

Disputes about whether Tengrism is a religion, cult, ancient belief, shamanism or just a philosophy and mind-set have been on-going for 6 years. Its active followers believe this is a religion, whose holy book is the Manas epic. Others think it is a philosophy. According to experts, this is both a cult and an ancient belief. However, no organisation of Tengrists has been registered as a religious one so far.

Кыргызча На русском

In January 2012, the chairman of Manas Ordo society, **Anarbek Usupbaev**, attempted to register the religious organisation of Tengrists, Tengirchilik. He collected all necessary documents and submitted them to the state commission for religious affairs. The authority has submitted the documents for examination, and then denied registration.

To assert his right to deem Tengrism a religion, Usupbaev tried to appeal against the actions of the authority in court and in 2016 the inter-district court of Bishkek made a decision in his favour. The servants of Themis found the actions by the state commission for religious affairs illegal and compelled them to “remedy the breach”.



Anarbek Usupbaev. Photo: proza.ru

The wording of the judgement for both parties was too vague and the authority requested the court ruling.

“It says we should remedy the breaches we have committed, yet it doesn’t mean we have to register Tengirchilik. It means we need to observe the procedure set forth in the law on religious freedom. In particular, it specifies that a religion examination should be held, if necessary,” **Zakir Chotaev**, deputy head of the state commission for religious affairs, said. However, Tengrists insist that according to the judgement the state commission should immediately register Tengirchilik as a religious organisation.

“Why should we submit our documents again? We have submitted them once and won the suit. Do we have to do it all again? We don’t have to file documents again, they have them

all. “Breaches committed” means that they did not register us. This is a doubletalk they appeal to. We have a judgment,” Usupbaev insisted.

Experts at threat

After the issue of the court ruling, the state commission conducted a comprehensive examination of the Tengirchilik documents. It should be noted that it was the second examination. The first one was held in 2012, when the organisation first filed documents for consideration.

Irina Balashova, senior lecturer of the UNESCO department for world culture studies and religions of KRSU, is one of the members of the first expert group. According to her, they did not examine the documents of Tengirchilik, but prepared a historical note about the phenomenon of Tengrism: what it is, when it first appeared. They concluded that tengri is a cult, and the state commission decided it was not a proper religion.

However, later on all experts who gave their opinions unexpectedly withdrew them.

“They had complaints not to the state commission, but to our expert opinion. So, after a bad scandal and threats, in order to avoid the continuation of this conflict, the experts asked the commission to take this issue off the table. Everything happened at the department when they [Tengirchilik] came to us unexpectedly. They made threats of this kind: “We will come to you during the thesis defence to see how you do it.” In general, the threats were not blunt, but, say, not very nice,” Balashova said.

However, Anarbek Usupbaev has his own version of events.

“These are all fairy tales. We met the first experts and proved them by showing books they had never seen. I took 20 kilogrammes of books in two bags. When I showed them, their eyes popped out. They were amazed and changed their opinion. Why would we threaten anyone? They saw the evidence and gave their opinion,” Usupbaev said.

The second examination held following the judgement was not just a religious one, but comprehensive with participation of representatives of the academic community, independent experts and relevant authorities. However, the state commission does not reveal the names of experts in order to avoid the previous situation.

“We have a lot of opinions saying that it is undesirable today to register this movement “. Zakir Chotaev.

According to the deputy head of the agency, Zakir Chotaev, the opinion said that Tengrism was not a proper religion as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism. However, it could be recognised as one of the early faiths. It means that Tengrists have a right to be registered. “At the same time, we have a lot of opinions saying that it is undesirable today to register this movement because there had been facts of offensive attacks against each other and on the feelings of the believers committed by both representatives of Islam and representatives

of Tengirchilik. Therefore, it was recommended not to register Tengirchilik. This is not the opinion of the state commission, but a comprehensive examination,” Chotaev said.

For a list of registered religious organisations of Kyrgyzstan please see [here](#) and [here](#).

Mutual antipathy

In fact, the confrontation between Islam and Tengrism from time to time turns into insults against each other.



Тенгрианец Кубанычбек Тезекбаев. Фото: CABAR.asia

In June 2011, Tengrist Kubanychbek Tezekbaev in the live programme on Kyrgyz Radio said that many mullahs in Kyrgyzstan were “former alcoholics and murderers” who wanted to accept their past. GKNB [State Committee for National Security] opened a criminal case on his statement.

This February, ex-mufti of Kyrgyzstan Chubak Zhalilov called the Tengrist Anarbek Usupbaev a kafir (“kaapyr”).

“There are some people, who are not Muslims, they are Tengrists, who criticise my statements. One of them is kafir

(“kaapyr”) Anarbek Usupbaev. When I say “Nooruz may not be celebrated”, he becomes outraged “why?” I don’t tell him [Anarbek Usupbaev] he may not celebrate Nooruz, he may celebrate Nooruz and all other holidays. I say we [Muslims] may not celebrate Nooruz. [...] I address those who are Muslims, who want to be Muslims,” Chubak Zhalilov said in one of his [sermons](#).

Tengrist **Gulzat Aalieva** thinks that the state commission for religious affairs didn't register their community officially because of the influence of the Muslim leaders.

"Currently, the state machinery represented by the state commission for religious affairs creates artificial obstacles to us, where such aalymys have the influence. Why would they do that? Because currently nearly 1,900 Islamic organisations have been registered. Aalymys, ulema have great influence on the state commission for religious affairs, i.e. the state commission as a secular state agency is fully governed by these aalymys," Aalieva said.

"We are a state agency and are independent from any religious organisations. We perform our functions in full compliance with the laws and regulations, i.e. law on the freedom of religion and religious organisations, regulation on the state commission for religious affairs. So I think it would be wrong to say that someone influences us especially since the principle of secularism implies that religious organisations or religious workers cannot influence the work of state agencies," **Zakir Chotaev** said.

Why do Tengrists need registration?

"I got married under the Muslim traditions and we lived according to the Muslim traditions, but we managed to combine the elements of our traditions harmoniously". Gulzat Aalieva.

Gulzat Aalieva was born in the Muslim family and until recently had deemed herself a Muslim. However, in April 2017 she decided she was a Tengrist. In this short period of time, she created her public movement "Uyutkuluu uulu zhurt" and together with her fellow-thinkers she is planning to write 7 books, where, according to her, all aspects of the Tengrism religion would be described in detail. She does not consider herself as the antagonist of Islam.

"I am an aggressive opponent of certain persons who preach the corrupted form of Islam, radical one. But I treat all Muslims with understanding, tolerance, respect because I was born in a Muslim family, where I acquired the elements of Islamic religion when I was a little girl. I got married under the Muslim traditions and we lived according to the Muslim



Gulzat Aalieva. Photo from personal archive

traditions, but we managed to combine the elements of our traditions harmoniously,” Aalieva said.



*Mountain range Khan Tengri is located on the China - Kyrgyzstan -Kazakhstan border and bears the name of the tengrists' Supreme deity.
Photo: alp.org.ua*

Apart from such activists as Gulzat, there are many people in Kyrgyzstan who deem themselves Tengrists, but don't think it is a religion:

“I think Tengrism is not a religion, but more a philosophy, world perception and attitude. I am against registration of Tengrism as a religion because religion implies a group of priests who start perverting it and making money on it. Tengrism should not have distinct religious rules - it is a freedom of your choice, actions according to conscience: pray whenever you want to, however you want to, with whomever you want to, etc. It should be registered as a kind of philosophic system, like Confucianism,” Arslan Korgonbekov said.

“I don't take Tengrism as a religion. Its registration won't mean anything to me and it needn't to,” Sumsarbek Mamyrallyev said.

“I don't need that Tengrism is recognised as a religion. I am not a religious person. I am just a believer, but not religious. But Tengrism is a mind-set, it's good it's not a religion,” Nariste Alieva said.

However, Gulzat thinks registration will allow them to spread Tengrism, acquire buildings and create forums for the development of material and spiritual values of the Kyrgyz nation. However, she, just like the majority of other associations of Tengrists, didn't even try to register her public movement and didn't submit any documents to the state commission for religious affairs.

"Tengirchilik filed documents six years ago, and they were rejected. If we file them again, it would be the iteration of what happened 6 years ago. That's why we refrain from doing this," Aalieva said.

The agency said they were open to everyone: comply with the law on the freedom of religion and submit documents for review. According to Chotaev, each case will be considered separately. The decision on registration will depend on the documents submitted, including the rationale provided by the organisation.

Joining efforts

The actions of small associations of Tengrists seem to have no results. Therefore, according to Aalieva, they are planning to join their efforts in a public movement they tentatively call "Kyrgyz baaluuluktaryn saktoo kyimyldy" ("Movement for preserving Kyrgyz national values"), and thus act in a cohesive way.

As to Tengirchilik, Anarbak Usupbaev still hopes to register his organisation. On October 10, he filed a request to MVD [ministry of internal affairs] to initiate a criminal case against the state commission for religious affairs for their non-compliance with the judgement, which is still pending.

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