans (*akkus* and *sunkars*), the trip to sacred places is useful for the participant's ancestors. On the trip, the participants go to burial grounds of saints and pray there. Each burial is served by *shirakshi* (a man who specially takes care of this burial and lives on the pilgrims' alms). The *Shirakshi* reads Koran and *Duga* (pray for this saint). Saints see not only participants but their ancestors (*aruaks*-spirits) too. A saint person is located near God and can ask God for the participant's ancestors and God can bring their spirits (*aruaks*) close. Also, God lets some spirits go out of shadow to light. Thus, a participant's ancestors (*aruaks*) can push up to God!

In opinion of the Kazakhs, each person is accompanied by 7 fathers' and 7 mothers' ancestors. These ancestors support the right (fathers) and left (mothers) hands all time. But each Kaza-

kh has to do Muslim ablution because ancestors are pure and cannot touch their dirty descendants. So, if Kazakhs would like to get support from their ancestors they have to do Muslim ablution.

Arman went to Turkestan with *akku* Mereke, who was the leader of the group. There were 15 people. They went to Almaty city to the *Big Orda* (the center of "Ata Zhol"), where they paid for the trip. This trip lasted for 4 days and the participants visited 37 saints. Shamans (*akkus* and *sunkars*) gave *bata* twice, at Arystan baba's burial site and in Almaty (the group returned to the *Big Orda*).

*Batas* in the sacred places are different from regional *bata*. The structure of the *bata* also includes 4 parts: spirit compassions, scolds, predicting the future and giving instructions. But *bata* in sacred places is more concrete and longer. This *bata* was given by *sunkar* Bolat from Arystan baba. Arystan baba is the general Muslim saint. According to a legend, he was an associate of Prophet Muhammad. Prophet Muhammad sent him to the Central Asia, where he lived till the 12<sup>th</sup> century and gave 3 dates from Muhammad to Hodja Ahmet Yassau. Muslims believe that Arystan baba is the teacher of Hodja Ahmet Yassau. Firstly, pilgrims go to the Arystan baba burial site and sleep there, next morning they go to the Turkestan city, the mausoleum of Hodja Ahmet Yassau. According to legend, Hodja Ahmet Yassau said to his teacher, "Pilgrims will sleep at your burial and will pray at my burial".

**Part 1:** *Sunkar* Bolat spoke about all the problems at Arman's home, and about his parents and relatives. In contrast to a regional *bata*, *bata* on Arystan baba's burial is more particular.

*Anaubirtugantuystaryna da renzhipbala*  
(My son, once your relatives offended you)  
*Ai birkolyndysiltegenkunin de boldy*  
(Once you wanted to escape from everything)

*Ai urpagymsagan da biraitaiyn*  
(My descend, I want to tell you)  
*Bugin de akzhaukytyanandy da oilap*  
(Even today you think about your old mother)

*Erbolsandaetzhureginelzhirep*  
(Despite being a man, you feel weak)  
*Akzhaukytyanandy oilap*  
(You think about your old mother)  
*Saryuaiymgasalyngan*

(You think too much)  
*Kunderin de otkenekentagy da*  
 (Days pass by again) (FM)

**Part 2:** *Sunkar* Bolat has scolded and he has been accurate.

*Zhaskunimdep dos*  
 (Don't say you are young)  
*Saskokireginsogypkalmasy*  
 (Don't beat your breast)  
*Urpagymadasypnakaldynba?*  
 (My descendant, are you lost?)  
*Adaspaganpendezhokosyduniede*  
 (Everyone can be lost in this world) (FM)

**Part 3:** *Sunkar* Bolat has predicted the future.

*Shanyragynynoishterkende*  
 (Don't worry about your home)  
*Ekizhylyndegendzharykbirduniegekeledi*  
*karagymay*  
 (The light will come in within two years, my dear)

*Tirilipketse de urpagynkeledikaragym*  
 (Some die, some are born)  
*Zhaksylyktyntkaragymsony*  
 (That is the welfare) (FM)

**Part 4:** *Sunkar* Bolat has given instructions. *Turkestani bata* always requires something from a man as well, to do Mohammedan prayer, to lay a table in honor of God, to welcome guests for God, and to give donations.

*Balambugin de myna besuakyt*  
 (My son, you came here)  
*Zhainamazyndyalaalmai*  
 (Not saying your 5 fold prayers) (FM)  
*Akmeshitkekepbala*  
 (Entering the white mosque)  
*99 sadakandysalsan*  
 (If you give 99 donations)  
*Shanyragynynastynda*  
 (Under your roof)  
*Kudaishaindyberesindepbygin de*  
 (God wants you to welcome guests)  
*Shaikanadaarystandaibabanyntaruagy*  
 (In honor of Aristan baba, the great)  
*Akbatasynberse*  
 (If he gives his blessing) (FM)

At the end of the trip, participants get *bata* in the *Big Orda* in Almaty city. Its structure includes 3 parts: spirits praise, predicting the future and giving instructions. We have two *batas* from Kainazar Ata (a Kazakh saint) and Aisha bibi.

**Part 1:** *Akku* and *sunkar* have been praising Arman.

*Bugyngy myna tanyndaauyldyn myna aruagy*

(The regional spirit in today's morning)  
*Alladan myna tilegenshagy bar ekenozi de*  
 (It's time you asked for God's blessing)  
*Ertenanatanyndaazinebalamzhaksylyk*  
 (Tomorrow morning you will be lucky) (FM)  
*Sauap myna kasiet*  
 (Will be blessed)  
*Ustatyp myna birbersem*  
 (Will be gifted) (FM)

**Part 2:** *Akku* and *sunkar* predict the future.

*Zhai bar ekenurpagym*  
 (You have ordinary descendants)  
*Boynda da talaibir*  
 (Changes will occur)  
*Ozgeristerbolady*  
 (In your life) (FM)  
*Ertengi myna tanynda*  
 (Tomorrow morning)  
*El zhurtyndyosibir*  
 (Your ancestors will be raised)

*Bes aruaktyntbasyna*  
 (To 5 spirits)  
*Kozi myna zhetkizer*  
 (By this lamb)  
*Tuiyakty myna biri de*  
 (You will be one of them)

*Bolasyndepaitayn*  
 (I will say to you) (FM)

**Part 3:** *Akku* and *sunkar* gives instructions.

*Ertengibalamsendebir*  
 (Tomorrow, my son)  
*Kolynnanbirtusirip*  
 (Don't drop your hands)  
*Almassyndepaitarmyn*  
 (I will tell you) (FM)  
*Tuiyak myna balasy*  
 (My descendant son)  
*Korkynyshkasalynba*  
 (Don't be afraid)

*Kabyldykkabylalshi*  
 (Accept this blessing) (FM)

Despite a common opinion that "*Ata Zhol*" is a sect, the researchers cannot agree. Modern Kazakhs do not do Muslim ablution, Mohammedan prayers for their ancestors, or drink alcohol. It is a heritage from the USSR. Therefore, calling *Akku* and *sunkar* to change their lifestyle scares them. In addition, some of *Akku* and *sunkar* put pressure on people by asking them to go to sacred places as "a panacea for all problems". The researchers have interviewed *Akku* and

*sunkar* in Almaty and they have regretted the lower level of spirituality among the members of the “*Ata Zhol*”. As they have said, we have had quantity, not quality (FM).

Researchers consider the “*Ata Zhol*” as a spiritual trend, which revived Sufi Islam (Kazakh Islam) in Kazakhstan. However, it has begun not deliberately, because the majority of shamans lack high education. This fact does not let them understand and explain to the audience what they are doing. A tradition of going on trips to sacred places has been established by Sufis and was ceased in the Soviet time. All Eurasian nomads had ancestor cults (Potapov 1991; Syzranov 2006; Khomushku 2009; Mustafina 2010; Tsydenov 2011) when Sufis brought Islam in Kazakhstan’s steppe, people believed in the healing power of the holy places. This is a characteristic not only of nomads (Ogydin 2002). For instance, Hammerschlag (2009) spent the night in the sacred cave of the Huichol Indians when treating their children. In addition, while Sufis were spreading Islam they accepted ancestor worship of nomads, although Arabian Islam denies ancestor worship. Therefore, Kazakh ancestors always had Sufi Islam, not Arabian. Thus, currently, we are witnesses of the revival of Folk Islam, Kazakh Islam or Sufi Islam.

In the researchers’ opinion, shamans of the *Ata Zhol*, *akkus* and *sunkars* are not traditional shamans (*baksy*). Researchers believe they are establishing neo-shamanism because they do not have a traditional “shaman’s disease” and they are in the community with Kazakh saints (high level of spirits). In contrast to traditional shamans, they are not connected with the lower level of spirits (water, woods, *jins* or *Albasty*). They can give *bata*-keeping clarity of mind (not faint and do not roll eyes). The researchers think, it looks like a new shamanism, because each person can choose to be a shaman (Zhelobtsov 2014; Leistle 2014; Scott 2014; Harner 2015; Henry 2015). However, in the researchers’ opinion, shamans who have a gift of clairvoyance can give clear and accurate *bata* while some of *akkus* and *sunkars* have used earlier prepared phrases.

### CONCLUSION

There is a revival of spiritualism at a personal level, because participants cannot deny all the words of shamans. For instance, Arman knows about problems faced by all the members of the

group. Participants have not liked the common reasons for why they go on trips. However, all the participants can get information about each other during the *bata*. The researchers were witnesses, when one man was afraid and did not come into the room in Almaty for receiving the *bata*. After this trip, the consciousness of participants changed, regardless of whether they liked it or not. The idea that this trip can help your ancestors and push them up to God is very attractive. Therefore people, returning home, try to cook *shelpek* (funeral cakes) every Thursday evening and read Koran, *Duga* for their ancestors. Some of them never go on trips with the “*Ata Zhol*” again, but they go to mosque or begin to do Mohammedan prayer. Thus, they try to work on themselves.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Anthropologists need to pay attention to the detailed study of the spiritual movement “*Ata Zhol*”. The researchers do not consider this to be a religion, but it is a spiritual movement. Anthropologists have to move away from a framework in the study of this organization. Its work does not belong to any known trends, Sufism, Shamanism or Spiritual movement. The study must be an integrated one of the organization.

It is also necessary to involve anthropologists’ data on New Shamanism and new spiritual movements that have arisen in the world in the late twentieth century. During the fieldwork, the researchers have seen similar complex moments between “*Ata Zhol*” and the doctrine of Oneness University (India).

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was prepared under a grant from the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan. The researchers wish to thank members of the “*Ata Zhol*”. It would not have been possible to write this paper without the cooperation of Arman who participated in the survey. The researchers are grateful to all of them.

### REFERENCES

- Buyandelgeriyn M 2007. Dealing with uncertainty: Shamans, marginal capitalism, and the remaking of history in post-socialist Mongolia. *American Ethnologist*, 34: 127-147.

- Hammerschlag CA 2009. The Huichol offering: A Shamanic healing journey. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 48: 246–258.
- Harner M 2015. The Need for a Spirituality Focused on Healing. From <<http://www.shamanism.org/papers/paper04.html>> ((Retrieved on 22 May 2015).
- Henry HM 2015. Spiritual energy of Islamic prayers as a catalyst for psychotherapy. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 54: 387–398.
- Îgudin VL 2002. Sacred places of Fergana as an object of scientific research. *Etnograficheskoe Obozreniye*, 1: 63–79.
- Khomushku OM 2009. Shamanism as a worldview basis of ethnocultural traditions of the peoples of the Sayan-Altai in present-day society. *Journal of Siberian Federal University-Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(3): 94–100.
- Leistle B 2014. From the alien to the other: Steps toward a phenomenological theory of spirit possession. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 25(1): 53–90.
- Mustafina RM 2010. *Islam e reliky doislamskih mirovozzrencheskih tradicii u Kazahkov*. Astana: Izdatelstvo ENU.
- Penkala-Gawêcka D 2014. The way of the Shaman and the revival of spiritual healing in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. *Shaman*, 22(1-2): 35–59.
- Potapov LP 1991. *Altayskiy Shamanism*. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Sarsambekova AS, Maslov HB, Esimova ZhK 2014. Ethno-linguistic processes of the Kazakhs of Western Siberia. *Anthropologist*, 18(2): 559–563.
- Scott E 2014. The visionary psyche: Jung’s analytical psychology and its impact on theories of Shamanic imagery. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 25(1): 91–115.
- Syzranov AV 2006. Cult of Muslim saints in the Astrakhan’ region. *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 2: 127–143.
- Tsydenov EM 2011. The ancestor cult in the modern Buryat Shamanism. *Vestnik Buryatskogo Gosuniversiteta*, 8: 246–250.
- Zhelobtsov FF 2014. About Shamanism in Korea. *Vestnik SVFU*, 11(5): 42–48.