

## Article

# Shamanic Sports: Buryat Wrestling, Archery, and Horse Racing

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the religious aspects of the historical and present forms of the traditional sports competitions of the Buryats—a Mongolian ethnic group settled in Southern Siberia, Northern Mongolia, and North-Eastern China. Both historically and in our time, their traditional sports have been closely linked to shamanic rituals. This paper provides insights into the functions of these sports competitions for Buryat shamanic rituals—why they have been, and still are, an inevitable part of these rituals. They are believed to play an important role in these rituals, which aim to trick and/or please the Buryats’ spirits and gods in order to get from them what is needed for survival. The major historical changes in the Buryats’ constructions of their relationship to their imagined spiritual entities and the corresponding changes in their sports competitions are described. The effects of both economic changes—from predominantly hunting to primarily livestock breeding—and of changes in religious beliefs and world views—from shamanism to Buddhism and from Soviet Communist ersatz religion to the post-Soviet revival of shamanism and Buddhism—are described. Special attention is given to the recent revival of these sports’ prominent role for Buddhist and shamanist rituals.

**Keywords:** Buryats; cultic sports; shamanism; Buddhism; post-Soviet revivals

## 1. Introduction

The Buryats are a Mongolian ethnic group mainly settled in the Russian Federation in the area to the west, south, and east of Lake Baikal in Southern Siberia. Smaller groups of Buryats also live in neighboring areas of Mongolia and in China’s Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia. Their total number is estimated at about 500,000. They formerly bore the name “Buryat-Mongols” because they belong to the family of Mongolian peoples, of which they are the northernmost members, and are both linguistically and culturally close relatives of the Mongols in Mongolia and China. They became a distinct ethnic group after the seventeenth century CE, when their territory was conquered and colonized by the Russian Empire (Forsyth 1992; Humphrey 1983; Humphrey 1990; Kolarz 1954; Krader 1954).

In addition to literature sources, this study rests upon sixteen ethnographic fieldwork trips lasting between one and three months, which I undertook in the stated regions over the past 25 years. I owe an immense debt of gratitude to all the Buryats and other locals there, who shared their knowledge with me; let me watch, photograph, and film them; or helped me otherwise. Most of this fieldwork also required administrative and logistic support from local scientific institutions, which I obtained first and foremost from the Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist, and Tibetan Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Buryat State University in Ulan-Ude, for which I am grateful to their respective leaderships and colleagues.

In geographical terms, the territory of Buryat settlement is located in the transition zone between the trans-Asian steppe belt and that of the taiga (i.e., the Siberian boreal forest). Thus, its landscape differs considerably from most lands of the Mongols in Mongolia and China. Forests are rare in these

regions, whereas the Buryats' land is characterized by an alternation of steppe and forest, and is also less arid. As a consequence, hunting has always played a more important role for their subsistence than for the other Mongols, and they have—especially in Lake Baikal—also been involved in fishing, which other Mongols have always despised. Additionally, the indigenous Siberian population groups which are the Buryats' neighbors to the north are hunting people of the taiga. The Buryats have had mutual trade and cultural exchange with these groups throughout history. These conditions have influenced both the Buryats' traditional religious beliefs and their traditional sports. It is this more important role that hunting plays in Buryat life as compared to other Mongols which exerts the shamanic influence on their sports.

In regard to these sports and for the analysis in this paper, it is necessary to avoid employing a narrow categorization of sports as being purely win- and record-orientated, highly formalized, standardized, regulated, and institutionalized activities. This view derives from focusing only on modern Western sports, which have developed under specific historical conditions of industrialization and associated processes of labor division, alienation, class struggle, etc., and thus constitute just one specific type of sport that is not universal. Instead of such a confining and exclusionary Eurocentric categorization, an open and much more integrative definition of sports is needed to comprehend a case such as traditional Buryat sports, as has long been established in social anthropology. In 1985, American sports anthropologists Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Taylor Cheska defined sport as:

a physically exertive activity that is aggressively competitive within constraints imposed by definitions and rules. A component of culture, it is ritually patterned, gamelike, and of varying amounts of play, work, and leisure. (Blanchard and Cheska 1985, p. 60)

Indeed, the majority of sports practiced in this world cannot be pigeonholed as being either competitive or gamelike, and without doubt, all of them have “ritualized features”, to use a phrase of one of the peer reviewers of this article. The traditional Buryat sports are no exception. As I will show, they are simultaneously sports, competitions, games, and rituals.

The Buryats' traditional sports comprise particular styles of wrestling, archery, and horse racing. Wrestlers fight their matches bare-chested and with a belt made of cloth bound in a specific way around their waist and hip. They have to grab each other on these belts after five minutes, if the match is not decided before this time (Figure 1). It is a standing-up wrestling style (i.e., there is no wrestling on the ground). One loses when one falls to the ground or touches it with three parts of one's body; this is the only way a match is decided, as there is neither a time-limit nor any point system. Archers typically use traditional composite reflex bows made of wood, horn, and animal sinew. They shoot with wooden arrows with thickened wooden blunt heads (Figure 2) at *sury*, soft targets of a cylindrical shape made of cloth or leather which are about six to eight centimeters in diameter and about ten to twelve centimeters long (Figure 3). A certain number of them are laid on the ground in a distance varying between 30 and 60 m from the archers, who have to hit them with their arrows and push them at least two meters further. In the horse races, typically horses of the Buryat breed are ridden by boy or girl jockeys at full gallop straight across the steppe over long distances, from 6 to 28 km. For this, the horses are specially trained for several weeks or months, mainly by managing their feed intake and accustoming them to racing. Certain methods that have been passed down from generation to generation are applied, but the breeders often keep these as closely guarded secrets.



**Figure 1.** Buryat wrestlers in a match overseen by a referee during a tournament organized as part of the Maidar Khural celebrations at the Ivolginsk Buddhist monastery in 2010. Photo: Stefan Krist.



**Figure 2.** Buryat archer at the Republic Surkharban Festival in the central stadium of Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Republic of Buryatia of the Russian Federation in summer 2015. Photo: Stefan Krist.

The Buryats, and all other Mongols, have always favored these particular three sports, or similar forms of these. Undoubtedly, this is due to their traditional way of life: nomadic animal husbandry



with hunting as a subsidiary economic activity and frequent engagement in wars and feuds. However, competitions in all three of these sports were and are usually held together at various occasions associated with solemn rituals, today also profane ones, but traditionally these occasions were of a mostly religious, cultic-magic nature. Thus, these sports also have a deep religious root or at least, a religious function. Why this?



**Figure 3.** A Buryat archer setting up “sury”, soft targets symbolizing hunted rodents, for his competitors to shoot at during a competition at the Ivolginsk Buddhist monastery in 2010. Photo: Stefan Krist.

## 2. Cultic Sports

Researchers, and in particular anthropologists, have long realized and widely agree that games and sports have very much in common with cults and rituals, because the broadly accepted definition of ritual as “a category of behavior which is prescribed, predictable, stereotyped, communicative, and shared” (Harris and Park 1983, p. 17) applies to and holds true for games and sports competitions as well. Countless historic and ethnographic reports about sports competitions which were carried out as parts of magic-religious rituals clearly indicate that there is a close link between these two human activities.

Most frequently, sports competitions accompanied—or were themselves considered to be—rituals of some sort of fertility magic, attempting to influence the weather so that it rained enough, that livestock or game propagated well, or that harvests were rich (Damm 1960, pp. 3–5; Jensen 1947, p. 38; Kamphausen 1972, p. 94; Körbs 1960, p. 14). This was, for instance, reported of the Australian Aborigines, of most North American native tribes, and of the Tikopian Islanders in the South Pacific, to mention just three examples that are prominent in the literature (Culin 1907, pp. 484–85; Firth 1930, p. 67; Sands 2010, p. 28). Many more examples from all over the world could be listed—not only past, but also numerous present ones, among them the *Naadam* games of the Mongolian peoples

(Kabzińska-Stawarz 1987, p. 54), including the *Eryn Gurban Naadan*<sup>1</sup> (i.e., the “Three Manly Games” of the Buryats).

Further occasions at which many people all over the world—including the Mongols and Buryats with the same games—did (and do) frequently organize and engage in sports competitions are rituals in connection with the cycles of life, both human and natural (Jensen 1947, p. 38; Damm 1960, p. 8; Calhoun 1987, pp. 76–77). Regarding the former, many rites of passage are accompanied by tough physical exercises (Körbs 1960, p. 14; Calhoun 1987, p. 64). Rites celebrating the change of seasons—especially the end of the winter and the beginning of the spring—are often accompanied by ball games, target shooting, boxing, wrestling, and all kinds of races (Culin 1907, p. 483; Damm 1960, p. 7; Calhoun 1987, p. 77).

The basic reason for this ancient and widespread interconnection between magic-religious cults and sports competitions lies in the purpose and structure of cults and rituals. Cults, as the German physical educator and sports scientist Werner Körbs has outlined, are the language in which people talk with “the sublime”, and this language is “the offering of oneself, in gestures and postures, in play and competitions, that is by corporeal effort” (Körbs 1960, p. 13, translation mine). For Körbs people employ corporeal (i.e., bodily) effort—or as one can equally call it, body language—in rituals because this means of communication “seems to be most noticeable and impressive for both the pleading and the bestowing” (Körbs 1960, p. 14, translation mine), that is, for the people and for their gods. The fact that it is a bodily means of communication which people use in their primordial rituals aiming at securing their survival is also more profanely explained by the fact that “man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time his first technical means, is his body”, as French anthropologist Marcel Mauss makes plain in his 1935 essay, “Les techniques du corps” (Mauss [1935] 1992, p. 461). That “[p]hysical movement is integral to human ritual”, as American sports anthropologist Robert Sands has succinctly phrased, is thus indeed beyond doubt (Sands 2010, p. 27). Hence, Sands correctly concludes that “physical movement is integral to human spirituality and religion”, and therefore, “spirituality and, later, sport evolved from the dynamic interaction of ritual and movement patterns” (Sands 2010, p. 27).

In and by means of these “movement patterns”—that is, through rituals and sports—people did, and still do, visualize imagined cosmic and divine events and make them come alive, and by their own active and periodically repeated participation they make them more perceptible and tangible for themselves (Mathys 1958, pp. 3, 14, and 23). Thus, as they are of a common origin, both rituals and sports are means that humans developed at an early stage for the purpose of “remov[ing] enough of the fear of the unknown to make the sacred work for society”, as American anthropologist Frank Salamone (1977, p. 166) has put it.

Rituals, including sports competitions, can “make the sacred work for society” because they—as those who participate in them believe—offer the possibility to intervene in “divine struggles” (Calhoun 1987, p. 76) between good and evil gods or, more generally, patrons and demons, in order to influence them for one’s own benefit. Sports seem to offer this opportunity to people, as American sports sociologist Donald Calhoun explains by drawing on reports about Native Americans, because

[p]reiterate peoples generally believe that by imitating or participating in the struggles of the gods they can influence the outcome and thereby themselves. So, at the festivals of spring, while the “good” gods were struggling to maintain fertility, the people would engage in contests—between villages, between subtribes, between women and men, between the married and the unmarried. (Calhoun 1987, p. 77)

[ ... ] The successful playing out of the athletic contest [is] supposed to win the favor of, or give help to, supernatural forces or beings in these very life-important natural struggles—for

<sup>1</sup> In Mongolian the games are called “Naadam”, i.e., with an “m” at the end of the word, while in Buryat they are called “Naadan”, i.e., with an “n”-ending.

the falling of needed rain, the fertility of crops or game, the healing of an illness, or the freeing of a dead person's spirit. Thus, on the principle of like begets like, the successful playing of the game [is] believed to give a homeopathic reinforcement to the forces favorable to human beings. (Calhoun 1987, p. 64)

In other words, the participants in these athletic contests believe and engage in sympathetic magic.

Körbs contributed a valuable and useful categorization of such cultic games into two types in regard to their function. The first of them he denoted as magic, or as “Kampf um etwas,” that is, a “fight for something,” thus aiming at having an effect. The second type constitutes cultic sports' symbolic function—that is, their “Darstellung von etwas,” or “enactment of something,” which they often do as these sports frequently mimic cosmic or mythic events, including “divine struggles.” These two functional categories may also occur simultaneously, which they often do (Körbs 1960, p. 14; Damm 1960, p. 9).

### 3. Buryat Cultic Sports

As a consequence of the above, participating in sports competitions that mimic or symbolize cosmic or mythic events—often a battle of the forces of good against those of evil—and/or are considered a means for intervention in these battles or “divine struggles,” has in most cases been considered to be a sacred duty (Mathys 1958, p. 22). The Buryats have definitely seen their traditional sports this way historically, and still do today. By engaging in them they have not only been attempting to intervene in the affairs of the supernatural creatures that they believe in, but even to reach their goals by direct interaction with them. How can this be?

As I reported in an earlier publication (Krist 2014, p. 425), works of rock art from the Neolithic that depict anthropomorphic figures engaged in wrestling were discovered on rock faces near the banks of Lake Baikal and its outlet, the river Angara. However, some of these figures bear zoomorphic features, including horns on their heads, heads shaped like those of birds and with beaks, or trunks shaped like those of four-legged animals. Thus, these figures are very reminiscent, if not congruent, with figures clearly depicted for cultic purposes in the famous cave paintings of Lascaux and other places in Southern France and Spain of the same time period (Müller 2006, pp. 8–9). What the Stone Age artists of Southern Siberia have depicted are doubtlessly representations of ritual wrestling matches (Okladnikov 1974, pp. 49–50 and 109–11; Reshetnikov and Rabetskaya 2007). This testifies that, already back then, the people who lived in that region were “playing out these athletic contests” for cultic-magic purposes.

The oldest written sources about the three traditional Mongolian sports can be found in the Liao-Shi, the official chronicle of the Liao dynasty of imperial China, which was established by the Khitan (a proto-Mongolian-speaking people in the northern parts of today's China) and lasted from 907 to 1125 CE. In this chronicle, we find detailed reports about wrestling and in particular, archery competitions that were held in the course of imperial shamanistic praying ceremonies for rain. (Wittfogel and Fêng 1949, pp. 176 (professional wrestlers), 219 and 277 (wrestling at weddings), 254 and 413 (wrestling as part of ceremonies at the imperial court), 267 (archery contest as part of an imperial sacrificial ceremony for rain); see also Lkhagvasuren 1998, p. 14).

These ceremonies at the Liao imperial court show that the utilization of these sports for magical purposes has been maintained by the people of that region through historic times, and even under significantly changing socio-economic and cultural conditions. However, these ceremonies represent already altered forms of the original life-ensuring magic rituals of the people of this region, as in those the participants did not ask for rain, but for game and luck in hunting.

In the Mongols' pre-Buddhist—and even Buddhist—religious beliefs and mythologies, wild animals, of which many were hunted, play crucial roles. For instance, Mongols consider animals such as the wolf, eagle, swan, or wild boar as totem animals (i.e., as the progenitors of their clans), and thus consider themselves as descendants and relatives of such animals. The important role that hunted wild animals play for them is understandable: firstly, because everywhere in the world

hunting and gathering were humans' first and by far longest lasting means of obtaining food, as the Neolithic Revolution—the invention of crop growing and, in most cases after this, that of animal husbandry—happened very late in human history (in the area under consideration here, this happened approximately in the second millennium BCE); and secondly, because until about 3000 years ago, forests also prevailed in the regions of today's arid grasslands in Mongolia and China, as only then did the climate change from a warmer and more humid one to a cold and dry climate—that is, a so-called extreme continental one, which is still characteristic of this region today.

For those reasons alone, it seems natural that up to the present day, the Buryat wrestlers mimic a wild animal—the eagle—in their *devekh*, a dance they perform before every match, and the winners also perform it afterwards (Figure 4); that the *sury* (the leather or cloth cushions that serve as targets in the archery competitions) symbolize the small rodents they used to hunt in large quantities (Dugarova 2004, p. 20); and that often the *bara*, a ritual song of praise, is performed by the judges, spectators, and competitors after an archer has hit a *sur*—a song which applauds the marksman but more importantly aims at pleasing and gratifying the tiger-goddess of the same name, who is the patroness of hunters, warriors, and archers, and who is believed to be invisibly present at the competitions (Dugarova 2004, p. 23).

Thus, the Buryats play their sports for giving pleasure to “invisible” or “immaterial beings”, as French anthropologist Hamayon (2016, p. 162) has put it, in order to maintain or regain their support; and it is often animal spirits to whom they direct these activities.<sup>2</sup> They imitate the animals for this purpose, for example, in their *devekh*-dances.<sup>3</sup> However, these sport games and dances originally had only the supplementary function of distracting the spirits from the play, which the group's shaman performed simultaneously. By analyzing ethnographic reports from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century about Buryat collective shamanistic rituals, which they were “playing”—*naadaha* in Buryat—every year for nine days early in spring, Hamayon reveals their structure, logic, and purpose and outlines them. These are summed up with additional explanatory remarks by the author of these lines as follows.

In what was both a metaphorical play and a ritual, the shaman also imitated the hunted animals. However, he did this with the purpose of directly attracting and finally marrying a female animal spirit in order to receive a loving gift from her, which consisted of game (i.e., quarry for the hunters of his group). In exchange for this gift—killed animals in fact—he needed to offer the spirits human lives or at least human vital energy, which he did by offering himself, which he enacted by letting himself fall and laying down motionless, thus, by fictionally dying. However, the present group members “woke him up” in time, so that not too much “vital human energy” was taken by the spirits (i.e., not too many of the group members would have died or died too early or become ill). Thus, the whole action was in fact intended for tricking the spirits. Yet, this was believed necessary to ensuring the group's survival. Participation in these activities was therefore a requirement: the Buryat shaman *had* to perform his play and his group members *had* to attend it and *had* to wrestle and dance, otherwise the intended effect (i.e., hunting success) would have been considered impossible to achieve. (Hamayon 2016).

<sup>2</sup> This and the next four paragraphs rest partially upon my review of Roberte Hamayon's book *Why we play* (see bibliography), published in *Anthropos* 113/1 (2018), pp. 296–98 (Krist 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Whereas wrestlers in Buryatia and Mongolia (and also in Tyva and even in Turkey) imitate an eagle in these dances, the Mongolian wrestlers in Inner Mongolia in China are an exception, as they imitate a lion.





**Figure 4.** Buryat wrestlers, two engaged in a match and one performing the “devekh”, the eagle dance, during a wrestling tournament following an “oboo” ritual in China, Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, Hulunbuir City, in summer 2018. Photo: Stefan Krist.

Thus, these plays and games aimed at an effect in the “empirical reality” (Hamayon 2016, pp. 297 and 299), which is outside the shaman’s play and the men’s sports competitions, that is, in the “actual world” or “real life” (Hamayon 2016, pp. 68 and 115). In order to achieve this desired effect, all players—shamans, wrestlers, and dancers alike—had to play their parts well and differently every time. That is, they had to “customize” (Hamayon 2016, p. 180) their actions each time anew, because otherwise, as immanent in this “magic logic,” the spirits would neither be distracted by the sportsmen and dancers nor fooled by the shaman again.

Hence, these complex, “prescribed, predictable,” yet not “stereotyped,” but definitely “communicative, and shared” *Naadan*—which in the Buryat language means both “plays” and “games”—constitute both of Körbs’s categories of such cultic activities: a “fight for” a desired effect and an “enactment of” the “sublime” or “divine”, thus a case in which the participants simultaneously “made the sacred work” as well as “more perceptible and tangible” for them; and the means by which they did this were metaphorical bodily expressions—that is, metaphorical play, as Hamayon’s characterization of them can be condensed (Hamayon 2016, pp. 279–94), and “corporeal effort,” as Körbs has it.

That the Buryats used “body language” in these *Naadan* is no surprise, because, as stated above, “physical movement is integral” to such rituals. It is not surprising that they employed metaphors either, because this is a basic and fundamental means of humans’ cognitive activities, as “our thought process[es]” are by necessity predominantly characterized by “metaphorical structuring”, as Hamayon (2016, pp. 282–83) has put it and which she defines by using a quote from linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing or experience, in



terms of another” (Hamayon 2016, p. 282 [quoted from Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 5]). This we humans are indeed constantly doing. “Resorting”, explains Hamayon, “to something tangible or well known”—in the case of the Buryats’ ritual plays and sports games, their movements which imitated the hunted animals—“is what allows us to think something that is not so”—in the Buryat case the realm of the animal spirits—“and possibly to manipulate it”—therein to have made those spirits give the people enough game for survival (Hamayon 2016, p. 286).

#### 4. Historical Developments in Buryat Economic Activities and Religious Affiliations and Their Repercussions on Buryat Traditional Sports

However, by the nineteenth century these particular shamanic-ritualistic plays, in which the three sports competitions played a direct and instant functional role (the aforesaid distraction of the spirits), were no longer the typical seasonal, life-ensuring rituals of the Buryats, but rather rare occurrences. The ethnographers of that time put down descriptions of these rituals, in what was typical for ethnography everywhere then, as acts of “salvation ethnography”—that is, for preserving the knowledge for future generations that such rituals had existed. Often their reports, such as many writings of the renowned Buryat ethnographer Matvey Khangalov, were already historical ones—that is, they constituted descriptions of what elders told them about how it was done in earlier times.

Instead, back then, the prevailing communal ritual which every Buryat clan organized at least three times per year (one in the spring, one in the summer, and one in the fall, but sometimes even more often) (Mikhaylov 1965, p. 11; Dashiyeveva 1985, p. 4) was either a *taylagan*, in which the clan’s shaman invoked the ancestor and protector spirits of the clan, made offerings to them (mainly of the milk-schnaps, *tarasun*, other dairy products, and parts of the horse or ram sacrificed by the clan’s members), and asked them to further protect the clan members and ensure the fertility of their livestock; or an *oboo* ritual, which was basically the same, except that Buddhist deities were invoked in it and the animal sacrifice was left out because it was not carried out by a shaman but by Buddhist lamas, making the killing of living creatures impossible. However, both these prayer ceremonies were always followed by a banquet, dances, and, compulsorily, by the three sports competitions.

This type of life-ensuring ritual developed among the Buryats—and all other Mongols—because of their mixed subsistence economy of hunting and livestock breeding, in which the latter had become more important over time. Therefore, as again the French anthropologist Roberte Hamayon explains most clearly, they combined two “logics” in their magic activities: the “magic logic” typical of hunting people, and the one typical for stockbreeding people. As hunters directly *take* from nature, namely game, they directly negotiate with the spirits of nature. That is, they are equal partners in their communication with them—a communication in which both partners try to trick the other, in other words *play* with each other. Therefore, the hunters’ negotiators (i.e., their shamans) are essentially *playing*; however, as stated above, this is on an obligatory basis: they are required to imitate the animals that their people hunt (i.e., want to *take*), and to (symbolically) marry a female animal spirit because both are necessary to become equal partners in these negotiations. Stockbreeders, on the other hand, *produce* their source of life (i.e., their herds of livestock), and they *inherit* them. Thus, they are not directly *taking* from nature (Hamayon 1994, pp. 78–85; Hamayon 2001, pp. 133–44; Hamayon 2003, pp. 63–66).

In other words, for them nature becomes—to use a Marxist notion—a *means* of production. However, unlike capitalist entrepreneurs, they do not own this means. Therefore, they have to *ask* their ancestor and protector spirits or the Buddhist deities to further *provide* them with the necessary means. Hence, they are not equal partners of the spirits or gods, but subordinates to them. This is why they cannot play with them, but have to *pray* to them; and why they cannot take from them, but instead have to *give* them gifts in order to win or keep their favor, which they do by sacrificing an animal—a horse or ram—and/or dairy products to them, both of which they have produced with their help.

The fact that the feast which followed this sacrificial ritual also had—in addition to joking, dancing, and singing—to mandatorily comprise the sports competitions with their immanent mimicry and symbolism of wild and hunted animals (i.e., the wrestlers’ performance of the eagle dance, archery

targets symbolizing rodents, etc.) shows that the “magic logic” typical of hunters had not disappeared. Yet, to make this clear, now both the sportsmen and the shamans—and definitely the Buddhist lamas too—no longer saw their tasks as negotiating with the “invisible” or “immaterial beings” and in tricking them, but in bringing joy to them by presenting gifts to them. The pleaders, which the participants of the rituals now were, hoped, that these gifts would be reciprocated by their spirits or deities. To achieve this goal, the participants in the rituals needed to show their spirits/deities that it was due to their (that is, the spirits’ and/or deities’) care and protection that one was well and strong, and hence *able* to present these gifts to them. Thus, the competitions were held with the purpose of proving and showing the success of their care as well as its necessity. The belief was that if the spirits or deities were satisfied with the gifts given and the entertainment shown to them, they would further protect those who gave the gifts and played the games (Dashiyeva 1984, p. 136; Kabzińska-Stawarz 1987, p. 53; Alekseyev and Gombozhapov 2000, pp. 151–52; Dugarova 2004, pp. 13 and 16). Thus, the sports competitions were also seen as gifts, as symbolic sacrifices, to “the sublime,” as an “offering of oneself in gestures and postures, in play and competitions.”

This transition from considering oneself “similar [ . . . ] in essence and status” to the animal spirits at whom these rituals were originally directed, and whom the shaman thus could play and trick, to becoming pleaders to “gods” (i.e., to supernatural beings “who are held to be different in essence and higher in status”—to use the very apt phrases of a peer reviewer of this article once again) was not as big a step to make for the Buryats as one might think. It was not, because they always believed in a whole pantheon of gods in addition to their own souls and the souls or spirits of animals, plants, mountains, waters, and all other entities in nature. Thus, their shamanism is in fact what is called tengrianism or tengrism, as they believe in 99 heavenly *tengri* (i.e., gods), of whom 55 gracious ones dwell in the western and 44 vicious ones in the eastern heaven and all have sons and daughters, who either rove about on Earth or in the underworld. To live by all of these divine creatures by fearing, praying to, or simply worshipping them is normal for a Buryat.

It is these above-described taylagan and oboo rituals that the Buryats have been carrying out for centuries with the purpose of ensuring their survival. Put concisely, they can be denoted as kin-group-based sacrificial prayer ceremonies—the first led by shamans, the latter by Buddhist lamas—which are mandatorily followed by a feast and competitions in the three traditional Buryat sports of wrestling, archery, and horse racing. Several of the earliest ethnographic reports on the Buryats contain descriptions of these events, such as Johann Georg Gmelin’s *Reise durch Sibirien* (Gmelin 1752, pp. 21–26) and Johann Gottlieb Georgi’s *Bemerkungen einer Reise im Rußischen Reich* (Georgi 1775, pp. 316–19) from the first and second half of the eighteenth century, or Vasiliy Parshin’s *Poyezdka v zabaykal’skiy kray* (Parshin 1844, pp. 61–63) from the first half of the nineteenth century. Quite a few, often detailed, descriptions of these events can also be found in the rich ethnographic literature about the Buryats produced by various Russian and Buryat authors—academics, travelers, exiles, local historians, etc.—of the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century (see, e.g., Khangalov 1880; Loginovskiy 1897; Golovachev 1902, pp. 112–13; Shagdaron and Ochirov 1909). From sources of that time, we also know that there were not only taylagans that each clan held for its members, but also some which were attended by members of several clans and brought together thousands of people (Potanina 1912, p. 13; Dashiyeva 2001, p. 29).

The taylagan is the original form of the ritual, in which, as stated, the prayer part is carried out by the clan’s shaman and the main sacrificial offering presented to the clan’s ancestor and protector spirits is a horse or a ram. The oboo or oboo *taykhu* ritual is the Buddhist version of it, in which Buddhist monks replace the shaman, pray to Buddhist deities, and no animal, but just *tsagaan idee*, “white food” (i.e., dairy products) are sacrificed. However, the purpose of the ritual is, as also already stated, exactly the same. The verb “*taykhu*”, from which also the noun “*taylagan*” derives, means in all Mongolian languages, including Buryat, “to honor by making offerings” (cf. Babuyeva 2004, p. 192). In the first case, the Buryats make these offerings to their shamanic spirits, in the latter case to Buddhist deities, but in both cases the purpose is the same: to maintain the benevolence and support of these supernatural

beings, on which they believe their survival depends. This is a prime example of how the Buddhist monks, who have been coming to the Buryats from Tibet and Mongolia from the late seventeenth century onwards, achieved much of their success in converting the Eastern Buryats (i.e., those east of Lake Baikal and who make up four-fifths of all Buryats) to Buddhism: by carrying on shamanist practices and incorporating them into the Buddhist belief system and ritualistic practices. The Buryats' ancient belief in numerous *tengri* (i.e., in gods inhabiting heaven, Earth, and the underworld) certainly helped the Buddhist monks to achieve this success, as many Buryats could accept that Buddhist deities have now taken their place and protected them in the same way. Nonetheless, the Buddhist clergy were unable to extinguish non-“Buddhistianized” shamanism. There have always been shamans, and people have turned to them frequently to this day.

The missionary success achieved by the Buddhist lamas was nonetheless remarkable, as almost all Eastern Buryats had converted to Buddhism in only about one hundred years, by the end of the eighteenth century. The lamas' utilization of the Buryats' great love for their three traditional sports played an important role in the success of this. They organized competitions in these sports not only as parts of the *oboo* rituals, but also for accompanying various services at their monasteries, most prominently the *Maydar Khural*—the worship service for Maytreya, the future Buddha, and one of the highest sacred ceremonies of the Buddhist year, held annually in mid-summer. Also, when high lamas from Tibet or Mongolia were visiting the *datsans*—which is what the Buryats call their Buddhist monasteries—competitions in these three sports were often organized to honor the venerated guests. Soon the *datsans* had their own wrestlers, whom the lamas provided with everything they needed so that they could concentrate on practicing wrestling. In other words, the Buddhist clergy became—to use a modern, yet perfectly fitting notion—potent sponsors of these sports. As a result, these competitions in the Buddhist monasteries frequently attracted large numbers of Buryat sportsmen and their aficionados, and thus contributed to the rise of the glory and importance of these monasteries and to that of the Buddhist clergy and religion in general among the Buryats settled east of Lake Baikal.

However, the situation of the Buryats settled to the west of the lake was, and still is, different. There, Buddhist missionary activity set in considerably later: only towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Before that time, it was clergymen of the Russian Orthodox Church that tried to convert the Buryats there to their creed. The Russian Christian priests were however much less successful than the Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhist lamas among the Eastern Buryats. In the two-and-a-half centuries from the Russian conquest of the area in the seventeenth century up to the end of the nineteenth century, they only converted slightly over 40% of the Western Buryats to Russian Orthodox Christianity (Hundley 2010, p. 247; Mikhaylov 1994, p. 122), and even these often did not become true believers of the new creed, which, for instance, came to the fore very clearly when flocks of them left the Church immediately after Tsar Nikolay the Second had to grant religious freedom in the wake of the empire-wide revolts of 1905 (Zhukovskaya 1995, p. 83). The vast majority of the Western Buryats remained shamanist at any time and still do so today. Even those among them who were, or are today, members of the Church have most typically not abandoned their shamanist beliefs and cults (Humphrey 1983, p. 30; Montgomery 2005, p. 72), and the late-starting Buddhist missionary activity was not very successful either. Thus, syncretistic religious practices also emerged among Western Buryats, but among them the new religion (i.e., in most cases Russian Orthodox Christianity) has played a much less important role than Buddhism did and does among the Eastern Buryats. Hence, shamanism has remained their prime religious belief system and ritualistic practice up to the present day.

As regards the three traditional Buryat sports, secular leaders and institutions have also utilized them for their purposes. Khans and clan leaders have often recruited the best wrestlers and archers for their life guards and elite troops, and also frequently organized competitions in the three sports after victorious battles (Zhukovskaya 1988, p. 59; Bardamov and Fomin 1998, p. 141; Darzha 2003, p. 38; Babuyeva 2004, p. 198; Krist 2014, p. 30). In times of peace, wealthy Buryat clan leaders nourished



chosen wrestlers and furnished them with everything for months-long periods before competitions (Khangalov 1880, p. 31).

Also the Tsarist state administration utilized them, as the lucid example of the large event shows, which in the summer of 1814 was organized in Kyakhta—then a booming commercial town at the border with the Chinese Empire—for celebrating the fall of Paris and the victory over Napoleon two years earlier. Central parts of this celebration’s three-day-long program consisted of large competitions in the three Buryat sports, including a horse race with more than one hundred participating horses (Shchapov 1908, pp. 710–12).

However, the utilization of the Buryats’ traditional sports for political purposes reached its peak under the regime following that of the Tsars. From the very beginning of their rule, the Soviet state and party cadres organized competitions in these sports as *aimak*—that is, district games named *Surkharban* and at a large Republic *Surkharban* held annually in Verkhneudinsk (later renamed as Ulan-Ude), the capital of the newly founded Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. From the early 1930s onwards, they also organized *kolkhoz* games, that is, on the level of the newly and forcefully established collective farms. These events were intensively used for state and party propaganda, and as an intended consequence of the described organization scheme, the sportsmen competed as members of their work units or as inhabitants of particular administrative units (Humphrey 1983, p. 381). Thus, these sports competitions, which formerly had mostly been the matter of kin groups, were now made events of the new Soviet production and administrative units and tightly linked with Soviet ideology (Ocherki istorii kul’tury Buryatii 1974, p. 287; Humphrey 1983, pp. 380–82; Vatanabe 1994, p. 54). Through changes to the rules, outfits, and equipment, the traditional Buryat sports were made very similar to international sports, in order to make them preparatory exercises for them and also as an openly declared measure against “ethnic nationalism or separatism” (Eichberg [1991] 1998, p. 134). In that way, in the seven decades of Soviet rule these sports lost much of their particular Buryat national character. Yet, their most incisive derogation, which the Soviet cadres invariably forced through, was their total secularization. The state- and party-organized competitions were stand-alone events not linked to any religious ritual, and were deprived of any religious elements, including even the *devekh*, the eagle dance of the wrestlers.

Nonetheless, the Buryats did not forget their traditions, and the Soviets evidently failed in their attempt to eradicate their religious beliefs. Although both shamans and lamas were persecuted at times and their spiritual activities were heavily thwarted and impeded during almost the whole Soviet period and almost all *datsans* were closed and destroyed in the 1930s, some *taylagans* have always been carried out in the traditional way (i.e., as sacrificial rituals of kin groups), and some of these have even been accompanied by traditional sports competitions (Mikhaylov 1971, pp. 66–67). In the late 1980s, when President Gorbachev’s reforms finally created a more liberal social and political climate in the Soviet Union, an “outburst”, as Caroline Humphrey has aptly put it, of both *taylagan* and *oboo* rituals set in, and the authorities no longer tried to thwart or impede them (Humphrey 1989, p. 168; Musch 2006, p. 19), even though their religious purpose was made perfectly clear. This volte-face of the authorities was also manifested in the purchase and exhibition of an abstract-decorative metal sculpture by the Buryat ASSR’s Fine Art Museum in 1987, which was made by the Buryat metalsmith Radna Sanzhitov and titled “*Surkharban*”. The sculpture’s rendering of the shamanic world tree, celestial bodies, and arrows clearly reveals the original religious meaning of these sports events to the viewer: people’s attempt to connect with their sacred heavenly creatures (Figure 5).

After the definitive fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was also the state’s sports administrators—now serving the semi-autonomous Republic of Buryatia of the Russian Federation—who were the first to undertake measures to re-traditionalize the Buryat sports competitions. For example, the time limit and point system introduced for Buryat wrestling in the Soviet period were abandoned, and an archery competition for senior archers—who were called upon to use traditional bows instead of modern plastic ones and to wear traditional Buryat *garb*—was added to the Republic *Surkharban*’s program.



**Figure 5.** Buryat blacksmith Radna Sanzhitov’s sculpture “Surkharban”, wrought iron, 1987. Photo: Stefan Krist (by courtesy of the Sampilov Fine Art Museum of the Republic of Buryatia).

However, it was not the state’s sports authorities that changed the Buryat traditional sports the most in the last two-and-a-half decades, but the lamas of the largest and most influential Buddhist institution in Buryatia—the “Buddhist Traditional *Sangkha* (which translates as “Assembly” or “Community of Monks”) of Russia” under the leadership of Khambo-lama Damba Ayusheyev. From about the mid-1990s onwards, the favorable development of all three traditional Buryat sports and their re-traditionalization was—in the particular modes and styles they preferred—one of their prime goals. Most importantly, they once more tightly linked the competitions with Buddhist rituals. In 1996, *Eryn Gurban Naadan* (i.e., the “Three Manly Games”, as their traditional name translates, and which has been used again by the lamas since then) were part of the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the datsan of Ivolginsk; in 1997, such games were organized in honor of a visiting high Mongolian lama at the datsans of Ivolginsk and Kizhinga; and since 2003 they have again become an integral part of the *Maydar Khurals*—the main Buddhist ceremonies of the summer—at the datsan of Ivolginsk as well as at other datsans as it was (as mentioned) customary in pre-Soviet times. Also, since 2008, prestigious Eryn Gurban Naadan have been organized annually at the datsan of *Egituy* in Eastern Buryatia, where the *Zandan Zhuu*, a famous sandal wood Buddha statue, is kept; and many more Buddhist sacred ceremonies have been accompanied by the games all over the Republic of Buryatia and other regions with significant Buryat population since about the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, many of them also organized annually. Thus, the Buddhist clergy has created

an actual annual *season* for these games (i.e., a series of Eryn Gurban Naadans), starting in April and ending in September with the season's climax, the games in honor of Dashi-Dorzho Itigelov (1852–1927), the twelfth khambo-lama, whose body, although he passed away more than 90 years ago, is for so-far unknown reasons not decaying and is displayed in the datsan of Ivolginsk.

Thus, as they now organize the vast majority of the competitions, the Buddhist Traditional Sangkha has taken over the control of the traditional Buryat sports from the state authorities, at least in the regions where Buddhism is the main religion of the Buryats. All these Eryn Gurban Naadan are organized in a very traditionalistic manner: all archers have to wear traditional Buryat garb and use (more or less) traditional Buryat bows; horse races are run over long distances, from 7 to 28 km; and wrestlers have to wear and use the traditional waist belts and obey the re-established traditional rules, including the mandatory performance of the *devekh*, the eagle dance (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Youth wrestling tournament during “Eryn Gurban Naadan” organized in the Tamchinskiy Datsan in Southern Buryatia in summer 2011. Photo: Stefan Krist.

The development was different among the Buryats settled to the west of Lake Baikal, where, as described, shamanism remained their main religion and where still today there are less than a handful of Buddhist datsans with quite small numbers of lamas. There, due to the weak position of the Buddhist clergy and the almost total absence of datsans, the state-organized Surkharbans, although not being very numerous, have maintained an important role in the sphere of Buryat traditional sports. Yet, another tradition, unsurprisingly a shamanic one, was revitalized there, which plays an important role up to the present day. This is the *Yordinskiye Igry*, the “Games of the Yord”, which is a dome-shaped hill over 40-m-high, located close to the western shore of Lake Baikal in a region with a predominantly Buryat population. In 2000, after an intermittence of more than a century and having almost vanished into oblivion, the big traditional all-Buryat (i.e., trans-clan) *taylagan* at this “world axis,” as this truly remarkable little mountain is considered by many Buryats, was resumed and accompanied by large-scale competitions in the traditional sports (Sodnompilov 2000; Babuyeva 2004,



pp. 176–80). In 2005, 2011, and from then onwards, this was repeated every other year, at ever growing scales (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** The hill “Yord” in the morning of the first day of the “Games of the Yord” of 2011. Photo: Stefan Krist.

Each time, thousands of people gather there to worship together. Dozens of shamans, representing various regional and trans-regional shamanist associations perform sacrificial rituals (i.e., *taylagans*) at the foot of the Yord (Figure 8). However, the main ritual and climax of the usually two-day celebration constitutes a *yokhor*—a typical Buryat round dance. A *yokhor* is danced together by representatives of both sexes. They form a closed circle by holding hands and move clockwise, and in the case where the dance is performed for ritual purposes, around an object representing the world axis or world tree, which it is believed connects this world and its inhabitants with heaven and its sacred creatures. Round dances of this type and spiritual meaning are part of the traditional culture of the Evens (Dugarov 1991, p. 144) and other ethnic groups of the Siberian taiga (Babuyeva 2004, pp. 180–81), that is, the hunting people settled to the north of the Buryats. However, among the Mongolian groups, it is only the Buryats who dance such dances (Babuyeva 2004, p. 181), which is another proof of the strong role “hunting magic” or, in other words, a believed direct communication with spirits, plays among them compared to the other Mongols.

In the case of the Yordynskie Igry, the *yokhor* is danced around the mountain Yord (Figure 9), for which a minimum of 700 dancers is needed in order to close the circle, which is considered to be necessary for ensuring the success of the ritual, as a closed circle is believed to ward off evil spirits, and thus to let the coming year be a good one (Dugarov 1991, p. 144; Babuyeva 2004, p. 178) (Figure 9). During the dance, the main local Buryat shaman, which for more than two decades has been Valentin Khagdayev and who has also played a leading role in the revitalization of the games, stands on the top of the mountain and invokes the spirits and prays to them on behalf of the worshippers around the mountain. He wears a crown with deer antlers, thus mimicking a hunted animal (Figure 10).





**Figure 8.** A group of Buryat shamans performing a sacrificial prayer ritual during the “Games of the Yord” at the foot of the hill “Yord” in 2011. Photo: Stefan Krist.



**Figure 9.** Buryat and other worshippers dancing a giant “yokhor” round dance around the hill “Yord” to allow the coming year to be a good one (2011). Photo: Stefan Krist.





**Figure 10.** Buryat shaman Valentin Khagdayev after descending from the hill “Yord” after performing the prayer ritual on its top during the worshippers’ “yokhor” dance around it (2011). Photo: Stefan Krist.

Before this climax of the event, there is a two-day-long concert and dance program performed on a stage built at the foot of the mountain, and people cheer and feast; and, also for two days, competitions in the three traditional Buryat sports as well as in the sports of other Siberian indigenous ethnic groups (e.g., Yakutian jumps) are carried out. Thus, this event, which is always attended by thousands of people (predominantly but not exclusively Buryats) constitutes an impressively large-scale shamanist ritual—probably one of the largest in the world today—which includes all components traditionally considered necessary, among them sports competitions, which again play a crucial role in and for it (Figure 11).





**Figure 11.** Wrestlers at the foot of the hill “Yord” at the “Games of the Yord” of 2011. Photo: Stefan Krist.

## 5. Conclusions

Ensuing from the well-documented principal link between sports and rituals, their logically concluded common origin as well as the common magic function they have had and still have today for many groups of people, this paper analyzed the historical and present forms of the three traditional Buryat sports, and in particular, their religious meaning.

Works of rock art from the Neolithic found near Lake Baikal prove that sports competitions—at any rate, wrestling matches—were also carried out for ritual purposes early on in the region of Buryat settlement. Written sources from the Middle Ages (Liao Dynasty) prove their historical continuity, and furthermore, that there were experts (i.e., shamans) for carrying out the rituals that aimed to ensure fertility and survival, and in which sports—in that case predominantly archery competitions—played a crucial role.

The analysis of ethnographic sources from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries (including my own observations) prove that the Buryat shamanistic rituals for the same purpose constitute a prime example of sports’ and rituals’ primordial purpose of on the one hand making imagined cosmic and divine events more perceptible and tangible for people, and on the other hand providing people with the possibility of influencing these events. Furthermore, I have shown that the Buryats’ traditional mixed economy of hunting and stockbreeding is reflected in the two differing magical activities of these rituals: the one typical for hunters (i.e., direct negotiation with the imagined sacred creatures), and the one typical for stockbreeders (i.e., pleading to the divine).

It was also shown that neither (Tibetan) Buddhism nor (Russian Orthodox) Christianity, including the missionary activities of lamas and priests since the seventeenth century and the conversion of a majority of Buryats to one or the other of these religions, eradicated the Buryats’ beliefs in their shamanistic rituals for ensuring survival and the crucial role their sports competitions plays in these rituals. The Buddhist lamas principally fully incorporated these rituals and sports into the Buddhist

belief system and ritualistic practices, not changing their meaning at all, and conversion to Christianity remained only at a very formal and shallow level among baptized Buryats, and therefore did not affect their shamanistic beliefs and practices at all, as they were continued as before.

Nearly 70 years of Soviet repression, or at least impediment, of any religious activity was also unable to extinguish them. This can be said because soon after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the three traditional Buryat sports flourished again, commonly accompanying a variety of Buddhist ceremonies as well as shamanistic rituals, including the Games of the Mountain Yord, a biennial, large-scale, all-Buryat, and in fact open to everyone sacrificial prayer ceremony, lasting for two days and including large competitions in traditional sports.

Thus, the three traditional Buryat sports are a vivid example of the great constancy which the engagement in sports for religious purposes can have, and that even today, active sportspeople view themselves as agents in the communication between people and the sacred creatures in which they believe.

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