

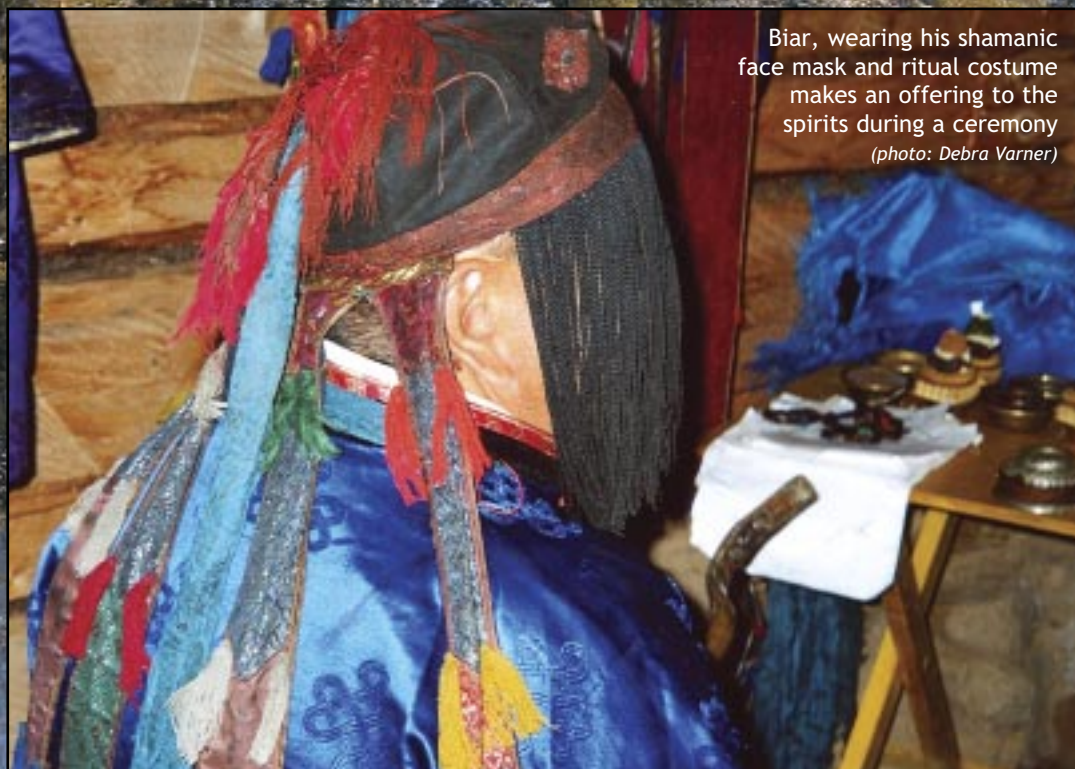
Spirits of the Taiga

Sacred Trees in the
Buryat traditions of
Siberian Shamanism

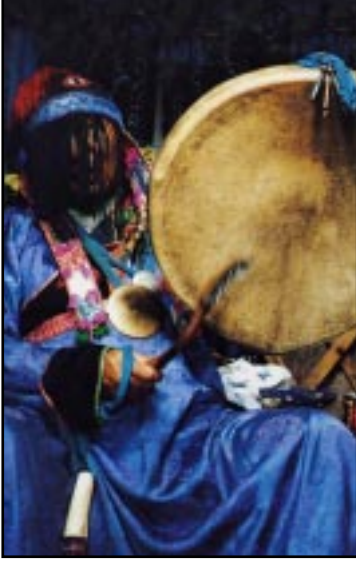
Fred Hageneder



Smudging with cedar
smoke before a ceremony
(photo: Debra Varner)



Biar, wearing his shamanic
face mask and ritual costume
makes an offering to the
spirits during a ceremony
(photo: Debra Varner)



A few years ago, my partner Vijaya and I served as chauffeurs and tour managers for a visiting Siberian shaman, Bair (pronounced Bah-er) Zh.

Tsyrendorzhiiev, driving him to venues across Britain. I had organised this tour on behalf of Galina Vladi, a Siberian-born shamanic healer who now lives near San Francisco (see Sacred Hoop Issue 42). Galina was in the UK to promote an expedition to Siberia, and Bair was accompanying her.

Bair came from from Ulan-Ude, a city east of Lake Baikal, some 2000 miles east of Moscow. As a native Mongolian speaker, Russian is only his second language, he and Galina had a lot of translation work to do.

The higher purpose of Galina's efforts was to bring together Native American and Native Siberian and Mongolian shamans, the crown and vision to be an Earth-healing ceremony in Siberia.

I was further attracted to this project by the call of the vast Siberian forest, the *Taiga*. Galina told me that Chinese logging companies are causing big-time destruction and that local timbermen who have to work for them are getting so worried that they have privately started to plant young trees in the clear-cut deserts, but that they need help. I hoped that the contact between the English and Siberian and Mongolian people arising from the expedition would help to establish a two-way relationship: Westerners reaping spiritual wisdoms from an ancient and almost uninterrupted nature spirituality; and in turn repaying

those people by helping them to save the *Taiga*.

Bair belongs to the Buryat people, who although of Mongolian descent, now live in a region which falls into the confines of Russia and hence belongs to Siberia. Ulan-Ude is in the southernmost part, relatively close to the border with Mongolia.

Bair was a successful vet, until he developed epilepsy in 1992, where upon his doctor told him something that one would never hear in the West, that he had a 'shamanic illness' which could only be cured by a shaman.

After years of Communist

persecution it was hard to find shamans, but luckily his grandmother used to be one herself, and so was able to find him someone to perform the ceremony. Bair was only cured from his serious condition (he was suffering up to nine fits per day) after the second ceremony, the one in which he was actually initiated as a shaman.

Today, Bair is a fully practising shaman and has up to 30 clients a day. He gives advice, counselling, heals with the traditional shaman's metal mirror (*toli*), and performs ceremonies. His shamanic equipment and costume; shamanic wand, crown, dress etc., he inherited from his grandmother, and some of these are about 200 years old.

Each shamanic initiation ceremony (*shamar*) is separated by several years, and the highest level a shaman can reach is the ninth level, needing nine initiations.

As a sign of this, shamans wear a traditional set of shaman's horns or antlers (*orgay*), made of metal with many colourful ribbons representing snakes hanging from them. Two fabric lizards 'control' the two antlers. The number of branches on these antlers corresponds to the number of initiations a shaman has had. Bair's has three and he told us that one learns not so much from human teachers but through visions and revelations in these very ceremonies, when the spirits come.



Top left: a Buryat shaman plays his drum. Around his neck hang shaman's mirrors (*toli*)



Left: the back of a small shaman's *toli* (shown life size). The front of the same *toli* is above



Right: a shaman drums while wearing his iron shaman's horns (*orgay*)

Below: A full set of iron horns





the shaman will warn loggers that whatever they do to a tree might happen to them and if the loggers don't listen, then the shaman will ask the spirits for help, and soon after accidents and technical failures will start.

Under the Soviet regime shamanism and all other forms of religion were heavily suppressed, with Special Forces snooping about and readily killing people. There are reported cases from the early decades of the 20th century where a shaman was shot dead in a forest, and when the murderers came back the next day to pick up the corpse, the bullets were neatly lined up in a row next to the body. This could be interpreted as one might kill a shaman, but one cannot kill shamanism, one cannot kill the spirit.

During 70 years of suppression, the practice gradually disappeared nevertheless, but as soon as Gorbachev's *perestroika* loosened the iron grip and the iron curtain the spirits have been coming back. We were told that they literally knock on the doors of their descendants, calling them with nightmares, hauntings, or most commonly with 'shamanic diseases' as in Bair's case.

CONNECTING SKY AND EARTH

In Buryat traditions, all trees are sacred because they connect Earth and Sky and because they are an antennae for cosmic energies. This only changed in the 1950's, when Soviet government policies finally reached remote Siberia and the people were told by the government that it was OK to cut down any living tree they wanted.

This decimation of the trees was exasperated because the shamans, who were traditionally the protectors of the land, had effectively gone because of the persecution. Today, locals worried about the impact of the Chinese logging companies sometimes remember this ancient role of the shaman and employ one to protect the forest.

Bair told us that at first the shaman will be fair, and warn the loggers that whatever they do to a tree might happen to them if the shaman is forced to call upon the spirits. But if the loggers don't listen, then the shaman will perform a ceremony and ask the spirits for



help, and soon after accidents and technical failures will start. But unfortunately the problems brought upon the loggers is not quite enough (yet) to stop the bigger picture of destruction that has started to unravel in the Siberian *Taiga*.

BIRCH – THE SHAMAN TREE

When I asked Bair about sacred trees his first answer was the birch.

In olden times shaman's corpses were hung up in birch trees and left to the elements and the wildlife. The quicker the skeleton of a shaman would disappear the more powerful he was said to have been. His spirit was understood to use the birch as a gateway to the spirit world, but could also use it anytime as a channel to come back when called or needed.

The birch is considered the most sacred of trees because it is the purest. In simple folk tradition for example, when a host had a guest, he would bind the reins of his guest's horse to a birch nearby the house, instead of putting it in



Above: 'kicking up the dust' in a shanar ceremony, Bair runs - taken over by his spirit (photo: Debra Varner)

the stable. This would indicate a special welcome.

The birch not only serves the spirits of ancestral shamans as the gateway to travel to the spirit world after death, it is also the tree that marks the beginning of any shamanic career; for it is a birch grove in which all *shanar* initiations take place.

For these ceremonies, the trees are actually cut and replanted in a special pattern. On one side of the grove are three special trees, on the left the 'father tree' (*esege*), on the right the 'mother tree' (*eche*), and between them the one that bridges to the spirit world, and up which the shaman in trance will climb during the ceremony. These three trees have to be at least five metres tall.

Below: twisted iron snakes from a Buryat or Mongolian shaman's costume

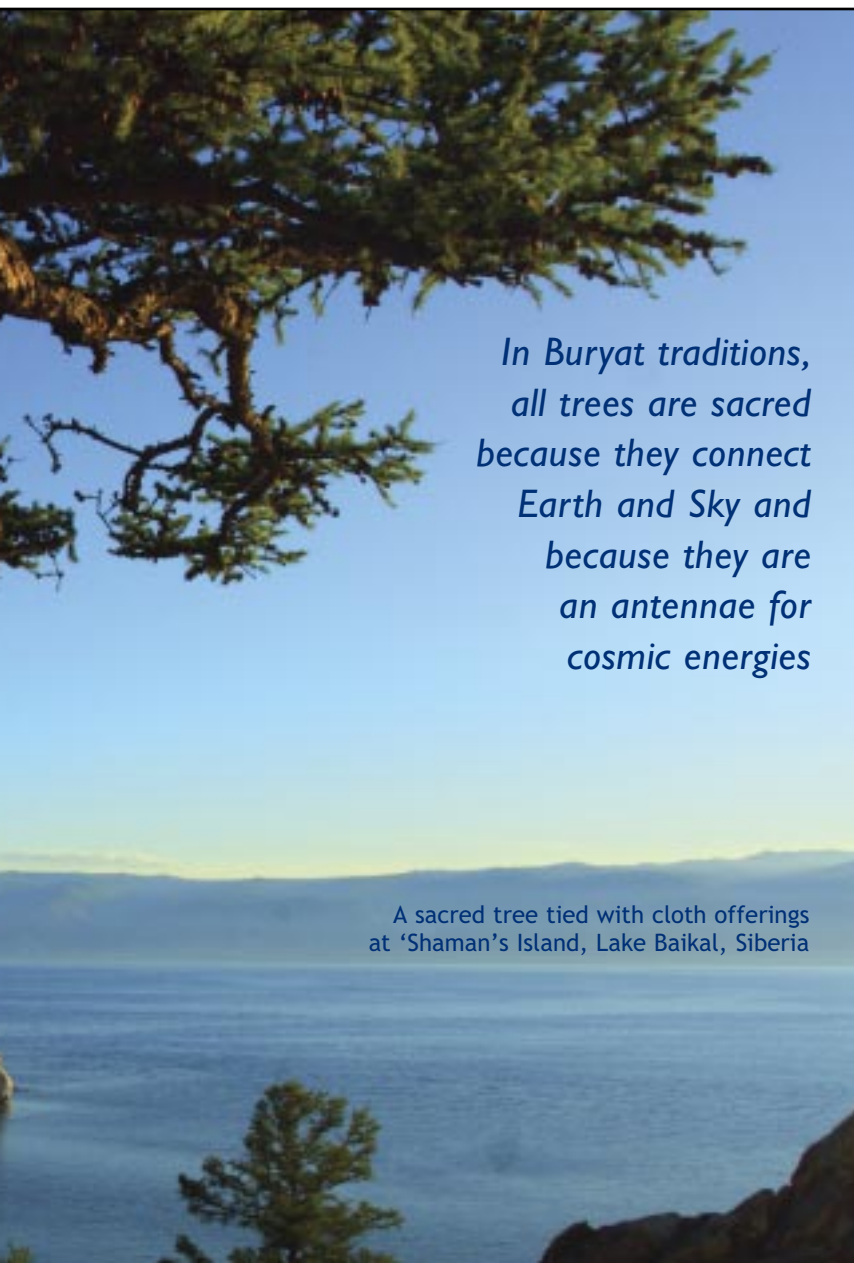
In front of these are a neat square of nine trees called 'wings' (*derbilge*). Nine is the most sacred number. At the bottom end of the grove is a single tree called 'the hitching post' (*sirge*), for the shaman to tether his spirit horse at his return. The 'wings' and 'the hitching post' are small trees of about 1.7 metres high. Altogether the number of trees makes thirteen, the second most sacred number.

The ceremony takes several days to complete, and has many parts to it, including one called 'Bringing up the Dust' (*tohorulkha*) where the initiate has to run around the grove time and time again. Bair ran for two days and two nights without stopping.

This is the setup for the first initiation as a shaman. For each higher stage, another nine 'wings' are added. Hence there would be nine times nine trees (plus the three at the top of the grove and 'the hitching post' at the bottom of the grove) for the ninth level. After the ceremony the trees are burnt.



Below: a shaman plays his drum



In Buryat traditions, all trees are sacred because they connect Earth and Sky and because they are an antennae for cosmic energies

A sacred tree tied with cloth offerings at 'Shaman's Island, Lake Baikal, Siberia

TOOLS OF THE SHAMAN

The main instrument of a shaman is his frame drum. A Buryat shaman's drum is made of birch, and so is the



Left: shaman's birch wood horse-headed staff tied with ermin pelts

Right: Buryat shaman's coat. Made from buckskin and decorated with metal pieces representing the shaman's ribs, as well as twisted iron rods probably representing snakes, twisted hard steel cone jingles, metal amulets representing spirit powers and large bells. Mid C19th

Below: a shaman's antler handled blessing wand (*bartag*)



drumstick. The round drum represents the sun, but at the same time the human face. It is held in the hand by means of an iron ring centred in the back of the drum, the ring is strapped to the frame by four strong leather thongs. These represent the four directions. The shaman's hand clasps the ring as though it was the sun, which in so doing connects him through the four directions to the circle of the cosmos (being the birchwood frame). The drumstick often ends in the carving of a snake head. The snake is a sacred animal which commonly features in Buryat shamanism.

Another important tool is the *harribar* (also known as *horbo* or *bayag* depending on the type of shaman who uses it), which is a staff the size of a waist-high walking stick. This is the spirit horse for the shaman's trance journey to the other worlds. It is precious because it is made out of rare pieces of birch root, and the end is carved into a horse's or dragon's head.

Although not made of birch, the second most important tool of a shaman is a wooden blessing whip (*bartag*). This is a wand, a little like a riding crop, around 40 or 50 cm long, and hung with many colourful ribbons representing snakes, as well as metal bells, and symbolic miniature blacksmith's metal tools (hammers, anvils etc.) and shaman's weapons, such as a miniature bow and arrow, a sword or dagger, and sometimes even a ladder or a small model boat.

The *bartag* has a handle made of the antler of a three year old stag, and is itself made of three branches each about 1cm thick and slightly curving around each other. The branches are taken from a tree known as a 'red willow' which grows in the mountains, and to get it the shaman must undertake quite a physical journey to find the right tree – which has to be growing by a spring. Its red bark signifies magical power.

TREES AND SPIRITS

Other trees that grow in the *Taiga* forests are the pine, larch, spruce, aspen, willow, cedar, juniper, wild apple, bird cherry, and perhaps surprisingly, the wild apricot.

The pine and the larch are also important trees within Buryat shamanic traditions. The pine is now used in place of the birch in shaman's funeral ceremonies. This is because some time ago the tradition of suspending shaman's corpses from birch trees was forced to change by law, and nowadays their remains are burnt before they are exposed to nature. Since fire performs an altogether different transformation, the spirit of the shaman doesn't need the bright birch anymore for his ascent, and the correct tree to use is now deemed to be the pine. Part of the reason for this is because the pine's red bark symbolises blood and life force.

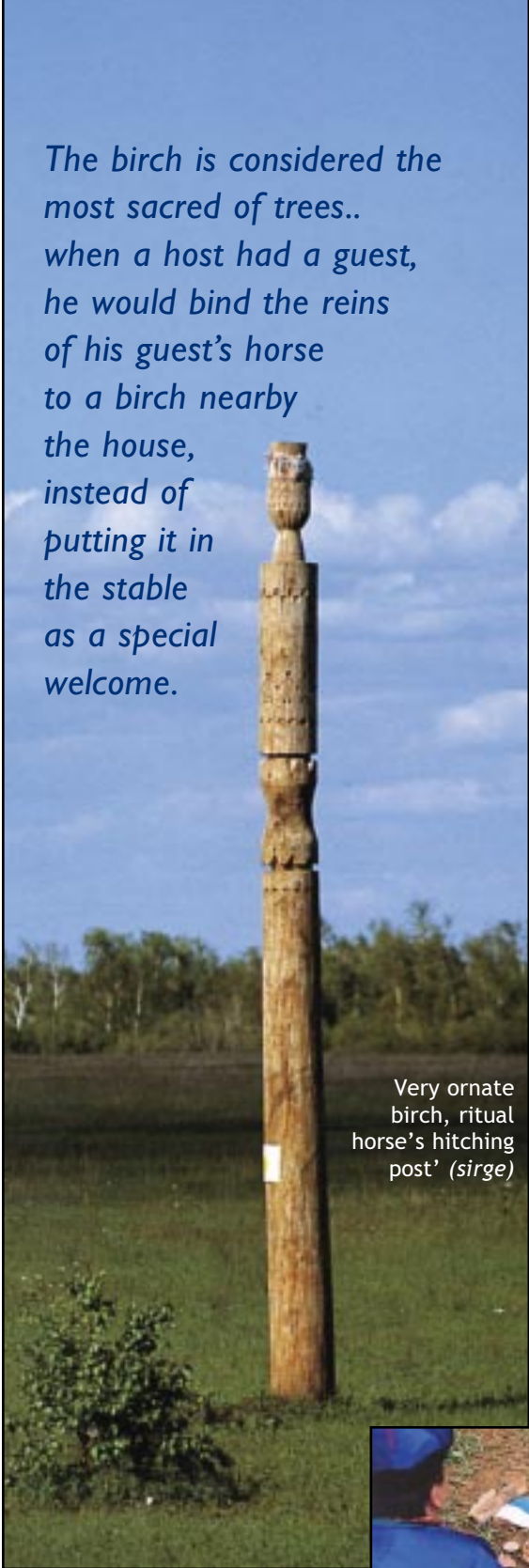
Larch trees also serve a very special purpose, as whilst birch is used for the *shamar* initiations in which the spirits and ancestors are called upon to form the new shaman,

larch trees form the ritual grove to communicate with the *Tengres*, the spirit powers themselves.

In Buryat shamanic cosmology, the original God of the universe split up a long, long time ago into 99 gods called *Tengres* (Mongolian shamanism is sometimes called *Tengerism*). Underneath these are the *Chate* spirits, serving as mediators to the lower realms. Every *Chate* spirit belongs to one of the *Tengres* and has a residence in a special



The birch is considered the most sacred of trees.. when a host had a guest, he would bind the reins of his guest's horse to a birch nearby the house, instead of putting it in the stable as a special welcome.



Very ornate birch, ritual horse's hitching post' (*sirge*)

willing to perform a blessing ceremony for a tree I knew.

I had in mind an old yew tree in Hayley's Wood north of Cirencester in Gloucestershire, England – the only old yew I knew which is not in a churchyard. He readily agreed. So we busily prepared all the offerings he requested and set out; Bair, Galina, Vijaya and I and others – in all seven people for one tree.

After a little, appropriate 'pilgrimage' through the ups and downs, lefts and rights and which-way-nows of Hayley Wood we grew silent as we walked down a magical avenue of yew trees, towards the elder yew at the far end.

We cleaned the space around the tree a little, and then Bair placed us

walking around the massive trunk of the yew, three times clockwise. He put on his fringed shamanic journey cap (*shapke* or *maykhabsha*) which hid his face and which shields a shaman's physical eyes so they can focus better on their inner sight, and started his drumming and sung invocations to the spirits.

Bair's particular tradition works with spirits and ancestors, but not with animal or plant spirits. Nevertheless Bair, seeing my honest quest for growing ever closer to trees, tried to communicate with the spirit of the yew, although he freely admitted afterwards that he was not very able to do so because 'their language is very different'.

So instead he called upon the familiar spirits of Ol'hon, the sacred island in Lake Baikal, and the spirits came and told him the age of the yew (500 years) and gave a personal message for me regarding my search to learn more about the language of trees.

Needless to say it was a very powerful and memorable experience for everyone. I am very glad to have made this connection and hope that one day we can invite Bair again for a blessing ceremony in a sacred grove protected by our charity Friends of the Trees.

Fred Hageneder is a recognised authority on ethnobotany. His books include: 'The Spirit of Trees: Science, Symbolism and Inspiration' (Floris, Edinburgh 2000), 'The Living Wisdom of Trees: Natural History, Folklore, Symbolism, Healing' (Duncan Baird, London 2005) and the ground-breaking 'Yew – A History' (Sutton, Stroud 2007).

Fred is a founding member and the chairman of Friends of the Trees, a registered charity concerned with nature conservation, and a founder member of the AYG (Ancient Yew Group). He lives near the Black Mountains in Wales. www.spirit-of-trees.net

Below and inset: Bair makes offerings to the spirit of the tree



direction of the compass or a specific sacred place on earth.

Thirteen of these *Chate* spirits live on Ol'hon, a sacred island in the middle of Lake Baikal. This island is honoured as the heartland of Siberian shamanism, because of the thirteen *Chate*, and because many of the greatest shamans in history have been buried there.

BLESSING AT THE YEW

I asked Bair towards the end of our tour across Britain if he would be

south of the tree, and, with the tree to the north, he set up his altar with two silk scarfs (*khadags*) and bowls filled with offerings: one with milk, one with vodka, one with hot tea, and one with an assortment of delicious cakes and biscuits all soaked with all three of the liquids.

Later, in the ceremony, we sprinkled these offerings while