

Sacred Land Film Project

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Hear the Echo of Their Voices

by Christopher McLeod

On the grassy banks of the silver Katun River, in Russia's Altai Republic, a gentle rain fell as we prepared to film Nogon Shumarov, an internationally acclaimed throat singer. His deep, haunting voice carried melodic love songs to the mountains and waters around us. As we started filming, the rain stopped and there was a flash of lightning. After two beautiful songs, we stopped and there was a deep rumble of thunder. I smiled at Nogon, who said, "It is the dialogue between man and the spirit of nature."

A few days later, on the summer solstice, we sat in the shade of a pine tree in Ooch Enmek Nature Park, in the heart of the Altai in southern Siberia. Local naturalists and intellectuals in this ancient Central Asian culture are creating their own model for how to protect the mountains and valleys they have inhabited for tens of thousands of years. I asked the park's founder, Danil Mamyev, "Why is there a need to protect sacred sites?"

Danil responded, "Sacred sites involve an interaction with a person. The place evokes a reaction. Sacred land cannot exist without sacred sites being visited by pilgrims and knowledgeable people." He paused

for a moment and continued, "Maybe it is thanks to sacred sites that the Earth exists as a fully living being that interacts with people on many levels. I think the reason we have climate change and so many natural disasters is because sacred places are being disturbed and not protected. This is partly the fault of indigenous people who do not visit sacred sites, or others who harm or excavate them. Irrespective of who is to blame, though, we are all experiencing the effect of those places being destroyed. Ooch Enmek Park is a model of how people can live in sacred places. Some prefer to create parks and make indigenous people leave—but very close contact is required."

At the end of an inspiring interview,

Danil invited our film crew on a three-day pilgrimage to his sacred mountain, Ooch Enmek, which rises at the end of the enchanting Karakol Valley. The valley contains three villages and several thousand people, along with standing stones, petroglyphs, rock mounds marking burials (*kurgans*) and shrines where hundreds of white ribbons flap in the wind and demonstrate the reverence of pilgrims.

As we hiked up the mountain, Danil told us to "watch for signs" that would occur "as if through a lens—a bright moment." He said that if one goes with faith and has good intentions the land responds: "This is the interaction of a sacred place. You give attention and

respect, and you receive in turn. Work in a quiet way with the signs, feel the inner energy move and keep it inside. This is the gift a sacred place gives to you."

Trudging up through dense, wet forests of cedar and larch, we crossed over milky torrents of snowmelt. Orange and yellow wildflowers bloomed everywhere. The spongy soil was saturated as we walked in a watery world of ever-changing clouds and sun. Each time we pulled out the camera to shoot, it began to



NOGON SHUMAROV BY THE KATUN RIVER, WHICH ORIGINATES ON SACRED MT. BELUKHA IN THE HEART OF THE ALTAI MOUNTAINS AND FLOWS NORTH INTO THE ARCTIC OCEAN.

Photo by Christopher McLeod

rain. As we packed the camera away the sun came out. If we didn't put the camera away, it rained harder. When we set up the tripod, it hailed and snowed.

When we reached the edge of a high boulder field, approaching the pinnacle of our pilgrimage, the craggy ridge of Ooch Enmek stretched across the horizon before us: black rock covered with white snow under blue sky. We were finally face-to-face with the sacred mountain.

Danil walked ahead and had already lit a ritual fire when we caught up. We scrambled to unpack the camera, connect the microphone cable, clean water droplets off the lens. Almost ready, we turned to start shooting. I glanced up and was stunned by what I saw. "Take a look, everyone, at what's about to happen," I announced. We all watched as a giant black cloud swept in from the east, a curtain

of darkness that closed from right to left in 20 seconds. The face of the mountain disappeared with a disturbing finality.

A cold wind whistled through us. Snow fell, then sleet, then hail. Danil pulled up the hood of his red raincoat, and continued to whisper prayers and feed the fire with small cedar branches and milk. We pressed in on him with a wet, foggy lens as thick snow fell. I was embarrassed to be between the pilgrim and the now hidden mountain, but we had no other vantage point to see his serene face buried in the raincoat. I felt humiliated. Danil ignored us. The snow swirled.

A few hours later, in a small hut, Danil lit a fire to dry our soaking clothes and socks. It was quiet for a long time. I apologized to Danil for intruding on his ceremony and apparently bringing water out of the sky at every opportunity. I asked if the massive dark cloud qualified as a sign. He laughed and said, "The mountain is a woman—and she is very temperamental. She rarely shows herself. I recently quit my job as planning director for the area. It was really a dirty job, lots of arguing. So, I felt the rain and snow were purifying me. Now I feel cleansed."

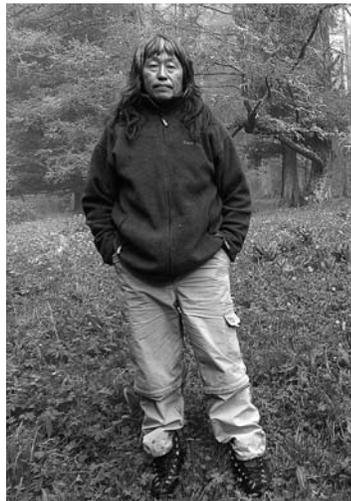
I realized how privileged we were to

have briefly seen Ooch Enmek interacting with her chief human ally.



One of the key strategies indigenous people are using to protect sacred places is to define their homeland, claim title to it, and interpret their sacred places by creating maps—mapping is power.

Our Altaian guide, Chagat Almashev, Executive Director of the Foundation for the Sustainable Development of Altai, explained, "Russians don't recognize spiritual places. They're intangible. So our strategy is to 'passport' our sacred sites, to document all of the precise information, and validate them in the Russian system. If every



Photos by Christopher McLeod

DANIL MAMYEV ON OOOH ENMEK (UPPER LEFT); MAYA ERLENBAEVA AND MARIA AMANCHINA MAP SACRED SITES IN THE ALTAI REPUBLIC NEAR KOSH AGACH.

detail is properly recorded, then they exist and are real." It's a form of cultural affirmation, rather than simply reacting to every new threat that comes along.

Chagat's colleague, Maya Erlenbaeva is mapping sacred sites in the area around Kosh Agach, where the Altai Republic borders Mongolia. Maya took us to meet a local healer, Maria Amanchina, who lives on the edge of town beneath snow-covered mountains. Maria interviewed us twice before agreeing to be

filmed in her cozy yurt where a dancing fire burns in the center and a shaman's paraphernalia adorns the rounded walls. Maria performed a "Feeding the Fire" ceremony, and then led us up to a clear, cold sacred spring, where she and Maya spent hours discussing the standing stones, shrines and offering sites that surround the spring.

Through their efforts to sustain and preserve their culture and homelands, Danil, Chagat, Maya and Maria are also leaders in a battle to stop a natural gas pipeline that the giant Russian state-owned corporation Gazprom plans to build through the Altai to carry fuel to China. The pipeline, and a new road, would cut straight through the Ukok Plateau, a biodiverse nature park on the border of China that guards primeval burial grounds. This is where Russian archaeologists unearthed the famous

Ukok Ice Princess in 1993, setting off a decade-long clamor for the return of a mysterious young ancestor to her resting place. The fight goes on.

Of all the mysterious and harshly beautiful places I've been, the Altai was the most compelling. When we return with a finished film, I will hope to see Ooch Enmek again.



From Central Asia to northern Australia, indigenous people are creating their own protected areas to guard sacred places. From CCAs (Community Conserved Areas) to IPAs (Indigenous Protected Areas), new acronyms belie a powerful movement blending biodiversity protection and traditional management practices. As corporate power extends its reach, indigenous people speak with a power that governments do not. We need to hear the echo of their voices.

On Australia's Gove Peninsula, our film crew spent a day with the impressive Dhimurru rangers, patrolling a sacred beach on the lookout for illegal fishing and abandoned drift nets (which kill sea turtles) and escorting a group of "cultural tourists" on the experience of a lifetime. We were invited to return to film the rangers mapping sacred sites at sea in 2008.

Further west, in Arnhem Land, we met the renowned 83-year old Aboriginal artist "Lofty" Bardayal Nadjamerrek at his outstation community of Kabulwarnamyu. In 2002, Lofty returned to his homeland—70 years after his people were moved off—and brought back traditional land management techniques. His extended family has reintroduced a controlled burn fire regime that has stopped the huge conflagrations that had begun to sweep the area. Bringing Aboriginal people back onto the land has brought better management based on thousands of years of experience.

On our first day of filming, Lofty cried out to the spirits to explain what we were doing. He told us we should swim in the community waterhole because the Rainbow Serpent would taste our sweat and recognize us as friends. Lofty described the Rainbow Serpent as both creative force and enforcer of the law. Live respectfully, in harmony with the land, and everything flourishes. Break the law and the Rainbow Serpent, the enforcer, will make you pay.

Three days later, as we drove away from Lofty's inspiring community and headed back toward home, I sat in the back seat of our Toyota Land Cruiser thinking about the great footage we'd captured but also the many important shots we'd missed. Fighting a glass-half-empty feeling, I wrote in my journal:



"Leaving Kabulwarnamyu—for all the stress and exhaustion, and all the shots and interviews we did not get, I guess the glass is pretty full."

At that moment our driver crested a rise in the dirt road at 60-mph and saw a river crossing immediately ahead. He hit the brakes hard and the car started fishtailing. As we hurtled sideways toward the river I only had a second to wonder if we had pleased or angered the Rainbow Serpent during our journey. I watched the brown river coming toward me sideways through the window. It seemed inevitable that we were going to roll right down into the river. At the last second, the tires caught in the sand at the water's edge, and the car reversed direction and pointed back up the road. We'd done a 180° turn.

We had been on a path seeking to glimpse and capture images of power for three months. Reminders of humility, gratitude and the need to trust fate came regularly. In silence, we all walked to the water's edge. I put my hands in the river.

Reentering civilization a few days later at Sydney Airport, I glanced up beyond the ticket counter and saw a huge painting of a female Rainbow Serpent. The giant creature was a mix of crocodile, fish, emu and snake,

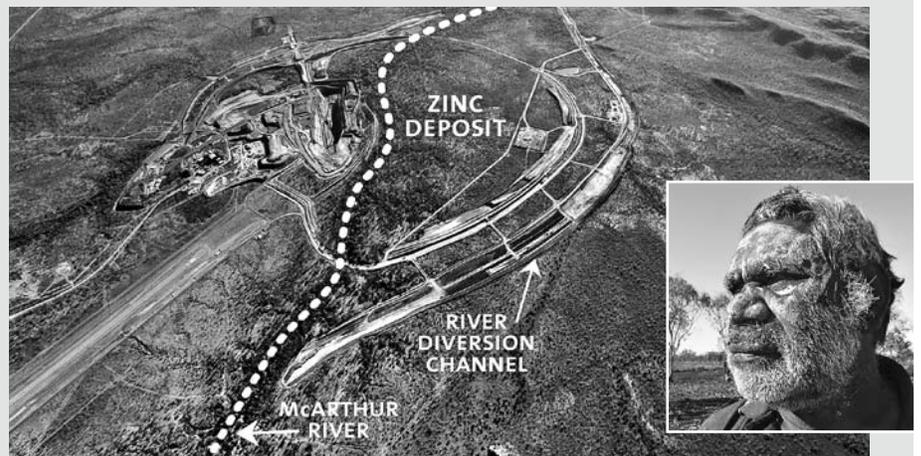
with water lilies growing out of her back—perfectly capturing the amazing biodiversity that Aboriginal people love and protect. The painting was signed by Lofty. Looking at the Rainbow Serpent, I jotted in my notebook, "She declined to swallow me just 48 hours ago. Perhaps she tasted our scent in the waterhole and heard Lofty's cry..."



Photos by Christopher McLeod

THE RENOWNED ARTIST "LOFTY" BARDAYAL NADJAMERREK RECEIVED THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA MEDAL FROM QUEEN ELIZABETH.

Disturbing the Rainbow Serpent



To establish a new open pit mine, and keep it dry, Xstrata Zinc will divert the McArthur River in a 5.5-kilometer channel. The riverbed is the Dreamtime path of the revered Rainbow Serpent and local Aboriginal leaders are fighting to stop the massive engineering project from desecrating their sacred landscape. They predict monsoon rains will wreak havoc—a sign of a displeased Rainbow Serpent. At right, Gudanji elder Jacky Green sang a song and led a protest at the mine site in August.