

Transformation of Altai-Kizhi Dwelling Under Russian Cultural Influences and Its Relevance in the Cultural Revitalization Process in Post-Soviet Period

DANIEL DĚDOVSKÝ*

Abstract: The article presents new data of modifications of the housing system in southern Siberian region of the Altai Mountains during the 20th century to the present day with a special focus on its changes in the last few years. The research was oriented on transformation of *ayil*, an Altai-Kizhi dwelling, under the influences of Russian culture, and its present significance in the revival process of indigenous Altai culture, including the technological aspects of constructing of a Russian-influenced timbered house adopted by the Altai people.

Keywords: Altai People; Architecture; Dwelling; Revitalization; Settlements; Social Change

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I. Introduction

The settlement structure of the southern Altai people (Altai-Kizhi) underwent a number of fundamental changes during the 20th century. After the forced sedentarization of the semi-nomadic population during Stalin's strengthening of colonial rule over Siberian ethnic groups in the interwar era, we continuously encounter external controlled interventions in the livelihood and lifestyle of the native population, which subsequently imply internal socio-cultural changes within the society's adaptation to new conditions. The autochthonous material culture of the southern Altai people is based on the traditional way of life and the ethnoculturally conditioned system of values; therefore, a certain degree of sacralization is still present in the dwelling and its components, and the workaday use of a traditional dwelling requires observing a number of customary and, to a lesser extent, ritual acts. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the hitherto formally repressed or marginalized patterns of Altai culture cease to be under ideological repressive pressure; with the establishment of the Altai Republic within the Russian Federation, a process of Altai cultural revitalization is beginning to take shape, indirectly supported by the international increase in lay interest in Siberian shamanism and the massive development of tourism in the region of the Altai Mountains. At the same time, however, the ordinary population of the Altai village still has a common knowledge of the construction of the current form of a traditional dwelling and a log house of the Russian type, including social and sanitary facilities. This paper primarily focuses on traditional buildings in the context of current ethno-social processes, while also dealing with the technology of their construction and utility functions in the climatic conditions of the Siberian mountains. In monitoring the

* Daniel Dědovský, University of Pardubice, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology. E-mail: daniel.dedovsky@upce.cz

development and changes in the forms and functions of Altai dwellings in the post-Soviet paradigm, the viability and transformation of traditions in recent Altai society became the main topic of repeated field research¹ in the Southern Altai region. The period under review is characterized by coexistence, but also by transformations of persistent traditional cultural patterns, their shifting and updating to new context and situations, including popularization and tourist presentation, since the intensified globalization brings contemporary Euro-Atlantic civilization values and products to the previously relatively isolated area on the borders with Mongolia and China.

II. Traditional settlements of the southern Altai people

The traditional form of dwelling of the Southern Altaians (Altai-Kizhi), *ayil* (айыл) corresponds in type and, above all, function to the general form of dwellings of the shamanistic cultural circle, occurring throughout Siberia and extending to the far north (Samoyeds), including the European part (Sámi), with its occurrence stretching steadily into North American territories [Jones 2016: 157]. Despite partial structural differences, these dwellings tend to have a similar layout and function: doors facing east or south-east, an interior divided into a women's and a men's part, and a sacred precinct situated behind the central fireplace [Dolgikh 1960: 36].

The naming of the traditional form of the Altai dwelling varies depending on the individual ethnographic groups (chadyr, alanchik etc.); the word *ayil* has begun to be generally used as an umbrella term for these buildings. In the Altai language, *being in ayil* generally means *being at home*, and this phrase covers not only the forms of dwelling derived from the traditional forms of Altai abodes, but also the house of the Russian type, referred to as *tura* in Altai [Golikova 2015: 273].

The original semi-nomadic way of life of the southern Altai people determined the settlement structure. Light portable huts travelled with herdsmen and their herds through summer mountain pastures, while non-portable winter log cabins stood in the lowlands, where the family wintered with their herds; while ethnic Russians established permanent villages in river valleys in the Altai region, southern Altaians usually created winter settlements of less than ten buildings, very often a single solitary log cabin. German botanist Carl Friedrich von Ledebour talks about the visit of an important personality, *zaysan* (from Chinese; a chieftain with the authority of a judge) [Ivanova 2007: 135–136], whose hut was surrounded by five other dwellings; the distance between the individual winter settlements was usually several kilometres [von Ledebour 1830: 124–125].

The layout of the Altai-Kizhi dwellings reflects the needs of the traditional way of life and the shamanistic belief system. In the case of the portable *ayil*, it is a conical tent with a wooden structure consisting of twelve supporting beams held together by hoops, supplemented with smaller logs interspersed with layers of moss and covered with a mantle of long strips of pine bark or deciduous trees, often exclusively birch; in forest-free areas of the mountains, a felt covering [Toshchakova 1978: 73] was used in the past, now absent in practice. The larger, non-portable winter log cabin-type dwelling formed a hexagon in

¹ Data from field research are anonymized to protect the privacy of selected informants.

its floor plan, and the timbered walls were covered with tree bark or quilted strips of felt cloth [Toshchakova 1978: 75].

III. Transformations of South Altai settlements under Soviet rule

The natural sedentarization of the Southern Altaians into Russian-type villages took place more or less spontaneously until the 20th century; the first official attempts to transform the nomadic way of life into a sedentary one in the region of Central Asia and southern Siberia did not appear until the late 19th century [Hejzlarová 2014: 5]; the traditional *ayils* therefore remained the main dwelling of the Altai people until the interwar period. In the revolutionary year of 1917, the population of the Altai Mountains was 12,702 people (including Russians): 10.1% of them lived in a European-type house with more than one room, 18.19% of the population lived in a house with one room and 71% of people lived in a traditional Altai dwelling [Zakharova 2015: 89–90]. However, with the end of the Russian Civil War, as part of the Stalinist repression, the state administration proceeded to forcibly settle the population in structured villages with a street system. Despite the continuity of the pastoral way of subsistence, newly concentrated under the administration of sovkhozes, the process of total sedentarization brought significant changes in appearance, but also in selected functions of the *ayil*.

Under the administration of sovkhozes, the method of Altai pastoralism changed from a semi-nomadic style to a mountain-hut style. However, the resettlement of the Altaians into Russian-style houses did not bring about the demise of the traditional dwelling, especially due to its religious and customary significance. Although the sacred district in the vicinity of *ayil*, which used to be part of the dwelling area, practically ceased to exist due to the government's anti-religious measures, the traditional huts escaped these waves of repression due to their residential function and survived as "summer kitchens" built in the immediate vicinity of the house. The portable type of dwelling gradually disappeared in favour of a reduced form of the non-portable winter form; several *ayils* of a tent-like form have survived to the present day, but are no longer portable. Therefore, huts laid out on a hexagonal floor plan, derived from the winter-type *ayil*, are beginning to predominate in villages, with walls of roughly hewn logs with doors, small windows and a cone-shaped or hexagonal truncated pyramid roof referring to the construction of historical forms; the smoke opening in these buildings gradually loses its function, being often covered with removable plastic or completely blinded, while the fireplaces are wood-burning stoves with a pipe run out of the wall or connected to the roof chimney. These Soviet-time *ayils* still prevail in Altai villages; in many localities we can still see an apparent anomaly with the entrance not facing east: it is a remnant of Khrushchev's anti-religious measures, on the basis of which officials for some time banned the construction of east-facing doors as evidence of overcoming religious ideas in the Siberian countryside². However, after the demonstrative construction of several such buildings in each village, people returned to the original orientation of the buildings. It is also from this period that the still popular

² Field research data, man, Ongudaysky District, woman, Ust-Kansky District.

term used for the *ayil* meaning a “summer kitchen” originates, purposefully sidelining the traditional spiritual aspects of the building.

Due to similar, only superficial intrusions into the private lives of the population and the forced observance of the Soviet ideology of egalitarianism, there were no open ethnic tensions between the Russian population and the Altai people during the second half of the 20th century. Recently, there has been minor tension in the only official town of the Altai Republic, its capital Gorno-Altaysk, where there is also ethnic segregation in the form of an ethnically Altai quarter³; the Altaians sometimes encounter a certain degree of arrogance here when dealing with some Russians. However, according to informants from smaller settlements, such conflicts has not occurred in the regions to this day and people still treat others as equals. An informant from Karakol, for example, confirmed that the Russians live side by side with the Altaians in their village and that mixed marriages are quite common there. Altai cultural influence also affected settled Russians in Soviet times; for example, the village of Yabogan in the Ust-Kansky District is inhabited by ethnic Russians, descendants of people expelled to Siberia in the early 20th century. Owing to their close and long-term coexistence with the Altaians, these people adopted the Altai language as their mother tongue and only encountered Russian for the first time at school, a situation that lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of modern media.

IV. The role of traditional dwelling in the current daily life of the Altai people

As the continuity of the construction and use of *ayils* has never been completely interrupted, the traditional dwellings have retained their cultural significance for the general public to this day. While in the socialist period *ayily* remained formally unchanged except for partial details, with the opening of the free market and the gradual expansion of the availability of various building materials since the 1990s, a large number of innovative elements started to appear, the application of which allows, to a certain extent, spontaneous building development, but also adapting *ayils* to increasing demands on living standards. Recent *ayils* thus do not lack a roof made of Canadian shingles or varnished sheet metal tiles and rooflights, modern solid fuel stoves, chimney, skylight in the form of a roofed tower with glazed walls in place of the original smoke hole, tiled floor instead of the original earthen one, being often wired up and equipped with contemporary furniture.

Also, the spiritual significance of the *ayil*, in the post-Soviet period maintained in many cases rather by the conservatism of the socialist countryside lifestyle rather than by true religiosity, began to lose its relevance in modern *ayils* under the influence of Euro-Atlantic civilization. At the same time, however, the Altaians are allowed to express their religiosity publicly, and due to the reintegration of Orthodoxy into Russian identity, accompanied by the construction of new or restoration of the original Orthodox churches, the Altaians begin to emphasize a similar function of the *ayil* as a cornerstone of Altai cultural and religious identity. In Russian Orthodox and Altai shamanistic or more radical Burkhanist environments, these manifestations shift from a position forcibly limited to the private family sphere to a multi-meaning national symbol, even for a large number of family

³ Field research data, woman, Gorno-Altaysk 2016.

ceremonies, annual holiday traditions and everyday customs directly or indirectly associated with a traditional dwelling.

Like some other neighbouring ethnic groups, the Altaians consider number six significant and positive; they therefore use a six-digit number system to express the relationships between the human life cycle and the ways of the world [Shodoev 2012: 59]. Analogous to the lunar calendar in China, the Altai calendar is related to the six planets of the solar system, with the months personified by twelve different animals. The Altai people themselves divide human life into six duodecimal cycles, with a special birthday celebration taking place during each finalization (i.e. every twelve years). This fact is directly reflected in the hexagonal structure of the traditional dwelling, and the *ayil* thus represents the contextualization of human existence within the world. The entrance to the *ayil* is always very low so that those who enter have to bow to the fireplace situated in the middle of the hut, or to the sacred precinct as a whole, with the chimney and entrance forming the only holes in the *ayil* of the traditional form. In the morning, when the door was opened, the sun's rays fell into the hearth and divided the interior in two; from the door, the *ayil* is divided along this axis into a women's (right) and a men's (left) half. People can move freely throughout the space, but in general everyone stays in their own part, where they also have their personal belongings; the woman also always sat to the right and the man to the left of the hearth [von Hellwald 1875: 86]. The central hearth is part of a small sacred precinct and people must not step on or over it, even when the fire is not burning; the same applies to the entire sacred precinct (the area behind the hearth), which neither family members nor guests enter. Each sphere of the abode personifies a specific part of the human body: the three main crossbeams, extended above the level of the smoke hole, represent the heart, the apex of the *ayil* represents the head, the space in the middle represents the entrails, and the lowest part symbolizes the feet. As a whole, the dwelling embodies the harmonious coexistence of the three interconnected spheres of the shamanistic world (the floor, the space above the hearth and the smoke hole).

Many informants, who moved to larger settlements and switched to the urban way of life, spoke openly about their disappointment with the new livelihood and its declining profitability, also due to the impact of anti-Russian sanctions on the economy and society. The return of a relatively large part of the Altai population to its original livelihoods, especially pastoralism and related crafts, also implies a renewed strengthening of the importance of Altai spiritual culture and traditional values. Prohibitions and taboos associated with the use of *ayil* are therefore increasingly respected not only in conservative families, their observance is also increasingly reflected in the upbringing of young children. In the urban environment, the revitalization of some traditions, depending on the natural environment, is only partially feasible.

The fire used for cooking, whether in a European-type house or in an *ayil*, should not be lighted by artificial means; therefore, using tractors and off-road vehicles with trailers, the people of Altai villages harvest birch bark in the woods to light a fire instead of paper (cutting off the top layer of bark in circular strips around the trunk without damaging the bast and resin canals). The motivation to do so should be sought on a spiritual level, not in ecological thinking; varnished wood, old paper and other waste material ends up in the stove heating the bathroom. In recent years, in the autumn, entire families can be seen harvesting birch bark in the woods to light a fire in the winter. In the town, however, this custom still exists only latently, and people there, unless already living in apartments with

central heating, usually light the stove with paper; many do feel that they are doing something inappropriate, but natural materials are harder to find in large quantities there. Still, after discussing this tradition with a resident of Gorno-Altaysk, we found freshly harvested birch bark by the stove in the morning instead of old newspapers. On the other hand, the ritual of feeding a newly lit fire for cooking with a piece of food is now widely maintained even in an urban environment, where log and, to a lesser extent, brick houses still predominate over apartment houses, present only in the centre. We can observe it not only in the *ayil*, but also in a typical clay kiln in a house of the European type or when lighting a fire in nature: a piece of bread is most often sacrificed to a fire. The informant from Karakol confirmed that even young families usually practice this small ritual act, also observed in her family whenever they start a fire for cooking, whether in the *ayil* or in the house.

The traditional *ayil*, which has served as a summer kitchen since the days of socialism, remains largely unused in the winter, but it still plays an irreplaceable role in the life of the Altaians in family ceremonial customs. Altai weddings traditionally take place only during the warm season of the year⁴, weather permitting, in the *ayil*, and so do duodecimal birthday celebrations as well as burial services⁵, the time of which cannot be planned in advance.

After all, the very construction of the *ayil* is closely connected with entering into marriage when the newlyweds move away from their parents. To this end, the young couple first builds a European-type house and then an *ayil*, usually within one year of building the house. A well-known professional *ayil* builder, Mr. Viktor Nikolayevich Chugin (61) from the village of Elo in Ongudaysky District, confirmed that the Altaians build an *ayil* after the wedding almost every time if they have enough money and space on the plot next to the house, even though it is not a cheap affair; the construction of an *ayil* costs 50–60,000 rubles and the roof alone for the cheapest variant costs 30,000 rubles, while the monthly income in the Altai region is usually 5,000 to 20,000 rubles⁶. While people in villages usually master the knowledge of the construction of the *ayil* and build it themselves with the help of their extended family, it is because of the high financial demands that a certain percentage of young people in larger settlements lose interest in Altai traditions; the price of the material alone represents a great burden even for the villagers. However, strong social pressure from more conservative family members plays a role in the acquisition of the *ayil*. An informant from Onguday, who recently got married, said that her parents, who respect Altai traditions, had begun to ask intensively about her plans to build an *ayil* immediately after the young couple completed the construction of the house. The informant herself also considers the *ayil* to be very important, while her husband, although an ethnic Altaian, does not attach much importance to the traditional building; still, the *ayil* will be built. Other informants from Ongudaysky, Ust-Kansky and Ust-Koksinsky districts also cited social pressure and the need to publicly present belonging to the Altai culture as the reason for the construction of their *ayils*.

Ethnic Russians settled in the Altai region do not usually build *ayils* in their gardens; informants from Boochi, Ust-Kan and other settlements said they did not know of a single Russian who would have an *ayil* in the garden, although there is no ban or taboo preventing

⁴ Field research data, woman, Ongudaysky District 2019.

⁵ Field research data, woman, Ust-Kansky District 2019.

⁶ Interview with Victor Nicolaewich Chugin, Karakol, Ongudaysky District 2019.

a member of another ethnic group or belief from building it. This is not the case with mixed couples, whose dwellings usually incorporate an *ayil*; this fact also demonstrates the exceptional importance of the structure and the intense social pressure to build it.

Historical types of *ayils* are rare in new buildings. If such an *ayil* appears in the field, it is often a very old, well-maintained building or a tourist or museum reconstruction, which no longer serves its original purpose. Often, however, the traditional form of the dwelling occurs as a symbol of Altai culture, whether in fine arts, commercial promotion or in the form of a realistic replica in the numerous so-called ethno parks, most often built close to village tourist hostels. Here, these *ayils* are often established and used for religious ceremonies and cultural events, combining elements of the Altai religion with younger Burkhanism, but also with ideas of modern esoteric movements, a trend that is growing stronger in the urban environment, with only marginal support of the ordinary rural population. Professional *ayil* builder Mr. Chugin has also built three replicas of traditional *ayils* outside the Altai region, in Moscow, Tomsk, Novosibirsk and St. Petersburg⁷, where they represent, promote and popularize the culture of the Altai Republic.

The vast majority of Chugin's private customers order *ayils* in the form of a hexagonal log hut; rarely does a highly conservative and usually intensely religious client request the traditional *ayil* in the form of a pyramid sheathed with tree bark. According to his words, the builder follows traditional procedures when building such a dwelling; he first measures the diameter of the building, erects three main beams (debarked logs) and adds another six. The bark for the *ayil* mantle is harvested only in the second half of June, when it is soft and full of sap, as the harder bark harvested in a different period would suffer from fragility and brittleness. If necessary, the builder allows the bark to mature for some time.

The lifespan of such a building is fifty years on average, however, the demolition of any old *ayil* is very unusual due to its importance; more often, the damaged parts of the building are replaced with new material. The idea of demolishing an *ayil* is extremely unpleasant for the Altaians⁸; many of the first *ayils* built after sedentarization in the 1930s have therefore still been preserved in a fairly good condition in the field, to which the cold Siberian climate also contributes. An informant from Ust-Kan said that she had two *ayils* in her garden for this reason: an old pyramid-type *ayil* covered with bark, which she refuses to demolish, and a new one with a hexagonal floor plan, which she currently uses⁹. Another informant from Ust-Kansky District points out that when the old *ayil* is finally out of service and the owner dismantles it, cinders with ashes from its fireplace are transferred to the fireplace of the new *ayil*. This act is performed by the Altaians even when the family moves to a new place, leaving their property to the new owner¹⁰.

A large number of Altai families live in a European-type house only in winter while mainly using *ayil* in summer¹¹. It is also for this reason that a substantial part of the Altai population still adheres to the basic rules associated with the use of *ayil*, especially the door facing the east, the interior divided into men's and women's sections and the sacral significance of the fireplace, although mostly not as strict as in the past. At present, for practical

⁷ Interview with Viktor Nikolayevich Chugin, Karakol 2019.

⁸ Field research data, 3 men, Ongudaysky and Ust-Kansky districts.

⁹ Field research data, woman, Ust-Kansky District 2019.

¹⁰ Field research data, woman, Ust-Kansky District 2019.

¹¹ Field research data, woman, Ust-Kansky District 2019.

reasons (especially if the owner has a small building plot) it is allowed to build an *ayil* with a north-facing door, however the door must never face west¹², which is a side symbolizing the end, death and darkness (according to the cycle of the sun); it is a sacralised stratification of the cardinal points generally present in Siberian shamanistic cultures [Vajda 2016: 304]. Today, we also find no traces of the ritual and sacrificial place called *tagyl*, which used to be near the entrance to every *ayil*. It disappeared during the forced sedentarization of the Altaians in the 1930s. The square structure with a wooden pole, referred to as *chaki*, which is also a pole for tying horses, once represented the union of the three spheres of the world. However, another *chaki* has been preserved in many cases in the *ayil* interior; it is a part of a wooden structure used to hang a cauldron and other objects above the fireplace. If such a *chaki* is located inside a shaman's *ayil*, it serves its owner as a spiritual ladder along which his soul moves between the three worlds.

In popularizing literature, but also in the statements of informants after 1990, with the wave of cultural and linguistic revitalization gradually growing into the proportions of the Altai national revival, we encounter claims about the occurrence of *ayils* only in areas populated by the Altaians; however, as already mentioned, the formal presence of similar buildings, differing in local names and materials used (the outer mantle is made of leather in the Nordic areas, while in the wooded areas it is made of bark), can be observed in a much wider cultural circle. The Altai region is the southernmost outpost of occurrence of this type of dwelling, bordering the northernmost area of occurrence of the Mongolian yurt [Toshchakova 1978: 75]. The *ayil* then becomes an important part of the construct of the unique ethnic and cultural identity of the Altai people, one of the defining characteristics of modern Altaianness, especially due to its organic connection with the specifics of the Altai faith. Recently, the described fact is also reflected in the system of education, which due to the large proportion of monolingual children often takes place (being tolerated by the authorities outside the official level) in village junior schools in the Altai language¹³; while visiting the school museum in the village of Novy Beltyr in Kosh-Agachsky District, we could see children's works from art lessons, depicting traditional *ayils*, but also other Altai themes (especially the three peaks of the sacred Belukha Mountain).

However, due to the revitalization of some cultural values already absent in part of Altai society, we encounter the creation of historically distorted but socially generally accepted ideas and interpretations of the form and function of *ayil*, especially in the construction of its traditional conical form, mostly abandoned shortly after the sedentarization of the Altaians in the 1930s. Builder Chugin only uses larch wood and bark for such constructions, claiming that this is the only historically correct material for the construction of *ayils*, as the Siberian pine (cedar) wood is too soft and birch began to grow in the Altai region only twenty years ago as a result of climate changes. However, the common occurrence of birch trees up to 1,500 m above sea level was documented in the region as early as the informant's childhood (in 1970), when birch trees grew there – as they do today – especially on the banks of rivers. Chugin's native village lies in a river valley 1,000 m above sea level and the use of birch material was already common in the old Pazyryk culture [Rudenko 1970: 195–197]. Choosing the easy way and passing it off as the only right

¹² Field research data, man, Ongudaysky District 2019.

¹³ Field research data, woman, Ongudaysky District 2019.

one, as opposed to the more complex practices used in the past, is a typical phenomenon of any revitalization process, in which people try to symbolically preserve at least parts of old traditions or their generalizations applicable to the current way of life. Within the described generalization, regional differences are usually blurred; the mentioned school works by the children of the Telengit ethnic group in Novy Beltyr thus depict bark-covered *ayils* of the dominant Altai-Kizhi group, even though their own ancestors used a different form, the so-called *kiyis ayil* with felt covering [Halemba 2006: 48], a transitional type with elements of the Mongolian yurt.

Today, *ayilas* are often also built as kitchens or hostels in tourist villages as a building that is relatively cheap from a business point of view and, at the same time, tradition-evoking. The central fireplace is usually replaced with stoves, and the fireplace is usually memorialized with an earthen circle of a colour different from the rest of the floor. Naturally, the taboo of crossing the fireplace, which is still observed in private *ayils*, does not apply here. The children of the owners of tourist *ayils* also run around areas prohibited elsewhere, because, as the owners point out, it is a building used by people who do not know Altai traditions, a building that retains its shape but not its functions¹⁴; still, its form draws visitors' attention to the existence of Altai cultural specifics. Nevertheless, the violation of the Altai taboo by an uninformed foreigner is usually tolerated even in a functioning *ayil* or other sacralised environment, while its violation by an Altaian, who has become accustomed to town life and their respect for traditions has subsided, is often frowned upon by local villagers. An Altaian living in a town, who climbed with us to the top of a waterfall, which is forbidden, was regaled with reproaches and rebuke by a fellow from their native village; one is expected to know the fundamental rules of Altai culture in such cases, and disrespecting them is considered rude and ill-mannered.

V. European-style architecture, its construction, function and significance in contemporary Altai society

One-storey wooden houses of the European type correspond to the traditions of Russian folk architecture, even in towns. Rarely preserved buildings from the pre-kolkhoz era are mainly merchant houses in larger settlements and, less frequently, small one-room houses in villages with a floor plan of about 20 square meters. Until recently, brick buildings were very rare in the region due to the unavailability and later also the considerable cost of materials, serving almost without exception administrative or commercial purposes. New private houses made of imported non-combustible, mostly prefabricated materials have only started to appear in the region in recent years.

Although it is a European cultural invention, forcibly accepted by the Altai people as part of the sedentarization process, the native population has acquired the knowledge of building a house to such a degree that it is mastered by almost every adult male member of the rural population. At the same time, the ethnic Altaians added certain inventions to the buildings, distinguishing their houses from the dwellings of the Altai Russians; the correlations between the construction of a log house and a recent type of *ayil* are also evident.

¹⁴ Interview with Mergen Tochtonov, hostel manager, Boochi village, Ongudaysky District 2017.

An informant from Boochi, who had built a house himself in the past and participated in several other constructions, described the construction of the house as follows: the house is usually built by the owner in cooperation with his family, neighbours and friends, and the construction of the *ayil* was always carried out in the same way in the past (and mostly to this day) [Tikhonov 1984: 56]. Only recently has some wealthier people started hiring professional builders for both the house and the *ayil*. The house is usually built by parents for their child; it usually stands on foundations of poles driven at least 1 meter below the surface of the terrain, the above-ground part of which protrudes about 1/2 meter above the surface. These poles are made of thick larch trunks, free of bark, branches and bast. Their surface is singed by the builders so that they do not absorb moisture from the ground too easily and rot. The plot for the construction of the house is not specially modified; the house is built directly on the grass and the builder only removes any larger stones. Having laid the foundation made of the singed poles, the builders proceed to lay four foundation beams delineating the perimeter of the house and, using a meter, check diagonally whether these beams are the same length. If necessary, they adjust the length of the beams so that the area of the house corresponds to a rectangle or square. At the top of the perimeter beams, the builders lay a layer of fresh forest moss and proceed to build a wall by laying other beams on top of each other; each new row is interspersed with a layer of moss. If the owner of the house later finds out that the moss has fallen out due to the wind or if they find the moss layer to be too thin, they always repair the part in question. In the past, cow dung was used as insulation in the space between the beams in the wall of the house; moss grows in forests relatively remote from the village and therefore the ubiquitous cow dung remains a popular material for repairing fallen-out sealing among the elderly; beef and other cattle, but also horses, move freely in the pastures around the village, but also in its streets and spaces between buildings. Due to the intensive Soviet educational and health safety campaign, but also with the ongoing modernization of lifestyle, which has accelerated in recent decades, cow dung is now only rarely used to fill the gaps between the beams of farm buildings, while moss is used for residential buildings.

The walls of the house are built without windows and doors, these openings are additionally cut into the finished wall with a chainsaw. Therefore, moss is not placed between the beams where doors and windows are to be made. When cutting out windows, builders always leave one beam intact in the middle of the opening. This log is only cut off once the construction is completed, fulfilling the load-bearing function; if removed, the wall would collapse. In the field, however, there are cases where a not very skilful owner did not leave the beams in the windows and the walls are therefore somewhat slanted. During the construction of the wall, two rows of long solid load-bearing beams are laid at the bottom and the foundation blocks then stand around the perimeter of the building and under the interior load-bearing wall, which divides the rooms and protrudes below the floor mass. Such long beams cannot be cut at a sawmill, so they are still cut by hand. First, notches are made in the trunk of the tree, making it easier to shape it into a prism; as a result, when being hewed, shorter pieces of waste wood fall off. In the corners, some beams are left to protrude from the walls, as they serve as scaffolding, and these overhangs are removed only after the construction has been finalized. A supporting column passes through the interior, on which the truss structure rests. At the upper end, it is supported during construction by one or more sticks, which are pushed out after the work is completed, whereby the entire structure rests on the pillar.

In the case of a soft subsoil, the poles on which the house is built sink unevenly and the house tilts, so we can see a lot of crooked buildings (permafrost). Another common reason for the resulting crookedness of the house is excessive vodka consumption. Such a house tends to have nice flat foundations and the wall starts to deviate once the builders started drinking and their concentration on the careful laying of individual beams began to fade. Each beam is drilled vertically and attached through the resulting hole to the other beams of the wall with a wooden pin called *shkant*. It passes through the entire beam up to half of the beam below it. The roof was traditionally made of thinner beams over which planks were laid. However, almost all Altaians now use a sheet metal called *shifer* (Schiefer – a German term for slate).

The windows of log buildings are usually fixed and cannot be opened; the pastoral area rich in water resources is inhabited by large amounts of annoying and stinging insects. In the past, openable windows were not produced at all, but the inner pair is removable – it is removed for the summer and put back for the winter; the wind then blows in the summer so much that the curtains tremble and the house is ventilated. A stop is used in the jamb for fitting the inner pair, which is fixed by nails. Some houses have shutters, but we will not find those in ethnically homogeneous Altai villages; shutters are used only by ethnic Russians. Inspired by the Russians, some Altaians bought shutters during the period of the USSR, but the element did not catch on. Currently, “Jevro-Remont” standardized windows of European mass production, both plastic and wooden (which are more expensive), are penetrating the regional market as a novelty.

There are only entrance doors, the house usually has no back entrance; inside we can only find empty door frames, usually painted in electric blue, similar to many *nalitchniki* (outdoor wooden window chambranles); the thresholds are in the colour of the floor, mostly brown. Due to the absence of the door, the heat is distributed evenly inside from a hand-built oven, which is not missing in any house, located roughly in the middle of the interior (an analogy with the centrally located fireplace in the *ayil*). There is an iron control stop in the chimney above the oven, the position of which regulates the burning rate of the wood; it can be used to narrow the flue gas path and damp down the flame. The brick chimney begins at the ceiling, where the stove pipe ends and its construction thus does not extend below the level of the attic; it is built straight, but some people adjust it due to the supporting beam with a sloping brick, which deflects the flue from the beam. However, this brick is clogged with ash and exposed to rain, so moisture stays in the chimney. From the oven, a thick metal pipe filled with water runs above the floor, distributing heat throughout all rooms in the house. It passes through empty door openings and in some, especially modern houses, is crimped at the wall into a high, simple structure resembling a radiator heater.

The traditional log house is a single-storey building; only recently built wooden buildings have a living floor as well. The attic space is used to store clutter and things currently unnecessary; it is entered from the outside on a ladder and is not used very often.

The height of the ceiling in living rooms varies according to the builder's discretion and length of wooden beams, which usually measure about 200 cm in length. In new non-combustible buildings, the dimensions of the houses are given by the standardized dimensions of the material and the height of the ceiling is thus usually 245–250 cm. In old houses, the ceiling used to be insulated with a layer of soil and dry leaves; at present, sawdust, soil and paper (cardboard), which has taken over the function of leaves, are laid on the base of planks. The interiors are lined with a grid of narrow wooden laths called *dranki*,

forming a dense rhombic pattern analogous to the wall lattice of a Mongolian yurt, and then plastered with a mixture of 70% sand and 30% clay. The pattern of *dranki* is clearly visible under the plaster; this lattice is also used for new brick buildings.

A clay bank reinforced with planks is attached to the walls of the finished house from the outside, whereby the builders close the underground (actually a space at ground level) with foundation poles, so frost and draught do not penetrate the floor from below (they place a board from the outside, another one from the inside, and the space between them is filled with clay, or the whole structure is covered with soil). This area can be entered from the living room through a trapdoor, but usually nothing is stored there (we rarely find potatoes here) and people come here only for maintenance. Similarly, the foundations of *banya*, barns and farm buildings are sealed, as well as concrete foundations of a recently introduced type of brick house – again, to weatherproof them.

When a log house outlives its usefulness, people dismantle it for firewood, leaving only blocks of wood in the ground. Old beams from demolished houses can be used to build fences for taming and training horses, which also have an elevated wooden ramp structure for loading horses into a transport truck. Well-preserved old beams and nalitchniki can be used in the construction of a new house; no taboo is related to this practice. Sometimes we can see a new building with somewhat inappropriate looking historical nalitchniki, while elsewhere modern plastic European-style windows installed in an old, already significantly curved house may surprise; in urban settlements (e.g. in Ust-Kan), standardized European-style windows are combined with nalitchniki. The nalitchniki are now made by ethnic Altaians, but in the past, it was an exclusively Russian invention (Altai people lived in *ayils* all year round).

For many manufacturers, nalitchniki are a secondary rather than a main source of income. According to an informant from Karakol, an artist, who lives in the village of Kulada, makes nalitchniki for a wide neighbourhood and is also skilled in working with metal. He makes iron beds and other household equipment. An informant from Boochi used to hire a professional manufacturer of nalitchniki from Onguday. Most nalitchniki are based on Neoclassical and Renaissance Revival morphology, with some reflecting the Art Nouveau style. All are formally based on the pre-kolkhoz era, being produced in this manner to this day, giving the village architecture a particularly ancient look. This architectural element is popular throughout Russia, but each producer creates his/her own style and ornamentation. Altai nalitchniki are mostly based on classic geometric shapes with occasional zoomorphic or symbolic motifs: a horse (Boochi), a pair of swans (Ust-Kan) or even a five-pointed star (Kulada). The informant from Karakol, as well as other informants, confirmed that in the era of socialism only blue colour was available on the market, later also white, which is the reason why lacquered elements on houses are usually painted blue and white. This style has persisted to the present day, and although all colours are available on the market today, most nalitchniki remain blue and white and, as confirmed by informants from various locations, for the above reasons, this coloration has nothing to do with the spiritual significance of these two colours in Altai culture. New houses made of non-combustible materials, which have begun to appear in the Altai region, already have concrete foundations laid below ground level. An informant from Onguday, as well as many others, said that she preferred a wooden house as it is easier to heat up and more comfortable. However, timber prices in the Altai region have risen sharply in recent years, and many young families now prefer brick houses. In addition to financial reasons, their popularity is also increased by the fact that a brick

house does not sink as much as the one built on piles. A survey of newly built homes in Karakol, Boochi and Onguday revealed plank floors, ceilings lined with polystyrene boards with an embossed pattern and chipboard-panelled walls on the ground floor and first floor. Nevertheless, even these houses are connected with the older way of life, being heated by a hand-made clay oven with a heating system distributing hot water in the same way as in wooden houses; we saw a massive radiator heater (brought from somewhere) serving as a doormat under the entrance stairs to the house, while a simple pipe distributed heat inside.

Even in decorating newly built brick houses, their inhabitants try to express their Altai identity. We saw, for example, an iron handrail with railings hand forged by a relative of the owner into the shape of the Altai symbols of snow leopard and ibex (wild mountain goat). After all, the name of the youngest child in the family of the owner of this house is Irbisek; names of Altai origin, in the past gradually displaced by Russian ones, are gaining in popularity in recent years as part of cultural revitalization. In modern brick houses there is an upstairs bedroom where people sleep on mattresses on the floor but also on wooden beds. However, even buildings of this type are supplemented with the traditional *ayil*.

Despite partial formal modifications, due to the imported origin, but also the presence of *ayil* in its vicinity, there are no taboos related to the construction and use of a house of the European type. Even in the most conservative areas of the Altai region, such as the Karakol Valley, building wooden houses at sites with kurgans (pre-Scythian and Scythian burial mounds) is not frowned upon. According to the owners of these houses, the presence of their ancient ancestors does not disturb the Altaians, and wooden houses with no underground foundations can be built in the immediate vicinity of such places. The houses are also not divided into male and female parts, and the doors do not necessarily face east. Nevertheless, newly built houses, including *ayils*, are often fumigated with juniper twigs¹⁵. The mother of an informant from Onguday urged her daughter and her husband not to forget to fumigate the house in this manner before moving into it; this cleansing ritual should be repeated from time to time.

A wooden house of the European type in the Altai region represents a special form of Russian vernacular architecture, thus forming its own ethnographic category accepted and slightly modified by a different ethnocultural environment (the absence of window shutters in houses belonging to the Altaians, translocation of lighting a fire with birch bark and its feeding, cleansing of the building by burning juniper). In the foothills of the Altai Mountains, this type of house can rarely be found, only the oldest preserved buildings are built on pile foundations. However, knowledge of the technology of building a wooden house and *ayil* remains very well preserved among the male population of the Altai-Kizhi group, including collective participation in the construction process.

VI. Specifics of construction and functions of sanitary facilities in the contemporary Altai village

In the yard of each house there is a bathroom working on the principle of sauna (Russian-type *banya*). Similar to a wooden house, its foundations rest on piles; but unlike it,

¹⁵ Field research data, man, Ongudaysky District, woman, Ust-Kansky District 2019.

these poles are not singed in the case of the *banya* and small farm buildings. The floor of the *banya* is made of planks divided in half by a furrow that passes under the floor, draining wastewater out of the building. The bathroom is usually heated by a stove, the plank ceiling is covered from above by an insulating cardboard layer, sprinkled with a thick layer of sawdust (as thick as possible) covered with a layer of soil to prevent mountain winds from reaching and drifting it away. Alternatively, only a thick layer of soil can be used instead of sawdust. According to informants, larch sawdust is most often used as it is heavy and well bonded due to its high resin content, which is why it insulates better than, for example, pine sawdust. The older type of bathroom consists of only one room, the younger buildings tend to have a small entrance hall, from where they can light a fire in the stove and tend it so that they do not have to ventilate inside the actual sauna. Inside the entrance hall, heated by the stove with one of its walls, there is usually a long bench on which people change their clothes. If the *banya* is not integrated into a line of farm buildings, it usually has a gabled roof with a roofing made of, for example, metal *shifer*. Even in the gardens of the newest brick houses we can find a wooden *banya* with walls of beams interspersed with moss and reinforced with *shkant*. Small settlements lack water lines. Basic hygiene is thus practised using a lavabo with a water tank, which must be refilled by hand, and if it is a washbasin with a drain, water flows into a bucket on the ground.

As is the case with the water supply system, there is no sewerage in the Altai rural areas, but also in a large part of the built-up area in urban settlements. Nearly every house has an outdoor pit latrine – a classic plank construction with a typically sloping roof, usually made of corrugated galvanised iron. It is usually built far from the well, the bottom of which is covered with sand, serving as a filter. There is no standard distance between the latrine and the house, but the further the better; however, there are also cases where the latrine stinks right next to the house in the summer. The construction of the latrine proceeds as follows: a pit is dug so deep that the soil cannot be thrown out with a shovel (about two meters deep and one and a half meters wide). With an excavator, a depth of up to three meters can be reached. The builder strengthens the pit with a simple plank formwork to prevent the soil from caving in, and builds a wooden shelter above it. The latrine does not have a seat, only a circular hole in the plank floor, pointed at both ends, rarely an ellipse pointed on both sides or a drop-shaped hole with the tip facing the door. In modern toilets we can also find a rhombus-shaped hole. In one of the richest residents, the owner of a new wooden multi-storey house insulated with mounting foam, a broader comparative survey of these buildings in the village of Boochi revealed a toilet with raised seating equipped with a classic purchased plastic seat including a closing cover, where others only have a hole in the floor, as a manifestation of higher social status and an obvious symbol of prestige. The Altaians use these pit latrines even in the harshest Siberian winters; according to the informants, the stagnant air inside the shelter maintains a slightly higher temperature than the outdoor environment and the small space quickly heats up with the body temperature and breath of the user, who is thus not at risk of frostbite, despite the fact that in some Altai valleys the winter temperature can drop to –50 degrees. The contents of the pit have no effect on the temperature, as it freezes completely in winter and does not emit any heat. Once the pit is filled with excrement, the latrine expires and the owner digs a new one, filling the old latrine with excavated soil. If the shelter is not too rotten, the upper structure of the latrine is moved to the new location.

VII. The nature of Altai cultural revitalization in relation to traditional architecture

The actual process of cultural revitalization is always a result of long-term interaction of two cultures, one of which has gained dominance for various reasons, whether of external (two different cultures) or internal nature (two components of a cultural unit within a single society), but most often in a combination of both levels permeating the whole society (culture of globalization and autochthonous culture). Rather than a conflict, it is a defining process initiated by the emerging need to renew the sense of self-determination that results from natural development. In the revitalization process, more protective rather than defensive needs are thus usually activated to a greater extent, the goal being to find a compromise, support and preserve the significance of disappearing cultural values and phenomena for society, most often by generalizing and symbolizing selected cultural elements with a characteristic emphasis on religiosity [Suchánková 1990: 48], characterized in the case of Altai shamanism by the sacralization of living space and extending in the sphere of material culture to the common objects of everyday use.

In different societies, according to the political situation, socio-economic conditions, cultural-historical background and local factors, the causes or philosophies of the revitalization movement differ, and so does the selection of cultural phenomena and access to their adjustments necessary to ensure their viability in the conditions and needs of a particular contemporary society [Reuter – Horstmann 2013: 3–4].

From a formal point of view, the nature of contemporary revitalization movements is similar across cultures; this is most often due to the continuous interaction with European thinking, based on the historical concept of the uniqueness of the spirit of the nation, which shapes the cultural differences and specifics of individual ethnic groups. In the Czech context, for example, after the independent republic was established, the Kyjov folk costume, i.e. a distinctively decorative form of folk clothing from the vicinity of President Masaryk's birthplace, was promoted to a national symbol [Štěpánová 1991: 42], used in interwar times at political, representational and cultural events throughout the country; moreover, the folk ornament here represented in the general public the materialization of ethnically conditioned innate taste, the manifestation of the nation's spirit and therefore also a sign of ethnicity.

The non-Altai public's awareness of Altai culture is primarily related to its spiritual level. From the outside, it is stimulated by the increase in global interest in Siberian shamanism after Russia's opening to the world, but also by the amateur or superficial tourist interest in ethnically accentuated souvenirs, products and experiences; this demand can be easily used, among other things, for a non-violent promotion of Altai culture outside the region itself. From the point of view of the internal needs of Altai society, the process of revitalization is caused mainly by the immediate presence of the Russian religious revival and the systematic government support to the Orthodox Church involving the construction of new churches. *Ayil* is the most suitable visual materialization of Altai spiritual values, as it connects the mentioned values with the family, personal and private spheres of everyday life while expressing Altaianness externally by adding a specific aesthetic level to the appearance of Altai buildings with its presence at every house.

While there is almost no formal difference between Altai *ayils* and the residences of the surrounding Turkic and Mongolian ethnic groups in the South Siberian area, all

informants unanimously deny the existence of *ayils* outside the Altai territory, raising their dwellings to the level of a newly constructed ethnic symbol.

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing intersection of European influences in all aspects of Altai life, especially in import of goods. Even in the smallest villages, the Internet is usually available from home. The material used to build houses and *ayils* is also changing in the process, albeit sometimes only slightly, but more and more brick houses are being built instead of wooden ones. An aunt of the informant from Karakol decided to build a traditional *ayil* with an earthen floor, but, as almost all other informants confirmed, such cases are not very common yet. In modern *ayils*, we most often find wooden, concrete or tiled floors and walls built of prismatic beams instead of logs, the same as those used in the construction of a log house. Recently, plastic foam seals have begun to be used for filling gaps between beams instead of moss in all wooden buildings, including *ayils*. Although this practice has not yet prevailed, we can observe an increasing tendency.

Elsewhere, however, the inclination towards tradition is growing. Unlike the *ayils* of the Socialist era, in which stove heating predominated at the end thereof, according to Mr. Chugin, there is an open fireplace in about half of the *ayils* he has built. Such *ayils* are demanded by people who attach importance to traditions. In other cases, the desire for comfort prevailed; thus, new fireplaces, electric and sometimes gas heating are no exception in *ayils*; in such cases, the smoke hole is usually replaced with a small turret with skylights. In returning to traditions, people very often try to modify a modern *ayil* in a traditional style by implementing a functional fireplace, but the open fire heating is limited here by the most typical cylindrical type of roof with a slope slighter than the older form, making the interior somewhat smoky¹⁶. An informant from Ust-Kan (27 years old) grew up in such an *ayil*, where the family prepared meals on an open fire and the whole interior was black with smoke. Builder Chugin confirmed that this often happens with amateur renovations or if the roof is poorly built. However, the interiors of Altai dwellings, smoke-filled due to an almost eternal fire, are repeatedly mentioned from various locations in the Onguday District in 1860 [Radloff 1860: 577] and 1867 [Radloff 1867: 249] by a classic of Russian Turkology, Barnaul-based schoolteacher Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff, noting that Altai people are accustomed to smoke-filled interiors while foreign visitors have to close their eyes for a while after entering the hut due to the acrid smoke [Radloff 1860: 577]. It is therefore evident that rather than it being a structural defect, people are not accustomed to living in an *ayil* with an open fireplace anymore due to having switched to the use of the stove.

In *ayils*, many young families still observe the division of space into male and female, endeavour to respect the taboo of entering the sacred precinct behind the fireplace, and the doors of the building are still being built very low. However, when compared with older literature, the current concept of the sacred precinct also appears to be a simplified interpretation of the original function of this space, in which family wealth was stored in the past (especially furs, clothing, silk and cotton fabrics and Chinese tea cubes, which also served as currency); from this probably stems the still preserved taboo of entering these places. Anthropomorphic carved wood figures of idols guarded these treasures hanging above them [Ritter 1832: 966].

¹⁶ Field research data, woman, Gorno-Altajsk 2019.

Birch bark, used to light fires, is gaining popularity throughout the Altai countryside. We were able to personally verify these facts in the field research, commonly encountering the above practices.

Summary

Despite the inevitable and often forced acceptance of European inventions in a gradual transition to a modern way of life, radically intensified by the onset of globalization after the collapse of the USSR, Altai cultural patterns have undergone a distinctive development; they have often found a new form, while maintaining the continuity of content, the importance of which has further been growing again in recent years in the process of cultural revitalization. At present, the relatively non-conflicting coexistence of Russian and Altai cultural structures (not only) in the field of settlement culture enables the vitality of native cultural expressions, while partly preserving and partly updating their functions, but also, to some extent, distorting the idea of their traditional form. Knowledge and collective participation in the process of construction of dwellings with adjacent social and farming facilities are still common among the population of rural areas and the majority of the urban population; however, especially in the case of traditional *ayil*, it is not a process without development. The methods of constructing the walls of the house and the *ayil* are thus converging. Even in the case of a log house of the Russian type, we find the specifics arising from the Altai cultural background and climatic conditions of the Altai-Sayan Mountains of southern Siberia. The development of the *ayil* would deserve comprehensive research mapping in detail the typology of buildings present in the current field, from classical types through revitalization works to curious architectural fads of recent times.

As the cultural revival movement is gradually gaining strength, some vanishing traditions has regained their importance as cultural symbols. In particular, the traditional *ayil* dwelling occupies a very important place in this process for its connection with a number of religious practices, customs and traditions. At present, in the Altaic mentality, it thus generally expresses the connection between the traditional and contemporary way of life, which, after the collapse of the USSR, is increasingly inclined to the modern Russian (European) style. The non-violent combination of tradition and modernity in the *ayil* enables the Altai people to build their own ethno-aesthetic expression, ensuring the continuation of the most important spiritual values; both then play a significant role in the formation, sustaining and development of modern Altai identity.

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Daniel Dědovský is a graduate of Charles University in Prague, Institute of Ethnology. He specialises in branch history and methodology of ethnology. Since 2025, he works at Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Pardubice.