

**YACHAY WASI Sacred Sites Event - Submission 25 – RUSSIA –
Received May 6, 2006**

Erjen Khamaganova
Chair, Buryat Baikal Center for Indigenous Cultures
ul. Chertenkova 6-72 Ulan-Ude, RUSSIA 670034
e-mail: bbcic@mail.ru, ekhamaga@indiana.edu

Sacred Sites: Our Pain, Hope and Strength

The process of education is called in my native Buryat language “*khumuuzhulekhe*” from the word “*khun*” – human, it literally means the process of helping a human to become a human. One of the most important aspects of being a human in native understanding is his ability to comprehend the world in the entirety of complex interconnectedness and interrelations of events, phenomena and actions. Sacred sites in Buryat culture are the embodiment of these interrelations and could be seen as the major “educational tool”, or better to say it is the way to realize oneself as a human being, as a part of an endless whole. The first sacred site of a Buryat child is his *toonto*, the place where a baby is born, where his placenta is buried. Through a special ceremony, the upper and lower worlds are informed that a new person is born in the middle world. Is it important for a human? Where else if not on this particular place could one experience this insurmountable connection to Mother Earth, *altan ulgii* “the golden cradle”, where else one could feel the ties with own ancestors?

Now more and more people see and recognize the correlation between spiritual work of a native person on a sacred place and corresponding higher level of biodiversity on this particular place. The devout attitude to sacred places, inability and impossibility to destroy an inherent harmony of these places for a native person has created the conditions for the conservation of biodiversity on these places. But can we see sacred sites as mere conservation activity? Probably not, it is the cornerstone of our cultures, worldviews and native philosophies. The efforts of indigenous peoples to protect biodiversity and preserve own cultures are interconnected and inseparable. Rare species of flora and fauna are alive today also by virtue of their special place in traditional cultures, and in the course of centuries indigenous people have been protecting with care sacred sites, sacred birds and animals, sacred plants and trees. Our sacred Lake Baikal—the oldest and the deepest lake in the world – is home to more than three thousand species of life, almost half of which are endemic to the area. Buryat clans connect their origin directly with Baikal and trace their lineage to natural forefathers — the animals and trees of the lake. This high degree of diversity of life forms on sacred sites could be explained by the fact that sacred sites are places of origin of certain families or clans, and have been protected because many of these forms were believed to be our ancestors. The forefather of Ekhirits is *Gutar*, the Eel-Pot fish from the lake. My clan’s ancestor from my mother’s side is *Khongodor*, the White Swan, the bird that comes every spring to the lake. The forefather of Bulagats is *Bukha Noen*, the Grey Bull, there are Birch clans, Eagle clans, Wolfe clans etc.

In a modern reality a sacred place is the only preserved special arena where indigenous people can educate their children (help children to become humans) in native ways. Sacred sites are also active actors of such education themselves. The forms and methods of education and

transmission of traditional indigenous knowledge on these places are unique; they are common heritage of each particular indigenous nation. This traditional indigenous knowledge, as well as unique forms and methods of traditional pedagogy, that help to better understand modern reality are indeed the “mechanisms” for ensuring continuation of our sacred sites. And sacred sites are in turn the “mechanisms” for ensuring the continuation of indigenous person as a human and indigenous people as people with distinct identities, philosophies and worldviews. The current reality, however, is such that we face now problems of destruction of Buryat native identity that eventually led to the destruction of many sacred sites, and destruction of sacred sites in turn contributed to the further destruction of Buryat identity.

I tried to articulate very serious concepts of what sacred sites are for an indigenous person, why it is important to preserve and protect sacred sites. Taking this opportunity today, I would like to present some thoughts about how UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and UN agencies could assist in protection of indigenous sacred sites.

1. Sacred sites as World Heritage and Indigenous Peoples. In the Russian Federation out of five World Natural Heritage Sites four are sacred sites for the indigenous peoples residing on these territories. However, UNESCO World Heritage Site status does not help indigenous peoples. It is ironic, indeed indigenous peoples are the ones who saved many of significant sites that now are recognized as world heritage through own “mechanisms” without any assistance from the state or in many cases despite the pressure from the states and despite the pressure from the outside dominating cultures. In today’s reality from my own experience I can say that on our World Heritage Sites – Lake Baikal and the Golden Mountains of Altai, existing ecological nihilism of incoming population is “balanced” in many ways only by native traditions and efforts of indigenous communities to protect their sacred sites. Indeed the native people are doing everyday constant work to ensure the continuity of own sacred sites, contributing to conservation of biodiversity and ultimately ensuring the future existence of the World Heritage Sites. If you wish the recent decision by President Putin to divert the construction of the oil pipeline 40 km away from Lake Baikal is the result of active resistance of the whole Russian civil society with significant input from local communities, including conducting of special ceremonies and rituals. It is very sad that UNESCO seems to underestimate the potential of indigenous communities to contribute to the promotion of the new environmentally sound planetary culture. The suggestions of our Center submitted to the UNESCO Moscow office on the development of a special project “Indigenous Cultures on the World Heritage Sites” are left without any consideration. It is time to expand the scope of WH concept and include specific provisions related to local indigenous peoples and their knowledge. UNPFII could initiate in collaboration with UNESCO establishing of a network of Indigenous knowledge on sacred sites of the World Heritage.

2. Sacred Sites and Rights for Traditional Education and Up-bringing. Protection of sacred sites is indispensably connected with the issues of self-determination and indigenous rights, including the rights of a native child to receive traditional education and develop skills to retain and develop traditional indigenous knowledge. Indigenous children have right to fully acquire the rich wealth of TIK; however, the unique ways of transferring this knowledge are under threat. Modern curricula in schools are far detached from the essence of native pedagogy. UNICEF and UNSECO could play a major role in developing Guidelines for the

member states regarding the protection and promotion of traditional indigenous knowledge in education, including traditional pedagogies. In no case should such Guidelines diminish the cultural diversity of indigenous peoples, trying to impose the detailed uniform regulations on every indigenous nation. The Guidelines should stress the importance of the diversity of unique techniques of intergenerational transmission of knowledge; these forms and methods of education must be at least as diverse as are indigenous peoples, and should be based on the fundamental principles of the native philosophy that are embodied in the sacred sites – non-violence and peace. Special role of indigenous women in native pedagogy must be stressed. And finally the keystone of the Guidelines should be recognition of the rights of children to know, practice own traditional knowledge, to live in and to protect/develop own culture.

3. Sacred Sites and Development. Akwe: Kon Voluntary Guidelines for the Conduct of Cultural, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment regarding Developments Proposed to Take Place on, or which are Likely to Impact on, Sacred Sites and on Lands and Waters Traditionally Occupied or Used by Indigenous and Local Communities as global framework for protection of sacred sites and their biodiversity arm local and native communities with very useful tools. The guidelines provides a good system ensuring collaboration of indigenous and local communities in assessment of cultural, spiritual, environmental and social impacts of proposed development on sacred sites. Surely we would love to have a document that is legally binding our governments to consider indigenous views, but we understand that it will be possible in a distant future; right now Akwe:Kon is one of the very few documents that addresses the issues of sacred sites from truly indigenous perspective. The SCBD and UNPFII should take enhanced steps to promote the implementation of the Akwe: Kon among states parties.

4. Sacred Sites and Healthy Ways of Life. Every indigenous nation has created its own system of healthy way of life. Centuries long development of these systems shaped their unique forms reflecting the environmental conditions of their respective localities and specificity of human economic life, sacred sites in these systems always had an important special role. Entering a sacred place, a person who is properly educated and who does not break any taboos associated with the place of power, finds himself under the patronage of spiritual owners of the place. A person, being constantly under pressure from everyday routine, upon entering the zone of sacred places finally gets an opportunity to be simply himself. The feeling of finding refuge and protection has a tremendously favorable effect on the human mind and soul. Today many of us are dealing with the problems of alcoholism and loss of spiritual and physical balance in our communities. Preservation of sacred sites is also the core and the way to restore traditions of healthy ways of life, healthy diet, healthy competitions in the forms that are unique and suitable for each particular region, each particular indigenous nation. It seems possible that UNPFII together with UN Department for Sport and Development, the World Health Organization could initiate special program of indigenous health based on the spiritual dimension of healthy life styles, embodied in our sacred sites.