

Charles Stépanoff

Journeys into the Invisible

Shamanic Technologies
of the Imagination

Foreword by
Philippe Descola

Translated by
Matthew H. Evans



Journeys into the Invisible



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Charles Stépanoff

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Abbreviations used in captions

MQB: Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac, Paris.

MAE: Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Saint Petersburg.

RME: Russian Museum of Ethnography, Saint Petersburg.

FOREWORD

Nomads of the Imagination

by Philippe Descola

Everyone knows that shamans come from Siberia. At least, the term itself comes from the Tungus language and has been used in Europe ever since the eighteenth century to refer to the ritual specialists of the Altai mountains, who were reputedly capable of communicating with the spirits. But over time the term *shaman* came to be used by anthropologists, some historians of religion, and soon by the general public to designate a somewhat mysterious figure, a practitioner of ecstatic techniques and representative of an archaic religion whose traces could be found just about anywhere: in Asia, the Americas, Melanesia, in late medieval European witchcraft, Paleolithic cave paintings, and even in more recent times with New Age therapeutic practices. As our knowledge of the world expanded, the term thus came to coagulate a multitude of disparate phenomena around a very broad definition: an individual who performs within their own person an elective mediation with non-human entities—a definition so broad, in fact, that it has very little to do with the majority of cases the term is applied to. And yet, Siberian shamanism does indeed exist and is still very much alive, despite the eradication policy so vigorously pursued by the Soviet authorities; it is also, above all else, an extremely diverse phenomenon. The remarkable achievement of Charles Stépanoff's book lies in its organization of this diverse field around a handful of hypotheses that are both convincing

and highly original, all the while situating these practices in the context of their long development, from prehistoric times on, and using them to elucidate the major tendencies of the human imagination in general.

There was no one better equipped than Charles Stépanoff to carry out this ambitious synthesis. Having spent several years studying the shamans of the Tuva republic in southern Siberia, he had the fundamental familiarity with the people and situations, the mastery of their language and codes, that are acquired through long periods in the field. But there is more. In his 2014 book on Tuvan shamanism, Stépanoff (2014a) parted ways with the long tradition of studying Siberian shamanism as a symbolic system of reparation for misfortune or for controlling randomness, or even as a cosmology codifying a corpus of representations partly divorced from the concrete practices of shamans themselves. By focusing on what Tuvan shamans actually do, the bonds they form with patients and communities in their healing rituals, the interactive techniques they employ in the process, and the different kinds of inferences about their actions that they manage to elicit from their spectators, Stépanoff has developed a veritable pragmatics of ritual action that examines shamanism in a wholly new light. To this original approach to shamanic practices, which is attentive to the smallest details of the situations observed and the speech heard, Stépanoff brings his remarkable knowledge of sources both old and new that concern Siberia and Central Asia. It is this uncommon erudition—which, for the reader's benefit, Stépanoff wields with a strikingly light touch—that has enabled him to introduce the shamanic phenomenon of this part of the world to a wide audience, both in the context of its long history and the multiplicity of its many regional variants (Stépanoff and Zarcone 2011). But not only is Stépanoff an accomplished ethnographer and comparative scholar, he is also a first-rate anthropologist, interested in the general conditions of human action; in different forms of social organization and the various modes of inhabiting space that result from certain technical choices (like pastoralism, for example); in the types of joint commitments between humans and nonhumans that these choices imply; and in the cognitive strategies through which they are implemented. All these qualities shine throughout the book that I here have the pleasure of prefacing.

The ambition of the present work is formidable: to present and make intelligible to a non-specialist audience the immense contribution to the human imagination made by the cognitive techniques of the boreal shamanic journey. Starting from the principal that, for most of their existence, *Homo sapiens* felt no need to store the virtual worlds they create in

stabilized physical signs—writing systems, pictographs, or images—the author takes the shamanic practices of northern Asia as a striking testimony to the complementary and competitive relationship that exists between imaginary techniques that do without externalized images—mental visualization and analogies suggested by certain behaviors and situations—and those that use concrete artifacts to give a material presence to the representations mobilized by ritual specialists. There is nothing anodyne about this relationship, and we can follow Stépanoff when he suggests that entrusting the work of the imagination to specialists in some kind of singular technique for exploring it, making it visible, and accumulating the fruits of this labor in durable signs—an initial bifurcation (which did not occur everywhere in the world)—might constitute the first form of the social division of labor. For there is a major difference between the guided imagination, on the one hand—which is most familiar to contemporary literate populations and can be effortlessly followed with the material support of a film or novel, for example, and even embellished to a limited degree—and the exploratory imagination, on the other hand—the product of a more-or-less free-roaming mind that is not stimulated by any external cues and which takes an active part in the imaginative creation. It is this second type of imaginative activity that most closely characterizes the shaman's experience, which can be seen as a reflexive and culturally conditioned form of mental travel in which the attention decouples itself from the sensory afferents. Not just anyone can have this type of experience, however; it no doubt requires some form of training, and certainly whatever material means are needed to make it possible, and, depending on the particularities of a given situation, triggers various forms of activation in the spectators' imagination.

Now, as Stépanoff shows, these ritual techniques vary considerably in boreal shamanic practices. In certain parts of Siberia, as well as in certain indigenous traditions of North America, shamanic seances take place in the darkness of lodges or tents, within which messages from invisible animal spirits are communicated in the often-unrecognizable voice of the shaman; here the ritual officiant acts as a facilitator for dyadic relations between humans and nonhumans. In this model, which should also be familiar to specialists of Amazonia, the shaman is no more than someone with more experience than others when it comes to interacting with the spirits; he has no exclusive monopoly on these exchanges; in fact, everyone, especially in dreams and psychotropic-induced visionary trances, is perfectly capable of having these encounters, without need for a specialist's intervention. In the other ritual technique, the "light tent,"

which is more widespread in Siberia than the previous one, the shaman's actions are displayed for all to see, as he theatrically performs the spirit coming into his body and speaking through it, and he embarks on a long journey in the spirit's company, during which he meticulously describes each stage of the itinerary to those in the audience. The spectators in this case find themselves in a contemplative situation; their imaginative experience is *guided* by the practitioner, while the scenography of the other technique, the "dark tent," induces in the listeners' imaginations a freely engaged, *active* experience.

Behind the contrast between these material techniques lies a more fundamental opposition, which Stépanoff shows to structure the social organization, values, and political philosophy of the Siberian world: that between *hierarchical* shamanism and another, egalitarian form of this practice that he calls *heterarchical*. In the former, shamans enjoy a hereditary status, are thought to have bodies of a different nature than those of ordinary people, and are understood to work for the community that has ritually invested them. Dressed in spectacular costumes and equipped with drums decorated with cosmological figurations, these shamans use the "light tent" scenography to act as mediators with the spirits, giving a detailed performance of the latter's actions before a gathering. In the second case, anyone can become a shaman, performing a specialized but reversible function (hence the term "heterarchy") that is practiced discreetly, at the request of an individual, and that also involves a journey, but one that is accomplished in the dark, without the aid of images. In the first situation, spectators are passive witnesses to a quasi-liturgic, their contemplative imagination guided by the shaman's narratives and the images he shows or evokes; in the second, they are encouraged to exercise their imagination in the continuity of ordinary dreamlike visions or hallucinations provoked by the consumption of *amanitas*. But, and this is one of the major contributions of Stépanoff's book, the contrasts between the two different ways of relating to the invisible, to which these two forms of shamanism attest, do not reflect corresponding contrasts in social organization—how segmentary a society might be, or how hierarchical—or modes of subsistence—pastoralism or hunting; these contrasts express deeper differences concerning the degree of autonomy accorded to individuals in their ability to construct relationships with the world.

A large part of the book is devoted to showing how these contrasts in the delegation of autonomy systematically manifest themselves in many aspects of the shaman's performance, in the instruments that make it

possible, and in the spatio-temporal patterns within which it unfolds. These analyses are a celebration of the mind. Stépanoff's illuminating explanations elucidate many of the features of Siberian shamanism that specialists have long made note of and which, in these pages, suddenly acquire the force of evidence. Such is the case with the interpretation of the shamanic drum as a pictorial interface with the cosmos, an approach that turns its back on the traditional iconological analysis of these visual motifs, which detaches them from their support. Stépanoff instead apprehends the instrument from a sensorimotor point of view, as a living, active object, integrated into a network of gestures, chants, and a number of visual and auditory effects. Just as masterful is his analysis of the combined use of the drum and the yurt, two circular surfaces in resonance with each other, which function as vectorial fields whereby the domestic space in which the ritual takes place is coordinated with the vast territories through which the shaman journeys, a way of embedding the cosmic in the everyday, real landscapes in virtual ones. Just as masterful, once more, is his analysis of the costume worn by the "hierarchical" shaman, with its picturesque accumulation of incongruous objects swinging freely, which, as Stépanoff shows, should not be interpreted according to what it iconically represents, but for what it makes possible during the shaman's journey, like a diving suit that must be donned to move safely through an environment where ordinary people cannot venture, or perhaps a virtual reality headset that articulates the immediate space where the rite takes place and the imagined space that the practitioner occupies.

Not wishing to spoil the pleasure of discovery that awaits the reader, I will confine myself by way of conclusion to saying just a word about another fundamental hypothesis put forward by Stépanoff: the correspondence between forms of shamanism and forms of marriage. Roberte Hamayon (1990) already suggested some thirty years ago that Siberian shamanism was a kind of mystical marriage between ritual practitioners and the daughters of the master spirits of animals. Stépanoff goes further, noting that the two types of shamanism he has identified correspond to two types of marriage. In societies characterized by hierarchical shamanism, it is the community as a whole that pays for the shaman's upkeep, in the same way that, in these societies, the groom's parents collectively pay a price for his future spouse, as though the collective were thus paying the debt incurred by its shaman for his marriage to the spirits. In societies where heterarchical shamanism prevails, by contrast, a son-in-law pays the debt he incurs in taking a bride by services rendered to his father-in-law, in exactly the same way that the shaman has only

a temporary obligation to the person requiring his services and not to the community as a whole. Behind this correspondence between two seemingly distinct institutions—one regulating relations of alliance and reciprocal dependence between humans, the other regulating relations of mediation between humans and nonhumans—it is possible to discern two underlying schemas which differentiate the systems of power allotted the person according to whether or not the human has the power to delegate their autonomy and responsibility to others. A few years ago, I myself developed this distinction in another form, contrasting two forms of exchange: on the one hand, what I called *heterosubstitution*—the practice, which is very common in Melanesia, of paying a bridewealth or blood money with various forms of wealth (in other words, replacing a human person with a material good)—and, on the other hand, *homosubstitution*—which is almost exclusive to South America and requires that a human person acquired through marriage or whose life has been taken be compensated for by another human person—either by reciprocating the alliance or by retaliation (Descola 2001). Here Stépanoff adds a new piece to the puzzle, offering a comprehensive overview of the various ways that humans in Siberia depend on other human and nonhuman persons, an issue that is clearly crucial to understanding the more general phenomenon of the transition from egalitarian to inequalitarian societies.

It is safe to bet that *Journeys into the Invisible* will be a landmark work. First of all, because it manages to be both a scholarly and an accessible account of the various kinds of shamanism to have developed in that part of the world where Westerners first discovered the practice, it is a work that happily combines the analysis of what shamans say with that of the conditions in which they speak, the analysis of their actions with that of the social circumstances in which they act, the analysis of the material devices they employ with that of the pragmatic modalities of their effectiveness. But also because, in the best tradition of ethnography, this book draws on a body of extremely specific and meticulously described facts in order to propose theoretical reflections of a much more general scope on problems as central to human experience as the relationship between physical and mental images, the complementarity of linguistic and iconic signs, and the use of the human body in action as a support for conjectures. These issues are of interest to the psychology of perception as much as to the field of aesthetics, to the pragmatics of action as well as to the theory of language. In short, through his description of a seemingly exotic array of techniques of the imagination, Stépanoff delivers a veritable essay in practical philosophy.

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In the course of preparing this book, a project that began eight years ago, I have become indebted to a great number of people to whom I would here like to express my gratitude: the people of Siberia and Mongolia who welcomed me; the shamans who shared their knowledge with me; the scholars, librarians, and curators who helped me with my research, in particular those at the Museum of Ethnography and Anthropology (the *Kunstkamera*) and the Russian Museum of Ethnography in Saint Petersburg, the Tuva National Museum in Kyzyl, the Minusinsk Regional Museum, the Khakassia National Museum in Abakan, and the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. I thank the museum directors and Michael Oppitz for permission to reproduce images from their collections and publications in this book.

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Introduction

Take a moment to imagine a large park, picturing it in as much detail as possible. In front of you is a wide gravel path lined with shrubs, running through hills of lush green grass. Further down, to your right, you can make out the reeds growing from a pond and hear the sound of ducks.

You set out along the path at a leisurely pace. You pass by the pond to your right and then come to a fork in the trail, where you veer to the left. Keep going in this direction until you reach a cottage. You see that there are a few steps leading up to a porch and then the door. Climb the stairs at your own pace. Now here you are on the porch, ready to grasp the black doorknob and turn it.

Let's interrupt this imagined excursion for a moment. We all have the ability to mentally "visualize" objects and scenes that are not actually there in front of us. We can even walk around inside these scenes quite easily and mentally perform various movements and actions within them. Not all of the images we experience are seen through our eyes; human consciousness is entirely capable of producing non-sensory images all by itself, which are often elaborate enough to capture our full attention. And that is not all.

Now let us return to our park and cottage. You notice a sign on the door that says "Vaccinations." Turn the handle and open the door. You see a large armchair, where you sit down and get comfortable. To one side is a shelf with a collection of hypodermic needles ready to be used. A nurse enters the room and asks you to roll up your sleeve, which you do. She chooses a large needle and brings it up against your arm. You feel the long thin needle slowly penetrate your skin.

Did reading these lines stir up any sensations in you? Some of your muscles may have tightened up ever so slightly. If the story had gone

on with a series of unpleasant episodes—botched injection attempts, a burst vein, etc.—your muscles and nerves might have gotten even more tense. You may have exhibited several physical manifestations of nervousness without even realizing it: an accelerated heartbeat, for example, or increased skin conductance, leading you to break out in a cold sweat. Experimental research has shown that most people do exhibit physical reactions like these when reading unpleasant stories involving needles or other kinds of distressing episodes (Vrana and Lang 1990; Vrana, Cuthbert, and Lang 1989).

These results provide striking evidence that the mental operation of imagining a situation involves more than the intellect alone. Emotions can well up in us and cause our autonomic nervous system and muscles to spontaneously react under the influence of purely imaginary visions, like that of a nurse giving us a shot, while we are actually alone with a book. These emotions seem to arise without us having much control over them: it is not by any voluntary choice that our heart starts to beat faster or that our skin becomes more conductive. What is most striking is that our reactions to these non-sensory images are similar to those triggered by our perceptions of real situations. Apparently our affects and bodies do not treat the imaginary as though it were a domain clearly separated from that which we call “reality.” When it comes to certain imaginary experiences, our ontological judgment seems to operate in a kind of suspension, as though the question of whether something is real or unreal were momentarily irrelevant.

And yet, in Western thought, the imaginary is opposed by definition to the real: the imaginary is what is not real and the real what is not imaginary, an opposition that sits at the heart of many social scientific analyses of “collective imaginaries.” But there is nothing universal about this dichotomy. There are other societies that feel no need to place reality and non-sensory perceptions in such a rigid stand-off. Thus, the experience you had just now of following a path through a mental park bears some connection to what in shamanic traditions is called the “journey of the soul.” In their most elaborate rituals, Siberian shamans travel to spaces far from the place where their body is located in order to meet and communicate with the spirits and gods who live there. While in Tuva in 2006, I witnessed one such journey undertaken by a shaman called Ondarmaa to save a hospitalized man whose doctors had failed to explain the cause of his suffering. Finding themselves at a loss, the medical team turned the patient over to the ritual specialist. According to her, the patient’s soul had fled his body and was headed to the lower world;

it was urgent to catch it before it reached the land of the dead. With her drum and drumstick in hand, she gestured as though she were seizing an invisible entity that was lodged in the patient's body and then threw it into a dough figurine that the patient had fashioned ahead of time. The figurine was immediately thrown outside of the house to be eaten by the dogs. Then, with her eyes closed, beating her drum and dancing in a costume composed of dozens of snake-like, colored straps, the shaman began howling like a wolf and then sang a chant in which she described her descent along the road to the lower world. After passing through a huge portal, she wandered across a yellow steppe, and it was here that she discovered the patient's soul. Fortunately, he had not yet crossed to the other side of the river, where the land of the dead lies and from where there is no return. The shaman was already on her way back when she suddenly realized that the sick man's soul was not wearing a cap. If any part of the individual had been left behind near the land of the dead, he would be at risk of dying. So the shaman had to go back to the yellow steppe to fetch the missing piece of headwear before bringing the intact soul back to the sick man. She finally restored the soul to her patient by spitting a juniper mixture onto his face.¹ For the Tuvans, these astonishing journeys are undertaken by the shaman's soul (*sūnezini*) while his or her body remains in place. As a nomadic herder once explained to me, "The shaman is here in the yurt, he's not going anywhere, but at the same time, his soul is off fighting demons in a far-away place." At the center of the Tuvan shamanic ritual is a cleft between two parallel spaces: an immediate space, where the assembly gathers, and a distant one, made of fantastic landscapes and beings. The purpose of the shamanic ritual is to bring humans and nonhumans into contact with one another by means of a kind of circulation between the visible and invisible. If God is omnipresent and omniscient and can be invoked wherever one finds oneself, the spirits invoked in shamanic rituals are always situated off somewhere else, in a particular place; thus, to meet with them, you either have to go to where they are or make them come to you. It is for this reason that shamanic performances are fundamentally spatial and typically involve various series of centrifugal and centripetal movements. In a mysterious way that is quite difficult to conceptualize as an outside observer, the shaman is an individual capable of visualizing him- or herself in two spaces at once—one immediate, the other virtual—and to simultaneously move within both, thus creating a connection between them.

1. I describe this ritual in more detail in Stépanoff 2014a.

Some of these cosmic itineraries—which recall certain journeys taken by mythic heroes and heroines, such as Orpheus’s descent into the underworld in search of Eurydice—are familiar to shamans; they know them well, having gone on them many times. Though they may encounter surprises—a forgotten cap, for example—they follow a sort of mental routine in a virtual world that is quite similar to what we experience in our daily comings and goings around our own neighborhoods; quite similar as well to the kind of routine we would experience if we were to spend more time wandering through and familiarizing ourselves with the mental park we have just begun to explore.

People all over the world have an amazing capacity for exploring elaborate mental worlds. Nowhere is the creativity of the human mind more universally or more powerfully shown than in our nocturnal dream lives and daytime reveries. But what do the societies we live in make of these prolific flows of non-sensory imagery? They rarely recognize any social value at all in them.

But for shamans, those argonauts of the invisible, the importance of these mental journeys goes well beyond their own individual experience of them: it is something to be shared, with a sick person, a family, or sometimes a broad community of relatives and neighbors. In a variety of ways, the participants in the ritual become collectively invested in this odyssey in a virtual space. Through collective ceremonies and individual dream experiences, a great many indigenous societies have passed on a treasured heritage of vibrant, but largely invisible images from generation to generation. By reproducing dreams, chants, and ephemeral figures, they have their own way of doing what we do in our museums, those places where we preserve images fixed in tangible media from one century to the next.

Shamanism is one of the most original and captivating methods that human beings have invented for transmitting invisible images and collectively projecting themselves into virtual worlds, distinct from the here and now. The civilizations of the invisible built up by the peoples of the Far North—which were still very much alive at the dawn of the twentieth century—were unable to resist for long the methodical programs of eradication implemented by the colonial forces of modern states, whether the USSR, the United States, or Canada. Numerous shamans in Siberia were deported and executed over the course of the twentieth century (Stépanoff 2009). Nowadays, in those regions where shamanism still exists, few practitioners will readily undertake a cosmic journey. The shaman Ondarmaa—who had gone back to fetch her patient’s cap from

the yellow steppe—confessed to me that, unlike the Tuvan shamans of the pre-Soviet period, she herself had never crossed over the river into the land of the dead where the god Erlik reigns. She did not believe she had the strength: “There aren’t any shamans who can do that anymore; or if there are any, I don’t know them.” She attributed this collective loss of competence to the severing of the bonds between humans and the spirits of the mountains and forests that resulted from the atheistic politics of the Soviet era. Their creative ways of relating to the world, their vast invisible geographies, and their subtle mental skills had clearly been swept away by the colonizing forces of modernity long before the latter had time to come to terms with the principles and value of shamanic practices.

Drawing on the extensive ethnographic literature concerning indigenous traditions of northern Eurasia and North America, as well as my own fieldwork in regions where certain practices have partially resurfaced after the fall of the Soviet Union, I hope to explore the immense contribution made to the human imaginary by the wide array of cognitive technologies employed by these northern shamans.² One of the theses I put forward is that, far from being the ecstatic deliriums or calculated simulations to which a number of erudite interpreters have reduced them, these shamanic practices masterfully cultivate mental aptitudes that are common to all human beings, but which our societies fail to recognize the value of. In Siberian traditions, visions and dreams are techniques used to explore the subjectivities of animals, trees, and mountains. In the invisible lies the purposeful dimension of our living environment. Whether or not someone has legitimate access to these subjectivities reveals something about the kind of relationship they have with the living world. This is why the question of how a society regulates its mode of access to the invisible has a crucial ecological dimension. What I refer to as the different *regimes of imagination*—the different modes of distributing imaginative skills—are ecologies of the imagination.

How do these shamanic traditions mobilize, cultivate, and distribute such astonishing abilities? What kinds of division of imaginative labor, what ecologies of the imagination do they elaborate? Do they grant access to the world’s invisible dimensions to each and every person or do they reserve it for an elite selection of highly gifted individuals? In Siberia, the social division of labor is generally not strongly marked.

2. In this work, the term “technology” is used to refer to a set of techniques, not the discipline that studies techniques.

Traditional ways of life, often nomadic, depend on the autonomous capacity of each family to produce its own food, shelter, clothing, and tools. Prior to the Russian Revolution, some indigenous societies had blacksmiths while others had none. Some of them had chiefs, nobles, and lords while others went without them. Traditionally speaking, the only type of specialist universally recognized in northern Asia is the shaman, to whom, with their specific expertise in dealing with the invisible, the group delegates the management of some part its relationship with the surrounding world. In a number of different contexts, it seems that the earliest form of the social division of labor to emerge was that of imaginative labor. It is for this reason that I believe the study of shamanism and its uses of the imagination can shed valuable light on the origins of specialization, the formation of elites, and the emergence of hierarchies.

One of the central theses of the present book is that visible images play a key role in the emergence of a hierarchical organization of different categories of beings. Most of the evolution of the imagination in anatomically modern humans occurred without any input from material images. In the long history of our species, going back at least three hundred thousand years according to current estimates, it was only in the Upper Paleolithic period, forty thousand years ago, that some human groups began to surround themselves with material supports for externalizing the contents of their imagination. It is to this era that the first sculpted, carved, or painted figures of animals and humans date, those of the famous Chauvet cave, for example, which was inhabited thirty-seven thousand years ago. This is the beginning of what has been called “external symbolic storage”: after tens of thousands of years of keeping their ideas and images in their heads and speech, humans gradually began to store them in durable material supports. The birth of figurative art took place at different times in different parts of the world and is therefore not the crude effect of some stage in human biological evolution, but a result of various social mutations. Art is a cultural choice that any given society may or may not make. Throughout the Paleolithic era, external symbolic storage remained a sparingly used and discreet phenomenon. For a long time, the only signs humans produced were rhythmic geometric lines. There were no stories told in the kind of figurative art that developed in caves, only animal figures and some fragmentary human bodies, with hardly any sign of interaction between them: no hunting scenes, battles, or heroic deeds. The earliest known image of a human face came ten thousand years after the images at Chauvet, in another cave, at Vilhonneur. Paleolithic art was not intended to frame and guide the

imagination but rather to offer suggestive material supports for imaginative exploration. This is why the semantic content of these images is inaccessible to us and probably always will be. It was more than twenty-five thousand years after Chauvet that certain groups in the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods began to expand their use of external symbolic storage by figuratively recording genuine scenes of interaction between different beings. The art of this period—geographically extending from the cave walls of the Spanish Levante all the way to the first known temple, the Göbekli Tepe, in Anatolia—represents the earliest scenic compositions whose content we might possibly be able to discern. Since then, external storage has continued to expand at an exponential rate, allowing for ever more precise and complete means of fixing imagined ideas and scenes in various material supports: from abstract design and pictographs to alphabetic writing and novels, on through paintings and films and up to the video games and virtual reality headsets of our time.³

However, it is unlikely that the anatomically modern humans who lived before the emergence of art were endowed with imaginative faculties much different from our own; their brains were no smaller than ours. To put it simply, for what was by far the longest portion of its history, the human species felt no need to externalize its virtual worlds, which were probably very rich, in artifacts. It would be reasonable to conclude from this that our current compulsive need for materialized images is only a recent and somewhat peculiar way of using our human imaginative capacities. What would it mean then to imagine totally different forms of imagination from those we have been accustomed to since childhood?

As the ethnologist and prehistorian André Leroi-Gourhan observed, in his vast exploration of the relationship between graphism and thought since the Paleolithic era, with the appearance of each new figurative medium, the individual imaginary is fed by and guided along an ever-narrower set of parameters. While the animals in the Lascaux

3. The notion of “external symbolic storage” was introduced by Donald (1991) and taken up again by Renfrew, who coined the term “sapiens paradox” to refer to the time lag between the appearance of anatomically modern humans and the more recent development of “modern behaviors” such as art and writing systems (1998). On the fact that the evolution of the human brain does not adequately explain the chronology of the development of art, see Lorblanchet and Bahn 2017: 35–37. On the non-scenic character of paleolithic cave art, see Leroi-Gourhan 1994: 195–96; and Testart 2016.

cave opened up a broad field of possible imaginary scenes for those who saw them, the “margin for individual interpretation” when watching a film is drastically reduced, leaving the spectator “absolutely no possibility for intervening actively.” The modern industry of the imaginary, as Leroi-Gourhan argues, is founded on a separation between a small elite of “image makers” and a general mass of “image consumers,” who are confined to assimilating the makers’ productions (Leroi-Gourhan 1993: 213–14). The expansion of increasingly invasive technologies that has been ongoing ever since the Upper Paleolithic thus gives the impression of a gradual subjugation of individual imaginations through an increasingly hierarchical division of mental labor. Leroi-Gourhan’s pessimistic vision is perhaps somewhat disconcertingly confirmed by recent evidence indicating a gradual reduction in the size of the human brain that seems to have begun around the same time as the development of art and has accelerated since the invention of agriculture and the division of labor.⁴

It is not my intention to claim that the externalization of public images in art necessarily leads to an impoverishment of the internal imaginative functions of individuals, but rather to question the idea that art is a natural manifestation of the human imagination and that the absence of visible art in a given sociocultural context implies a lack of enlightenment. What I mean to interrogate are the implications involved in tethering the human imagination to material figures. Why do some societies place value in the production of painted and sculpted images while others prefer to explore images that come to them in hallucinations and dreams? Is there a connection between the expansion of invasive image technologies and the hierarchization of ecologies of the imagination? These immense questions, which have yet to be thoroughly explored, are nonetheless of the utmost importance if we consider that, for many human societies, the imagination and dream experiences represent privileged means of establishing profound relationships with the world’s nonhuman entities. How does one pass from one regime of imagination to another and at what cost? I do not purport to provide any universally applicable answers to these questions in this book; rather, I will try to approach certain aspects of them from the perspective of a universe in which the art of the visible and the art of the invisible have

4. A gradual reduction in the endocranial volume of humans can be traced from the end of the Pleistocene, through the Holocene, and up until the present day (Leach 2003; Cieri et al. 2014).

long had a complementary and rivalrous existence: the shamanic traditions of Siberia.

The first part of this book examines what the current neuroscientific and anthropological data can teach us about the nature and uses of the human power of imagination. Rather than understanding the imagination in opposition to the “real,” I develop an approach that recognizes this faculty as an essential tool for accessing the perspectives of others, both human and nonhuman. I follow a trajectory through the regimes of imagination observed in the diverse traditions of the sub-Arctic region, my main focus falling on Siberia, but with some comparative detours into Scandinavia and North America. As I will show, the shamanic traditions of northern Asia can be organized around two kinds of ritual practices used to access the invisible and that mobilize imaginative activity in two starkly different ways: the dark tent and the light tent. From the analysis of these rituals, it becomes possible to distinguish two types of shamanism: one heterarchical, which, in other words, allows for a flexibility of positions; and the other hierarchical, premised on an intrinsic distinction between ritual specialists and ordinary, non-shamanic people. Drawing on a wide array of ritual and iconographic traditions, the second part of the book delves more deeply into the powerful technologies used for sharing virtual spaces that lie at the heart of the hierarchical universe. In the third part, I set out to delineate the structural opposition between these different ecologies of the imagination in an attempt to understand how it was that hierarchical shamanism historically came to dominate heterarchical traditions all over northern Asia. The expansion of hierarchy is tightly bound up with the immense upheavals experienced by these peoples in recent centuries: great migrations, Russian colonial expansion, the spread of devastating epidemics, and the introduction of new forms of power. In the background though, this journey across the boreal region is meant to shed new light on two major anthropological questions: How do hierarchical relations spread? And by what processes are humans able to multiply the intermediaries involved in their interactions with their living environment?

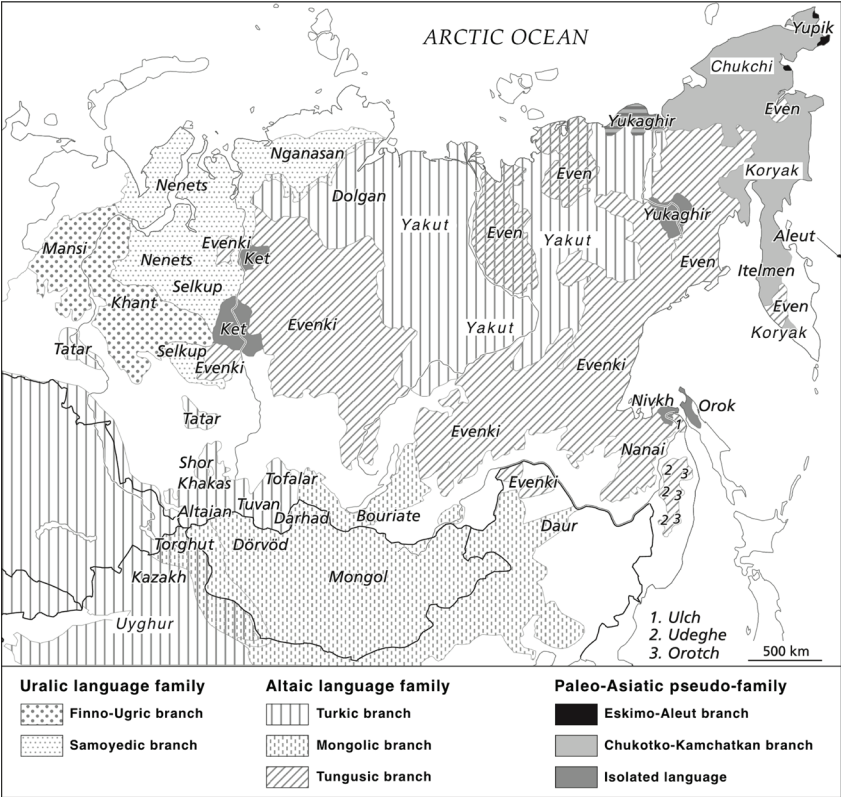


Figure 1. Indigenous Peoples of North Asia in the Twentieth Century.

*Transliteration of vernacular terms and ethnonyms: I use the international notation systems for spelling based on English pronunciation.

PART ONE

Wandering Souls

CHAPTER I

Imagination and Mental Travel

I met Nadia, a Khakas woman and recognized shaman, in the small town of Tashtyp, in South Siberia. At one point in the conversations we had in her modest house of painted wood, I asked her how she had begun practicing as a shaman, and she told me the following story. When she was young, she had a dream that changed the course of her life.

I was lying down. There were three men dressed in black. They took off my head, but I wasn't in pain. They said to me, "Are you watching? Take a good look!" I watched while they took off my fingers, my arms. They took everything apart. They took out my ribs, and then they held one of them up and said, "Here it is, right here, the extra bone!" Then they put my limbs back together and put my head back in place. I woke up.

This dream left a vivid emotional impression on Nadia. It was an experience that profoundly changed her perception of herself: she was no ordinary person. When she recounted the dream to those around her, and they considered it in relation to a few other factors, they came to view Nadia as a shaman. By the time I visited her in 2008, she was consulting with both Khakas and Russian clients every day. The dream truly had changed her life.

Nadia's dream of this shamanic autopsy, and her experience of it, are in fact quite typical of the process through which shamans are recognized in Khakas society. For the dreamer, seeing yourself cut up by a

team of spirits who discover an “extra bone” (*artyh sөөk*) means that you have a different kind of skeleton, one that is unlike that of ordinary people: a shamanic skeleton. Because it gives an image of the body’s interior, this dream works a bit like an X-ray, but one taken by the patient him- or herself. For those who have and relate this oneiric experience, the dream demonstrates an ability to see oneself from the exterior, to project one’s consciousness outside of the body. A mental operation that psychologists call *heautoscopy*, it is a fundamental ability to the practice of shamanism, and indeed the journey taken by the officiant’s soul in the course of a shamanic ritual is based on the shaman’s ability to detach their consciousness from their perception of their body and their immediate surroundings. In Khakas society, certain dreams can thus be thought of as extremely serious events with very real consequences, not only for the dreamer, but also for those around them. It is difficult for people in modern Western societies to understand how the fundamentally private experiences that are dreams can take on any kind of social value, yet this is the case in a great number of societies all over the world.

When we dream in a sleeping state or indulge in daydreams during our waking hours, we all have perceptive experiences that do not stem from our eyes or other sensory organs. Whenever we focus on these images, we are turning our attention away from the information our senses give us about our current surroundings. Many societies confer a special status on things that are perceived outside of the ordinary sensory channels. For the Tuvans in South Siberia, where I conducted much of my research, there are things that exist beyond what everybody is able to see, “things we don’t see with our eyes,” our “eyes of water,” as they say, which are so fragile and imperfect. Dreams might present some people with an opportunity to see “invisible” things, but to perceive them in a waking state, you have to be “someone who sees,” a person gifted with a “second sight” (*iyi körnür kizhi*).¹ On the basis of these indigenous ideas, the “invisible” could be defined, from an anthropological point of view, as a set of entities and spaces that, for a given society, are not usually considered accessible to ordinary vision but only through a special, non-ocular kind of sight. Calling these experiences “non-sensory perceptions” allows us

1. Grégory Delaplace has done much to shed light on the phenomenology of “invisible things” (*üzegdehgüi yum*) among the Dörvöd Mongols. The “invisible thing,” “which is not available to an ordinary regime of perception,” can nevertheless be seen by infants, animals, and “those who can see things” (*yun üzdeg хүн*) (Delaplace 2008: 264).

to avoid falling into the reductive dualism of modern thought, whereby the empirical certainty of sense perceptions is opposed to the illusory nature of internal mental images. What I am calling “the imagination” is precisely that faculty that allows us to mobilize these non-sensory perceptions in order to immerse ourselves in situations that are distinct from the here and now.

For the Tuvans, the invisible is populated by the “master spirits of places” (*cher eezi*) who live in the mountains and rivers, as well as by wandering demons—who people need to be wary of when crossing certain haunted places—and the souls (*sünezin*) of human beings and animals. All of these entities have their own intentions and feelings, and they are quite capable of hurting you if you should ever offend them. Whenever a sheep is slain, Tuvans are careful not to let it suffer for too long, otherwise its invisible soul might take revenge by inflicting illness or other misfortune on the human community. The Tuvans are also careful to never urinate too close to a river for fear that they might anger its master spirit—an entity that shamans can sometimes see in their visions or dreams. It is in the invisible that the sensory and intentional dimensions of the visible surroundings are concentrated and it thus plays a primordial role in the ecology of relations between Tuvans and the nonhuman inhabitants of the surrounding landscape.

Modern Western societies, which tend not to recognize that dreams can have any social value, are heirs to a very particular philosophical tradition in which imagination and reality are thought of as two intrinsically separate domains. The imaginary is what is not real, and the real is what is not imaginary. Westerners usually judge non-sensory visual experiences in negative terms; they are seen as illusions, which typically draw individuals away from the matter of reality. Dreams and daydreams are only associated with the real when they are objectified and given a material form, as is the case with novels, paintings, and films.

But where does this quite particular habit of positing rigid dichotomies between the real and the imaginary, between sensory and non-sensory perceptions, come from? And what do recent findings in neuroscience tell us about the relationship between these two different forms of experience?

The Imaginary and the Real: The Story of a Rupture

What I describe in this book as a “regime of imagination” is the particular way in which a society distributes imaginative skills and activities

among its members. Understanding the manner in which a society treats the dream lives of its members offers a highly revealing set of indicators as to the specific make-up of any such regime. Ancient Greece saw the emergence of a highly unusual attitude regarding dreams, strange even in comparison with those of the other cultures in the ancient Mediterranean region, all of which were home to well-established traditions in oneiromancy, or dream divination. In Greek cosmology, dreams belonged to a specific physical place known as the “village of dreams” (*dêmos Oneiron*), which lay beyond the *Okeanos*, the edge, that is, of the real cosmos. They thus were not a part of reality but instead belonged to the anti-world of the dead and nonexistence. The Greeks did in fact have their own tradition of dream divination, but they generally held that dreams showed the opposite of what would happen in reality. This negative judgment, which goes back to the archaic period, was pushed further with the emergence of Greek philosophy, where dreams are defined as illusory images, not to be confused with reality. It was Aristotle who definitively refuted the idea expressed in Homer’s poetry that dreams could be sent by the gods, and instead attributed them with a demonic origin. “[Mental] pictures are like reflections in water [...],” according to Aristotle, “if there is such movement, the reflection is not like the original, nor the images like the real object” (cited in Meier 1966: 306). Aristotle’s use of the reflection metaphor here is significant: it introduces a hierarchical distinction between the real, which constitutes the “original,” and mental imagery, which is no more than a copy and always subject to some degree of distortion. Since the real is primary, mental images are no more than ontologically secondary representations of it, whose only potential source of value lies in their relative fidelity to the real objects they are derived from.

In one of his most famous aphorisms, Heraclitus introduces another important contrast between reality and dreams: “the waking are having one world and a common one, but when asleep everyone turns away from it into his own one” (Meier 1966: 307). To us moderns, this conception seems self-evident: is it not true that sleepers shut themselves off in their own bedrooms when it comes time to dive into the personal fantasies that constitute their dream lives? But this basic attitude is nevertheless highly unusual: in most other societies, dreams are understood as a mode of access to realities no less significant than those we perceive with our eyes. Far from confining anyone to an isolated universe, dreams are instead understood to open individuals up to social interactions with the dead, with spirits, and with gods. In Western philosophy, however, dreams withdraw into themselves, closing a door of communication

between humans and the world outside. But this anti-oneiric posture of the Greeks was an exception to the general attitude; it just so happens that we are its heirs.²

It took many centuries, however, for these scholarly theories to fully supersede most popular conceptions of dreaming. The philosophers of the classical age took the project of severing all form of communication between dreams and the world even further, denying even the demonic origin that Aristotle had granted them. For Descartes, dreaming became a strictly internal phenomenon, emerging from the mind as a result of the excitation of nerves. The various possibilities of occult communication and movement between human and nonhuman worlds were refuted by Malebranche, for whom popular beliefs in witches and werewolves could only be explained by dreams produced exclusively by the human mind. Dreams were neither visits from spirits or demons, nor were they departures of the soul from the body. Daniel Fabre (1996) offers a perfect summary of these new perceptions: "From then on, the visions seen in dreams no longer had any source outside of the human mind—they were entirely psychic events—and the soul was firmly anchored in the body, even when it was asleep."

But with the birth of ethnology at the end of the nineteenth century, Western scholars found themselves once again encountering populations that had not set off down the path of devaluing non-sensory perceptions and confining the imaginary to a hermetically sealed body. That these societies did not share our own ontological dualism was, and largely still is, the cause of much perplexity. As Edward Tylor wrote, "the savage or barbarian has never learnt to make that rigid distinction between subjective and objective, between imagination and reality, which is one of the main results of scientific education" (Tylor 1871: 402).

It is true that this scientific "result," unattained by the "savages," had a long-lasting influence over the way psychologists conceive of the imagination.³ For Freud, the imaginary is governed by the *Lustprinzip*, or pleasure principle, that dominates the psychic lives of children, and which only gradually gives way to the *Realitätprinzip*, or reality principle, as we mature. Following in Freud's footsteps, Jean Piaget identified children's symbolic play as the manifestation of an "autistic" mode of thought in which young children isolate themselves from the outside world to satisfy frustrated desires. We are not far here from the "solitary world" of

2. On dreams in ancient Greece, see Brelich 1966; and Meier 1966.

3. This paragraph leans heavily on the work of Paul L. Harris (2000).

Heraclitus's dreamer. It is only as children grow older that they are able to free themselves from this egocentric existence and develop a logical mode of thinking through which they can engage with reality and social life. The theoretical framework in which Freud and Piaget constructed their analyses was thus premised on a radical separation between the socialized world of reality and the isolated domain of the imaginary and the psychic life of the individual.

But these classical models have been largely overturned by experimental research. As a psychologist of the imagination Paul L. Harris has shown, drawing on studies conducted over the last few decades, the theoretical models of Freud and Piaget in fact are quite poor at describing the role of the imagination in the mental lives of both children and adults. Since children are only capable of engaging in symbolic play—playing with dolls, for example—from the age of two, it makes little sense to associate this kind of activity with a “primitive” stage of development. Rather than isolating children in their own inner worlds, symbolic or “pretend” play (as Harris calls it) engages them in cooperative interactions that are crucial to the process of socialization and learning about the realities of life. Taking part in role-playing games by pretending to be a pirate, for example, or a mother, provides children with a means of exploring the world from a different perspective than their own. Experimental studies have indeed shown that there is a positive correlation between the ability to engage in imaginary play and the willingness to explore the psychological experience of others. As Harris makes clear, we now know that it is the absence of symbolic play and of immersion in the imaginary that could be more accurately described as pathological, this sometimes being a symptom of autism. The psychological faculties engaged in role playing, moreover, by no means disappear at the end of childhood; they are the driving force behind the insatiable taste adults have for the fictional worlds of novels and films (Harris 2000).

Despite the new perspectives offered by experimental psychology, which we will further discuss in following sections, the opposition between reality and imagination remains even today the dominant model for a large number of theories of the imaginary. Even Sartre, in his effort to rehabilitate the concept, found himself mired in the old dualism when he characterized the imaginary as the “‘irrealizing’ function of consciousness” (Sartre 2004: 3). Rather than considering the prospective role of the imagination in exploring different possibilities, Sartre persisted in conceiving of it as a negation of reality. For him, the imagination by definition knows itself to be an illusion: “the image gives its object as

a nothingness of being” (2004: 13). It is difficult not to be struck by the inherent ethnocentrism of a statement like this when you consider just how many societies regard dreams and hallucinations as decisive emotional experiences. Despite the wide variety of philosophical systems developed from Aristotle to Sartre, this tradition has overwhelmingly evaluated human imaginative experiences in terms of how closely they conform to a distinct domain of existence called “reality.” What we might call this ontological perspective—which was for many centuries the exclusive purview of a philosophical elite who looked down on superstitions about dreams as well as any popular tradition of interpreting them—has long been integrated into the prevailing common sense of modern societies, and it is not easy to detach ourselves from it when considering other ways of organizing the relationship between the visible and the invisible.

Even in the field of sociocultural anthropology, analyses of the imaginary are often still informed by this same ontological standpoint. Anthropologists generally talk about “the social imaginary” as though it were just another term for culture. This conception of the imaginary would thus have to include the entire set of beliefs, symbols, and values shared by the members of any given society; their mental representations, in short, in contrast to the objective facts of nature revealed by Western science. It is a notion of the imaginary that falls squarely in line with the quintessential cleft of modern epistemology, the foundational opposition between nature and culture.⁴

In a recent work, *The Imagined, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic*, the anthropologist Maurice Godelier establishes an inventory of different types of imaginaries according to the “singular relationship each entertains with the ‘real’” (Godelier 2020: x). For Godelier, the standard of conformity to reality leads him to articulate a distinction between the “imagined” and the “imaginary.” What is imagined is not necessarily imaginary; the plan of a city, for instance, is imagined but not imaginary “because it refers to a reality, the city, which exists independently of the map and outside the mind of the tourist who wants to visit it” (2020: 39). The category of “the purely imaginary” is represented by fictional beings like Tintin, who inhabits a world that exists only in the minds of individuals.

4. This point is at the heart of the critique formulated by Sneath, Holbraad, and Pedersen (2009).

For Godelier, religious cultural productions fall within the domain of the imaginary and not simply the imagined, since they typically concern beings that do not exist, such as gods and spirits, or at least no longer exist, such as ancestors. But the imaginary starts to have tangible effects on reality when it acquires a social dimension in the symbolic realm and through the collective adherence of believers: spirits and gods can thus legitimize the construction of temples and the power of kings. Though the imaginary is born in the minds of individuals, and thus as separated from the sphere of reality, it often ends up reuniting with it by way of the symbolic.

Godelier's approach thus seeks to bring the imaginary and the real into contact with each other at the same time as it defines them as categorically incompatible, based on the classical postulate that the imaginary fundamentally belongs to the domain of representation and can only be evaluated in relation to what already exists. But this representationalist framework raises several difficulties. First of all, it assumes it is possible to access an absolute point of view from which human imaginative productions can be classed according to how adequately they conform to reality. But between the imagined and the imaginary, how should we classify an architect's plan for a future house, not yet constructed? As long as the house has not been built, we would have to classify the project as imaginary and then reclassify it as imagined as soon as the project is realized. But what if the planned house is abandoned during construction for lack of funding? As philosophers like John Searle and Jean-Marie Schaeffer have argued, the ontological status of imaginative productions is quite often impossible to resolve and ultimately futile (Schaeffer 1999; Searle 1975). Moreover, it seems fair to assume that the absolute vantage point from which the imaginaries of different societies could be classified according to their relative degree of reality is a rather clear expression of the particular regime of imagination that dominates Western modernity.

As we observed in the opening pages of this book, when faced with imaginary circumstances or situations, our affective and physical responses tend to momentarily suspend the ontological question of whether something is true or false. A better question to ask ourselves in undertaking a properly anthropological investigation would be that of how people make use of their imagination in daily life. Every day, we find ourselves making several decisions about how to spend our time, what to eat, how to deal with this or that friend, or how to resolve a certain problem, and in each case, we envision a series of different possibilities as

well as the consequences they would entail. Our ability to imagine these consequences plays a key role in our ability to make decisions. When I consider what color to repaint a room, I produce mental images of the space in a series of shades that differ from its actual color in the present. One after the other, I imagine the room as pink, green, and blue, and then evaluate these alternatives by comparing them with one another and taking into account the color of the floor, the furniture, and so on. Finally, when I have settled on one of these mental images, I gather the necessary materials for bridging the gap between this image and the room as it is before me. Imagine the time and energy I save myself by not having to work through all of the available shades at the paint shop by trial and error.

We constantly create simulations like this that allow us to mentally go through a series of possible outcomes and hopefully make the optimal choice. Difficult decisions involving high-risk or complex actions require longer explorations through our catalogs of mental imagery, but even simple actions involve some kind of imaginative representation. Generally speaking, what we call an “action” can be any event that results from intentional causality—in other words, caused by a mental representation formed prior to the action’s realization (see Searle 1983). Imaginative activity is thus the driver of all human action; it permeates every one of our exchanges with the world around us.

Such everyday examples show us that the primary function of the imagination is not to describe the reality that surrounds us (our sensory organs take care of this very well!); it thus seems entirely beside the point to admonish it for failing to do so. In daily life, imaginative activity is often *prospective*: it allows us to embark on simulated explorations of possible situations that we may or may not work to realize.⁵ Human beings do not therefore use their imaginative abilities to flee reality but, on the contrary, to act on it and interact with one another. If the imagination has an impact on reality, it is not because it is an accidental by-product of historical religious influences, but because *the imagination is an integral part of our relationship with the world at every moment*.

To better understand what the imagination is, in the following sections we will take a closer look at the psychological role this faculty plays in the basic activities of everyday human life. It is possible that the examination of these day-to-day functions will shed some light on the

5. Psychologists refer to this faculty as “episodic future thought” (Szpunar 2010).

imagination's role in the evolution of our species. The imaginative function would hardly have been so favored by the evolutionary selection process if its main function was to turn us away from reality and foster false ideas about the world. From an evolutionary point of view, such a maladaptive trait would have done little to ensure the survival, let alone the reproduction, of a species so emphatically marked by it.

Imaginary Experiences Are Real Experiences

The representationalist concept of the imagination as a cognitive simulacrum that places some degree of separation between the subject and reality has been profoundly put in doubt in recent decades by findings in experimental psychology and neurophysiology. Since the 1990s, neuroimaging techniques—positron emission tomography (PET) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)—have afforded us a much better understanding of what goes on in the brain when we produce mental images. It is now clear that the activity of immersing ourselves in mental imagery activates the neural mechanisms involved in perception, emotion, and motor function, a discovery that has led researchers to distinguish between different types of imaginative productions: there is visual mental imagery, which, as in dreaming, activates the visual area of the cerebral cortex; auditory imagery, which allows us to carry a tune or sing a melody in our heads; and motor imagery, through which we can mentally rehearse or simulate movements in imagined spaces (Nir and Tononi 2010; Cui et al. 2007). Thanks to these neuroimaging techniques, it is possible to see that when someone is asked to imagine taking part in a race, the motor areas of the cerebral cortex are activated even if no muscular activity actually occurs. Some subjects even see their breath and heartrate intensify, as though they really were running (Decety et al. 1994).

But what do these studies contribute to our understanding of what imaginative activity really is? It seems that, on a neurological level, there exists some kind of continuity between imagining that we are performing an action, dreaming that we are, and actually doing it. Whatever its name might suggest, the imagination is not a simple machine for making images scroll by the mind's eye. For neuropsychologists, rather than being exclusively made up of representations, the imagination is an "ideomotor" faculty: it activates our mental capacities as well as our motor faculties—our capacity to move, make gestures, and communicate

with other people (Yágüez et al. 1998). This means that, if we are able to imagine, it is because we are also able to walk, run, speak—in short, because we are able to interact with our environment. There is thus no such thing as the “purely imaginary”; *our capacity to immerse ourselves in an imaginary world is based on our capacity to engage with the actual world.*

This is not a unilateral relationship, however; it would be reductive to understand our imaginative activities as mere traces of our interactions with the actual world, since our imaginative experiences reciprocally shape and inform our most basic abilities to interact with our surroundings. It is for this reason that guided waking dreams have long been used as a psychotherapeutic technique to help patients change their relationship with their environment (Desoille 1945). Hypnotherapy and cognitive therapy both make use of mental imagery to treat a variety of psychological conditions such as phobias, tobacco addiction, eating disorders, or sexual dysfunction (Sheikh 2003; Stopa 2009).

And the therapeutic effects of the imagination do not end there. Because the imagination is an ideomotor faculty, its field of action is not restricted to the psyche; it also exercises a surprising degree of influence over the execution of motor actions. Multiple studies have shown that mentally rehearsing a movement is an effective way of improving the accuracy, strength, and speed of its motor execution. This is called the “cognitive priming” of an action. Before walking a complex route, mentally simulating the itinerary can thus be just as effective a preparation as actually rehearsing the trajectory on foot (Berthoz 2015: 36). One test designed to measure the efficacy of cognitive priming compared the accuracy with which two groups were able to copy an ideogram, with one group preparing for the evaluation by copying the ideogram on paper and another by practicing the task mentally. The results showed that the latter group were able to reproduce the ideogram more accurately than those who had manually rehearsed the task (Yágüez et al. 1998).

The efficacy of this kind of motor imagery training is such that it is sometimes recommended as a rehabilitation technique for patients with motor deficits. As surprising as it may seem, people who suffer from hemiparesis (partial paralysis of one side of the body) tend to improve their mobility with motor imagery training more quickly than with rehabilitative physical therapy (Grabherr et al. 2015). The success of these patients illuminates something that also occurs in our everyday lives, only without our realizing it. We often learn to carry out complex tasks simply by observing others perform intricate actions and imagining ourselves in their place, thus regularly building on and improving our motor

skills through mental practice. The imagination does not project us into the unreal then, but, much to the contrary, provides us with a *mental mode of interacting with the world*, one that complements our physical engagements with it and helps us to master them. The new understanding of imaginative activity afforded by contemporary neuroscience needs to be seriously taken into account by anthropologists; in this book, it will serve as a guide as we explore the cognitive techniques of shamanism.

We All Travel by Mind

We tend to intuitively assume that an individual's brain activity is proportionate to their level of engagement with any ongoing activities and their perception of external phenomena. Whenever we encounter someone who is slow to respond to our questions or exhortations, when we perceive a certain vacancy in their eyes, we usually judge them as cognitively absent or "tuned out." But brain imaging technology has largely reversed this notion in recent decades, demonstrating that the withdrawal of attention from external stimuli does not in fact correspond at all to any slowing down of cerebral activity. In the absence of external tasks, several parts of the brain are activated simultaneously, namely those forming what is called the *default mode network*. This default network is particularly active when we turn our attention away from our immediate surroundings and allow ourselves to daydream, and it seems to play just as central a role in our sleeping dream experiences (Christoff et al. 2009; Mason et al. 2007; Domhoff and Fox 2015). Daydreaming, mind wandering, or "stimulus-independent thought" more technically speaking, is a mode of mental activity in which the attention detaches itself from sensory afferents and external tasks, and turns to concentrate on its own internal flow. It is a free and spontaneous way of mobilizing the imagination in which images and ideas flow from one another in a generally unpredictable manner; it is thus quite different from any imaginative activity directed toward action.

In modern Western societies, daydreaming is typically judged negatively, as a deviation from the mind's normal way of functioning. In children, it is often stigmatized as a pathological inability to concentrate. Indeed, indulging in daydreaming does have obvious drawbacks: reduced attention to our immediate surroundings, the risk of an accident while driving, and so on. Yet some studies show that daydreaming occupies about fifty percent of our waking mental lives (McMillan et al.

2013). Of course it is difficult to believe that an activity as significant as this could only have disadvantages; there must also be some benefits. For example, when we read a book, we occasionally detach our attention from the lines on the page to consider our own ideas and memories. In doing so, we establish links between the reading material and our own experience. It is not a detrimental distraction or a failing in our ability to pay attention, but an essential part of how we connect with what we are reading. So while reading this book, I hope you won't forget to daydream from time to time!

As we saw in the Introduction, when conjuring up the unpleasant image of a nurse giving us a shot, the contents of our imagination can quite easily conjure up emotions similar to those generated by real situations. Someone who has a snake phobia might show the same signs of panic when imagining a serpent as they would when confronted with a live snake (Marziller, Carroll, and Newland 1979). There is something surprising about this: it is one thing to imagine a situation, but being emotionally affected by it is another. There hardly seems to be any adaptive advantage to being as emotionally sensitive to fictional situations as to real ones. After all, from an evolutionary perspective, a species that finds it difficult to distinguish between real and imaginary threats would have little chance of surviving.

But in fact, our capacity to *experience* the contents of our imagination is something we use constantly in our daily lives. If I take care to turn off the main water supply to my house before going on vacation, it is because I am able mentally to picture the disastrous consequences that would result if any of the pipes were to spring a leak. I imagine the flooding, the water damage, the mold; and the anxiety caused by these disturbing images is what helps me remember to turn off the water. By giving us a precursory experience of consequences like these, our ability to be moved by imaginary scenes helps us make good decisions and avoid hazardous situations. With this in mind, it is not hard to understand why evolution favored those among our ancestors who were better endowed with this capacity (Harris 2000: 84–90; Damasio 1994).

But the emotional impact our imagination has on us serves not only to help us avoid risks; it is the common thread on which the unity of subjectivity is constructed. As the neurophysiologist Alain Berthoz and his colleagues have shown, without the imagination, we would be unable to anticipate our future actions or predict any changes in our environment (Berthoz and Debru 2015). Without realizing it, we project ourselves back and forth in time constantly: thinking ahead to upcoming

meetings, this evening's dinner, or reflecting back on our last vacation. These incessant movements between the past and future, which engage our ability to relive past events and to prospectively experience future situations (in either excitement or anxiety), constitute what psychologists call "chronesthesia" or "mental time travel." According to Berthoz and his colleagues, our memories help us create scenarios for future actions, the anticipation of which both feeds into our present actions and modifies our perception of the past. Mental journeys through situations far removed from the here and now play an essential role in the construction of our identity, its continuity in time, and its perpetual dynamic of renewal.

To go on this kind of imaginary journey, I often make use of a mental representation of myself and my body. I project this "double" into imagined situations and watch what happens to it as they unfold. When I am preparing for an important interview, for example, I create a mental simulation in which I imagine myself uttering such and such a statement and responding to such and such a question. For Berthoz, this capacity to project a double into virtual situations during the waking state is the same as that which allows us to see ourselves going through various kinds of adventures in dreams—its neural basis appears to be located primarily at the temporoparietal junction. This same faculty is also involved in the phenomena known as heautoscopy (seeing one's own body at a distance) and out-of-body experiences (Blanke et al. 2004). As Berthoz (2006: 280) writes in reference to dream experiences, "My double and the internal models I have of my body and the world are all I need to completely emulate a world that in every way resembles the physical world."

The relevance of these faculties to our own interests is quite remarkable, as they immediately recall Nadia's account of witnessing her own autopsy in a dream. In fact, the experience of seeing their own bodies from the outside, either in a dream or a waking state, features frequently in the autobiographical narratives of shamans. The public rituals in which shamans go on their cosmic journeys—those which dramatize the departure of the shaman's soul and its itinerary across the sky while the body of the officiant remains in place—are founded on the possibility of a dissociation between the self and its double. It may be that these shamanic traditions rely on the ability of the human mind not only to create a double and send it on a journey through distant times and spaces, but paradoxically, with the use of various time-tested techniques, to also ground this movement in the immediate surroundings.

There are obvious connections between what psychologists call “mental time travel” and the journeys embarked on by the shaman’s soul. The neural basis of these mental activities appears to be the default mode network. From an anthropological point of view, a significant consequence of this is that shamans’ own accounts of these journeys of the soul can hardly be treated as mere forms of symbolic discourse, as members of the discipline have long done. If going on mental journeys is something that everyone does on a daily basis, how can we deny shamans the ability to have this same kind of experience? If anthropologists have refused to take these accounts seriously it is because, for a long time, we lacked a psychological theory of imaginative activity, and this for the simple reason that these kinds of mental experiences are generally ignored and devalued in our own societies. “Zoning out” and “having one’s head in the clouds” are behaviors we tend to regard with irony. But the situation is quite different in societies where closing one’s eyes and “going to the moon”—as is the case in some Inuit rituals—is an activity of great social importance.

My hypothesis is that there is a close relationship between shamans who travel to the moon and dreamers with their heads in the clouds. Whenever we project ourselves into the past or future—a mental activity we partake in every day in our private lives, often without even realizing it—we are doing something that shamans do deliberately and with great refinement in their public performances. The shamanic journey is a metacognitive art, a reflexive and culturally established technique for mental travel. *Thus, with our common capacity for imaginative projection, we are all potential shamans without realizing it.* And an important anthropological question flows from this: why is it that some cultural traditions cultivate these extraordinary individual faculties while others are indifferent to or even devalue and repress them? This will be one of the central questions of the following chapters, in which we will begin to compare hierarchical and heterarchical traditions of shamanic practice.

Exploring Nonhuman Worlds

The explorative reach of our mental journeys is not limited to our self-projections into the past (memories) and future (plans); we are also able to take leave of our own mental universe and make forays into the minds of others. Psychologists who study the imagination emphasize the vital role our ability to take mental journeys plays in our communications

with other people. When I listen to a friend's description of a car accident he was involved in, I mentally construct a "situational model" from his account. It is only because of my ability to experience the emotions evoked by these mental scenes that I am able to relate to what he tells me and share in his feelings about the episode. It would be difficult to make sense of other people's emotions without this faculty, but it would also be difficult to take seriously various other kinds of important information, perhaps even some that is essential to my survival. It is for these reasons that some scholars have proposed that the ability to go on mental journeys was implicated in the evolution of the human capacity for language. The pairing of language and the imagination is what enables us to share our past experiences and future plans and thus to coordinate our representations of situations that are independent of the here and now (Suddendorf, Addis, and Corballis 2009; Corballis 2012).

Psychologists generally focus on the role of the imagination in establishing relations with other people, but there is no reason to assume this aptitude is limited to interactions with fellow human beings. We frequently attribute our pets, for example, with emotions, sensations, and intentions that we infer from various behavioral cues. When a dog barks a certain way, his owner deduces, "He wants me to give him some food"; if he barks in another way the owner might say: "He wants to go out in the garden"; while a different behavior might make the owner think, "He's sad, he wants me to pet him."⁶ In such cases, we put to use our knowledge of animal behavior, our ability to make inferences about the intentions of others (our "theory of mind"), and our capacity to associate emotions with imagined scenes and thus to experience empathy. Cognitive psychology has shown that, from the youngest age, people display a lively interest in animal behavior and a tendency to interpret it in terms of actions and intentions (Barrett 2005). From an evolutionary point of view, there is nothing particularly surprising about the ease with which we attribute animals with intentional thought; it allows us to anticipate their needs, to care for their health, and to maintain good relations with them.

The evolutionary context in which humans developed their capacity to mentally travel into the minds of others was one in which relations with animals were extremely important. As paleoanthropology has shown us, one of the most distinctive characteristics of early humans in comparison

6. An experimental study has shown that humans are able to correctly interpret different kinds of canine vocalizations (Pongrácz et al. 2005).

to other hominids was their talent for hunting. While chimpanzees and gorillas get most of their nourishment from leaves and fruits, all of the species belonging to the genus *Homo* included a significant portion of meat in their diets. *Homo erectus* was a formidable predator who employed a number of novel techniques: organizing ambushes, preparing traps, and using their extraordinary physical endurance to pursue prey to the point of exhaustion. Their capacity for tracking and ambushing animals would not have been possible without the development of certain cognitive processes: they must have been able to interpret footprints, predict behaviors, and think up strategies that could be shared with their hunting companions. These complex cognitive tasks were only possible with *Homo erectus*'s large brain, which itself required a significant energy supply that necessitated eating larger amounts of meat, and this in turn made it possible to develop increasingly complex and effective hunting strategies. Thus hunting practices and the imagination probably became more complex as they reciprocally supported one another in a positive feedback loop.⁷

Certain kinds of physical remains provide clear evidence of the imagination's significant development in *Homo erectus*, for these formidable hunters were also talented artisans. Around 1.8 million years ago, a new type of lithic tool appeared in East Africa: the Acheulean biface, of which *Homo erectus* is most likely the author. A biface is a stone tool comprised of two symmetrical planes made by repeatedly removing material from both sides. To create this kind of geometric form, which has no parallel in nature, artisans had to execute each movement in relation to a precise mental image of the intended tool (Pelegrin 1993). In other words, the tool had to exist in an autonomous form in their imagination before it appeared in their hands. Some remarkably innovative studies combining experimental archeological methods with neuroimaging techniques have recently shown that the activity involved in carving Acheulean tools—unlike earlier, simpler devices—mobilizes the left superior frontal gyrus in particular, an area of the brain involved in the formation of prospective strategies and “mental time travel” (Stout et al. 2015). The deployment of the imagination achieved by *Homo erectus* in hunting and producing flint tools was likely of the same sort as that which allows us to manipulate virtual scenes and project ourselves into them.

7. On the relationship between diet, hunting, and imagination in the process of hominization, see Mithen 2001; Aiello and Wheeler 1995; Kaplan et al. 2000.

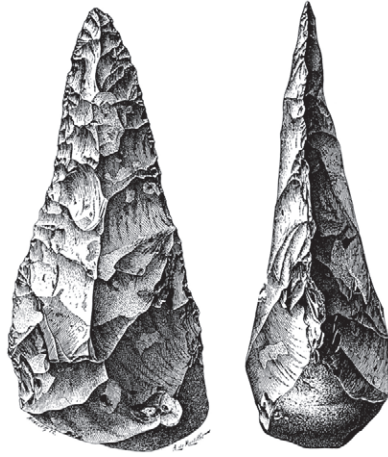


Figure 2. Acheulean Biface, flint. Drawing by A. de Mortillet, end of the nineteenth century. fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/fichier:Biface.jpg.

Let us take a look at the evolutionary context in which the human imagination emerged. We owe more to our ape ancestors than we are usually ready to admit: color vision, for example, not shared by other mammals, is an adaptive trait favored by a fruit diet. We are not endowed with a strong sense of smell, on the other hand, which is a major shortcoming for a primate-cum-predator. Dogs, by contrast, have a sense of smell that is ten to a hundred thousand times more sensitive than our own. It was the imagination that came to stand in for this sense among the earliest humans, a faculty that seems to have played the role of a powerful hunting weapon. To effectively track an animal, hunters had to know how to decipher a large amount of information from footprints, tracks, droppings, and a variety of other kinds of traces. Not only did they need to tell what species of animal it was, but also its sex, age, size, and health. And these investigations were not limited to the body of the pursued animal. Urban readers might find the idea that hunters are alert to the mental states of wild animals quite strange, seeing as their ultimate goal is to kill them. But anyone with much experience in hunting understands how essential it is for hunters to put themselves in the animal's place, to guess its intentions and to anticipate its behavior if they are to succeed in overpowering or trapping it. Depending on whether an animal is traveling at a hurried or relaxed pace, a hunter can typically surmise whether it is looking for food, wants to rejoin the pack, or is on the run. "[In] the process of projecting himself into the position

of the animal,” writes Louis Liebenberg, who has studied the tracking techniques of hunters in the Kalahari Desert, “[the hunter] actually *feels* like the animal” (Liebenberg 1990: ix). Hunters construct scenarios of possible events that may have led an animal to behave in a certain way and could give some insight into its intentions. In short, hunters frequently go back and forth in their minds between the situation presently in front of them and various imagined scenes. As Baptiste Morizot writes in his philosophical reflection on the art of tracking, hunters are “*devoted to finding absent things*. Deprived of a strong sense of smell, to do this they have had to open up the eye that sees the invisible, the mind’s eye” (Morizot 2017: 31, author’s italics). In other words, we could say that hunters *explore animal worlds by making the invisible emerge from the visible*. During my own fieldwork in Siberia, a Tuvan friend pointed out to me the similarity between the hunter’s experience of the invisible and that of the shaman. Morizot has the same intuition when he aptly writes that: “The methodology of tracking has a deeply rooted point of intersection with shamanic rites: *dislocation*, which consists in the power to shift one’s mind into the body of an animal—often a feline, a wolf, or a vulture” (Morizot 2022: 155). My hypothesis is that the way the imagination is mobilized in shamanic journeys relies on the same capacity to immerse oneself in other worlds that emerged at the start of our history as a species of hunters.

It is an intrinsic paradox of human predation that, to become hunters, our ancestors had to develop a truly exceptional kind of sensitivity to the intimate worlds of other species. No other predator shows such an astonishing degree of empathy toward its prey—the same kind of empathy that, in recent history, led people to create organizations for the protection of animals. There is nothing novel about the guilty conscience that motivates some movements in the West today to advocate for vegetarianism; it is simply a new avatar of the painfully paradoxical state of being *empathetic predators*.

This probably at least in part explains why, in societies whose way of life is centered on hunting, relations between humans and animals are often marked by what some anthropologists call “animism.” Animist ontology is a mode of relating to nonhuman beings that involves attributing them with a mental life and social existence similar to those of humans (Descola 2013). When people are constantly having to observe and pursue wild animals, and when they depend on success in hunting to feed their families, it becomes vital to be able to immerse oneself in their subjectivity.

But where do hunting techniques end and animistic beliefs and shamanic explorations begin? While modern societies typically think of technical activities and religious beliefs as two very different categories, they are part of a fundamental continuity in the universe of hunter-gatherer societies. From a psychological point of view, they both make use of the imaginative faculty in the same basic way. As I observed during my fieldwork in Kamchatka, when Even hunters kill a bear, they eat the flesh of its head and then reattach its jaw to the skull, before putting some grass in its mouth, hanging the head from a tree facing east, and then telling it, "Come back next spring as a bear cub!" This ritual gesture reveals a strong sensitivity to the mental life of the animal. For these hunters, the bear has something like a spirit that survives the death of its body as an invisible entity and is alert to the posthumous signs of respect offered by the hunters. It is also able to acquire a new body when it is reborn in the spring. In fact, bears often give birth in their den during the winter and emerge in the spring with new cubs. With this conception of the bear's soul, the hunters are careful not to disrespect the animal. There is no contradiction between the moment when the hunter sets a trap for his prey by considering its perceptions and preferences, and the moment when he pays homage to its soul after he has killed it. In both instances, his attention is focused on something he never sees, but which he can imagine in great detail: the creature's subjectivity.

The above example specifically concerns the manner in which hunters behave toward the soul of a dead animal. But the same kind of imaginative work is clearly also involved in the extraordinarily rich relationships that people all over the world establish with souls, spirits, and gods. We draw heavily on our social imaginaries and theories of mind whenever we seek to represent the mental states of nonhuman entities, whether they be animal or divine.⁸ *The imagination is at the heart of our relationship with animals; it is like an additional sensory organ that allows us to connect with nonhuman worlds.*

It is important to note, however, that the imaginative work involved in understanding nonhumans is quite different from that seen in linguistic exchanges between human interlocutors. The way in which a listener interprets a sentence is closely guided by the words spoken and the context of the utterance. To understand a conversation partner, I mentally

8. According to Pascal Boyer, intuitive psychology—which is to say, our disposition for interpreting the mental states of others—plays an integral role in our conceptions of supernatural beings (Boyer 1994).

recreate the emotional states and situational patterns they are trying to convey with their utterances. But when I try to infer the intentions of a deer who is staring at me or interpret a trail it has left behind, I am exploring a vast open field of possible meanings and causes. When I attempt to go beyond human communication and penetrate nonhuman worlds, I am thus faced with the particular opacity of the boundaries that exist between different species. I know I will never be able to understand a deer as well as I could if I were a deer, and I know there is a strong possibility that my interpretations of its signs are wrong, given that our systems of communication are so thoroughly different. Whereas when listening to another human being I can let my imagination be guided by their speech, when I interact with nonhuman animals, my imagination operates in a largely *exploratory* mode.

This kind of exploratory imagination requires sensitivity and experience. Many societies have developed special techniques for stimulating non-sensory perceptions in order to open up imaginative practices to the exploration of nonhuman messages. These include trances, visions obtained through fasting, sleep deprivation, consuming psychotropic substances, as well as dreaming. All these various kinds of experiences involve losing at least some degree of control over one's mental imagery and seeing it turn in unexpected directions. In many parts of the world, especially in Siberia and North America, dreams are seen as a particularly privileged medium for opening up the mind to the intentions of nonhumans, be they animal, vegetal, or divine. It was for this reason that the American anthropologist Irving Hallowell proposed that the culture of imagination and dreaming among the Ojibwa hunters of North America represented a form of psychological and ecological adaptation to the restrictive boreal environment and the animals inhabiting it (Hallowell 1966).

The evolution of the genus *Homo* unfolded in a context that was significantly marked by daily contact with animals that our ancestors would have regarded as either dangerous predators or essential prey. It is thus not surprising that the human mind evolved a keen interest in animals and an enthusiasm for exploring their worlds and behaviors. As psychological studies have confirmed, the fascination with animals seen in small children—who are captivated by the sight of other species and memorize numerous stories about them—represents a highly developed trait (Barrett 2005). In urbanized societies, this interest diminishes with age as children come to understand that such concerns have no use in their daily lives. In hunter-gatherer societies, on the contrary, this

curiosity is only enriched by new experiences that unfold over the course of a person's life, such that adults can often demonstrate an expertise that surpasses that of professional zoologists (Liebenberg 1990; Barrett 2005). While anthropologists think of animism as an ontology belonging to particular cultural contexts, psychologists see it as a fundamental psychological tendency of our species. It is only through a long process of habituation that, in modern societies, we learn to repress, blunt, and ultimately forget it.

Multiple Imaginations

Over the previous pages, I have given a wide variety of examples of the roles imaginative activity can play in daily life. But it would be useful at this point to set out some clear parameters for understanding the different modalities in question. This will allow us to better appreciate the contrasts between different ways of mobilizing the imagination in various ritual contexts. To avoid the pitfalls of classifying human imaginaries according to whether or not they conform to reality, I propose to distinguish between the different modes of engagement exhibited by subjects in relation to their own imaginative activity.

Take, for example, a child playing alone with a doll and feeding it with blades of grass while calling them french fries. This activity is largely supported by a set of perceived objects: the child sees the doll and the blades of grass, but treats them as though they were something else, as though they were a real, living baby and a real serving of french fries. Here, the operation of *seeing X as Y* consists of putting aside certain aspects of perceived reality and consciously replacing them with imagined aspects. Over the course of the game, certain objects take on a new *stipulated* identity. This kind of imaginative activity is typically described as “symbolic” or “pretend” play (Harris 2000; Schaeffer 1999).

By the age of two, children are able to collaborate in play activities and, as they get older, they engage in increasingly complex collective imaginary games. What makes this possible? It is easy to understand how children might work together to move a table, for instance: they perceive the same object in their shared surroundings as well as the place where they want to take it. But what are they doing when they play together with entities that do not exist and that they cannot see, like imaginary french fries? For several children to play the same game of make-believe, they have to agree to the same set of stipulations. If any of the children

treat the grass as grass and not as french fries, they are simply not participating in the game. But children who do engage in pretend play are not victims of a collective hallucination; they are choosing to distinguish between two levels, one being that of their perceptions and the other that of the scene they construct on the basis of shared conventions. The tone of their voices clearly varies depending on whether they are referring to something “in the game” or “in real life.” To take part in symbolic play, participants have to coordinate their imaginations according to a set of common rules; it is a truly cooperative activity that is both physical and mental (Clark 1996).

In our example, the children’s game is supported by objects (a doll, grass) that, through the stipulations conferred on them, each functions as *cues* for collective imaginative activity. Sometimes the children themselves are mobilized as supports; as is the case when they play the role of certain characters, for example, a knight or a princess. This is what is called role play. Children’s role-playing games often constitute complex collective fictions that can go on for several days.

But it is also possible for pretend play to take place without any material supports. For example, some children create a type of long-term relationship with beings that are completely invisible to others, “imaginary friends” as we call them. Some children might regularly talk about such characters and give their parents frequent updates on them. They are often able to provide coherent descriptions of these friends without relying on any sensory perception of visible objects.

These various situations differ according to the relative importance placed on material cues. Images of an imaginary friend are formed on an entirely non-sensory basis; they are products of imaginative activity. Imaginary friends do not generally feature in collaborative play; they belong to one child and no other. The integration of material cues into play is essential for building stable stipulations, without which collaborative participation is difficult. Children can often make do with basic or even weak cues from their environment, such as blades of grass, pieces of wood, or scrap metal, with stipulated meanings established through oral convention (“Let’s pretend it’s a gun”). Ethnologists often marvel at the creative powers of children in social contexts where crude objects such as those mentioned above are all that are available. In the West, however, the toy industry produces and sells an abundance of complex material cues; tea sets, castles, multistory dollhouses, and picture books have been filling up children’s imaginations for centuries (figure 3). Video games, which are just as popular with adults as they are with children, provide



Figure 3. On the left, the frontispiece of the 1697 edition of Charles Perrault’s *Contes*. On the right, that of the 1867 edition illustrated by Gustave Doré. The seventeenth-century engraving emphasizes the oral transmission of the tale by an old lady as she spins wool. By the nineteenth century, the transmission is supported by a printed book. While the attention of the children in the earlier image is focused on the face of the storyteller, in Doré’s illustration their eyes are directed toward the images in the book. One might also note the invasion of the nineteenth-century bourgeois home by material supports for imaginative activity: paintings, puppets, miniature mills, and theaters. *Contes* by Charles Perrault. Left, 1698 edition; right, 1867 edition.

users with highly detailed visual and audio stimuli designed to produce as realistic and comprehensive an image as possible of the fictional world the game is set in. Hardly any creative work is left to the individual imagination. It is clear that, as the complexity of these cues increases, the mental imagery required in the creation of the game’s characters, settings, and fictional situations diminishes, as does the freedom of the imaginative production.

In this book, I will draw two principal distinctions between different modalities of imaginative activity: the first is between “guided” and “exploratory” uses of the imagination, and the second between “contemplative” and “agentive” uses. Imaginative work varies according to whether it is directed by more or less complex public cues, and this is by no means confined to the context of play. When I imagine an accident that a friend has experienced and is now telling me about, I construct a situational model guided by what he says. Similarly, reading a novel stimulates

a great deal of imaginative production which is directed at every moment by the narrative and its descriptive language. But we cannot add a guest to one of the dinner parties at Madame de Guermantes's house described by Marcel Proust, nor can we change the color of the duchess's dress. What is mobilized in this case is what I will call the *guided imagination*, since the experience consists in following the narrator's instructions, or any other cues available to us, so as to reactivate a universe that has already been constructed.

In our daily lives, on the other hand, we use our imagination for our own personal ends, without an external guide. When I imagine the meal I am going to prepare for my friends this Saturday, for example, and think of the ingredients I will need, I invent the scenario myself, instead of reactivating one that has already been written, as when, while reading Proust, I mentally reconstitute the dinner at Madame de Guermantes's house. This type of experience mobilizes what we will call the *exploratory imagination*, being largely spontaneous and not guided. As we saw earlier, it is the exploratory imagination at work when people try to understand the intentions and messages of nonhumans. The more exploratory the imaginative activity, the less it is guided and the more it can open up to unexpected images and ideas. When I let my imagination wander without subjecting it to the deliberate execution of a precise task, it can lead my consciousness into some surprising places, where distant memories or projections into the future may arise. Psychologists call these involuntary or uncontrolled images (Berntsen and Jacobsen 2008).

Another significant criterion lies in the position of the subject itself in relation to the imagined situations. Some imaginative experiences involve a double of the subject, as Berthoz has pointed out. In dreams, the dreaming subject is usually present in the position of the actor. Similarly, a person who imagines a future vacation or a child who is engaged in role play constructs an imaginary situation that provides a setting for their actions. In these egocentric imaginary situations, the subject makes decisions and takes actions. We can describe this type of activity as engaging an *agentive imagination*. This modality is probably tied to the specific capacity to produce a mental double of oneself. In other cases, however, the imagination constructs situations in which the subject is not in a position to act. This is the case when I imagine scenes I myself am not involved in: for instance, when I listen to my friend's account of his accident or when I read a novel or watch a film. I cannot say anything, for example, at any of Madame de Guermantes's

dinner parties. In these examples, the imaginative operation consists of perceiving the scenes through someone else's eyes and not being free to intervene in them. We can thus call this a mobilization of the *contemplative imagination*.

It may seem like there is a good deal of overlap between these two distinctions—that between the guided and the exploratory imagination, and that between the contemplative and the agentive imagination; but this is not the case. Of course, dreaming and children's role-playing games are both highly exploratory and agentive modes of imaginative experience, while watching a film involves both a guided and a contemplative one. But when I imagine what has become of an old friend about whom I have no news, or when I make up a story, my imaginative activity is both exploratory, because it is not guided by any external cues, and contemplative, because I am not the subject. And when I play a video game, I mobilize my agentive imagination (since I am the hero of the game) at the same time as the imaginative production is a guided one (given the intrusive complexity of the images and information displayed on the screen).

These four different types of imaginative experiences—guided or exploratory, contemplative or agentive—do not refer to distinct mental mechanisms (even if the agentive imagination is intrinsically bound up with the subject's ability to form a double), but rather to different ways of using our imaginative faculty. It is my contention that all conceivable combinations and possible nuances of human cultural productions can be situated between these four poles.

Guided Imagination Complex cues Listening to a story, seeing a film, playing a videogame	Exploratory Imagination Simple cues Planning for the future, making up a story, interacting with an imaginary friend
Contemplative Imagination Passive subject Listening to a story, reading a book, watching a film	Agentive Imagination Active subject Deliberate actions in a dream, playing a video game

Western societies have invented the most powerful devices for sharing imaginative experiences. The main function of the industries that produce novels, films, and video games is to produce extraordinary tools

for the collective stimulation of the imagination. Take, for example, the television series *Game of Thrones*, which has broken worldwide records for viewership. Each episode in the series is awaited by millions of people across every continent. It is a saga that takes place in imaginary kingdoms where knights, kings, magicians, soldiers, the undead, and other fantasy creatures vie for power. As it happens, some of the main heroes share a few common traits of shamanic figures. Queen Daenerys Targaryen, for instance, commands respect from her enemies with the help of her auxiliaries: three dragons, which she can ride and use to fly through the sky. While I was in South Siberia, I came to know a proud female shaman from Tuva, who also had a dragon (*ulu*) among her auxiliary spirits. But this similarity allows us to underscore some fundamental differences between the two different ecologies of imagination involved.

In the case of the television series, the story was created by a novelist, George R.R. Martin, and then adapted for the screen by various teams of producers, writers, and directors. The script is performed by actors, the footage is edited, and then the film is broadcast around the world via intercontinental internet cables that connect to millions of television and computer screens. The sums of money and the kinds of technological infrastructure needed to broadcast the story of the queen-shaman are enormous.

But what are the series' audience members doing when they watch an episode? They reactivate the story, in the sense that they share the meanings and emotions the creators wanted to put into it. But they do not participate in the story. When I sit in front of a screen that displays the series, just like when I am at a movie theater or reading a novel, I am aware that there is an unbridgeable gap separating the fictional universe from my own sphere of experience. There is no movement from one to the other. This configuration of imaginative activity is based on the principle of a profound separation between the status of the creator and the person consuming the images, as Leroi-Gourhan (1993: 214) points out.

However, this configuration—with which Westerners are especially familiar—is not the only one possible. The dream in which Nadia saw herself being cut into pieces by strangers is one experienced by many people from a number of different Siberian groups for whom the “shamanic autopsy” represents a kind of oneiric tradition. This scenario has no identifiable author, and thus the creator–consumer dualism is not applicable. Furthermore, although it is based on a conventional plot structure, each dreamer reactivates the scenario in a manner that is shaped by

their own unique memories and idiosyncrasies. And further still, each dreamer experiences it as an event in which they are the main character, an experience that concerns them personally. The same is true of the relationship that shamans have with their raven or dragon auxiliaries; they live these experiences in the first person and not by delegating them to a distinct hero whose adventures they observe from afar.

While the *guided* and *contemplative* imaginative activity of a television audience is limited to reactivating a single and intangible history in which the audience members do not participate, dreamers in the Siberian taiga perpetually renew the scenarios they experience by mobilizing their imaginations in an *exploratory* and *agentive* manner. In the case of the television series, a coded and fixed arrangement of scenes, characters, and words is conceived by one or several creators and transmitted in a form of stabilized cultural content to millions of individuals who immerse themselves emotionally and mentally in it without being able to change it in any way. In the case of the Siberian oneiric tradition, what is transmitted is not so much a predetermined piece of content as it is a set of *rules* that allow new content to be indefinitely generated.

We can begin to see two very different modes of transmitting mental images: on the one hand, there is the *canonical model*, which transmits fixed public content by mobilizing the contemplative and guided imagination, and, on the other, there is the *generative pattern*, which transmits rules for the production of individualized content by mobilizing the agentive and exploratory imagination.⁹ Of course in all societies, various processes of cultural transmission mobilize both of these modes. Cultural content is transmitted with some degree of stability all over the world (through words or stories learned by heart, coded images, written texts), and all over the world individuals learn to produce new content (lived experiences, ritual training, and so on). But the role and value accorded

9. I am borrowing the opposition between “canonical models” and “generative patterns” defined by Carlo Fausto and his colleagues as different types of economies of memory in the context of Amazonian oral traditions (Fausto, Franchetto, and Montagnani 2011). For these authors, the contrast is based on the difference between procedural and declarative memory. My own use of these terms extends the opposition to contexts of cultural transmission where the principal mode of storage is not necessarily the human memory, but sometimes various material or technological supports such as iconography, books, films, the internet.

to each of these modes of transmission can vary a great deal from one society to another.

Who exactly is entitled to have, like Nadia, original experiences of communicating with spirits and gods? In Siberian societies, the answer to this question is of crucial importance to the relationship humans have with their environment, as it also is to relations among humans themselves. Even in societies with marked egalitarian tendencies, certain individuals are more disposed than others to cultivating non-sensory perceptions and thus to communicating with nonhumans.

Psychological studies show that the ability to immerse oneself in imaginary experiences—especially through reading, daydreams, and play—can vary significantly from individual to individual (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974). Adults who are inclined to immerse themselves in books, daydreams, or role play often acknowledge that these tendencies go back to their childhood (Harris 2000: 180; Singer 1974).¹⁰ In Western societies individuals like these—those with what is called a *fantasy-prone personality*—represent about four percent of the population. They spend a considerable amount of their time in imaginary worlds, “seeing,” “hearing,” “smelling,” or “touching” what they imagine more vividly than the rest of the population. They are able to hallucinate at will, have a heightened susceptibility for hypnosis, and have vivid memories of their own lived experiences (Wilson and Barber 1982).

But this is not a matter of purely innate talent: training and regular practice are essential for enhancing this ability. Several tests have shown that training exercises and verbalization techniques can increase the physiological effects of mental imagery. It has also been found that people can learn to control the contents of their nocturnal dreams by stimulating certain images while in a hypnagogic state, the transitional state between wakefulness and sleep.¹¹

In short, with talent and training certain individuals are able obtain remarkable results in enhancing the richness of, and developing a mastery over, their mental imagery and dreams. Might a greater capacity for mental imagery play a role in the status of seers and prophets who

10. With regard to sexuality, some male subjects are able to experience sexual arousal simply by mentally evoking erotic images while others are not (Smith and Over 1987).

11. On mental-imagery training, see Smith and Over 1990; and Lang 1979. On controlling the contents of dreams, see Stickgold et al. 2001; and Tholey 1983.

are recognized by their peers as having a special relationship with the nonhuman world?

At the Heart of Religious Experience

In first decade of the 2000s, the American anthropologist Tanya Luhmann conducted an innovative study among an evangelical community in Chicago, combining various research methods from ethnography and psychology—a notable approach for the value it placed on subjects' personal experiences of communicating with God. Collaborating with two psychologists, she asked members of the religious community a set of questions designed to assess the intensity and vividness of their experience of God. For example, do your prayers take the form of a dialogue with God? The researchers also administered a psychological test, the Tellegen Absorption Scale, which is designed to assess a subject's willingness to be absorbed by imaginative experiences. The statistical comparison between the results of these two questionnaires revealed a correlation between the intensity of a subject's contact with God and their capacity for becoming absorbed in imaginative experiences. For Luhmann and her colleagues, the combination of a basic talent for absorption and the cultivation of this ability with regular practice—through prayer, for example—is a crucial element in powerful subjective religious experience (Luhmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010).

Shamanism is even better known than Pentecostalism for placing visionary experiences at the heart of its practice. In 1985, the psychologist Richard Noll published an article proposing an entirely novel theory of shamanism. Noll was the first to recognize parallels between the fruitful research into the psychology of mental imagery and the ethnographic data on shamanic practices. Drawing on descriptions of the great shamanic traditions of Asia and the Americas, Noll observed that mental imagery is the common thread uniting all of these practices. Indeed, according to most ethnographic accounts, shamans are individuals who are supposed to see what others do not see and who are able to access these visions voluntarily. Noll's hypothesis is that shamans are preferentially recruited among fantasy-prone personalities.

But shamanism is not just a process of talent selection; it also involves what Noll calls "mental imagery cultivation," through which apprentice shamans learn first to intensify the vividness and precision of their mental images, and then to elicit them at will. Aspirant Tamang shamans

in Nepal, for example, must advance from having “unripe or crude visions” to voluntarily cultivating “clear visions” (Peters 1982). Among the Tukano of Amazonia, apprentices are instructed by experienced shamans, who make them ingest a psychotropic concoction and help them refine the visions they receive from it. “Tell me,” the elder shaman will say to the apprentice, “what do you see?” To which the apprentice might reply, “There are birds, red birds, sitting on the lower branches of a tree.” The instructor then asks, “Are they sitting on your left or on your right?” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975: 79). As we will soon see, shamanic training in a number of Siberian traditions works in a similar manner. As mentioned earlier, we know from psychological studies that mental imagery training exercises are effective and even have beneficial therapeutic purposes. The advantage of Noll’s approach is that it is able to account for several known features of shamanic traditions, such as the impressive mnemonic capacity that shamans often demonstrate—typically knowing long ritual chants and numerous myths by heart—and their especially vivid and complex dream narratives. We know in fact that mnemonic performance is enhanced by the activation of mental images, as both the ancient arts of memory and much of the empirical data provided by modern psychological research amply demonstrate (Richardson 1980). And mental imagery is just as central an element to dreams as it is to memory. Psychologists report that subjects who find it easiest to give detailed accounts of their dreams are also those with a high capacity for mental imagery (Nir and Tononi 2010). So if mental imagery is essential to being a good shaman, it makes sense that various peoples would consider elaborate dream narratives a sign of shamanic talent.

Approaching shamanism as a controlled culture of mental images provides us with a useful position from which to dismiss the two main schools that have until now competed to explain shamanic phenomena: one describes shamanism as a technique for producing ecstatic experiences or “altered states of consciousness;” the other takes a sociocentric symbolic approach, refusing to take into account the psychological experiences of shamans themselves.

The main source of inspiration for the altered states of consciousness (ASC) school is the classic work by the historian of religions, Mircea Eliade: *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. In Eliade’s view, shamanism is a technique for producing ecstatic states that originated in prehistoric times and has since been preserved among traditional peoples on several continents. However, in the northern Asian traditions, states of ecstasy rarely have the central importance that Eliade ascribes

to them, as he himself admitted on several occasions. The rituals led by Altaian shamans, for example, seemed to him to involve imitations of ecstatic states more than they did genuine ones, such that “the interest of the rite is dramatic rather than ecstatic.” Similarly for the Samoyed, he wrote, “it is plain that real shamanic trances are comparatively rare.” He expressed the same disappointment over what he called the “ecstatic pseudo-journeys” of Chukchi shamans in northeastern Siberia, whose “simulated” character “[gives] the impression that the ecstatic technique is in decadence” (Eliade 1964: 200, 228, 219). In reading Eliade’s book, one has the impression that the ecstatic thesis is remarkably lacking in an empirical foundation. While the journey of the soul is incorporated into all of these shamanic traditions, the practitioners themselves hardly ever display the loss of consciousness or hallucinatory state implied by the notion of ecstasy.

This lack of a strong empirical basis has not prevented a number of researchers from being seduced by Eliade’s approach, nor from further developing the idea that access to altered states of consciousness is the common ground of all shamanic traditions (Eliade 1964; Lewis-Williams 1988; Winkelman 2002; Clottes and Lewis-Williams 2007). Each of these authors attempts to identify the archetypal patterns of brain activity that characterize altered states of consciousness and that would supposedly account for shamanic traditions from Paleolithic times up to the present. An implicit premise of this approach is that it is possible to reduce the diversity of cultural phenomena to a simple expression of natural universals.

But there are several drawbacks to the basic notion of an altered state of consciousness, the extreme vagueness of the idea first and foremost. It would hardly be satisfying to describe the technical artistry of Western music as an “altered state of tonality,” or that of painting as an “altered state of canvas.” From a psychological standpoint, this theory is based on a binary model opposing ASCs with a “normal waking consciousness” (or NWC). By this logic, even daydreaming is sometimes considered an altered state of consciousness, alongside dreaming, meditation, and hypnosis (Dietrich 2003). From this perspective, what should be considered the “normal” functioning of the human brain corresponds to a vigilant state of consciousness, entirely controlled by and subject to the will of the individual. But, as we have seen, the most recent research has largely undermined this classically rationalist point of view. Uncontrolled thought, such as that involved in daydreaming, is not a deviant kind of cerebral activity, but rather something that happens when the

brain's "default network" is activated. Using the term "altered state of consciousness" to describe one of the brain's most routine and neutral activities, one that takes up about fifty percent of waking mental life, therefore belies quite a curious misunderstanding.

As we will discuss later, there are of course several shamanic traditions that include the consumption of psychotropic substances among their practices; but as Noll's comparative study shows, the sought-after effect in these cases is not an indeterminately modified state of consciousness, but rather the temporary amplification of a culturally defined genre of mental imagery. Entering a trance is only one of many possible ways of going about this, along with fasting or simply blindfolding oneself with a scarf. In Siberia, in fact, sensory deprivation represents an especially privileged technique for stimulating mental imagery, as we will soon see.

In contrast to the ASC school, the symbolic approach, which has long dominated anthropological studies, rejects the reduction of shamanism to the production of trance states. Its analytical focus falls on the system of thought that underlies the various practices and discourses of shamans.¹² From this perspective, a shamanic ritual can be quite readily compared to a theatrical production, emphasizing the shaman's mastery of a determinate set of actions that follow a fixed conventional model. Partisans of this approach have vigorously rejected what they see as the reductive interpretations of Paleolithic art and shamanic traditions elaborated by the ASC school (Francfort, Hamayon, and Bahn 2001).

It is striking to note that the emphasis the sociocentric approach places on the shaman's control over his or her actions is also based on an implicitly rationalist conception of human consciousness, according to which the contents of waking mental life are directed by the sovereign principle of reason: the individual thinks about what he or she has chosen to think about.

We are well aware, however, that this conception of consciousness is not very accurate. If mastering mental images is one of the main objectives of shamanic apprenticeship, this mastery is never total, nor is it supposed to be. Shamanic rituals are full of unexpected events; obstacles and evil spirits regularly appear, and shamans are often caught off guard by them. Recall the journey taken by Ondarmaa that I described in the introduction: having already retrieved her patient's soul, she then

12. See, for example, Hamayon 1995: 175. "Physiological and psychological considerations are of no use when it comes to understanding the shaman's behavior."

realized she had to go back and fetch the cap he had left behind in the steppe. It would be difficult to explain an unexpected incident like this one in accordance with any hypothetical cultural model concerning the symbolic function of caps; there is no such thing in Siberian shamanism. The question of whether the incidents described by shamans are genuine or simulated has been a source of perplexity for generations of Western observers and analysts. Is a shaman who shows surprise or fright at his own visions not just a kind of actor playing a role prescribed by tradition?

Psychological research has clearly demonstrated the partially unpredictable nature of the flow of thoughts and the presence of intrusive images in mental time travel. Consciousness is riddled with involuntary episodes made up of autobiographical memories and uncontrolled projections into the future (Berntsen and Jacobsen 2008). These phenomena were perhaps most famously encapsulated by Marcel Proust's madeleine, the iconic trigger for what the writer described as "involuntary memory," unexpected bursts of memories long forgotten by the conscious mind but reanimated by a perception in the present moment. More commonly, daydreaming is a mental state in which consciousness relaxes its control and gives free rein to mental images, which follow one another spontaneously, according to the free association of ideas. You can count yourself lucky, furthermore, if you have never experienced the flood of uncontrollable thoughts that characterizes insomnia! There is thus little reason not to trust shamans when they say that they sometimes lose control of the events they experience during a mental journey. Through the art of the shamanic journey, shamans are able to give their imaginative activity enough power and freedom for it to sometimes develop independently of the will of the conscious subject and even surprise it. Shamanic rituals are ultimately a combination of controlled moments and unpredictable episodes; what varies from one tradition to another is the relative proportion of these two components.

While rightly rejecting the trance paradigm, the symbolic school goes too far in refusing to consider the authenticity and diversity of mental experiences that ritual actions can mobilize. It is clear, however, that certain recurring practices in shamanic traditions—such as fasting, sensory deprivation, and the use of psychotropic drugs—are effective methods for stimulating mental imagery. If, as Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed, the anthropological approach seeks to integrate the social, psychological, and physiological dimensions of human existence, it cannot be based on a dualism of nature and culture

that separates the symbolic from the psychic. The immersion of thought in free-flowing, spontaneous images is the brain's default activity, its most quotidian modality, and it only needs to be trained to become a source of extraordinarily rich experiences. It is from this banal and neglected source of reverie and dreams that shamanism draws its art, not from some deviant, pathological mode of thought or any kind of deceptive theatrics.

It is obviously not possible for an anthropologist, no more than it is for the participants in a shamanic ritual, to know the inner experience of a shaman or to evaluate how deeply he or she is immersed in any given mental state. The accounts I heard from Tuvan shamans convinced me that the intensity and character of these states vary from one shaman to another, just as they do for any single practitioner from one ritual to another, or even from one phase of the ritual to the next. Anthropologists only have access to public forms of discourse and ritual techniques, and can never really know the private experiences of those they observe; it would therefore be presumptuous of them to conclude that the shamans do not have the experiences they claim to have. It is the anthropologist's job—using what we have learned from neuropsychology—to explore how the practices elaborated over the course of several generations in shamanic traditions constitute *original techniques for eliciting remarkable experiences*. The aim of the chapters that follow will be to study, using eyewitness accounts, the operation of these ritual techniques, and not the content of personal experiences—all the more unknowable in many cases as a great number of these traditions have not survived the processes of colonial acculturation.

CHAPTER 2

Argonauts of the Invisible

Shamanism, a Three-Way Relationship

Some think of shamanism as the simplest form of religious relationship that humans can establish between themselves and the natural world, and thus as a good candidate for something like the original religion of nondifferentiated prehistorical societies. But shamanism does not establish a simple, homogeneous connection between “mankind” and the world; it constitutes a particular division of ritual labor that implies a certain kind of differentiation between individuals.

There are various practices in every society that allow individuals to maintain relations with different invisible entities, be they spirits, ancestors, or gods. Some traditions allow each and every individual to address spirits and gods directly, through prayers or offerings, for example. The relationship established by these kinds of practices is a dyadic one: they produce a direct line of contact between a human and a nonhuman. In other configurations, a group entrusts one of its members with performing certain actions or utterances on their behalf. This third party could be a priest, sorcerer, diviner, or shaman: in short, what anthropologists call a ritual specialist. These practices are triadic, since they stipulate a complementary relationship between three categories of participants: specialists, non-specialists, and supernatural agents.

Dyadic religious practices are based on the idea that certain modalities of communication with the invisible are accessible to everyone, with no need for an intermediary. Triadic practices, on the contrary, are

premised on the idea that there are differences in individuals' capacities for such modes of communication. Dyadic and triadic actions are by no means mutually exclusive; most often they coexist in a complementary fashion within a single religious tradition. In Catholicism, for instance, laypeople can communicate with God through prayer, while sacraments such as the Eucharist or Confession require the intervention of an ordained priest.

The distribution among individuals of these practices and forms of communication with invisible agents is what constitutes a society's particular *division of ritual competencies*. Of course, this division is subject to all manner of debates and negotiations through councils, heresies, schisms, accusations of sacrilege, and so on. Shamanic practices are fundamentally triadic techniques that involve a complementary relationship between shamans, non-shamans, and spirits. To recognize certain individuals as shamans means admitting that others are less competent than these specialists when it comes to conducting certain forms of communication with the invisible. Shamanism is thus founded on a principle of unequal competencies, whether this inequality is conceived as a difference of degree between people or as an absolute, unalterable contrast.

But what is it exactly that makes someone a shaman? Being a shaman is not something that people take turns at, with different individuals assuming the role from one ritual to another; it is not an interchangeable position like those occupied in role playing. Taking the role of shaman in a ritual performance requires meeting various expectations of the other participants regarding an individual's skills and abilities. Anthropologists sometimes define shamans as individuals who maintain "direct" relations with spirits. However, in societies with shamanic traditions, most illnesses are attributed to attacks from spirits that enter the human body. Could you imagine having a more direct relationship with a spirit than when it is devouring your liver? But it is certainly not enough for someone to be in poor health for them to be considered a shaman in their community. Some more precise criteria are needed.

Shamans not only pray to spirits, they talk to them, and the spirits talk back; shamans can see and hear spirits and are thus able to do things with them that most people can usually only do with other human beings: sharing meals with them, traveling in their company, or even fighting with them. We can thus say that a shaman is *an individual who exhibits certain physical and sensory abilities and thus to whom a group entrusts certain interactions with the nonhuman entities in their surroundings*. These capacities are both personalized and embodied, a feature that

differentiates the shaman from the priest, whose legitimacy is conferred by a religious organization. The importance of the tasks delegated to the shaman varies considerably from one society to another and changes over time as social relations evolve. As we will soon see, some groups entrust their shamans with tasks that are essential to the life of the collective and its relationship with the outside world; others delegate only a select few minor interventions to the shaman, such as curing illnesses, and manage without them for everything else.

How to Recognize a Shaman in Tuva

There is never a dull moment when you are in the company of a shaman. They are frequently telling stories about the surprising encounters they had in recent rituals or others they had in perfectly ordinary moments. During a nighttime gathering or while waiting for a bus that never comes, a shaman might regale their audience with stories of strange animals and spirits. Perhaps just the other day, they were driving in the mountains when, all of a sudden, the car they were in came to an abrupt halt all by itself to let a small hairy dwarf cross the road—this was no doubt the master spirit of the place. If you take a walk in the woods with a shaman, they will tell you at the end of the outing about the bear they saw, of which you were totally unaware. It must have been a spirit, of course. Ondarmaa, a shaman I often visited in Tuva, explained to me that important places like mountains always have master spirits and that these masters wear traditional Tuvan clothes and a braid down their back. “I’ve seen them ever since I was a child,” she told me; “they’ll pop up all of a sudden in the midst of people; no one else ever looks so beautiful to me. Whenever a friend points out a man in the street to me and says, ‘He’s handsome isn’t he!’, I always find them plain looking compared to the masters. That’s why I’ve never found a man and why I stay single!”

I went with Ondarmaa to several different rituals that she conducted at the homes of nomadic herders in the mountains. Sometimes I would see her grow inexplicably gloomy. Cheerful and lighthearted one minute, she would suddenly close up and fall silent the next. But this was a meaningful silence: everybody around her would stop talking, since they understood that she had seen “something.”

One day, while visiting a camp where the head of the family had fallen ill and gone to a nearby village for treatment, Ondarmaa announced

that she had seen something and would have to perform an emergency ritual. At these few words, several members of the sick man's family turned pale, and his daughters broke down in sobs. They had assumed that the shaman had just seen their father dying. But their tears irritated Ondarmaa, and she explained that it was wrong to cry when someone is in danger: "I didn't say he was dead!" An expedition was immediately organized to quickly get the shaman to the patient's bedside. Ondarmaa had determined from her visions that the patient had a black snake in his belly and that one of his souls had left his body and was now on the path to the world of the dead. It was to save this patient that she then embarked on the journey described in the introduction of this book (Stépanoff 2014a).

Tuvan shamans (or *ham*, in their language) belong to a wider category of people endowed with a special kind of vision beyond that of ordinary people. They are called *iyi körnür kizhi*, "a double-sighted person," or sometimes *öttür köör kizhi*, "a person who sees through things"—in short, they are seers. As a number of people who consult shamans explained to me, "true shamans" speak "the truth" spontaneously and with startling speed. They have no need to pause to reflect because they "see right away" (*doraan-na köör*). Their utterances are not expressions of thoughts, but descriptions of their visions.

References to a special kind of vision are also a constant feature of shamans' own explanations of their practices. To diagnose a patient, the shaman looks "inside" to see "if anything has gone missing or is off-kilter." They might sometimes discover a demon, a monster, or an evil spell cast by an enemy—things that ordinary people cannot perceive.

During a consultation, Tuvan shamans will often close their eyes; "they see better this way." For the audience, it is well understood that the scenes described in the shaman's invocations have nothing to do with any ordinary visual experience involving the eyes. Closing them thus has the express purpose of shutting out the "noise" of the shaman's ocular perceptions. Some attribute these visionary capacities to an invisible "third" or "shamanic eye." There are typically two eyes depicted on shamans' ritual headdresses, representing the special vision they inherited from their ancestors. All these elements add considerable weight to Noll's hypothesis concerning the central role played by a certain culture of mental imagery in shamanism.

There is a conventional expression the Tuvans use to describe shamans and other diviners: "Someone who sees what ordinary folk's eyes cannot see and who hears what their ears cannot hear" (*Bödүүн kizhilerniң*



Figure 4. On the headdress of this Tuvan shaman are depicted eyes, ears, and a nose. Photo by Charles Stépanoff, 2006.

karaanga közülbəs chüveni köör, kulaanga dynjalbas chüveni dynnaar kizhi"). This formula clearly indicates that the perceptive capacities of shamans follow different channels than ordinary people's sense organs; the Tuvans have another poetic expression to describe the fragility and weakness of these ordinary organs: "My eyes of water and my heart of fat" (*suglug karaktarym chaglyg chürèèm*").

How do the Tuvans determine if someone is a potential shaman? First and foremost, people do not *become* shamans for the Tuvans: in most cases, they are *born* this way. It is thus up to the community at large to recognize whether someone is a shaman or not. This is a long and complex process, stretching over several years. It all begins within the family: if the members know they have shamans among their ancestors, they will be ready for a new shaman to be born among them and will be on the lookout for certain identifying "clues." For an infant, these signs could include the habit of sleeping on its stomach, crying noisily, behaving in an agitated manner, or simply being unusually heavy. As the child grows, the family looks out for anything that might suggest visionary capacities. Before claiming the child has regular interactions with spirits, the relatives need to be certain that they have the intrinsic capacities without which such interactions would be inconceivable.

In principle, the earlier the visionary dispositions are shown, the more powerful the shaman. A person's shamanic identity is generally

considered more complete and more authentic if it manifests before any kind of training or insincere posturing are possible. I once rather clumsily asked a shaman called Nadezhda how she had “learned to shamanize.” She gave me the following account, which places an emphasis on her remarkable memory and perceptual faculties:

I didn't learn. I remember everything from the time when I was little. I remember how my mother used to change me, in what part of the bed she placed me. I used to look out the window, I remember. I remember the first time I walked. I was watching the clouds, it was when I was two years old. Then at school, I struggled to learn the letters. I remember everything from childhood. And my mother didn't pay any attention to the fact that I could remember everything. And in fourth or fifth grade, I saw something pink with lovely ears! I remember it to this day. It smiled at me. And then it disappeared into the wall. I thought those creatures really existed. And then I noticed that no one ever talked about them. It had a small horn and lovely Roma eyes. And then in fifth or sixth grade, I began to predict things that would happen to my friends. They'd tell me, “Shut up! Or else it'll really happen.” I'd say, “That bottle's going to fall over,” and then it would. All my shamanic powers came to me at that time.

Or maybe we'd go somewhere in the car and I'd say, “Let's not go, if we do, the car'll flip over.” “Be quiet,” I was told, “It's not going to flip.” And then it would flip over. It was always like that.

At first, the little girl did not think there was anything unusual about the pink creature, but then she realized that no one else could see it. This is an important stage in the process; it suggests that from this point on, everything will be divided into two classes of objects for her: those that she and everyone else can see and those that are visible only to her. The lone fact of having these uncommon experiences that no one else has is enough to make shamans aware that their visions are different from ordinary perceptions. For its part, the family initially treats the child's imaginative representations as mere fantasies, before reading any special significance into them; after all, it is only in light of subsequent events that anyone's visionary abilities can be recognized.

A particularly dreamy child who displays the typical signs of a potential shaman might be suspected of “having something” and is subsequently seen as being different from the other children in the community. Adults listen attentively, even apprehensively, to their reports of strange visual and auditory perceptions. These childhood visions are

generally followed by a period of turmoil, what is often referred to as an initial or triggering crisis. During this period, which often occurs in adolescence, the person with shamanic dispositions experiences all sorts of symptoms: fainting spells, panic attacks, prolonged illnesses. Some even flee their homes and go sleep in the desert or the forest.

The visions of the potential shaman start to change: they become more precise and stable. Certain characters begin to make regular appearances and tell the individual, "Shamanize or you will die." At this point, others in the community send for a recognized shaman to come and determine whether the person in question has a shamanic destiny. If this is the case, they will receive the necessary ritual instruments and begin to practice.

With the intervention of the community and that of an experienced shaman, the aspirant is able to put a name to the characters haunting their visions: they are the spirits of the apprentice's shamanic ancestors, who have come to demand that their descendent follow in their steps. The young shaman's entry into ritual practice provides them with a way of regulating their encounters with these figures. Establishing a distance and a partial control over these visions represents a typical phase in the shaman's development, one that gives further support to the model proposed by Noll.

In the Tuvan tradition, the shaman's visionary talents are causally derived from a set of peculiar bodily characteristics inherited from a line of ancestors. This innate character of the shaman's talent and the role of ancestors are typical of a particular form of shamanism that is not universal; later we will see that other Siberian peoples explain things quite differently. Nevertheless, the role accorded to visions and to the physical qualities of the shaman is a common feature.

Throughout Northern Asia

In northern Asia, wherever it is believed that certain individuals enjoy a privileged relationship with invisible agents, these people are attributed with uncommon perceptual abilities. Throughout the region, it is thus understood that shamans can see, hear, and understand entities to which ordinary people have only limited access, if any at all.

For the Nganasan of the Taymyr Peninsula (in the Siberian Arctic), shamans are individuals who are able to communicate with forces that are "invisible to the eyes" of "simple folk," a formula that is surprisingly

close to that of the Tuvans. During the initial crisis, Nganasan shamans have visions in which they see themselves traveling and encountering various spirits. Blacksmith spirits make them new bodies with robust skeletons of iron, piercing eyes that can see spirits and gods, and ears that let them hear the language of plants. One statement collected in the 1930s by the ethnologist Andrei Popov from a shaman named Diuhadie offers some valuable insights: “I don’t know where they implanted these eyes, maybe under the skin. When I shamanize, I don’t see anything with my real eyes; I see with the implanted ones. When I’m asked to look for a lost object, my real eyes are blindfolded and I see with my other eyes, much better and much more clearly than I do with my real eyes” (Popov 1936: 92; see also Popov 1984). This capacity for non-ocular vision is represented on the shaman’s ceremonial headdress by images of eyes, which are referred to as the “eyes of the soul.”

But how can non-shamans be sure that someone claiming to have these fantastic visions is really endowed with a talent for this double-sightedness? The Nganasan established a variety of procedures for objectively testing the visionary abilities of apprentice shamans. As Diuhadie explained, a new shaman had to find a hidden object with their eyes blindfolded or sometimes shoot an arrow into a reindeer hide.

The Chukchi shamans of northeastern Siberia were famous for their visions, the contents of which they would retrospectively recount to their social circle. According to the ethnologist Waldemar Bogoras, these accounts—which they called “things seen by a shaman” (*ene’nilinā lo’o*)—comprised the most poetic expressions of Chukchi folklore: “They are filled with a fresh and vibrant love of nature, with strange, unexpected, and sublime images appearing at every turn” (Bogoraz 1910: 35). During these deliveries, the Chukchi shaman’s eyes are not directed at their audience but seem to look further away; their eyes are “very bright,” as the Chukchi say, and it is this quality that gives them the ability to see spirits, even in the dark (Bogoras 1904–1909: 416).

As in the art of painting, the art of non-sensory images demands assiduous practice as well as skill. The various shamanic traditions of Siberia have made use of a number of methods for stimulating mental imagery; among some groups this once included the ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms (which we will examine in more detail later on), but more common practices are fasting, isolation, drumming, and sensory deprivation. The drum is used in all the Siberian shamanic traditions, and among other uses, it often serves to enhance the non-sensory perceptions of ritual participants. A recent neuropsychological study showed

that subjects exposed to a rapid drumbeat sometimes exhibit an activation of the brain's default mode network coupled with a shutdown of the auditory system. It seems that the monotonous, predictable rhythm of the drum, which covers the auditory afferents, causes the attention to turn away from external sounds and concentrate on its own internal flux (Hove et al. 2015). The sound of the drum constitutes a sort of sonic veil that promotes a sensory deprivation analogous to what darkness does on the visual plane. If shamans cut off their sense of sight by closing their eyes, they mute their sense of hearing with the sound of the drum.

Before owning a drum, an apprentice shaman from any of the Samoyedic peoples will enclose himself in solitude and go without food until the spirits present themselves and teach the novice the words they will then have to repeat in their chants (Homich 1981).¹ The nineteenth-century ethnologist P. I. Tret'iakov gave an evocative description of one such case: "Surrendering to the representations of his imagination, he became anxious, fearful, especially at night, when his head was filled with strange dreams. As the day of the ritual drew closer, he would be unable to sleep, would often faint, and would fix his gaze on an object for several hours. Pale, exhausted, his gaze sharp and piercing, to those around him he looked like a superior being, filled with supernatural forces" (Tret'iakov 1871: 209).

This kind of fixed gaze was also a sign of shamanic powers for my Tuvan interlocutors. And similarly for the Selkup, "the man who has visions" is distinguished by a piercing gaze (Prokof'eva 1981: 49).

Why this recurrent interest in the gaze? For psychologists, the gaze is a useful external sign of imaginative activity. Eye movements as well as changes in the size of the pupils are good indicators as to how focused the attention is on sensory perceptions and thus inversely of immersion in inner thought (Grandchamp, Braboszcz, and Delorme 2014). It is likely that people with a propensity for rich mental imagery turn their attention to these images more often by disconnecting themselves from external sensory information and assuming a gaze that often seems quite peculiar from the outside. So if you are trying to identify a shaman, pay attention to what their eyes are doing.

1. Similarly, during the initial crisis, apprentice Koryak shamans will isolate themselves, fast, and have visions of spirits who order them to become shamans (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 83–84).

Bodies Open to the Invisible

How do people explain their shamans' talents? The dissociation of mind and body lies at the heart of modern thought, its most exemplary formalization being the Cartesian doctrine of dualism. In this tradition, the imagination is intuitively classed as a kind of pure mental phenomenon. Despite all that neuroscientific research has done to call this attitude into question—by revealing the ideomotor function of the imagination first of all—the mind/body split is still widely accepted as common sense in the modern West.

But Siberian societies do not divide the phenomena of life into a physical order and a separate mental one. And this is one of the reasons that some of their ways of understanding the world seem particularly strange and exotic to us. Their own theories concerning the capacity to experience complex non-sensory perceptions are rooted in both the soul and the body.

As we saw earlier, Tuvans believe that the shaman's capacity for double-sightedness derives from an invisible eye as well as from a special skeleton that only shamans are equipped with. While ordinary people are said to have "black bones," shamans have "white" or "pure" ones. Shamans' skeletons are also said to have an extra bone, as we learned from the dream that Nadia recounted: it was this extra bone that the spirits were looking for as they took apart her body to make sure she was a true shaman.

But what does having an extra bone have to do with visionary abilities? A succinct answer to this question can be found in a comment from a Sagai (or Khakas) shaman, according to whom his extra bone had a hole in the middle through which he could see and know everything (Diószegi 1998: 30). It is a captivating image, this idea of a hole through which the entire universe becomes visible, not unlike "the iridescent sphere" that Borges described in his short story, "The Aleph": "[its] diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished" (Borges 1971: 13). But unlike the simple object of contemplation and philosophical meditation that is the Aleph, the perforated bone of the Sagai shaman belongs to an individualized body and enables him to perform certain actions, thus providing the shamanic status with an organic foundation.

Shamans' perceptual openness to invisible entities is in fact only one aspect of a more general shamanic quality: a kind of essential openness, which is not only mental—as some spiritualist conceptions of



Figure 5. Tungus Shaman Piercing His Body with an Arrow. Georgi 1776–1777, plate 62.

shamanism propagated by the Western New Age movement would have it—but also corporeal. This becomes evident when comparing the data concerning different peoples of northern Asia. Shamans often use their mouths in their healing practices, to suck evil out of the patient's body or to blow protective energies into it. On many occasions, I saw Tuvan shamans blow juniper smoke over their patients or spit a ritual mixture onto their face. As gestures like these show us, the body of the Tuvan shaman is integrated into ritual operations as a node of transfers and exchanges between the human and nonhuman worlds.

Shamans perform all manner of astonishing feats in their ceremonies that show off the extraordinary qualities of their penetrable bodies. The ethnologist Sergei Shirokogoroff knew a Tungus shaman whose belly would swell up like that of a pregnant woman when his auxiliary spirit entered it and then deflate after the spirit had left. Some male Yakut shamans even claimed to have given birth to zoomorphic beings (Shirokogoroff 1935: 364).

But the most impressive demonstration of the porosity of the shamanic body is surely the practice, found throughout the continent, of piercing the body with a foreign object. Let us take a quick trip through

the immense expanse of Siberia, from east to west. On the Pacific coast, the great shamans of the Nivkh were renowned for their ability to plunge knives into their own bodies (Shrenk 1903: 121; Shternberg 1933: 324). Further north, on the Kamchatka peninsula, a famous Koryak shaman was known for thrusting a knife through his fur robe and then licking the blood from his hands (Krasheninnikov [1755] 1949). The Chukchi shamans would also drive knives into themselves, but this was only one of their spectacular feats: Bogoras once witnessed one of them pull a rope through her own body (Bogoras 1904–1909: 447). The best Tungus shamans were not to be outdone: they were also able to knife themselves (Shirokogoroff 1935: 364), like Ket shamans, who would pierce themselves with knives and rifles or swallow burning coals or needles that they then drew out through their feet (Alekseenko 1981: 115). Nganasan shamans would insert rods into their anus (Simchenko 1996, I: 177). The first Western travelers to encounter Siberian shamans described similarly astonishing scenes: in 1557, the English navigator Richard Johnson, who had dropped anchor in the Pechora River, saw a Nenets shaman pierce his belly with a white-hot sword, the point of which emerged from his bottom (Hakluyt 2004: 132). In 1581, the Cossacks who conquered western Siberia witnessed a ritual in which a shaman, probably of Mansi ethnicity, stabbed himself several times and then drank his own blood (Miller 1999: 246–47). In the eighteenth century, two academicians, Johann Friedrich Gmelin and Gerhard Friedrich Müller, observed with horror a young Yakut shaman take a knife to herself, cut off a piece of flesh, and eat it (Gmelin [1751–1752] 1767, II: 495).

I myself have elsewhere published a number of narratives of this kind from southern Siberia. I will recall just one of them here: a woman from the village of Mugur-Aksy once told me that her grandmother, who had been a great shaman, used to plunge a knife into her heart and pull it out three days later without shedding a single drop of blood (Stépanoff 2014a).

Gestures like these, which are repeated by shamans throughout Siberia, cannot be merely anecdotal. The point of these demonstrations is quite clearly to convince the audience of the fundamental openness of the shaman's body. The Yakut explicitly refer to shamans as “open-bodied” people (*ahagas ètteeh*) whose skin can be pierced without harm (Alekseev 1975: 160; 1984: 204). It is because of its porosity that the shaman's body is able to allow auxiliary spirits to enter it and speak through the shaman's mouth during rituals; it also allows the shaman's soul to take leave of the body and travel to invisible worlds. The openness of the shamanic

body is thus the condition for a kind of double movement, at once centripetal and centrifugal, as we will discuss in more detail later.

The Great Chain of Singular Beings

One of the fundamental aspects of Siberian shamanism that still needs to be addressed is its individualized character. Since shamans are recruited for their extraordinary perceptive abilities, their status is based on a kind of experience that is necessarily personal and unique. While their cosmology draws on tradition, it owes just as much to the special perceptual experiences that launched their own shamanic careers and continue to feed into their practice; it is thus unique to each shaman. The spirits they address—some inherited from their ancestors and others acquired over the course of their career—are diverse, and since each one requires a particular chant and must be treated in its own particular way, the practical modalities, the ritual objects used, and the shaman's clothing differ from one specialist to another. All in all, each shaman constructs a distinctive personality and represents a singular universe. They are judged, therefore, not only by their conformity to tradition, but also by their capacity to surprise by their originality. As we will see shortly, some societies place more emphasis on tradition and others on individuality, but both are important throughout the region. Expressing cosmological views that are often incompatible and practicing divergent methods, shamans are rarely inclined to collaborate with one another, to say the least. One of the most widespread and consistent themes in northern Asian oral traditions is that of the battle between shamans. The outcome of these magical duels, which are invisible to ordinary persons, is that one shaman "eats" the other, thereby provoking the latter's death. And the struggle between shamans is no less fierce in the visible world, as they compete with one another to attract loyal clients.

It is helpful here to try to shed some light on the cognitive principles that lead people to recognize certain individuals as shamans. Nowadays, the word "shaman" is fairly well known in the West; the term usually refers to a social category of individuals who play a religious role in certain traditional cultures, comparable to that of priests in other societies. But is this how shamans are viewed in Siberia itself? I began to suspect some kind of misunderstanding when some Tuvan friends explained to me that there are also shamans in my home country of France, we just do not know how to spot them. It is clear then that, for the Tuvans, shamans

are not simply a social phenomenon produced by a particular culture. I then noticed that the Tuvans recognize shamans (*ham*) not only among themselves and possibly the French, but also among trees, squirrels, and rocks. Obviously, this has nothing to do with what Westerners ordinarily understand by the term “social category.” This is why I made a special effort in my interviews to understand the specific modes of reasoning that are bound up with the category of “shaman” as the Tuvans understand it.

It is possible, for example, that an albino squirrel seen in the forest might be considered a “shaman squirrel” (*ham diin*), and if a hunter were to kill it, he would risk losing his life or going mad. An animal like this is thought to enjoy close relations with the spirits of a place. A larch tree with intertwined branches might also be viewed as a shaman and receive regular worship from members of a local community, who tie myriad colorful ribbons to its branches. Trees like this, it is believed, allow you to communicate with the spirits of the surroundings, the mountains, and the lakes. As we have seen, young men or women are considered potential shamans when they manifest various exceptional signs: agitated and elusive behavior, a strange gaze, an unusual perceptive ability, or sometimes atypical bodily features, such as a malformation. There is a common thread here; in each of these cases, attention falls on some atypical trait, and significant consequences are then drawn from it. The underlying hypothesis is that this peculiar feature is an indication of other special qualities in the individual who bears it. It is not simply one particular trait that makes this individual unusual, but a whole set of other uncommon characteristics and abilities.

The Tuvans expect that an albino squirrel might cause the death of a hunter, or that a strange deer could transform into a human, or that a twisted tree could allow you to communicate directly with the spirits. But abilities like these are never attributed to ordinary specimens of these plants and animals. The Tuvans know full well that a normal squirrel is a harmless animal. They call into question, however, whether an unusual individual really belongs to its supposed species and attribute it with the faculty of metamorphosis. It is as if the classification of the individual proves to be fragile and much less meaningful in relation to the powerful, unexpected properties associated with its remarkable singularity. Rather than an ordinary specimen of its species that is interchangeable with any other, these beings are what we might call *superindividuals*. In this mode of reasoning, *individuality (or the essence of the individual) is attributed with more causal power than the category (the essence of the species)*.

Central to this lively attention to atypical beings is what I have elsewhere called a “singularity detection device”: a technical apparatus that mutes the inductive generalizations intuitively produced in categorical thinking (whereby a squirrel is necessarily a small, harmless animal) and opens the way to hypotheses concerning the individual itself as a unique being encountered in a singular situation (Stépanoff 2015).

These inferential strategies lead to imputing qualities to singular individuals that move simultaneously in two different directions: inward and outward. Inward, first of all, since the singular trait is viewed in relation to a set of personal capacities thought to be mutually associated with one another. This line of reasoning presumes that a fundamental underlying trait, an individual essence, is the cause of other, visible traits. It also moves outward, since the Tuvans do not see the singular individual as having an intrinsic nature that is closed in on itself but, to the contrary, as having a capacity for transcending the limits of its species and interacting with beings in other worlds. Thus, both the singular animal and the unusual tree are considered privileged intermediaries between humans and spirits. A certain kind of solidarity is presumed to exist between shamanic beings that transgress categorical boundaries: owing to their differences from other members of the species, such atypical individuals share a resemblance and are able to associate with one another. This communion among singular entities that transcend categories is what is sometimes called *transsingularity*. This ontological status can also be attested in Amazonian cosmologies, in which, according to Viveiros de Castro, “each species has its own shamans, and [...] the relations human shamans develop with [those of others] primarily occur with the species they ally themselves with” (Viveiros de Castro 2015: 151 n. 95).²

Inferring a disposition for communicating with the invisible is a rational strategy that is by no means exclusive to Tuvan society, but is, on the contrary, extremely widespread throughout all of Siberia. In southern Siberia, for example, an extra finger, a protuberance on the body, or a buck tooth can all be seen as signs of a shamanic calling. Peoples as far-flung as the Nenets, the Nganasan, the Uda Tungus, and the Nanai all share the same belief that an infant that is “born with a veil” (covered by the amniotic sac) will almost undoubtedly grow up to be a shaman. For the Nganasan, humans and animals displaying atypical physical or psychic characteristics—such as exceptionally short or tall people, twins,

2. Translation slightly modified by the present translator.

or people with mental disorders—are always seen as beings with special relationships with spirits, and sometimes even as shamans. For example, a lame bear is referred to as a “shaman bear.” The Russian ethnologist Galina Gracheva derives the following rule from this: “Any notable deviation from a certain norm is interpreted as the mark of a *ngo* [a category of spirits]” (Gracheva 1983: 132–33; cf. Stépanoff 2014a).

And this way of thinking is not specific to Siberia. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss noted as early as 1902 the importance of the magician’s body to the relationship he or she has with their auxiliary spirits—“These relations are not externally or incidentally conceived, but profoundly affect the physical and moral condition of the magician” (Mauss [1902] 1972: 48)—and thus drew attention to the “physical characteristics” regularly associated with ritual specialists: “Nobody can become a magician at will; there are qualities which distinguish a magician from the layman. Some are acquired, some inherited” ([1902] 1972: 27). Like the *signum diaboli* thought to mark witch’s bodies in Medieval Europe, ethnographic literature is full of physical singularities associated with magical and shamanic practices: the pierced tongues or crystals inside the bodies of Australian shamans, for example; the hidden organs of sorcerers and ritual specialists in West Africa (*mangu*, *evur*); or the “knowledge” (*yachay*) of Quechua-speaking shamans in the Peruvian Amazon, which takes the form of a magical mucus contained in the stomach (Boyer 1994: 177–79; Gutierrez-Choquevilca 2012: 608). What all of these cases seem to have in common is a form of reasoning that establishes a causal relation between odd behaviors and certain visible or presumed physical traits. If we find such a similar way of conceptualizing an uncommon kind of individuality in certain people in so many different cultures, it is most likely because all of them mobilize, in their own way, a type of singularity detection device.

Where might this tenacious mode of reasoning come from? There are a number of reasons to think that it was already at work in the most ancient eras of human history. In the Upper Paleolithic, all human societies subsisted from hunting, gathering, and sometimes fishing. Without agriculture or livestock, it is difficult to accumulate any form of wealth, and so archeological sites from this period rarely show much social or economic differentiation within the same group. In the Gravettian culture, burials were rare; most of the deceased were probably abandoned and either withered away or were eaten by other animals. But among the known burials, several are notable for their exceptional grave goods. One of the most famous sites is that of Sungir, Russia,

dating back about thirty thousand years, where several people were buried in clothes decorated with thousands of beads made of mammoth ivory. The extraordinary nature of these goods is reflected in the amount of labor that would have been required to make the beads—estimated at five thousand hours for each deceased person. Archeologists have often interpreted these unusual tombs as evidence of an established elite and the constitution of a socioeconomic hierarchy. However, in recent years, paleopathological analyses have revealed new information that opens up some entirely different avenues of interpretation. Archeologists have repeatedly found that exceptional Upper Paleolithic burials contain people whose body shows significant physical anomalies. In Sungir, it was a nine- or ten-year-old girl whose leg bones were bowed due to a congenital disorder. In the lavish tomb of Dolni Veštonice in Moravia, an individual with asymmetrical legs was surrounded by two people in unconventional positions: one lying on his stomach, the other with his hands resting on the pubic region of the anomalous individual. In Romito 2 in southern Italy, it was an adolescent with dwarfism whose burial seemed to have received special treatment. In all these cases from the Gravettian period, the individual with an anomalous condition was accompanied by one or two other people without anomalies, suggesting the possibility of ritual killings. To some archeologists, this recurring link between physical anomalies and unusual funerary treatment suggests that divergence from bodily norms held a special place in Upper Paleolithic systems of thought (Formicola and Buzhilova 2004; Formicola 2007).

The burial of a child holding deer antlers in Qafzeh, Israel, suggests that the special treatment of singularity went back even further. The body of this twelve- or thirteen-year-old child was found in one of the most ancient burial sites in the world, from almost one hundred thousand years ago. In his hands, he held a pair of deer antlers, while none of the neighboring graves contained any offering. In 2014, French researchers did a three-dimensional scan of the child's skull and discovered that his brain had developed abnormally as a result of a head trauma. The analysis of the affected cortical areas indicated that he likely displayed personality and behavioral disorders (Coqueugniot et al. 2014).

Turning now to a more recent era in the prehistorical record, one of the most richly endowed burial sites in Mesolithic Europe lies in Bad Dürrenberg, Germany, where dozens of tools, animal bones, personal ornaments, as well as turtle and mussel shells were discovered. An examination of the human remains found here showed that the buried

individual had a malformation of the atlas vertebrae, probably resulting in neurological disorders affecting perception and behavior. This individual may have exhibited rapid eye movements or loss of control over bodily movements (Porr and Alt 2006).

It thus appears that special treatment of singularity has been practiced over a much longer period than was previously assumed. Based on my analyses of Tuvan shamanism, it is possible to formulate a more precise hypothesis than any of those previously proposed by exploring the cognitive foundations of these cross-cultural practices. We are certainly not dealing with a cult of bow-legged individuals in Russia or of dwarfism in Italy. The anomalies found in these burial sites are varied in kind, and paleopathological research will no doubt discover others. As the archeologist David Wengrow and anthropologist David Graeber have recently suggested concerning the Gravettian burials, “We can know little of the day-to-day status of those buried with rich grave goods; but in such cases we can at least suggest that they would have been seen as the ultimate individuals, about as different as it was possible to be” (Wengrow and Graeber 2015: 605). Physical and behavioral differences were not venerated in and of themselves, but as deviations from categorical norms that were clearly seen as causal signs of something more profound, a multiform singularity of the individual that warranted a particular social status. Clearly these anomalous individuals were treated as beings with superior relational skills, as is illustrated by the fact that they were accompanied by other human or animal remains.

Does it make sense to speak of “shamans” in these cases, as some authors have not hesitated to do? Though these atypical individuals received special ritual treatment in death, there is nothing to indicate that they exercised active ritual functions during their lives. While their burials reveal the use of a singularity detection device, they do not thereby imply the existence of a shamanic institution. Were the people who gave these individuals special funerals responding primarily to their physical anomalies or to their behavioral differences? Did they conceive of singularity as hereditary, as acquired, or as something conferred by spirits? From an ethnographic perspective, all kinds of answers are possible, and nothing favors one over any other.

What does seem clear is that a singularity detection device, without necessarily being exercised in a universal fashion, probably represents a significant resource in the cognitive heritage of *Homo sapiens*. This particular mode of reflexive reasoning, which reins in the inductive

generalizations of classificatory thought, gave rise to an extremely diverse range of cultural practices among a significant number of human societies. Shamanism is only one of the possible paths for making cultural and social sense of the cognitive inferences triggered by singularity.

CHAPTER 3

The Dark Tent and the Light Tent

During one of his visits to the Alaskan Athapaskans (or Dene) in the 1860s, the French-born Canadian missionary Father Émile Petitot discovered that his hosts practiced a strange ritual of divination and healing called the *inkanzé*, in which a shaman would enclose himself with a sick person in the total darkness of a small tent called a *chounsh* and summon spirits into it. Before long, these entities would manifest themselves through strange human and animal cries. All around the tent, the audience would sing, ask the spirits questions, and hear their answers. These nocturnal ceremonies profoundly exasperated Petitot:

The *Inkanzé* is our Indians' entire science. The devil knows just how to disguise himself among them, so well that he goes unnoticed; but, by hiding, he has also concealed the knowledge and love of God from them. He has thus gotten what he wanted. Poor savage! He seems to get a glimpse of the Divinity, to be on the verge of reaching it and discovering the truth through it, but just when it seems that the light is going to suddenly flood his eyes and illuminate his path, he ends up surrounded by nothing but more darkness, sitting on the floor of his *chounsh*, beating his drum, and summoning a shadow! *In tenebris et in umbra mortis sedent* (Petitot 1867: 514).¹

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1. Pierre Délégé, to whom I owe my own familiarity with Petitot's work, recently published a book-length work on this missionary, as erudite as he was eccentric (Délégé 2020).

Petitot was angered less by the choice of the ritual's addressees, namely the spirits, than by the medium of communication with the divine: darkness. In his view, the divine manifests itself to people as light, just as the dawn comes "to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (*in tenebris et in umbra mortis sedent*) (Luke 1:78–79). For Petitot, as for the entire Western tradition, light is the bearer of truth and certainty, while darkness contains only error. Thus, a ritual technique that deliberately places the participants in darkness can only be nonsense, a ruse of the devil intended to wrap people in illusion.

The missionary's wrath in this case is highly instructive in that it clearly shows us an encounter between two ways of perceiving darkness and light. In fact, our Western conceptions concerning the search for truth are still fairly consistent with Petitot's, guided entirely by the prestige of light and its association with certainty, which casts out the illusions of darkness. Whether we think of ourselves as children of Light or as heirs to the Enlightenment, either way we are fleeing from darkness.

We are going to have to wrap our heads around other forms of perception that have nothing to do with such a hierarchy of light and shadows. As we will see in this chapter, indigenous peoples throughout the boreal world have long maintained certain modes of exploring nonhuman worlds that require absolute darkness. But how can anyone seek out knowledge and healing in obscurity? Such practices involve a concept of the relationship between the visible and the invisible that is profoundly different from the one we are familiar with. The few Westerners who have had the privilege of attending these boreal ceremonies of shadows were often left with memories of profound emotion and amazement. In this chapter, I will first present the accounts of three authors who attended these rituals, and then go on to analyze how the proceedings mobilized participants' non-sensory perceptions.

Three Dark Tents

Russian descriptions of divination sessions conducted in darkness by the Khant—an Ob-Ugrian hunter society from the forests of western Siberia—go as far back as the eighteenth century. The classic scenario goes something like this: to learn where to find game and fish in abundance, a ritual officiant is tied up at night in a totally dark tent; generic bird and animal calls are heard, telling the hunters where to look for their prey; and then invisible beings help the officiant to free himself

from his bonds. If a skeptic among the audience were to doubt the reality of these events, a bear's paw or a squirrel might come and strike him. The officiant is not paid for his participation and does not wear any special clothing for the proceedings (Novickii 1941: 54; Kulemzin 2004: 50–51).

Little more would be known of the Khant practice were it not for the Russian ethnologist Mikhail Shatilov, who vividly captured the atmosphere that reigned inside one of these dark tents during a ritual he attended in the 1920s. But his description was almost lost forever. Passionate about indigenous cultures and, like other ethnologists of his generation, active in the Siberian autonomy movement, Shatilov had been Minister of indigenous Affairs in a short-lived democratic government of Siberia for a few months in 1918. The arrival of the Red Army put an end to this experiment, and, in 1937, Shatilov was executed by firing squad during the Stalinist purges. The work of this remarkable scholar, notable for his deeply empathetic views, was blacklisted, and his description of the Khant ritual he attended remained in the archives until, almost forty years after his death, the University of Tomsk decided to publish it in a small confidential volume (Reshetov n.d.).

Shatilov recalled being so impressed by the ritual he attended that he regretted being unable to give himself over to his emotions and overcome his own incredulity as a Western scholar: “Plagued as I was by skepticism, I could only regret not being able to fully experience what was going on, so powerful was the scene!” (Shatilov 1982: 162). For the ceremony in question—“the presentation of news,” as the Khant called it—the participants gathered at night in a tent that was tightly sealed to ensure total darkness. In this version of the ritual, the shaman was not tied up, but sat in the middle of the assembly playing a *dombra* (a stringed instrument related to the lute). Soon, the participants began to perceive a number of strange acoustic phenomena—but let's see how Shatilov describes the scene:

The sound of the *dombra*, first heard coming from the spot where the shaman sat, began to move about and seemed to be coming from different parts of the tent one after the other: down near the ground, then the ceiling, until finally the sounds of the *dombra* began to drift away and eventually disappear; but then they were heard again, coming from a distance and moving closer. The result was a total spatial illusion.

The Khant whispered to the ethnologist that the shaman was flying around the tent. Finally, the music falls silent, indicating that the shaman has left the tent through its smoke hole. Soon after that comes a series of animal sounds:

We first heard the song of a cuckoo, that prophetic bird. Its melodious, sweet song rang out for quite a long time from different corners of the yurt. Then its sad and tender melody was suddenly replaced by the beating wings of a much larger bird, and we were startled by a remarkably skilled imitation of an owl's call: "Hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo!" This sinister laugh literally filled the yurt and, in the total darkness, made a strong impression on the participants, who were especially receptive to it. [...] Suddenly, this somber scene was jolted by the lively, defiant squawk of a duck that seemed to have been surprised: "Quack, quack, quack!" The mood of the participants immediately changed—lively whispers and a sigh of relief could be heard. Next, high up in the sky, a crane passed by squawking, as though summoning everyone, and all of a sudden, something fell once again from above, and we could hear the distinctive whistling of a Siberian chipmunk.

At this point in the ritual, the participants immediately call out, "Chipmunk, I'm shooting, fall down!" and if they then hear the squirrel fall to the ground, they will know to expect a good hunt. Suddenly, the tent resounds with grunts and terrible noises: this time it is the bear that arrives and greets each one of the participants: "Hello old friend, greetings! greetings!" After a few more animal sound effects, the lute music is heard again, as though descending from the top of the tent: the shaman is returning from the sky. He greets the gathering, recounts what he has seen in flight, and makes a few predictions regarding some of the individual participants (Shatilov 1982: 159–60).

The staged action just described combines a centripetal movement—the arrival at the ritual site of several invisible visitors from the forest—with a centrifugal one—the shaman's departure from the tent and his flight through the sky. A similar ritual was practiced by a neighboring Ob-Ugrian group, the Mansi, whose territories once stretched all the way to the Middle Urals on the edge of Europe. The Mansi would gather in a "dark house" (*turman kol*) and, presiding without a drum, the shaman (*nait*) would lie down and go to sleep. In the pitch black, spirits could be heard appearing one after the other, and the dwelling would begin to shake, sometimes until it rose from the ground (Soldatova 2014; Fedorova 2010).

According to the Khant's explanations, the different voices heard in the dark tent were those of the *lung*, spirits coming from the forest world. It is important to note that the shaman's cosmic journey does not constitute the central part of the proceedings; it is only at the end of the ritual, when the officiant recounts his adventures, that the participants learn anything about it. The core of the scene, the very aim of the ritual, is the meeting of the human participants and the zoomorphic spirits, which provides a forum for various propitiatory acts and exchanges of greetings with the master of the forest, the bear. Over the course of the seance, each hunter has the opportunity to communicate with the animals he regularly encounters and pursues in the taiga. The dark tent thus gives them a chance to mentally penetrate the inner worlds of animals more deeply than they are able to while tracking them. It functions as *a kind of echo chamber that can produce a heightened sensitivity of that vital organ of communication with nonhuman worlds that we discussed in the first chapter, the exploratory imagination.*

At the other end of Siberia, 4,500 kilometers from where the Khant live, a strikingly similar practice was once performed by the Chukchi, in the tundra surrounding the Bering Strait.

Among the various practices of Chukchi shamans, the most frequent performance, one that only they were entitled to enact and in which they displayed their most astonishing talents, was the ritual conducted in the "inner room" to summon up and listen to the "separate voices." The "inner room" is a small enclosure made of thick reindeer furs, contained within the huge tent that is the traditional dwelling of Chukchi herders; it is the warmest part of the structure, where the family gathers to sleep.

The performance in question takes place in complete darkness, at night, after dinner, and without a fire. The audience piles into the small room where the shaman is already seated and stripped to the waste; sometimes he is tied up, at others he is free to play his drum (Bogoras 1904–1909: 448). He chants melodies, in a soft voice at first, which then gets louder and louder. The chant has no words and is composed of short melodic phrases that can be repeated indefinitely: "Ah, ya, ka, ya, ka, ya, ka!" (1904–1909: 434). The audience does not join in the chant, but intermittently calls out words of encouragement to support the shaman. If he has a drum, the shaman uses it as an acoustic shield to direct the sounds of his voice to the left or the right. In the darkness, it soon becomes impossible to tell where any of the sounds are coming from: the voice of the shaman seems to move around from place to place in the room.

After fifteen to thirty minutes, the shaman vibrates his lips while shaking his head and makes various human and animal cries and noises: these are the “separate voices” of the spirits (*kelet*) who are beginning to arrive. Here is how the great ethnologist of the Chukchi, Waldemar Bogoras, describes them:

Some voices are at first faint, as if coming from afar; as they gradually approach, they increase in volume, and at last they rush into the room, pass through it and out, decreasing, and dying away in the remote distance. Other voices come from above, pass through the room and seem to go underground, where they are heard as if from the depths of the earth (1904–1909: 435).

Some of these invisible visitors are animals: the wolf, the raven, the walrus, or the mouse, for instance. Others are objects, such as the bucket, the needle, or the chamber pot. And still others are human beings, such as the Black Old Man, the One-Eyed Woman, and so on. At one of the rituals that Bogoras attended, an “Echo” spirit demonstrated its ability to imitate everything it heard; the ethnologist put it to the test by pronouncing phrases in Russian and English, which to everyone’s great amusement, the spirit successfully repeated (1904–1909: 300; Bogoraz 1910: 27).

Because these seances do not follow a fixed sequence of events, they are typically full of surprises for the attendees. Sometimes they feel the tent violently shake or even be lifted from the ground. They may have the disagreeable experience of being struck by various projectiles: pieces of wood, stones, icy water, urine, and so on. Each spirit makes a sound appropriate to its species: the wolf, fox, and raven, moreover, are able to use human language, but their utterances are interspersed with howls, barks, and caws, and each voice has a characteristic tone. The invisible visitors argue among themselves, converse with the shaman, and speak to the participants. A spirit might predict a good hunting season, announce an illness, put questions to individual participants, or admonish them for having neglected certain ritual prescriptions. During another seance attended by Bogoras, for example, after having listened to a number of different entities, the shaman gave the floor to a female spirit, who accused a hunter of having behaved disrespectfully toward bears. The man tried to defend himself, but the spirit reminded him that, two months earlier, he had attacked a bear while it was sleeping in its den and, because of this and some other offenses, he was at risk of losing his ability

to walk long distances. Flustered, the man asked how he could avoid this punishment, a catastrophic one for any hunter, to which the spirit replied by telling him the ritual procedure that would appease the animals (Bogoras 1904–1909: 440).

Sometimes, after a violent outburst of chanting and drum beating, the whole tent suddenly falls silent: the shaman lays stretched out on the ground. The Chukchi say that he is “sinking” (*an-ia’arkin*). As long as he lies there, it is understood that his soul is traveling around the world. After some time, he gets up and tells the audience what he has seen, offering bits of advice to the participants as he recounts the experience.

As with the Khant example, this ritual gives the audience a chance to ask questions and converse with the animals or their spirit representatives. This centripetal aspect of the spirits coming into the tent is combined with a centrifugal movement, as the shaman may disappear and go off on a journey of his own.

Let us now cross the Bering Strait and look at another example from the forests of Canada.

The Anglo-Canadian George Nelson was no ordinary fur trader. While working for large commercial enterprises like the Hudson’s Bay Company, he took a passionate interest in the lives and traditions of the Ojibwa and Cree hunters who supplied him with his inventory. Nelson’s written accounts of his time with these groups, both of whose languages he had learned, are of great ethnographic value. In 1823, near Lac La Ronge in western Canada, he attended a Cree ceremony that had a profound effect on him.²

That evening, away from their dwellings, the Cree set up a miniature tent, around a meter in diameter, made of poles covered with elk hides. The “conjurer” (as Nelson refers to the officiant) took up his drum and uttered some prayers. The drum was then passed around the other attendees as they addressed a series of chants to various animal spirits: the elk, the horse, the bear, and the dog. After undressing himself, the conjurer asked for volunteers to help tie him up, a task for which Nelson stepped forward, thus enabling himself to observe at close range. After his hands were carefully bound, the conjurer was wrapped in a blanket and that in turn was tied securely with a rope. “[Because] I assisted in *this*,” Nelson recalls, “I could have laid wager that it was beyond the Power of the Spirits themselves, thus tied, to eradicate [extricate] themselves; and his hands were *under* his hams—as he could no more move than fly.” Thus

2. Nelson’s account can be found in Brown and Brightman 2009.



Figure 6. An Ojibwa Shaking Tent, mid-nineteenth century. Schoolcraft 1855: 428, fig. 33A.

encased, the conjurer was introduced with some difficulty into the miniature tent, around which the attendees then seated themselves. “I could not help but laughing in myself and pitying the boldness of their vanity,” Nelson writes “but I had soon occasion to think otherwise and had I not predetermined that reason should conduct me throughout the whole of this, I cannot say how far in the *other* extreme *I* might have gone” (Brown and Brightman 2009: 103).

After only a few minutes, while the gathering intoned the song of the Stone, Nelson had the clear impression that the spirit was entering the tent: “I was struck dumb with astonishment; for he appeared to me to *slide* in by something that was neither invisible nor discernable—I heard something that for the life of me I cannot account for, and that’s all.” And then to his even greater surprise, the officiant’s blanket and ropes were thrown into the audience without a single knot being undone: “My astonishment and apprehensions of his being entirely carried off from us were such that I was nearly springing up to haul him out, for fear of his being for ever lost. The others continued singing a few other songs and I had the utmost anxiety in hearing [him] repeatedly call out as if in the greatest apprehensions himself, ‘enough! enough! Enough, of ye I say!’; and frequently for the space of some minutes repeating the same, and now and then calling out, ‘do not *Thou* enter!’” (Brown and Brightman 2009: 103–4). One after the other, dozens of other spirits then entered the tent, shaking it violently each time.

From outside the enclosure, the audience heard the voice of the Ice spirit, then the Turtle—who entertained the assembly by imitating a drunkard and then snoring loudly—followed by the Dog, several species

of bear, the Horse, the Moose, a group of skeletons, and finally some spirits of the deceased, along with those of a few living friends who were far away. The Turtle made a few predictions concerning the rains and the movements of game. Over the course of the seance, the officiant invited Nelson and a few others to look into the tent and see the spirits. Lying on his back and sliding his head inside, Nelson could see lights near the top of tent resembling stars in a cloudy sky. Finally, around 2:00 A.M., the tent shook one last time and the spirits disappeared.

The Canadian fur-trader's skepticism had been more than shaken: "I am fully convinced, as much so as that I am in existence [sic], that Spirits of some kind did really and virtually enter, some truly terrific, but others again quite of a different character. [...] I verily believe I shall never forget the impressions of that evening" (Brown and Brightman 2009: 106–7).

Despite their differences—most notably the absence of the officiant's cosmic journey in Nelson's account—the three of these Khant, Chukchi, and Cree rituals clearly share a number of structural features. All of them take place in the dark, with the officiant not visible to the audience and often restrained with rope or confined within an enclosure of some kind. In all three cases, the shaking of the shelter and the sounds and voices of various humans and animals signal the arrival of the spirits with whom the participants are able to dialogue about hunting or illnesses.

An Unrecognized Transcontinental Phenomenon

Several authors have noted the recurrence of similar performances carried out in the dark throughout the Far North. But lacking any knowledge of Americanist ethnographies, Soviet researchers considered the ritual of the "dark tent" (*temnyi chum*) a North Asian phenomenon. Their Americanist colleagues, on the other hand, regarded the "shaking tent" as a North American tradition. Robert Lowie and Ake Hultkrantz were the only scholars to note the parallels between the Algonquian and Chukchi rituals, but they limited their scope to North America and the Bering Strait (Hultkrantz 1967: 54; Lowie 1934: 188).³ Without access to any of the Russian literature, they had no idea that, from the

3. Concerning the shaking tent among the Saukteaux of North America, Hallowell stated: "So far as I know, similar parallels do not occur in the Boreal regions of Asia. *If they did, it would be difficult to dismiss the possibility*

eighteenth century on, similar practices had been documented on the eastern edges of Europe.

The descriptions presented in the previous section come from three far-flung places: the taiga of the eastern Urals, the tundra of the Bering Strait, and the forests of central Canada. As distant from another as these groups are, could the resemblances between these practices be a mere coincidence, or might it be reasonable to surmise that they testify to some kind of common heritage or series of historical exchanges between these populations? The best way to construct an answer to this question would be to look for examples of the dark-tent ritual in the vast expanse that lies between the Ural Mountains and Hudson Bay. If the examples discussed above are no more than isolated cases, it would be difficult to claim much more than a fortuitous similarity; if, on the other hand, a continuous chain can be drawn across the ritual performances of different neighboring populations, we could hypothesize that these practices belong to a single cultural substrate of the Circumpolar North that probably has a long history.

To be clear, there is no evidence that the dark tent has ever been practiced by the northern populations west of the Urals: it did not feature among the shamanic customs of the European Samoyedic-speaking population (the Nenets), whose rituals were typically performed by firelight, nor those of the Saami in northern Scandinavia. According to accounts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Saami rituals incorporated drums covered with dozens of painted figures, which the audience would have interpreted for divinatory messages—a practice that would have been impossible in the dark (Magnus 1561: 57–58; Scheffer 1678: 105–12).

Heading eastward, now, to the Yenisei Valley in Central Siberia, Selkup and Ket shamans, like their Ob-Ugrian neighbors, held memorable seances in the dark. Selkup shamans, dressed in ordinary clothing, would have themselves tied up on a bearskin next to an overturned cauldron, while the tent filled with animal and bird sounds.⁴ The Ket referred

of historical connections with North America" (Hallowell 1942, vol. 2: 14 n. 20, cited by Hultkrantz 1967: 54).

4. According to the testimony of Prokofiev, who attended a seance, the dark-tent ritual was a show of prowess: "All by himself, with very few means, he produced a great variety of effects, using sound elements and elusive air movements to create images of animals and birds of different sizes and strengths" (Prokof'eva 1981: 68).

to this performance as the “dark game” (*unat kus’* or *unat bayus’*). Their version took place in a specially built tent that could be hermetically sealed and in which a cauldron was hung from straps with bells attached. At the shaman’s call, the spirits would enter through the tent’s smoke hole and announce themselves by ringing the bells. The participants would then ask the spirits questions, and they would respond through either the shaman’s voice or by a certain number of taps on the cauldron: three taps for “yes” and one for “no.” Without a drum or any kind of special clothing, the shaman who led the ritual—a service for which he was never compensated—was supposed to sleep during the entire performance. For both the Ket and Selkup, these rituals were less prestigious than one of the others they practiced, that of the “light tent,” a tradition we will return to shortly and discuss the rivalry that existed between the two practices.⁵

If we go by twentieth-century ethnographies, the dark tent seems to have been unknown among the peoples of the Central Siberian Arctic. But one description by a forgotten Russian scholar of the nineteenth century, Pavel Tret’alakov, of a ritual he observed among the Samoyedic-speaking population of the Turukhansk region, seems to indicate otherwise. In this example, the shaman is tied up in the dark, imitates the cries of all sorts of animals, and goes on celestial and underground journeys.⁶ The dark tent thus did indeed exist in this part of

5. On the Ket variation of the dark tent, see Anuchin 1914: 31; and Alekseenko 1981: 118–19.

6. “Sometimes the shaman asks his audience to bind him with ropes and he lies down in this state in the middle of the tent near an overturned cauldron. The participants in this act, sitting in the dark, soon hear the clinking of the handle of the pot getting louder and louder, which means that underground spirits are escaping from the container, and their flight is soon heard with a sound reminiscent of beating wings. Then sounds are heard, such as the steps and grunts of a bear, the wild cry of an owl, and finally the voice of the shaman gradually fading away. This means that the shaman is flying up into the sky. After a while, the shaman’s voice becomes audible again: he is flying back. Following this aerial journey comes the underground journey, which is also indicated by the sound of his voice fading away. Upon his return from his underground journey, the shaman trembles and asks for the fire, which is immediately lit. Most of the Native people are convinced that these are only tricks, and yet all listen with extreme attention to the stories and predictions pronounced by the shaman after his mysterious journeys” (Tret’iakov 1871: 223).

Siberia at one time, probably among the Nganasan, even if it had disappeared by the turn of the twentieth century and been replaced by other ritual modalities that required lighting.

Further east still, there is no sign that the Yakut and the Tungus have ever practiced the dark tent, and it is not until we reach the Pacific shores, on the other side of their territories, that we again find evidence of a wide variety of dark-tent practices. The Chukchi were masters of the dark tent, as we have seen. Their Eskimo neighbors, the Siberian Yupik, performed the ritual in much the same way, with the same commotion, spirit cries, and wordless melodies. A powerful shaman could make the sound of his drum fade into the distance outside the tent, while he himself would lose consciousness and lie on the ground with a slowed pulse. The audience understood at this point that his soul had left his body to travel across mountains and seas and consult with the spirits. When he regained consciousness, the shaman would recount the results of the expedition (Tein, Shimkin, and Kan 1994).

To the south of the Chukchi and Yupik territories, Koryak shamans would beat their drums in a tent without a fire and sound the arrival of spirits such as the wolf or the grebe to their audience. These shamans might also consume fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), a psychotropic mushroom, before starting the seance (Lindenau 1983: 123; Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 43, 593). According to nineteenth-century authors, Nivkh shamans around the lower Amur River and on Sakhalin Island, just north of Japan, would be tied up in the dark, and signal the arrival of the spirits with loud noises, sometimes causing the house to shake. Here too people were able to ask questions of the spirits, who would respond affirmatively with a tap and negatively with a scratching sound (Shrenk 1903: 123–24; Shternberg 1933: 322). We will discuss the evolution of the dark tent in more detail later on; suffice it to say for the time being that by the twentieth century ethnographers no longer seemed to encounter these practices, finding in their place a number of other shamanic rituals conducted by firelight.

Further still to the south, again on Sakhalin Island and the Japanese island of Hokkaido, Ainu shamans (*tusukuru*) would be tied up in front of their audience with their drum hanging out of reach and all lights extinguished. Spirits would present themselves with beats of the drum and again respond affirmatively or negatively by tapping out different patterns on the instrument (Pilsudski 1909). It is hard not to be struck by the resemblances between these different techniques for communicating with the spirits with the codified tapping sounds heard in the

dark tents of the Ket, the Nivkh, and the Ainu, despite the fact these populations are separated by rivers, seas, and thousands of kilometers of taiga.

As we just mentioned, between the West Siberian Plain—which encompasses the Ural Mountains and Yenissei River—and the Pacific coast, there lies a vast blank zone, where there is little to suggest the dark tent has ever been practiced. This gap, represented by the Lena river-basin, which is nowadays dominated by the Yakut and the Tungus, was once occupied by a very different population, who had no knowledge of animal husbandry: the Yukaghir. Once a powerful people, their population was devastated by Russian colonization, contact-related epidemics, and the expansion of their Altaic neighbors. For this reason, their native shamanic traditions had been largely forgotten by the time Waldemar Jochelson visited them at the turn of the century.⁷ To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever witnessed a dark-tent ritual performed by the Yukaghir; in their oral traditions, however, there are two stories of legendary shamans whose practices are reminiscent of this ceremony. In both of these narratives, the shaman is summoned to demonstrate his powers and is locked up; one in a tent, the other in a house with its doors and windows hermetically sealed, spaces from which all sorts of animals and strange beings can then be heard (some of the creatures even visibly appearing). In one of the stories, furthermore, the shaman lies down on the ground; he is not tied up, but whipped.⁸ It is quite likely that these legends contain elements of ancient dark-tent practices that older generations of Yukaghir may have shared with their Koryak and Chukchi neighbors—groups with whom their other ritual traditions have much in common.

This geographical overview reveals a remarkable distributive pattern: dark-tent rituals have been attested in all of the so-called “Paleo-Asiatic” peoples—the Chukchi, Nivkh, Koryak, Ket, Eskimo, and probably the Yukaghir as well. The Paleo-Asiatic group is a linguistic “pseudo-family” comprised of a series of isolated, often unrelated languages, their common feature being that they were each spoken by peoples who occupied northern Siberia prior to the expansion of the Altaic populations over the last millennium. Added to the fact that the dark tent is unknown

7. Waldemar Jochelson published an important monograph on this group in 1926.

8. See the legends “Ichen” and “A Shaman” in Kurilova 2005: 409, 439–41.

among Altaic peoples,⁹ this geographical distribution suggests that this mode of communication with the invisible belonged to an ancient cultural substrate of the boreal world.

This hypothesis is considerably strengthened if we adopt the “intercontinental perspective” that Irving Hallowell advocated as a line of research in the 1920s—one that was unfortunately abandoned as soon as it was proposed due to tensions between the Soviet and American academies (Hallowell 1926: 163). So let us venture once more across the Bering Strait for a quick tour of comparable ritual performances on the North American continent. Among the Yupik Eskimos of Alaska, the shaman performs in the communal men’s house, having himself tied up or sometimes wrapped in a blanket before all kinds of sounds and voices would ring out (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 61–63). Further east, the Inuit of both Canada and Greenland traditionally performed a ritual in which the shaman was said to “mount up to Heaven.” Inside his house, the shaman (*angakkog*) would be placed behind a curtain with his fists tied behind his back and his head secured between his knees. When all of the lights had been extinguished and everybody had closed their eyes, they would begin to hear a variety of noises and strange voices coming from different parts of the room. The voices of the stars would then come forward and the participants would be able to speak with them. The shaman himself could no longer be heard, since he had flown away to visit the sky and the moon. On his return, he would recount his extraordinary adventures to the other participants. In Canadian accounts, when the lights are relit, the shaman is found to have been miraculously freed from his bonds.¹⁰

The most perilous journey an Inuit shaman can go on is that in which “he descends to the bottom of the sea.” The purpose of this expedition is to call upon the mistress of the sea and obtain from her, willingly or by force, marine animals for the hunters or a cure for a sick person. To do this, the shaman, nearly naked, gets under a blanket. He summons his

9. The only exception is the Nanai of the lower Amur region, the only Tungus group known to have ever practiced the dark tent (Lopatin 1922: 184). In this case it is a clear cultural influence from the neighboring Nivkh.

10. The oldest description of the dark tent among the Inuit is that of Hans Egede ([1741] 1818: 189–90), who attended several rituals in Greenland in 1722. On this ritual among the Inuit of Greenland and Canada, see Rasmussen 1929: 129; Jakobsen 1999: 77–84, 140 n. 72. As for the central Inuit (“Eskimo”), see Boas 1964: 185–86.

auxiliaries and then sets out for the house of the spirit of the sea, facing numerous daunting trials along the way (Rasmussen 1929: 124 ff.). The audience receives no visual indications of the shaman's progress on his maritime or celestial journeys since everything happens in the dark. It is only through the shaman's subsequent narrations and legends about powerful shamans of the past that ordinary people have any idea of what goes on during these adventures.

The journey to "the bottom of the sea" performed by Inuit shamans has a close parallel among the practices of their southern neighbors, the Athapaskan peoples of inland Alaska and northwestern Canada. To cure serious illnesses, shamans among the Nabesna, the Chandalar Gwich'in, and the Tutchone turn to the "underwater" ritual, in which the officiant journeys toward the land of the dead to retrieve the patient's wandering soul. The shaman undresses and lies down with the patient under a large hide or blanket made to form a miniature tent, while the other participants, sitting on the edge of the cover to prevent it from lifting up, ask questions. Under the blanket, the shaman alternates between chants and silence. He sends an auxiliary spirit or departs himself on a subaquatic expedition in pursuit of the patient's soul. At certain moments, while the shaman is supposedly lying motionless, the blanket is seen to shake and rise up, and then the voices of spirits can be heard. When it is over and the blanket is removed, the shaman is found soaking wet as though he had just emerged from the water, sometimes even leaving a puddle on the ground (Guédon 2005: 445–47, 495–98).

Pushing further south, the Chipewyan of the Athapaskan language family, who live just west of Hudson Bay, have long been known to summon spirits in the *inkanzé* ritual that so irritated Father Petitot. Here the shaman, on some occasions accompanied by a patient, is not under a blanket, but rather a small tent supported by four poles and encircled by ropes. The shaman chants and produces the sounds of various animals and birds of prey, sometimes shaking the tent so violently that the rope breaks and he inexplicably escapes.¹¹

11. On the Chipewyan ritual tent called *shuns*, we have the descriptions of Samuel Hearne, who traveled among the Chipewyan in 1770–1772 (cited by Curtis 1928, vol. 18: 47) and of the priest Émile Petitot (1867: 506–7) and of Edward Curtis (1928, vol. 18: 47). The Beaver (Dunne-Za) also had special huts in which the shaman transformed himself into an animal, for example, a buffalo (Goddard 1916: 228, 260). The Hare and Gwich'in

Keeping to our southward course, we enter the lands of the Algonquian-speaking peoples, whose well-known “shaking tent” we have already encountered in the memorable account of the fur trader George Nelson. The shaking tent ritual—widely practiced by the Ojibwa, the Cree, the Innu, and the Gros Ventre—is most typically performed in the following manner: with an audience gathered in darkness, the shaman is placed inside a small hut, either in the middle of a dwelling or in the open air, and sometimes tied up.¹² As we saw in Nelson’s account, the spirits’ entrances and exits are signaled by the hut’s shaking. These invisible visitors answer questions from the shaman and audience, mainly concerning the location of game, but also warfare or the identity of a thief. The Cree, for example, might ask where to find reindeer in the forest, and a reindeer replies with information about their location: “Brothers, you go there if you want to kill us” (Brightman 1993: 175). The movement of the spirits toward the tent is sometimes coupled with a parallel, centrifugal movement, as the shaman escapes the enclosure and travels off into the invisible, as is shown in the explanations given by the Innu (or the Montagnais as the French called them) to the Jesuit Paul Le Jeune in the 1630s: “Some of these Barbarians imagined that this juggler [the shaman] was not inside, that he had been carried away, without knowing where or how. Others said that his body was lying on the ground, and that his soul was up above the tent, where it spoke at first, calling these Genii, and throwing from time to time sparks of fire” (Le Jeune [1634] 1858: 167).

The domain of the dark tent extends even further south to the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains, specifically the Algonquian Arapaho and the Lakota and Dakota Sioux. In the Sioux *yuwipi* (or “tied-up”) ceremony, the participants gather in a darkened tent or, more recently, a wooden house. When called upon to cure an illness, the shaman

also had a ritual for good luck in hunting and war in which the shaman was tied up and suspended in a tent (Petitot 1876: 38).

12. According to Le Jeune’s observations among the Innu in 1634, the officiant was enclosed in a hut constructed within a cabin that housed the audience (Le Jeune [1634] 1897: 167). Flannery gives a description of the Montagnais ritual in the twentieth century (Flannery 1939). The fur trader George Nelson helped tie up the officiant of a Cree ceremony. According to Joseph Nicolas Nicollet, describing a Chippewa (or Ojibwa, not to be confused with the Asthapaskan Chipewyan) in the nineteenth century: “The juggler, or *jasakid*, has his hands and feet bound by the singers, and he’s pushed into the hut, beneath the skins that cover it” (Lind 1979: 120).

is carefully tied up near an altar bearing various offerings, and then wrapped in a blanket. Summoned by the shaman, human and animal spirits soon raise their voices and indicate the appropriate procedure to follow to heal the sick person. Sitting against the walls of the enclosure, the participants can often make out human and animal creatures in the darkness as well as blue sparks reminiscent of the small lights seen by the Innu and the Cree. Some participants take the opportunity to ask the spirits for help in their own lives. When there is light again, they discover the shaman mysteriously freed from his bonds.¹³

The domain of the dark tent stops here: further south, the ritual practices are quite different, no longer presenting any of the elements that characterize this performance. It would no doubt be possible, after this all too hasty survey, to highlight a series of significant contrasts between the different traditions we have mentioned. Some of these groups address ancestors in these performances, while others do not; some make offerings, but not others; in some cases, the participants sit inside the tent with the officiant, while in others they remain outside. But there is nothing too surprising about variations like these between peoples with such different ways of life and modes of social organization. From our transcontinental perspective, what is more striking and still needs to be explained is the basic continuity of these techniques for communicating with nonhuman worlds. In both Siberia and North America, the officiant is tied up; in addition to the rope, the Inuit add a blanket or covering of some kind; the Athapaskans keep the blanket but discard the rope; the Algonquians restore the rope and place the blanket over a wooden structure; and finally, at the most southern point of this domain, the Sioux use both the blanket and the rope, like the Inuit. The transformations we observe here, from one group to another, are made with such continuity that it is difficult to deny the traces of some kind of ancient ritual tradition that, as could be expected, would have been subject to a number of local variations over time.

In sum, the dark tent can be characterized as a technique of communication with the invisible that is used for divination or healing purposes.

13. In Gideon Pond's account from the 1860s, the Dakota Sioux are still practicing the ritual in a tent (1867: 57), while in the twentieth century, following the process of sedentarization, it came to be practiced in houses with hard walls (Powers 1984). A description of the ritual as practiced by the Arapaho can be found in Hultkrantz (1967).

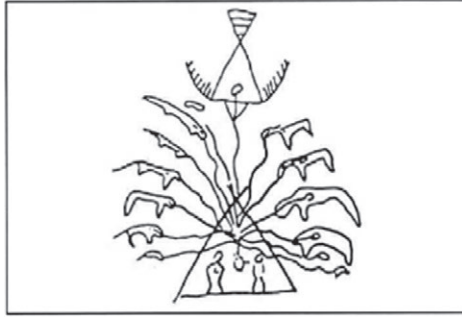


Figure 7. Drawing on Birch Bark Representing the Ojibwa Shaking Tent. The animal spirits enter the tent, where the Turtle, in the center, serves as interpreter. Rajnovich 2002: 37, fig. 30.

Although a given performance may or may not contain all of them, the characteristic features of this ritual apparatus are as follows:

- the audience gathers in complete darkness;
- the officiant’s physical movements are either limited or entirely restricted;
- sounds, and sometimes the shaking of the structure where the action takes place, signal the arrival of invisible nonhuman visitors;
- the participants are able to communicate with these visitors;
- and finally, in some cases, the shaman is supposed to go on a cosmic journey.

The cluster of features we see here is unique, not found in other shamanic traditions—either because the shaman remains free to move around as he or she wishes, or because the action is not performed in the dark. Until now, no one has noticed the extraordinary extension of this distinctive, powerful method for encountering nonhuman worlds, despite its use across such a large swath of the Northern Hemisphere’s indigenous populations, from the Uralic edges of Europe to the American plains by way of the Bering Strait.

How Did the Dark Tent Make Its Way around the Arctic?

How is it that these far-flung peoples of America and Asia, speaking a variety of languages with no known connection, could have come to

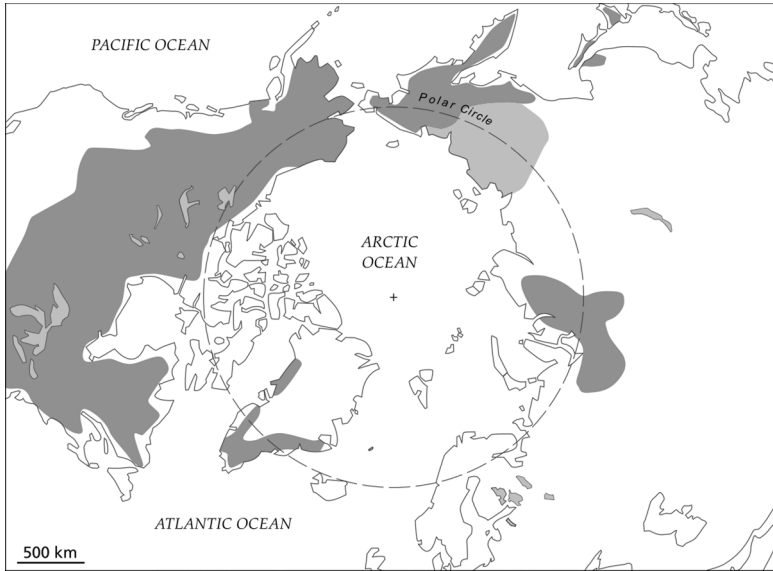


Figure 8. The Geographical Territory of the Dark-Tent Ritual in the Circumpolar World (nineteenth–twentieth century).

share a ritual practice with such a specific series of features?¹⁴ The circumpolar distribution of the dark tent inevitably raises the question of the historical relationships connecting indigenous peoples of northern Asia and North America. And indeed, analogies between different cultures on the Asian and American sides of the North Pacific have long intrigued researchers.¹⁵

In recent years, wholly new insights into these historical relationships have been provided by comparative studies in population genetics and paleogenomics. Far from fixing populations into some sort of eternal, pure biological identity, these studies reveal the extraordinary degree of entanglement that characterizes the connections between different human groups. The combination of physical anthropology and archaeological data now provides cultural anthropologists with unparalleled

14. The details of the hypothesis concerning the diffusion of the dark tent as developed here were previously published in Stépanoff 2021.

15. See, for example, Boas 1910: 534. Contrary to today's hypotheses, Boas argued that the Siberian Paleo-Asiatic populations were descendants of migrants from North America.

information about the migrations, clashes, and intermingling of populations from times and places for which no historical accounts are available.

According to the model most widely accepted by geneticists and archaeologists today, the indigenous population of the Americas was born of three major migratory waves of Asian populations coming across the Bering Strait. The first took place at least fifteen thousand years ago and rapidly spread to South America. These early arrivals gave rise to an immense diversity of cultures throughout the Americas, which diverged considerably from their Arctic origins. The second wave was that of the Paleo-Eskimos, who left Chukotka around five thousand years ago. In archeological terms, this wave is identified with the Arctic Small Tool tradition, which established the first human settlements in the Canadian Arctic and Greenland as well as the later Dorset and Saqqaq cultures. It was probably this migration that introduced the bow and arrow into the American Arctic, before their use spread to the rest of the continent. It was during the third wave, about one thousand years ago, that the Thule came to replace the Paleo-Eskimo population of the American Arctic, eventually giving rise to the modern Inuit and Yupik (Neo-Eskimo) cultures (Skoglund and Reich 2016; Torroni et al. 1992; Flegontov, Altinisik et al. 2016).

The second migratory wave is the only one that specifically links the peoples of Central Siberia to those of North America, to the exclusion of other populations. Could this have been a vector of diffusion for ritual traditions like the dark tent?

The paleogenomic studies conducted by the Czech geneticist Pavel Flegontov, published between 2015 and 2017, compared the genome of Paleo-Eskimo human remains from the Saqqaq culture in Greenland—which date back to 2000 BCE—with the genome of various current populations. As Flegontov's data showed, the closest modern relatives of the Paleo-Eskimo are the Beringian Paleo-Asiatic populations (the Chukchi, Koryak, Inuit, and Itelmen), followed on the Siberian side by the Ket, and, to a lesser extent, by the Selkup, Nganasan, Yukaghir, and Even (Flegontov, Changmai et al. 2016). The only descendants of the Paleo-Eskimo that geneticists have identified in North America are the Aleut peoples and some of the groups belonging to the Na-Dene language family: those speaking Northern and Southern Athapaskan languages, and the Tlingit (Flegontov et al. 2017). The modern Paleo-Asiatic populations on the North American continent—the Yupik, the Inuit, and the Athapaskans—would then be descendants of some of the groups that migrated across the Bering Land Bridge between Asia and North

America during the third millennium BCE. The vast expansion of the Athapaskan-speaking populations, some of which migrated from Alaska to the Great Plains, and eventually all the way Mexico to form the current peoples speaking Apache and Navajo languages, was likely aided by their mastery of the bow and arrow, tools that they inherited from their Paleo-Eskimo ancestors.

These new paleogenomic findings reinforce a revolutionary hypothesis proposed by the American linguist Edward Vajda in 2008: the “Dene-Yeniseian connection.” Based on the comparison of tones and prefixes, and the identification of around a hundred cognate words, Vajda argues that the Yeniseian languages (of which only Ket survives today) and those of the Na-Dene family (Athapaskan and Tlingit) are related and can thus be subsumed in a Dene-Yeniseian macrofamily. As the first to establish a serious foundation for a link between Old and New World languages, this hypothesis has been of great interest to those working in the genetics field. Combining their respective specialties, Vajda and Flegontov have jointly proposed that Dene-Yeniseian languages were brought to the American continent by the Paleo-Eskimo during the second wave of migrations over the Bering Strait. The genetic relationship between the Ket and the Paleo-Eskimo populations that Flegontov established using human remains from Greenland and Chukotka effectively confirms the possibility of a five-thousand-year-old relationship between groups in western Siberia and the North Pacific (Vajda 2010a; Flegontov, Altinisik et al. 2016; Diamond 2011).

Through the migrations of the Paleo-Eskimo populations, gene flows circulated over a vast distance across continents. Of course, these migrating populations brought with them not only genes, but also techniques such as archery, languages (including, in all likelihood, those of the Dene-Yeniseian macrofamily), ideas, and no doubt religious practices. Here is where we return to the dark tent: it is quite possible that it was among the practices introduced into North America in the course of these migrations. The distribution of populations with a common Paleo-Eskimo ancestry corresponds closely to the geographical expanse of the dark tent, with the Ket, Selkup, Mansi, and Nganasan in Central Siberia; the Yukaghir, Chukchi, Koryak, and Inuit in the Beringian region; and the Northern Athapaskans further south on the North American continent.

The dark tent expanded well beyond this group of related populations, extending westward to the Khant, to the east of the Nanai, and

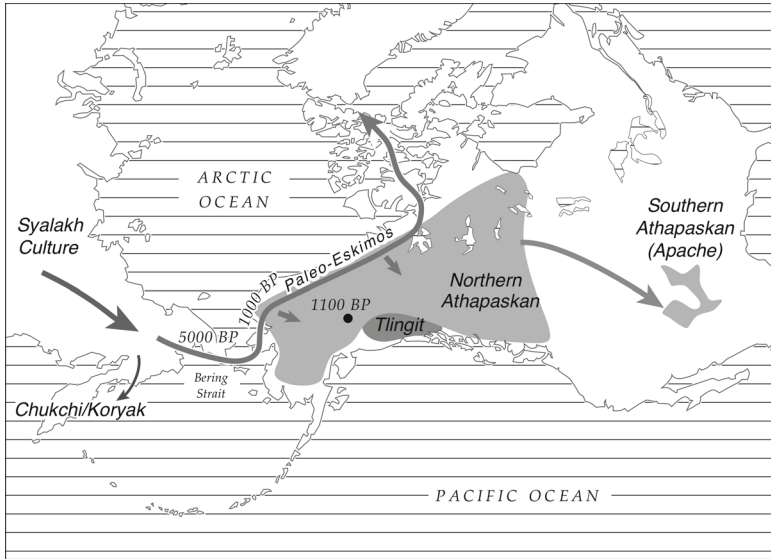


Figure 9. Paleo-Eskimo and Athapaskan Migration (from Flegontov et al. 2017). BP = before present.

across a vast swathe of North America, to various Algonquian- and Sioux-speaking peoples. This extended reach is not surprising; ideas and practices have their own itineraries that do not necessarily end where those who first introduced them to a given region chose to settle. The arrival of the Paleo-Eskimo, then the southward migration of the Alaskan Athapaskans brought the bow to the Great Plains, but its gradual expansion across the entire North American continent over the first millennium CE occurred through borrowing among settled populations (Blitz 1988). The Paleo-Eskimo migration may have similarly been the initial pathway for the introduction of the dark tent in North America without being the vector for the entirety of its geographical propagation. The absence of the dark tent among the Tlingit and Southern Athapaskans could possibly be explained by their own particular histories, both of which led them to abandon their ancestral way of life as nomadic hunters (a subsistence pattern to which the dark tent appears to have been closely linked).

If this hypothesis is correct, the transmission of the dark tent from Asia to North America must have taken place during the third millennium BCE—a remarkable piece of information with regard to the history of a ritual passed down through oral tradition.

The Antechamber of Dreams

Why was the dark tent so successful in its propagation through time and space? How did the strange practice of tying up a shaman manage to establish itself in so many parts of the boreal world? The extraordinary geographical extension of this technique, which has gone unnoticed by specialists until now, ought to raise some questions about the distinctive way of relating to the surrounding world for which this particular ritual technique appears to be the privileged medium.

In the darkness of the tent, the voices that speak and the noises that fill the room are reputedly caused by spirits. As for the shaman, people sometimes hear him converse with his spirits, but more often than not he disappears from the ritual stage, neither seen nor heard. None of the cries and noises that are heard are attributed to him. In some societies, he is said to fly away or to sink (as we will discuss at greater length in the following chapter), while elsewhere they say he is sleeping. The purpose of binding the shaman, another recurrent feature, is to constrain, reduce, or even neutralize his individual power of action in order to allow the nonhuman visitors to express their own agency and to ensure their direct interaction, without an intermediary, with the human participants. The astounding liberation of the shaman at the end of the ritual stands as proof that the invisible visitors were really there.

What all the variants of the dark tent have in common, in both Siberia and North America, is an encounter between hunters and their game, albeit in a different, though closely related, mode than that which characterizes their interactions during the hunt. Everywhere it is practiced, the dark tent mixes animal voices with human ones, and in all of its variants it gives hunters a chance to talk, using human language, with beings that they usually relate to as prey or with the spirits that govern these beings. This practice can only be fully understood when placed in the context of the relations these boreal hunters have with the animals of the taiga, the tundra, and the ocean. For them, game is never a simple source of food, a raw material reduced to its brute state. Hunters pay close attention to the habits of animals—their relations with each other, their psychology, their perception of their environment, and especially their perception of the humans who hunt them. This was all the more necessary in times past, when the only weapons available were the spear and the bow and arrow, a situation that prevailed in many of these regions until the end of the nineteenth century. Hunters know that their encounters with wild animals are largely beyond their control. What is it that determines the

path of an animal that a hunter comes across in his quest if not the will of the creature itself to visit that particular spot rather than another? For the hunters of the boreal north, if an animal ends up being killed, it is not only because of the skill or intelligence of the hunter, and it is certainly not because of any kind of human superiority over other species, but rather because, in some way, either the animal or the invisible spirit that controls it wanted this to happen (Brightman 1993; Willerslev 2007; Tanner 1979; Lot-Falck 1953). The idea that the animal offers itself to the hunter out of love, a recurrent theme in the circumpolar world, underscores the fact that in their typical interactions, the will of the hunter is but one factor among many (Hallowell 1926).

Throughout this vast area, the bear is regarded as a quasi-human creature that understands the hunters' words; sometimes it is seen as an ancestral figure and addressed as "Grandfather," and often as a man hidden beneath a bear's animal fur and rough demeanor. The treatment of the bear expresses with utmost clarity an animist conception that is often extended to a variety of other animals: behind the appearance given by the form of their body, animals are endowed, just like humans, with intentions, perceptions, and subjectivity—in short, with a "soul." Certain animals have powerful souls that surpass the limits of their species and make them authentic "persons" with whom the hunter must interact as a peer. For these circumpolar hunting societies, personhood is not a quality exclusive to humans; nonhuman persons also exist, and they are often more powerful than human ones.¹⁶

Through exchanges with them in a common human language, the dark tent is a ritual technique that enables each participant to envisage animals as having an interiority that is much like their own. But there is another way of accessing the hidden subjectivity of animals: dreams. For its Algonquian practitioners, the shaking tent is more than just a form of entertainment; in the words of anthropologist Emmanuel Désveaux, it represents "the rite *par excellence*, the source of all knowledge" (Désveaux 1988: 155). In the Ojibwa language, this ceremony is called *kosapatshikan*, "to see over a great distance," that is, beyond the limits of the senses. The person presiding over the shaking tent is not necessarily a recognized shaman, but may be an experienced hunter who, throughout his career, has entertained intimate relations with animal spirits. These

16. The concept of "other-than-human persons," or nonhuman persons in more recent discussions, was introduced by Hallowell 1960. For a recent definition and panoramic overview of animism, see Descola 2013.

relationships are formed through private dream encounters, cultivated by the rich oneiric culture of the indigenous peoples of North America. As Désveaux points out, dreaming and the shaking tent are “two separate moments of a comprehensive procedure: seducing animal species in private to bind them to oneself and then proclaiming the quality of these relations in public” (Désveaux 1995: 439). Between the ages of ten and fifteen, young Ojibwa hunters practice a dream fast for several days that enables them to establish a mental relationship with a “dream visitor” (a *paŋwáganak*), who is often the master of a particular animal species. This dream relationship is considered an indispensable part of becoming an accomplished hunter: the visitor becomes his “guardian spirit” and confers certain powers on him. It is typically in the shaking tent that children first hear and familiarize themselves with the human voices of animals, preparing to open themselves up to these nonhuman visitors in their dreams.¹⁷

In northern Asia as well, as we will see shortly, peoples who practice the dark tent also form personal relationships with dream visitors, who teach them magical chants and assure their safety and success in hunting. There is thus a striking complementarity between the dark tent and the dream, one that is aptly summed up by Philippe Descola in terms that could be generally extended to many of the hunting societies of the North: “When animals visit humans in their dreams, they reveal themselves as they really are, that is, in their human form. Likewise, when their spirits express themselves publicly in the course of the ritual known as ‘the shaking [tent],’ they speak in the native [human] language” (Descola 2013: 14).¹⁸

The dark tent provides a public forum for exploring an animist mode of relation with nonhuman persons, one that is inherently social (based on mutually recognized personhood) and characterized by trust and cooperation, and that is reproduced in private in the dream experiences of each hunter. It is in this sense that we could describe the shaking tent as a kind of antechamber of oneiric experience, a place where hunters gather to learn how to dream. Georges Devereux’s description of the psychological link between rites and dreams for the Mohave of California is informative in this regard: “it is quite probable that a youth who has just

17. The complementary relationship between dreams and the shaking tent for the Ojibwa was highlighted by Hallowell 1966: 279, and for the Cree, by Brightman 1993: 170–76.

18. Translation modified by the present translator.

attended a curing ritual may, over the course of the following night, have one or more dreams pertaining to or derived from this (non-logical) experience. In addition, given the cultural importance of dreams in Mohave society, it is likely that this dream will preoccupy him during the following day. [...] This preoccupation will lead to a 'secondary elaboration' of the dream, which will probably consist in the expansion of the actually dreamed material by the addition of information about myths, songs, and rituals acquired in a waking state" (Devereux 1957: 1036-37). Although Mohave ritual practices differ from those of the boreal north, Devereux's analysis applies perfectly to the dark tent: taking place at night, just before the participants go to sleep, the ritual is perfectly positioned to feed their dreams with shared scenes and characters. There must therefore be a reciprocally reinforcing feedback loop between the public appearance of nonhuman visitors in a ritual led by skilled dreamers, on the one hand, and, on the other, the private encounters each participant may have with these nonhumans in their sleep.

But there is nothing academic about the way in which, in the antechamber of dreams, participants learn from their experiences of non-ocular perception. The obscurity of the dark tent, like that of dreams, excludes visual perceptions, so there are no material images to guide the individual imagination. Each seance is thus a new event full of surprises. And there will naturally be just as many variants on the individual dream experiences that follow from these events as there are dreamers. For these northern hunting societies, the aim is not to transmit a rigid body of knowledge, as is the case in religious systems based on sacred texts, but to stimulate fundamentally individualized experiences. The logic of transmission in these contexts is nicely captured by a phrase cited by David Smith in his work on the Chipewyan of the Athapaskan family: "To explain too much is to steal a person's opportunity to learn" (Smith 1998: 421).¹⁹

In the first chapter, I made a distinction between two modes of transmission of mental images: the stable canonical mode, which is reactivated in the minds of its recipients (the readers of a novel, for example), and the generative mode, which is transmitted in the form of a variety of individual productions. The mode of transmission at work in the dark tent is typically that of a generative pattern that allows for the constant renewal of individual experiences.

19. Smith borrows this phrase from Thomas Buckley's research on the Yurok of northern California (Buckley 1979: 31).

To summarize: in the dark tent, the ritual specialist largely fulfills their ritual function by eclipsing their own presence to the benefit of the relationship established between the other participants and the nonhuman visitors. In this context, *the triadic structure of the shamanic relationship—that formed by specialist, nonspecialist, and spirit—is meant to foster a dyadic exchange, putting human and nonhuman persons in direct, face-to-face contact.*

The Light Tent

At various points in the preceding pages, I have spoken of the ritual of the “light tent,” which, in northern Siberia, represents a rival practice to its dark counterpart. The terms “light tent” and “dark tent” were coined by two Russian ethnologists, Georgy and Ekaterina Prokofiev, a husband and wife who lived among the Selkup of the Yenisei River basin, a group that conducted both types of ritual. Recall that in the Selkup dark tent, the shaman would wear ordinary clothes and was tied up near an overturned cauldron before filling the space with a variety of animal cries.

The Selkup performance of the light-tent ritual is different. The gathering is lit by a central fire with the shaman sitting nearby. His eyes are closed, and he starts yawning more and more deeply, while everyone else watches him closely. He begins to chant, singing along to the rhythmic beating of his drum, and then raises his voice to call on his auxiliary spirits to join him—a centripetal movement—and settle into his body and costume (fig. 10). Growing increasingly excited, he puts on an embroidered apron, a shamanic coat covered with dozens of metallic figures representing various anthropo- and zoomorphic spirits, and an iron crown fitted with antlers. His face is covered by a fringe that dangles from the crown and partially obscures his vision. Then begins the song of his journey.

Selkup shamans each have at their disposal a repertoire of several chants that correspond to different itineraries: one describes the journey to the land of the ancestors, another the ascent into the sky, and another still the trip across the middle world. These ritual specialists share a common cosmic geography; the path to the upper world, for example, passes through a stretch of tundra where seven larch trees grow. For the most part, these chants are inherited: they reiterate the words uttered by the ancestor from whom the shaman inherited his role, so much so that listeners often claim to recognize the voice of a grandfather in that of his descendant. For the Selkup, a shaman’s song-itinerary represents

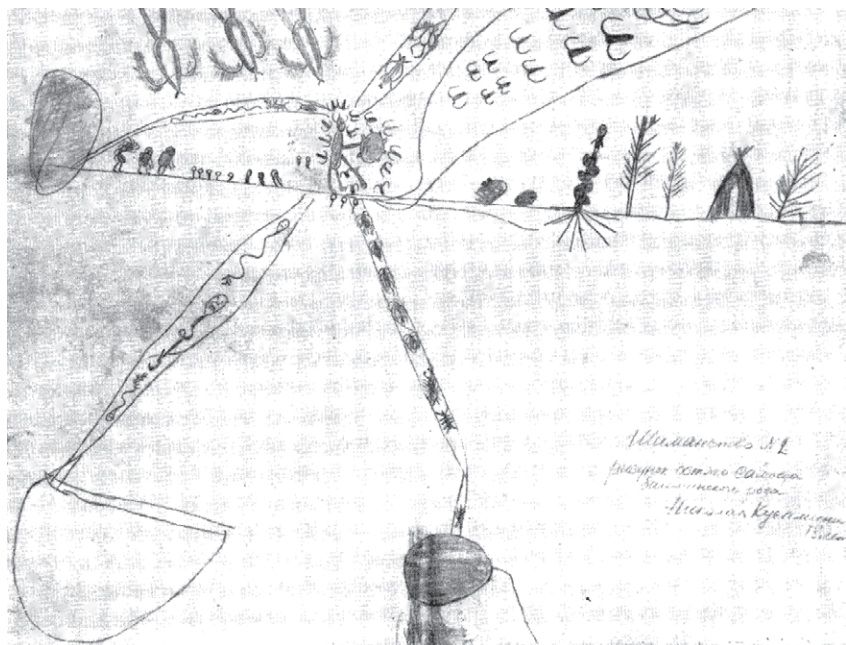


Figure 10. Selkup Drawing Depicting the Centripetal Movement of the Spirits Moving toward the Shaman from above and below. In the light tent, the spirits are understood to take their place inside the shaman's body. Prokof'eva 1961a: fig. 2.

“the road trodden by the grandfather.” Formally speaking, these chants follow a consistent structure that is typically organized into verses of eight syllables, as is also the case among the other Samoyedic-speaking peoples, which distinguishes them from ordinary, non-shamanic songs (Prokof'eva 1949, 1981; Dobzhanskaia 2008: 228).

Here is Ekatarina Prokofiev's description of a journey staged in the light tent:

He gallops around the fire on his invisible reindeer (or his bear, if he is heading to the lower world). His assistants jump up and down, repeat his chants, and are ready at any moment to catch the shaman or his drum if they fall. They understand and follow all of the shaman's actions with empathy. The sound of the pendants and the bells on the apron, coat, and drum, as well as the regular strokes of the drumstick and the melody of the chant: everything intermingles in a sonorous chaos. The lively jumping, the shimmering of the dancing shaman,

his pale face with closed eyes, the “snakes” formed by the tail of his crown floating in the air, the fringes on his costume, the flames of the hearth (sometimes luminous, sometimes dimmed): all this creates a fantastical tableau of quivering and whirling colors and lines. The participants are caught up in the action and respond in kind to the shaman’s cries. They understand his every movement. They see that he is chasing an evil spirit, fighting it, and defeating it. With his gestures and his cries, the shaman alternately represents himself, galloping on his drum-reindeer, and the spirit he is doing battle with (Prokof’eva 1981: 66–67).

Sometimes the melody breaks off, and the shaman slumps to the ground. When he comes to, he smokes for a long time in silence and then narrates the result of his journey, making several predictions. For Prokofiev, this ritual of the light tent, which is entirely centered on the shaman’s actions, can be described as a “theater of a single performer.”

Obviously, such a colorful performance, one so captivating for those in attendance, could not be conducted in the dark—hence the stark contrast between the rituals of the light and dark tents. In the latter, the participants have access only to auditory signals: chants, words, and animal noises. In the light tent, by contrast, information is available to both the eyes and the ears, with the gestures and mimicries of the shaman creating a rich visual scene. While in the dark tent the cosmic journey is reduced to the shaman’s loss of consciousness, it is represented in the light tent in such a way that the audience can follow it step by step. Based on the above example, the light tent can be characterized as a ritual technique in which the shaman, equipped with an official costume and drum and clearly lit by the fire, uses his words and gestures to represent the arrival of the spirits to his side and his own journey across the cosmos.

The light tent constituted the prototypical shamanic ritual for most of the different populations of northern Asia, who were largely unaware of the dark tent. This is true of the Altaic peoples—those speaking Tungusic languages (the Evenki, Even, Udeghe, Nanai, and Manchu), Turkic languages (the Altaians, Teleut, Khakas, Tuvans, Yakut, and Dolgan), and Mongolic languages (the Buryat and Mongols)—as well as of some Samoyedic-speaking groups (the Enets and Nenets).²⁰ As mentioned earlier, the Selkup practiced both the dark- and light-tent rituals, as was

20. The Enets and the Nenets have no knowledge of the dark tent (Prokofyeva 1963: 150).

also the case for the Khant and Ket. However, the Paleo-Asiatic peoples of the Pacific arc—the Chukchi, Koryak, Nivkh, Inuit, and Ainu—practiced only the dark tent. To be sure, Chukchi shamans did sometimes perform by the light of a bright fireplace when they took part in family rituals conducted in the main living space of a domestic tent. But on these occasions, the shaman's presence was never an essential part of the proceedings—they were one of many participants to own and play a drum and stood out only for the relative strength of their music and chants.

The light tent presents a series of striking contrasts with the dark tent, the most obvious being that it is performed in a space illuminated by fire, even if this light source is sometimes dim. The manner in which the spirits manifest themselves is also profoundly different. In the dark tent, the scene has no fixed center; the spirits move throughout the space and approach each participant in turn, such that everyone in attendance may experience some degree of contact with them. In the light tent, the stipulated setting for the actions performed by the shaman is not the actual site of the ritual, but a faraway space, a celestial world inhabited by the spirits. The audience members are thus unable to participate in the action themselves, since they are not *there* where it is really happening. In this case, they are not necessarily copresent with the spirits, and are not, in fact, invited to communicate with them. While in the dark tent the spirits arrive with the express purpose of interacting with the participants, in the light tent they arrive as the shaman's auxiliaries, there to assist the officiant and accompany him or her on the cosmic journey. The order of events in the dark tent is remarkably free: from one seance to the next, the shaman can summon different spirits in a variable order, and there are numerous, sometimes amusing surprises. The contents of the scene vary according to the individuals present at the gathering and their dialogues with the spirits. In the light tent, on the other hand, the action is constrained by the fact that it follows an itinerary through a cosmic spatial schema that is culturally defined and structured by pre-existing routes. Even though unforeseen episodes occur quite frequently, the general order of the different stages that make up the shaman's journey cannot be modified; the shaman cannot visit the spirits of the third sky before those of the second, for instance. The dark-tent ritual is thus an essentially improvised performance, whereas the light tent introduces a liturgical dimension at the level of its basic organization and in the ritual use of speech.

Finally, in the light tent, there is nothing to hide the fact that the spirits express themselves through the voice of the shaman, as everyone

in the audience can see the officiant taking on a series of alternate roles as the action progresses. The spirit can be perceived only through the body of the shaman, who becomes the hero of the action and the center of the audience's attention. While the dark-tent technique works to hide the role played by the shaman's body in the principal action of the ritual, the light tent displays it with a deliberate degree of ostentation. *The relational schema generated by the light tent therefore follows a three-part model: there are human persons and nonhuman ones, and, at the heart of their relationship, a qualified intermediary.*

Two Divisions of Imaginative Labor

For Petitot, there was something plainly demonic about a ritual performed in the dark. The idea of searching for the truth in the dark certainly goes against the grain of our modern intuitions. But something else is at stake in different cultural attitudes toward light and dark, and that is the respective status accorded to vision and non-sensory perceptions. In the dominant mindset of the West, ocular perception, which requires light, is a guarantee of some kind of relationship with reality, even if it is a biased one; the kind of mental imagery that germinates in darkness and inner fantasy, on the other hand, rarely produces anything but illusion.

Generally regarded by ethnologists as identical manifestations of a single "shamanism," the dark and light tents in fact represent two profoundly different ways of relating to the visible and the invisible. This comes clearly into view if we analyze the differences between the two ritual techniques in terms of the division of cognitive labor each involves. Darkness functions as a form of sensory deprivation, which, as psychological research has shown, favors the emergence of rich mental images and can even give rise to hallucinations comparable to those induced by psychotropic drugs. Sensory deprivation thus makes it easier to perceive the presence of other persons, even in an empty room (Corlett, Frith, and Fletcher 2009). Because it places all of its participants in identical perceptual conditions, the dark tent is in this respect a highly egalitarian device. But it is not as though each participant's imaginative experience is formed independently of the others': their imaginations are coordinated around a shared series of events. As we saw in the first chapter of this book, human beings coordinate their imaginations through various public cues, perceptible sources of information

that stimulate and orientate the imaginative production of each individual: paintings, novels, or films, for example. In the dark tent, these public cues are primarily of an auditory nature: songs, voices, animal calls, and other noises. A certain growl may evoke the presence of a bear for the participants, while a rustling noise might call up the flight of an owl. The audience *completes* the auditory cues, mentally producing the figure of an animal or anthropomorphic being. But their imaginative experience of the ritual is not limited to the observation of scenes thus evoked. Anyone in attendance may find themselves asking the spirits questions or being called on to respond to them. Based on the sounds they hear, the participants are led to picture a face-to-face situation (without being able to see it) in which they are personally involved as actors. According to the distinction we drew earlier between the *contemplative* imagination of someone watching a film and the *agentive* imagination of someone who experiences themselves playing an active role in a dream, the dark tent clearly favors the latter.

We have also noted that the scene's unfolding is not pre-ordained. The contents of the ritual largely follow the spontaneous, unpredictable character of a conversation, marked by constant reciprocal adaptations on the part of the interlocutors. Taking up again the terms of our typology of imaginative modalities, between the *guided* imagination of the novel reader and the *exploratory* imagination of someone making plans for the future, the imaginative work that is collectively performed by the participants in the dark tent seems to be largely of the *exploratory* sort.

The ritual technique of the light tent fosters a very different kind of imaginative experience. It establishes a fundamental asymmetry between the situation of the shaman, who keeps their eyes closed or has their vision obscured by the fringe of their headdress, and that of the other participants, whose eyes are fixed on this "theatre of a single performer." As the spectators keep their eyes open, not only are their afferent visual pathways unimpeded, but the spectacle itself is rich enough to capture their full attention. Here is how the Russian ethnologist Arkady Anisimov described the attitude of the Evenki audience in a light-tent ritual: "The clansmen, pressing themselves against the sides of the tent, awaited the shaman's words with palpitating hearts. The most impressionable and those with the strongest imaginations *looked with wide-open and protruding eyes* at the grim figure of the shaman" (Anisimov 1963: 100, italics added; see also Anisimov 1958: 206). While the operation of the dark tent favors the intense production of mental images, the

light tent places the shaman, with his costume and dramatic gestures, at the center of attention. And yet, as Anisimov suggests, this emphasis on vision does not mean that the participants' imaginations are inactive. The shaman's actions in the light tent never provide an exhaustively realistic view of the scene depicted, as a film would, but only a partial glimpse. The spirits the shaman interacts with remain invisible to the audience, and it falls to the imaginative labor of these participants to complete this partial view so that they can follow and understand the action portrayed. The ritual apparatus of the light tent thus implicates visual perception side by side with the production of mental imagery. Occupying two sensory channels at once—the visual and the auditory—the public cues are much richer than those of the dark tent, thus giving less freedom to the imaginative activity of each individual. The imaginative labor promoted by the light-tent ritual thus tends to be of the *guided* rather than the exploratory type.

In the light tent, moreover, it is quite rare—though not impossible—for participants to be invited by the shaman to interact and communicate with the spirits themselves. Their role is generally limited to witnessing the officiant's adventures and encouraging him or her with their chants or cries. In most cases, therefore, the imaginative production of the audience is *contemplative*, and not *agentive*.

The shaman is placed in a very different position. Their eyes are often closed, and they alone enjoy the benefit of a long-fringed headdress, a kind of individualized, miniature dark tent that reduces the noise of their visual perceptions and stimulates the flow of mental imagery. The shaman's imaginative experience, furthermore, is totally *agentive*, since it falls to them to conceive of a series of complex scenes in which they are the main protagonist. And although it is guided by the mental schema of the song-itinerary, the shaman's imaginative activity also retains an exploratory aspect, since unanticipated incidents—such as an attack from an evil spirit—can always occur along the way.

The dark tent is *a metamorphic space with no center*, where the officiant effaces himself so as to allow the other participants *to communicate with nonhumans*; the light tent, on the other hand, *gives a visible form* to the shaman's own interactions with nonhumans. When the shaman summons the spirits to the dark tent, the stipulated relational schema is a *dyadic* one, bringing participants and spirits into direct contact. By contrast, the light tent exalts a *triadic* relationship, where the intermediary (the shaman) is the indispensable link in the chain of relations between humans and their environment.

	Dark tent	Light tent
Imaginative vectors	Auditory	Visual and auditory
Performance type	Improvised	Liturgical tendency
Oral techniques	Improvised speech and wordless songs	Inherited chants with stable language
Audience's imaginative experience	Exploratory and agentive	Guided and contemplative
Relational schema	Dyadic	Triadic

In Siberia, the dark tent never enjoyed equal popularity among the various peoples who at one time or another practiced it. While the Chukchi associated the ritual with their most powerful shamans, for the Selkup it was reserved for beginners. More experienced Selkup shamans, those crowned with the antlered headdress as a symbol of their power and prestige, only perform in the light tent. They regard the dark tent as a simple form of entertainment that “no longer suits their position” (Prokof’eva 1949). This disparagement of the dark tent is echoed by the Selkup’s neighbors, the Ket of the Yenissei River basin. “Serious” Ket shamans hold this activity in low regard, whereas the public is very fond of it as a source of amusement. Like their Selkup counterparts, the great Ket shamans consider the ritual of the light tent—where they embark on their journeys across the universe in elaborate ceremonial costumes—to be more worthy of their status (Anuchin 1914: 51; Alekseenko 1981: 119).

Among the Nganasan, the dark tent seems to have disappeared from their practices without a trace around the end of the nineteenth century, as was also the case among the Nivkh of Sakhalin Island at around the same time. The vague allusions to the dark tent found in Yukaghir oral traditions suggest that they too must have abandoned the practice at an earlier date. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the shamanic practices of each of these groups had come to be dominated by the Altaic ritual of the light tent.

The light tent, then, is clearly associated with the group of populations belonging to the Altaic linguistic macrofamily, which expanded throughout northern Asia over the last millennium. Wherever the Altaics have brought the light tent into contact with a native dark-tent tradition, the latter has ended up a minor form of entertainment reserved for novice or mediocre practitioners, despite the public’s affection for it. It is easy to understand why the great professional shamans might have disparaged



Figure 11. Axes of Expansion of the Altaic Populations (Tatars, Yakut, and Tungus) over the Last Millennium.

these old customs, in which they had to be tied up so that everyone else could dialogue with the spirits. And more particularly, given the constant state of competition that exists between shamans, light-tent practitioners had the advantage of being able to display a whole arsenal of personal objects that demonstrated their power and ensured their monopoly over certain difficult actions. If, as Bogoras noted, the absence of light in the dark tent renders a ritual costume useless (Bogoras 1904–1909: 457), it is conversely conceivable that the introduction into a society of ritual costumes (possibly copied from neighboring peoples) would render the dark tent obsolete. In a competitive context, as shamans practicing the dark tent start to appear less prestigious, the shamans of subsequent generations have little incentive to take up their techniques—which are now emblematic of their forebears’ weakness. The ceremony most likely to bring glory and authority to its officiant drives out more egalitarian, but less glamorous practices.

CHAPTER 4

The Two Shamanisms

Two distinct ways of exploring the invisible and setting out to encounter nonhuman persons are revealed by the rituals of the dark tent and the light tent. On open display in the latter, while hidden and bound up in the dark tent, the shaman seems to enjoy a profoundly different status in either case. Behind each of these techniques are in fact two different forms of shamanism, both of which find themselves in competition with one another in the immense expanse of northern Asia. In this chapter, we will take a detailed look at these two modes of relating to the invisible, which, although they sometimes intersect and interpenetrate one another, constitute two clearly opposed poles.

We begin with hierarchical, light-tent shamanism, which was the first form encountered and then studied by Western travelers; then we will move on to heterarchical, dark-tent shamanism, so different from the former that some observers have even wondered whether the term shamanism can be accurately used to describe it.

Open Bodies, Closed Bodies: The Hierarchical World

The Tuvans of the upper valleys of the Süt-Höl (or “milk lake”) district live in wooden yurts and keep flocks of sheep, goats, and cows. In 2006, one family from this region found themselves beset by a number of problems. Their livestock was dwindling, and several family members

were troubled by nightmares. They consulted the shaman Ondarmaa, who told them that their *haacha* had been torn. As one herder explained to me: “The *haacha* protects the household and its livestock, but us simple folk can’t tell whether it’s open or not. Only the shaman can see it. And only the shaman can close the *haacha* once it’s open, an ordinary person can’t do this.”

Ondarmaa, for her part, describes the *haacha* as a kind of rainbow that arcs over the camp. When a family’s *haacha* has an opening in it, its members are exposed to intrusions from pathogenic spirits and curses sent by enemy families. Bad dreams are thus explained as visits from demons while a person sleeps. The *haacha* is kept closed by the “mistress of the fire” (*ot eezi*), a female spirit present in every family’s hearth. But if family members neglect her, or if someone offends her by throwing dirt or refuse into the fire, then in a weakened and vexed state, she will eventually start letting evil get through. Tuvan families generally take great care of the mistress, offering her a few drops of the first-brewed milk tea every morning and sharing bits of meat and fat with her at every meal. But these daily gestures are not enough: to keep her powerful, it is necessary to invite a shaman to come and perform the “fire ritual” (*ot dagyyr*) every year. This is what the afflicted family from Süt-Höl had neglected to do. And so, to remedy the situation, Ondarmaa organized the ritual: a copious pancake was made from a mixture of butter, millet flour, meat, and juniper, and then thrown into the fire; the yurt was lit with candles of butter, and while beating her drum, the shaman sang praises to the mistress of the fire and then to the skies (*denjer*). The operation was intended to restore the strength of the mistress of the fire and dispose her favorably by feeding and flattering her, and reaffirming her bond with the celestial powers. For seven days after the ritual, it was important to keep any milk or meat from leaving the house so as to “stop the good fortune,” meaning to secure it within the home and prevent it from leaving again.

The *haacha* protects the entirety of a domestic group, both herders and livestock, a human–animal ensemble that the Tuvans call *aal-kodan*. In this hybrid community, men, sheep, and dogs are all exposed to the same sources of disease and bad dreams. The name *haacha* itself derives from the verb *haa*, “to close,” and the action of the shaman who comes to restore it is described with the verb phrase *haacha haar*, which might be translated as “to close the closure.” Keeping protective barriers closed is a collective obsession for the Tuvans: any breach is a threat, and it is for this reason, too, that they traditionally avoid going out bare-headed

and use a belt to fasten their coats shut. When it comes to their homes, however, they cannot do this alone: keeping the *haacha* closed and the household in balance requires the regular intervention of a specialist like the shaman Ondarmaa, who came to put things right for the family in Süt-Höl.

In what we call “hierarchical” traditions, shamans enjoy a monopoly on actions that are essential to maintaining good relations between humans and nonhumans. They intervene at all levels of their community’s religious life, in individual and domestic rituals, as well as in larger collective celebrations. Today, a Tuvan man or woman might consult a shaman to find out whether they have chosen a good life partner, to cure an illness, lift a curse, pass an exam, or even to avoid car accidents. Families are expected to invite a shaman into their home once a year to feed the mistress of the fire. The presence of a shaman is required in funerary rites to lead the soul of the deceased to the land of the dead. Shamans also take part in annual collective festivals, where the population of a rural district might gather around a sacred place or a clan around a shamanic tree. In these public gatherings of several dozen or even hundreds of people, the officiant invokes the master spirits of the place and of the skies, and asks them to grant the group prosperity and fertility. If a group fails to hold one of these annual ceremonies, its members will feel exposed, and all deaths and accidents that occur during the year will be seen as punishment on the part of the neglected spirits. As is the case elsewhere in southern Siberia, and even more so in Mongolia, shamans have been competing with Buddhist lamas since the seventeenth century, and the latter have not shied away from copying their rituals and, under the protection of local authorities, taking their place in certain territorial ceremonies—which, of course, merely lends a Buddhist flavor to what remains a fundamentally hierarchical mode of relation.

Things are quite similar in the taiga, where the shamans of Evenki hunting communities are also responsible for both individual and collective rituals. They treat illnesses, perform divinations, lead the souls of the deceased to the land of the ancestors, cleanse unlucky hunters, and have a central role in the great collective “renewal-of-life” rituals held in the spring or autumn. Clan communities observe a similar seasonal ritual in the Yenisei basin, where they perform dances mimicking game animals. Beating the drum and chanting, the shaman embarks on a journey to visit the “mistress of the world” (*bugady mushun*), who sometimes appears to him in the form of a female moose, sometimes as an old woman. This mother of game animals spends her life surrounded by herds of

deer, which she considers her livestock and keeps in an enclosure. The shaman asks her for permission to take away some of the animals' souls, then uses his drum to catch them, wielding it like a lasso, and brings them back to his clan's hunting grounds. When the various other parts of the ritual have been concluded, the participants sacrifice domesticated reindeer in honor of the master spirit of the taiga, and then the assembly eats them (Anisimov 1958: 28–32).

The purpose of all these actions is to promote the clan's hunting success. The souls the shaman obtains by visiting the mistress of the world have a multiplying effect on the number of elk and reindeer on the group's hunting grounds. The shamanic journey is therefore seen as essential to maintaining good relations between clan members and the nonhuman beings of the forest, and thus ultimately to reproducing the resources from which the clan draws its sustenance. Without the annual intervention of the shaman, hunters would perceive their relationship with the world as weakened and feel themselves to be at risk of famine.

In short, in the Altaic world to which both the Tuvans and the Evenki belong, shamanic interventions are considered indispensable to the individual life cycle, to the harmony and wellbeing of each household, and to the maintenance of good relations between the human community as a whole and the environment that sustains it. And this holds regardless of whether a group's primary mode of subsistence is pastoralism or hunting and gathering. Therefore, in these societies, we could say that ordinary people *delegate* the management of an important part of their relationship with the world to a single individual who they recognize as more powerful than themselves—the shaman. It is a distribution of ritual tasks based on the presumption that certain individuals have some particular abilities that others do not.

As we discussed earlier, one of the most widespread shamanic practices in northern Asia is that of the specialist piercing their own body. For shamans, this is a way of showing that their bodies have a porous, or permeable quality, that they are *open* to the invisible: a physical characteristic that makes the doubly centripetal and centrifugal movement of the shamanic ritual possible. But what about the bodies of those who are not shamans? Are they to some degree less open or are they totally closed? Are they, too, capable of maintaining some kind of relationship with the invisible?

Among the Tuvans, non-shamans call themselves “simple folk,” and it is just as clear to them as it is to the shamans that maintaining good relations with the gods and spirits is an essential part of any normal

life. Everyone has to perform a certain number of daily ritual actions to protect themselves from misfortune: feeding the fire every morning, as we have seen; but also offering libations of tea or milk to the sky, the mountains, and each of the cardinal points, while uttering the words, “Have mercy, merciful one” (*örshee haiyrakan*); flicking a few drops of vodka off a finger before drinking; tying ribbons to sacred trees near hallowed springs and mountain passes; offering a libation to the spirit of the forest when setting out to hunt; saying words of respect to a bear you have just killed; and so on. Does this mean that all Tuvans are shamans? Certainly not as they themselves see it. Shamans do things with spirits that “simple folk” would never imagine doing. For example, the Tuvans often describe the shaman as someone who “converses with the spirits,” or as “someone who sees what simple folks’ eyes cannot see and hears what their ears cannot hear.”

Ordinary people do have access to a certain mode of communication with the invisible, but this mode has some distinctive parameters. Firstly, it is unilateral: ordinary people might speak to the mountain, but they do not expect the mountain to respond. Secondly, it consists of prescribed utterances, conventional formulas handed down by tradition. This ritualized mode of communication is therefore very different from the kind of language used in ordinary circumstances, most often in conversational contexts, which are face-to-face interactions based on the co-presence of participants, with a general sense of immediacy and spontaneity (Clark 1996).

Of course, Tuvan shamans often address nonhuman entities in a ritualized form as well, most notably in their long chants; but the shamanic mode of communication distinguishes itself from that of ordinary people in regular episodes that take on the formal hallmarks of a conversation. When a Tuvan family invites a shaman to lead a deceased person to the land of the dead, for example, the specialist engages in a free, improvised dialogue with the person’s soul, alternately assuming the role of himself and that of the deceased. He questions, consoles, and admonishes the soul; and the soul protests, but generally ends up accepting its fate and taking leave of the world of the living. These dialogues are full of unexpected twists and turns: the deceased might rebel, make unexpected revelations, announce where they have hidden their savings, or simply refuse to communicate at all. Tuvan shamans conduct similar conversations with their auxiliary spirits, like the bear and the raven. At other times they might scold demons, then grab them and throw them away into the distance.

This is what makes Tuvan shamanic communication stand out: it unfolds in the form of a *face-to-face interaction* with a distinct partner whose reactions are at least in part unpredictable. Because of their ability to perceive what others do not, shamans are able to experience a kind of co-presence with things that are absent to others, to treat the invisible in the same way as the visible, and have a sense of familiarity with what everyone else considers strange and disquieting.

Interactional exchanges with spirits are not entirely unheard of in the case of “simple folk,” but they experience them very differently. Most old hunters can recall moments when they have heard, seen, or felt spirits, but these are often frightening episodes, recounted with great emotion. There are even stories of hunters who let themselves be drawn into long-lasting amorous relationships with female spirits. The following example was told to me by members of the Tozhu population in eastern Tuva:

In the forest there is the shamans’ river, a place where people are afraid to go. Not long ago, though, two boys stopped there. One of them started to go crazy, seeing people coming from far and wide to sit around the fire. He invited them to come and sit with him. Most of all, he was drawn to a beautiful woman: she was the mistress of the place. The other, younger boy couldn’t see her. His friend ran into the taiga, ignoring the deep snow, and said to him: “This woman is so beautiful! We are talking together, she is calling me to her. You’re very young, so go home. I’m going to stay.”

The young boy didn’t want to leave his friend alone, but his friend got so angry with him that he went home. Back in the village, he told their family, “There’s something wrong with him. Come with me to bring him back.” And when they got to the forest, they saw his tracks all over the place, circling through the deep snow. And then they found him dead. When they took him away in the truck, it was terrible. The sideboards kept falling open by themselves, as if they wouldn’t let him go, and then the truck broke down. They left the truck there and had to bring the body back home on a sled pulled by a snowmobile. The other boy, his friend, when they brought him back to the village, he fainted and lay unconscious for two days. The dead boy’s sister came back a bit crazy too, so they brought in a shaman from Kyzyl to treat her.

It’s a terrible place, and that is why herders and hunters always go around it.

For a “simple man,” meeting and becoming intimate with a spirit is to be condemned to madness and a tragic death. As the Tozhu put it, in a seemingly paradoxical yet highly meaningful saying: “If a man who can’t see masters of places meets the master of a place, it’s a very bad thing” (“*Cher èèzin körbes kizhi čer èèzinge uzhurazhyrga dyka bagaj.*”). Ordinary people can only live in the company of spirits and see the invisible after they die; and so, if an event like this befalls you before then, when you are still alive, it can only mean you already have one foot in the grave. The *fact* of having a relationship with a spirit is therefore clearly not the same thing as the *ability* to have one, and it is the latter which sets the shaman apart. The encounter is a chance event, but the ability is an intrinsic trait, a predestined quality. Unless you have this kind of predisposition, perceiving something that is normally invisible is an aberration with potentially tragic consequences—and not only during your waking life, but also when you are asleep.

As we saw above, the Süt-Höl family with the partially open *haacha* had begun to receive visits from spirits in their dreams. As with neighboring populations, the Tuvans have two main theories about the origin of dreams: dream-journeys and dream-visits. Dream-journeys are caused by the soul leaving the body during sleep. When the dreamer traverses a landscape, their visions correspond to the landscapes traversed by their soul. But it can be dangerous for the soul to take flight like this, and it is important to never wake a sleeper too abruptly, in case the soul remains outside the body. Other dreams might be interpreted as a visit from a spirit. Some of my Tuvan friends have told me about nocturnal experiences in which they have been able to see everything extremely realistically, as if awake, but they cannot move and they feel suffocated. The Tuvan name for these hallucinatory dream experiences is “the dark crush” (*haram bastykkän*), which evokes the supposed action of a pathogenic spirit on the dreamer. We recognize in this phenomenon what psychologists describe as sleep paralysis or hypnagogic hallucinations, striking experiences that different populations from all over the world identify as ghostly visitations (Tedlock 1987: 19).

For the moment it should be noted that these two theories—the dream-journey and the dream-visit—offer opposite interpretations: the first is centrifugal, describing the movement of consciousness out of and away from the body, while the second is centripetal, postulating a movement toward the dreamer by an invisible agent. This movement-based interpretation is by no means peculiar to the Tuvans; several populations

all over the world interpret dreams in a similar fashion.¹ This double movement, centrifugal and centripetal, is also at the heart of the shamanic ritual, in which the spirits move toward the shaman, while the officiant's soul moves out into the invisible realm. It is as though, in a sleeping state, ordinary folk do something akin to what shamans do in their rituals: dreams thus have the potential to turn any individual into a quasi-shaman. This is why it is crucial to consider the various roles and values that different societies attach to dream experiences.

For the Tuvans, one of the most common forms a dream-visit can take is an encounter with a deceased loved one. These experiences are traditionally interpreted as visits from the soul of the deceased to someone they had been close to in life and whose company he or she now seeks. But the deceased are unaware that this kind of affection for a living person can put the living in danger, entangling them in the world of the dead and drawing them away from that of the living. And indeed, when a Tuvan person dies, it is not uncommon for a loved one to soon follow them, suffering an accident, depression, or suicide. This is why dream-visits are regarded as real events, important and critical moments in a person's life, and are thought to pose a certain threat to the dreamer—unless that dreamer is a shaman, of course. If an ordinary person finds themselves regularly affected by such visits, the situation can be extremely worrying, and they might consult a shaman, who will perform a ritual to definitively drive away the soul of the deceased.

We should add, however, that not all oneiric experiences conform to one of these two models—the dream-journey and the dream-visit. More often than not, the cause of a dream is less important than the question of how to interpret it. There are other kinds of dreaming that are cultivated and expected, like those that Tuvan hunters practice before setting out. For example, drinking alcohol or seeing horses in a dream means you are likely to find game. Dreaming that you lose a tooth, on the other hand, is a bad sign, meaning that a relative is about to die. It is possible therefore for one individual's dream to signify something about the life of another: you can “dream for someone else,” as ethnologist Caroline

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1. See, for example, the recent volume edited by Roger Lohmann: *Dream Travelers: Sleep Experiences and Culture in the Western Pacific*. As Lohmann writes, “[these] religious uses of dreams depend on the notion that real travel takes place in dreams, either of the soul to the spirits, or the spirits to the soul” (Lohmann 2003: 2).

Humphrey has said of the Mongols, for whom the loss of a tooth also heralds the death of a relative (Humphrey and Hürelbaatar 1996).²

Most ordinary people's dreams are interpreted along these lines: metaphorically, that is, according to a few conventional rules that make up an unwritten dream key. These ordinary dreams do not have the status of real events *per se*, but are signs to be decoded of an event to come. Far from being reduced to the status of mere illusions with little value beyond the individual—as is the case in the modern West—being able to “dream for someone else,” means that dreams can take on a social significance. When it comes to the dreams of ordinary people, only those involving visits are interpreted literally, as real events, and these incidents are deemed abnormal and even dangerous.³

Things are quite different when you are a shaman. Take the Khakas shaman Nadia's dream, for example, in which she saw herself cut up by strangers: shamans' oneiric experiences are always treated literally, as real encounters with spirits and souls. Almost all shamans go through a period of frequent and intense dreaming during the initial crisis, in the course of which they come to know the spirit of an initiating ancestor as well as several auxiliary spirits. Frequent contact with the souls of the dead is not only harmless for these individuals, it is an essential part of their status and practice as shamans. If a shaman reports that an ancestor has told them in a dream that they are going to receive a new drum, their

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2. Alexandra Lavrillier has noted the same dream image, with the same meaning, among the Evenki in the Stanovoy Mountains, as well as the same hunting dreams mentioned here in reference to the Tozhu (Lavrillier 2005a: 248). There is much to be learned from the oneiric geography of northern Asia.
 3. Yet, according to Hamayon, Evenki, Northern Altai, and Buryat hunters, all of whom belong to the hierarchical tradition as we have defined it, see themselves united in dreams with the daughter of the spirit of the forest, heralding a successful hunt (1990: 393). In fact, the identification of the woman in these dreams as a female master spirit comes not from any indigenous sources, but rather from the hypothesis proposed in 1929 by the influential ethnologist L. P. Potapov, then adopted by his disciples (Potapov 1929: 128–29; Alekseev 1980: 255; Galdanova 1981: 156). In reality, this erotic dream belongs to a set of positively auspicious dreams which hunters themselves interpret not literally, but metaphorically. As we will soon see, in the hierarchical world, hunters who have erotic dreams never claim to actually be the spirit's lover, as Yukaghir hunters do.

entourage will take the message literally, as an order rather than a sign that needs to be interpreted metaphorically.

Tuvans observe a division of oneiric labor between “simple folk,” on the one hand, whose dreams are either literal and, in that case, dangerous, or metaphorical; and ritual specialists, on the other, whose dreams are real events, integral to the person’s identity.

For Tuvans, dreams and visions are privileged experiences that open onto face-to-face interactions with nonhuman persons, whether master spirits of certain places or ancestors. But these modes of communication are not accessible to everyone: this kind of openness is thought to be as destructive for ordinary people as it is valuable for specialists. This is because “simple folk, with eyes of water and hearts of blood,” are closed by nature, and must take precautions to preserve their closedness: encircling their bodies in a belt, refraining from yawning, stopping the souls of infants from escaping through their still-open fontanelles, and shielding their camp under the protection of a *haacha*. Any opening represents a breach that would expose them to all manner of aggression from invisible powers as well as to loss of the soul.

The spectacular contrast between the shamanic costume and the clothes of ordinary people is telling in this regard⁴: while simple folk fasten their clothes tightly around themselves with a belt, the shaman’s coat is loose and unfettered. Some costumes even have special holes around the armpits or the chest to let the spirits through. As we have seen, the shaman has an open body that allows certain forces to flow in and out through the mouth, armpits, navel, crown of the head, and the anus. While an ordinary person would perish if their soul left their body, the shaman’s soul can easily take leave and travel across the cosmos without posing any risk to the integrity of the shaman’s person. The shamanic body can thus let the soul out and allow other spirits and forces in. “I’m like a transformer,” Ondarmaa told me. If her patients were to receive energy directly from the sky, they would suffer something like an electric shock. But by allowing it to pass through her body first, the shaman-transformer converts this power and adapts it to the inferior capacity of the ordinary body. The openness of the shaman’s conductive body thus stands in contrast to the lack of conductivity that characterizes non-shamanic bodies.

Some hierarchical groups, like the Yakut and Teleut, explicitly express the contrast between shamans as people with “open bodies” and

4. Gaëlle Lacaze has made the same observation of the Mongols (2000).

non-shamans as those with “closed bodies,” or sometimes “closed chests” (Alekseev 1984: 204; Dyrenkova 1949: 161, 166). The Khakas call ordinary people *hal*, meaning “inexperienced” or “stupid.” Even in their own prayers, these non-shamans describe themselves in remarkably unflattering terms:

I am simpler than a heifer, dumber than a calf,
I understand nothing,
I see nothing,
I am a stupid hero with no eyes,
I am a slave hero with no ears! (Butanaev 2003: 209)

Here the non-shaman describes himself as a *hul*, or “slave,” a term already used in Old Turkic (*kuł*) in reference to the institution of slavery, at one point omnipresent in the Eurasian steppe. “Simple folk” see nothing and hear nothing: they are closed to the invisible and have no perception of it. One of the more striking manifestations of this distinction is seen in the shaman’s privileged relationship to ritual objects. For the Tuvans, the Khakas, and the Yakut, only the shaman possesses a ritual drum, and once the instrument has been consecrated, no ordinary person may touch it on pain of dropping dead on the spot (Potapov 1947; Kenin-Lopsan 1987: 54).

In hierarchical traditions, to be clear, shamanic openness has a symmetrical correlation with the closed nature of the ordinary population. Openness and closedness are complementary qualities, each one implying the existence of the other; and so the shaman defines himself or herself as open, in contrast to closed people, and the latter see themselves as hermetically sealed, in contrast to the specialist’s porosity. The perceptive abilities of ordinary people, which are strictly confined to the sphere of the visible, start to look incomplete when compared to the plenitude of shamanic perceptions, fully immersed in the invisible. The qualities of openness and closedness thus form a system in the shamanic hierarchy, in a manner not unlike the mutual implication of the pure and the impure in Louis Dumont’s description of the Indian caste system (Dumont 1966). Castes, according to Dumont, are stratified according to each person’s relative degree of purity. The shamanic hierarchy is based on openness in much the same way. As a system that turns individuals into interconnected parts of a whole, Siberian hierarchicalism places ordinary people in a position of *structural dependency* in relation to their shamans: because of their incomplete nature, they need

a complete being to help them manage their relationship to the world around them.

Of course, there are nuances between the various hierarchical traditions. Tuvan shamanism—which was the subject of my own fieldwork—represents one of the most rigid forms, but also, it is worth noting, one of the only shamanic traditions still alive today in Siberia. Tungus shamanism—of which the Evenki were the largest representatives, and which has been essentially decapitated for lack of shamans—allotted more power to ordinary people. As is relatively standard in the hierarchical world, only the shaman was allowed to possess a ritual drum, but ordinary Evenki were allowed to touch and play the instrument when it was passed around at certain points in ceremonies (Shirokogoroff 1935: 303). And yet, despite these more flexible rules, the Evenki were no less conscious of the limits of their own abilities in comparison to those of their shamans. The interactive and conversational mode of communicating with the invisible, which involved switching back and forth between the role of the spirit and that of the interlocutor, was reserved for the shaman alone. Sergei Shirokogoroff quite aptly describes this phenomenon of self-limitation on the part of the ordinary population, which served to curtail the extreme collective excitement that could spread through the crowd during a ritual:

The rhythmic music and singing and later the “dancing” of the shaman gradually involve every participant more and more in a collective action. When the audience begins to repeat refrains together with the assistants, only those who are defective fail to join the chorus. The tempo of the action increases, the shaman with a spirit is no more an ordinary man or relative, but is a “placing” for the spirit; the spirit acts together with the audience, and this is felt by every one of the audience. The state of many participants is now near to that of the shaman himself, and only a strong belief that in the presence of the shaman the spirit may enter only into the shaman, detains the participants from being “possessed” in mass by the spirit (Shirokogoroff 1935: 331).

This collective emotion is certainly powerful, but it is the participants themselves who keep its spread in check, well aware that they are not qualified to get too close to the spirit. The participants “follow” the shaman’s actions and repeat the verses he utters, because only the shaman, as author of these words, has the authority to interact with the spirits. This

inhibition on the part of ordinary Evenki participants is easy to explain: just as in any other hierarchical tradition, their shamans enjoy a status that can only be attained through inheritance.

The Russian ethnologist Grigory Potanin, who together with his wife went on numerous expeditions among the Turkic- and Mongolic-speaking peoples of Inner Asia in the late nineteenth century, gives the following summary of how the shamanic function is passed down in the Altaic world: "The title of shaman is no ordinary kind of inheritance, but a physical one; the ability to shamanize is innate; no more than a basic knowledge of the practice, along with the *alkysh* [shamanic chants] and the superficial aspects of the ritual, can be acquired through learning." And he adds: "The shamanic function is not always transmitted from father to son, but like a congenital disease, the shamanic inclination often is hereditary. [...] If a boy or girl suffering from seizures is born into a family where there is no shaman, it must mean that there is a shaman somewhere among the deceased ancestors. And if there is a shaman in the lineage, then his blood will necessarily be reborn in his descendants" (Potanin 1883, vol. 4: 56–57).

As I observed during my own time in Tuva, what makes a shaman authentic is having shamanic ancestors, and the more ancestors there are, the more powerful a shaman is. It is from their ancestors that Tuvan shamans inherit their distinguishing physical characteristics, foremost among which is their "white" or "pure" skeleton. It thus makes no sense to ask when somebody became a shaman; they are a shaman from birth, and only cease to be so in death. Gifted individuals are typically identified in childhood by unusual physical traits or behaviors: for example, being born with a caul, as was mentioned earlier, or having a sixth finger. It is important to note that the shamanic status is passed on cognatically (on either the maternal or paternal side) and can skip generations fairly unpredictably. The fact that it can be passed on to both men and women gives the status a transgressive aspect in these societies, where property and other titles are typically passed down matrilineally. Though shamans are associated with physical singularities throughout Siberia—visible markers of a singular essence of the shamanic being—it is only in hierarchical traditions that this essence is conceived of as an innate, inalterable, and *hereditary* trait. This is as true of the Buryat, the Yakut, the Tungus, the Ket, and the Selkup, as it is of the eastern Samoyedic peoples in the Arctic: "The Nganasan never miss a chance to let you know: every shaman has ancestors who were shamans before him." (Lambert

2002–2003: 262). Thus *a constitutive relationship with one's ancestors lies at the heart of the hierarchical shaman's essential identity*.⁵

Another striking feature of hierarchical shamanism is its immoderate penchant for ostentation. You will have no difficulty telling who the shaman is in any ritual context: as the only member of the assembly wearing a ceremonial costume and carrying a ritual drum, he is very much the center of attention. None of the hierarchical traditions can function without an elaborate collection of images and objects, a point that Shirokogoroff makes quite clearly with regard to Evenki shamanism: “there is no shamanism without paraphernalia. [...] If a shaman has no paraphernalia, he or she is not a good shaman in the eyes of the people. The richer the paraphernalia, the more influential the shaman” (Shirokogoroff 1935: 287). As to this last point, consider that the figurines attached to an Evenki shaman's costume can weigh up to forty kilograms!

It is important to note, however, that none of this equipment is ever manufactured or purchased by shamans themselves. Once an experienced shaman has approved a novice's investiture, the members of the community make the necessary equipment for the new specialist and present it to them on the occasion of one or more ceremonial festivals, which usually involve animal sacrifices. The focal point of these investiture ceremonies is the ritual “animation” of the new shaman's drum; the instrument is brought to life, in other words, and imbued with its effective power. These festivals typically bring several families together, sometimes a considerable number of people, and can go on for several days (we will return to this topic at greater length in chapter 12).

In northern Asia, what we are calling the hierarchical style of shamanism is the dominant form among the region's Altaic populations—those belonging to the Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic language families, in

5. On the transgressive nature of the hereditary transmission of shamanism in a patrilineal context, see my own argument in Stépanoff 2014a. The shamanic status is usually acquired through maternal or paternal inheritance among the Buryat (Hangalov 1958–1960 II: 158), the Yakut (Ksenofontov [1928] 1998: 56), and the Evenki (Shirokogoroff 1935; Lindenau 1983: 93). For the Ket, “the art of shamanizing is not given to just anyone; it cannot be learned, but is something innate. At present, only those who have shamans in their lineage can become shamans. [...] In no case is it possible to stop being a shaman.” There do exist some specialists among these peoples without any shamanic ancestors, but they are considered weak (see Stépanoff 2014a: 178–93).

other words. But it is also found among certain Samoyedic-speaking peoples, such as the Selkup, the Enets, and the Nganasan, as well as one Paleo-Asiatic group, the Ket. What characterizes each of these shamanic traditions as hierarchical is the presumption of a *strict inequality of competencies between people who are open or closed in relation to the invisible*. Hierarchical shamans are categorically different from ordinary people because of unusual innate physical traits, a distinct hereditary essence, and their exclusive right to possess certain ritual objects. There do exist, however, very different forms of shamanism, some of which we shall now explore as we shift our focus to the Siberian Far East.

Heterarchical Magics

By the time the scholars of Vitus Bering's second great expedition reached the Kamchatka peninsula on the Pacific in the 1730s, they had grown used to meeting hierarchical shamans, with their brightly colored costumes and loud drums, among the countless peoples they had visited since leaving Saint Petersburg. But the traditions observed by Kamchatka's inhabitants struck them as very strange in comparison. For Stepan Krasheninnikov, it seemed like the Itelmen (or the Kamchadals, as he called them) just did not have shamans: "The Kamchadals have no specific shaman like other local peoples; but all women, particularly old ones, and the *koekhchuch*, are regarded as magicians and interpreters of dreams" (Krasheninnikov [1755] 1949: 412).⁶ The *koekhchuch* that Krasheninnikov refers to were male-born individuals who had adopted a female social identity: they dressed as women, performed feminine activities, and lived in wedlock with men who sometimes had one or more ordinary wives. Another member of the expedition, the scholar Georg Wilhelm Steller, had no qualms using the term shaman to designate these individuals, but he also observed that they were shown no respect by other members of the community, had neither costumes nor drums, and the ritual actions they performed could just as easily be carried out by any non-shaman (Steller 1774: 277).

With no costume to confer status and no monopoly on ritual practices, the authority of the Itelmen specialists seemed to be not nearly as institutionalized as that of their counterparts in hierarchical traditions. Furthermore, shamanism was only a minor aspect of the Itelmen's

6. Translation by Charles Stépanoff.

intense ritual life, which was punctuated by a number of large-scale collective festivals with round dances and pantomimes in which performers would mimic the movements of animals. For example, Krashennnikov witnessed seasonal ceremonies in which women would perform dances, crying out to signal the presence of spirits and using their gestures to represent the spirits entering their bodies through their mouths. At several points in the performance, the women would collapse, stunned “in a kind of ecstasy.” Krashennnikov’s remarks on these proceedings are telling: “This spectacle seemed stranger and more repulsive to me than Yakut shamanism, for there only the shaman goes into a frenzy, but here the whole settlement does” (Krashennnikov [1755] 1949: 417).⁷ Familiar with the hierarchical ceremonies performed by the Yakut, where only the specialist can directly interact with the spirits, the explorer was surprised to come across a population for whom anyone could behave in this extraordinary manner and thus see the ritual fervor of the event take on a collective form. And indeed, by opening their mouths and welcoming in the spirits, these women were demonstrating the kind of corporeal porosity that in hierarchical traditions is strictly reserved for shamans. Clearly the Itelmen had nothing of the sense of inhibition that Shirokogoroff observed among the Tungus, which held them one step back from the shaman and kept them from surrendering to the forces of possession.

But Itelmen shamanism was not as exceptional as these early explorers believed. A little further north, Koryak shamans had no costumes either and were also often recruited from a class of men—the *qava’u*, as they were known—who wore women’s clothing and lived in partnerships with men. For the Koryak, it was the spirits who forced these individuals to become women: any male task they took on would end in failure, and men’s tools would simply break in their hands. As a Russian observer wrote in the late eighteenth century, “they have no desire to do this and it is often with tears in their eyes that they take up the needle” (Titova 1978: 103; cf. Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 90–92). This kind of shamanic gender inversion has been described in the greatest detail among the Chukchi, for whom it was still well established at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is thus to the Chukchi that we will turn our attention to get a better grasp on the peculiarities that make this type of shamanism so different from what we know of the hierarchical world.

7. Translated by Charles Stépanoff. On the spirits entering the mouths of women, see p. 428.

"I am no shaman [...] but with our people the power of singing comes voluntarily with every danger or illness. Then it passes away, but I cannot tell where its house is. It is the same with the power of drumming. It comes in time of need, then it passes, and returns to its own house" (Bogoras 1904–1909: 463). This was how one Chukchi individual explained the origin of his magical abilities to the ethnologist Waldemar Bogoras; though he occasionally practiced spells, he himself made no claim to being a shaman. His words here suggest a profoundly original conception of individual expertise. For him, the abilities to perform ritual chants and use the ritual drum are like living entities, characters who come and go and even have a "house." It would be difficult to find a better formulation of the idea that these abilities are not intrinsic, innate traits of the individual, as a hierarchical practitioner would have it. In this case, these powers are entirely *independent* of the individual, who acquires them just as easily as he loses them. This profoundly non-essentialist conception of shamanic ability sheds a good deal of light on how the Chukchi relate to magic and the idea of individual talent.

The difference between the Chukchi tradition and the various Altaic shamanisms is clearly illustrated by the free access ordinary members of the former group have to the ritual drum. As we mentioned earlier, the sound of the drum acts as a kind of sonic veil, shifting attention away from our auditory afferents and toward non-sensory perceptions. Far from the prohibitions surrounding the shamanic instrument in the Altaic world, in Chukchi and Koryak communities, each family has its own ritual drum and sometimes several. It is simply a household item, like the oil lamp or the family sledges. Anyone can pick up the drum and play it whenever they like, beating along as they sing their own personal songs for pleasure. As Bogoras writes, "The transition from such songs to shamanistic performances is quite imperceptible, and in this way it is fair to say that every Chukchee may play the shaman in all branches of the craft as far as his skill and inclination permit him to do so" (Bogoras 1904–1909: 413).

Chukchi religious life, moreover, is neither limited to shamanic practices nor centered on the figure of the shaman. "Collective ceremonies are not led by shamans," the missionary Argentov observed in the mid nineteenth century, "instead each head of family performs his own religious rites. At large communal gatherings, the priestly function is assumed by the head of family who organized the celebration" (cited in Vdovin 1981: 197). There are thus no shamans involved in the collective seasonal ceremonies that form the core of Chukchi religious life, primarily devoted

to the worship of ancestors and deities. When shamans are called upon, it is either to heal the sick by casting out demons and recovering the patient's soul, to converse with the dead, or to see what others are unable to see—to track down a lost herd, for example. As we saw in the previous chapter, Chukchi shamans mainly operate under cover of the dark tent, while collective rituals are conducted in the light.

One of the main familial ceremonies is the festival held in autumn to mark the slaughtering of domestic reindeer. The family gathers in the tent, and everyone, children included, takes turns beating the drum, singing, dancing, and trying to summon spirits into themselves. Several of the adults succeed: they leap up, twisting their bodies into violent contortions, and utter a string of unintelligible words and animal cries, all the while vigorously shaking their heads and letting their lips vibrate, so that out comes the familiar noise of the spirits: prrrr (Bogoras 1904–1909: 274, 413).

During the thanks-giving ceremonies held for success in hunting, several families gather in a single tent, and up to a dozen drums can be beaten at any time. As Bogoras writes, “the huge Chukchi tent has been almost hermetically sealed for the festival so that it can be specially filled with smoke from a dying fire. The combined sound of the drums and the enraged screams and cries of the participants—which can either be human or animal depending on the spirit represented—is overwhelming. As is required by the ritual, the whole family—relatives, friends, guests: twenty to twenty-five people—dances, bellows, and wails around the fire” (Bogoras 1910: 8). For Bogoras, this represents “a certain kind of psychosis that seizes all of the participants at once.” In more precise anthropological terms, we could describe this as a scene of collective possession, exactly what the inhibition among the Evenki is designed to prevent.

In a ceremony like this, anyone present, regardless of age or gender, can behave in a way that could be culturally interpreted as a form of communication, or even identification, with the spirits. These behaviors are even expected of the participants and thus in no way confer any kind of special status.

In the Chukchi world, therefore, ordinary mortals are allowed to perform actions that, elsewhere in Siberia, would require the specific expertise of a shaman. Take the following scene that Bogoras witnessed: a Chukchi woman had fainted, and her husband, who had no particular talent for shamanic practices, took her by the hands and began to chant incantations. He made a grasping gesture with one hand, as though he

were seizing something from the air and then thrusting it into his wife's mouth. These movements were meant to capture his wife's soul and return it to her. The woman awoke shortly thereafter (Bogoraz 1910: 30). A gesture like this indicates some degree of familiarity with the invisible that authorizes this interaction—a modality that, in the hierarchical world, would be considered exclusive to persons with the ability to see what others cannot.

The Chukchi have several methods of communicating with the invisible, all based on a consummate art of non-sensory perception. These sometimes involve the hallucinogenic effects of the mushroom commonly known as fly agaric. Yet this species is rare in the parts of the tundra where the Chukchi live, and we will have occasion to examine in more detail its use among the Koryak, who are its most frequent consumers. The Chukchi draw much more often on the inexhaustible source of mental imagery that we call dreams. Far from considering them illusory images with little connection to "reality," as is the typical Western attitude, or as metaphorical messages, as we saw in the hierarchical world, for the Chukchi, anyone's dreams can be treated as serious events. When an infant is born, for example, a family member might dream of the ancestor who has been reincarnated as the newborn child, and this would determine what name to give them (Vaté 2003: 110). Dreams are a means of communicating with the spirits: they might come to warn the dreamer of a threat, teach them a magical incantation, or demand they perform a ritual action such as making a sacrifice or a talisman. This goes for many of the different amulets made of simple knotted laces that the Chukchi wear as bracelets, necklaces, or as simple vestimentary decorations; some of these amulets are made following significant dreams. And so, far from hiding away or forgetting their oneiric experiences as Westerners typically do, the Chukchi display them publicly, posting them all over their clothes. Some of their major ceremonies are also initiated by oneiric visions—"dream responses," as these events are called. If a young child dreams of a thanks-giving ceremony, their family is obliged to start preparing for the festival or risk serious misfortune. The events that occur in dreams are not simply symbolic announcements of something that may occur at a future moment; they cause what they represent. A Russian official once told a Chukchi man that he had seen him die in a dream. The psychic shock was so great that the man did indeed die the next day (Bogoras 1904–1909: 382, 347, 417, 463, 490–91).

But dreams are undoubtedly most important for the Chukchi as a source of magical incantations. Indeed, it is in dreams that all Chukchi

individuals learn from the spirits the often-secret incantations they use throughout their lives, before passing them on to their children in old age. One Chukchi whale hunter, for example, learned a song for making ritual offerings when the Ancestor-Raven spirit visited him in a dream (Weinstein-Tagrina 2007: 263–64). All Chukchi have a vast repertoire of magical songs, many of which are unique to the individual and cannot be performed by anyone else. They touch on a limitless diversity of subjects, ranging from hunting to witchcraft, with even the most trivial of activities in between. As Bogoras writes, “There is no moment in life and no action too trifling to have its special incantation. A man driving reindeer will make use of an incantation to shorten the distance ahead. In like manner, a hungry person eating with others from the same dish will try by an incantation to make the motions of his rivals slower than his own. Women apply incantations to their sinew-thread to make it stronger. A man who has forgotten a magic formula will resort to another incantation which is helpful in calling to mind things that are forgotten” (Bogoras 1904–1909: 470–71). Some of these formulas can be very simple, “I sing (the song) of the partridge,” for example, or “I sing (the song) of the wooden man”; the important part is the melody. Not all of these personal songs are kept secret; some are performed publicly during collective seasonal rituals: the participants take turns singing their own personal songs while dancing and beating the drum to summon the spirits (Vensten-Tagrina 2008: 20).

With ceremonies, chants, and amulets depending on either shamans or the dreams of various family members, ritual practices can take on a wide variety of forms from camp to camp. Each family has its own collection of traditions, sacred objects, and body paintings, which grows and transforms with the major events of its members’ dream lives. Because of their oneiric inspiration, these practices resist any form of standardization, and thus belong to a generative pattern ensuring the regular appearance of innovations.

The status of dreams for the Chukchi stands in stark contrast to what we observed with the Tuvans. The Chukchi do not make a radical distinction between the dreams of shamans and those of ordinary people. Encountering a spirit in a dream is not a threatening event for non-shamans, but a privilege, a chance to acquire new and powerful magical incantations. Bogoras makes no mention of any metaphorical dream interpretations among the Chukchi, but it does seem that certain cases call for very literal interpretations; seeing a death while asleep, for example, will inevitably lead to a death when awake. Dreams seem to

have the same literal status for the Itelmen: if someone dreams of another individual doing them a service of some sort, the latter will be obliged to realize these actions. The explorer Steller, for example, reports with understandable skepticism that if a man so much as tells a young woman that she has granted him her favors in a dream, she will fear death if she fails to fulfill the obligation (Steller 1774: 279). In these traditions, rather than being seen as mere reflections of reality, as Aristotle put it, or as signs of things to come, dreams appear to represent a reality more powerful than the visible world of our waking hours, a world of events that are essential to the lives of humans. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that waking life sometimes seems like a fleeting reflection of imperious dream realities.

For the Chukchi, the ability to dream is directly linked to the ability to act in the world. By recognizing all individuals as able to experience important events in their dreams, they extend to everyone in the community the ability to forge personal and private connections with the world's invisible entities, and to draw from the experience precisely those powers that are elsewhere reserved for shamans and magicians.

The way a family manages its relationship with the spirit of the hearth, and thus keeps itself in harmony with the surrounding world, is telling as to the kind of abilities ordinary people may or may not attribute to themselves—something that provides an interesting point of comparison between the Chukchi and the Tuvans. As we have seen, the Tuvans invite a shaman into their home every year to honor and strengthen the mistress of the fire, who watches over the wellbeing of the family and their herd. For the Chukchi, too, the domestic fireplace plays a central role in maintaining good relationships with the surrounding world: a healthy fire keeps the bond between the reindeer herd, the tent, and the family in balance. But Chukchi herders see to the maintenance of this system of relationships themselves, without need of a specialist. Traditionally, the Chukchi light fires by rubbing a spark rod over a wooden board. Each of these boards is understood to house a spirit, a “fire-board man,” who helps watch over the family's reindeer herd—hence the faces engraved onto the board (figure 12). At every festival having to do with reindeer herding, these fire-boards are fed with marrow from a sacrificed reindeer (Vaté and Beyries 2007: 412–13). Whenever a new one is made, the head of the family performs a special ritual to consecrate it. He announces, “I have brought a fire-tool man,” then slaughters a reindeer, smears the board with the animal's blood, and says, “Enough, take up your abode here.” Another reindeer is slaughtered, and the head of the



Figure 12. Chukchi Fire-Board. Bogoras 1904–1909: 350, fig. 246b.

family declares, “Since you are one of my assistants [...], go and drive the herd hither.” Not long afterwards, he asks the board, “Have you brought it?” And he himself answers on behalf of the fire-board man: “I have.” He continues, “Then catch some reindeer! It seems that you will keep a good watch over the herd” (Bogoras 1904–1909: 352–53).

As we can see, the head of the family does not hesitate to engage in a short conversation with the fire-board man, playing both himself and his interlocutor. Though only briefly, he engages in a symmetrical, face-to-face interaction with the spirit that follows the same basic logic as that behind the shamanic practices of hierarchical systems.

But the fire-board is just one of many different figures of spirits that ordinary Chukchi surround themselves with. There are other talismans—bits of animal fur or bone—that are thought to transform into living animals and protect their owners. Sometimes these are anthropomorphic pieces of wood worn around the neck or on the belt. They are often clustered in a somewhat disorderly manner on lengths of string, with no particular spatial arrangement that might constitute some kind of cosmic image. These objects are not simply “good luck charms,” however, but vehicles for interacting with an individual’s guardian spirits. The relationship between an individual and their guardian has nothing to do with that between a devotee and a distant divinity: it is often highly personalized and exclusive. Some Chukchi consider their guardian a “ceremonial wife or husband,” for example, and at certain festivals perform mysterious dances with the partners these small figurines represent (Bogoras 1904–1909: 343–44). The Chukchi use such a wide variety of charms and enchantments in their daily lives that they give the impression of being a community of magicians.

The status of Chukchi shamans is clearly far more fragile than that of their Altaic counterparts. Being a shaman is neither an innate quality, nor a hereditarily transmitted one, nor is it even definitive for that matter. People become shamans after encountering a peculiar animal or an unusual stone, which then becomes an auxiliary spirit, or after miraculously surviving a catastrophe of some sort. Whether or not someone has any shamanic ancestry is of no importance. They go through a crisis period during which they figure out for themselves how to master their spirits, and then they start to practice. There is no investiture ritual or anything of the sort: the shamanic status is acquired gradually, as the community begins to recognize a novice's talents, and there is no need to consult a more experienced shaman for their opinion on the newcomer, as is typically the case in hierarchical traditions. The shamans themselves insist that they acquire their knowledge independently, with no help from anyone else, for it is understood that if a shaman were to transmit anything of their expertise, they themselves would lose their powers.

Later on in life, as old age sets in, there is no problem with giving up the practice. Bogoras met many older Chukchi individuals who had been shamans earlier in life. As one of them explained, she and her spirits had simply grown tired of each other (Bogoras 1910: 18–19). And so for the Chukchi, *being a shaman is an activity rather than an identity, and the ability to do it comes from experience more than it does from anything passed on or handed down to an individual.*

Moreover, the status of Chukchi shamans is not sanctified by any ritual costume; on the contrary, they perform bare-chested in the dark tent. At most, some shamans might add a few tassels to their everyday coats. It is not surprising then that, again according to Bogoras, one in every three or four Chukchi individuals sees himself as having the right and ability to act as a shaman, or simply to call himself a kind of shaman (Bogoras 1904–1909: 413). If shamans are feared, it is by no means out of respect for their status, but rather for their singular personalities. Paradoxically, those deemed the most powerful, and indeed the most fearsome, are those known as “soft men.”

The “soft men”—also called “similar to women,” in Bogoras’s translation—are men who have undergone a gradual transformation in their sexual identity. There is a female equivalent, the “similar to a man,” though these cases are much rarer. Reputedly imposed by the spirits (*kelet*), the transformation begins in adolescence, during the same period of crisis in which the individual’s shamanic disposition starts to show itself. Many young men prefer suicide to becoming a shaman,

precisely as a way of interrupting this irrepressible process of becoming a woman. First the individual adopts a female haircut, then begins to dress in women's clothes, and eventually abandons the harpoon and rifle for the sewing needle. He learns to speak like a woman (men and women use quite distinct phonetic variants and even terminology), officially marries an ordinary man, and the two are united as a homosexual couple until death. The Chukchi claim that some "soft men" even grow female organs. In addition to their human spouses, these shamans also possess powerful spirit husbands and are thought to excel in all areas of shamanic practice, first and foremost of which is the dark tent.

Bogoras writes of a tall, vigorous "transformed" man in whose company he spent a considerable amount of time:

This was the young boy Tiluwgi, or perhaps the young girl, I do not know how better to say it. [...] Tiluwgi had the kind of face you never forget. It had a feminine expression like a giant female tragic mask. His whole constitution was masculine, and he lived with his husband *modo Socratis*, the "wife" being, incidentally, a passive pederast. Both husband and wife lived in harmony. [...] What struck me most were the feminine habits and manners of the "transformed" woman, her shyness and even modesty, her passionate love of little children that it was, of course, not in her power to have of her own flesh. Despite her young age, Tiluwgi was considered a powerful shaman. All her neighbors and even the other shamans feared her, and if anyone joked about or spoke ill of her, as happens in any human society in such thorny situations, it was only ever in hushed tones, fearing the vengeance of her demon-husband (Bogoraz 1910: 32–33).

Bogoras also reports the case of a female-born shaman transformed into a man. She cut her hair, dressed in men's clothes, spoke like a man, had learned to shoot a rifle, and was officially married to a woman. In the conjugal bed, she used the calf muscle of a reindeer tied to her belt as a penis. So that she could have a lineage of her own, she also frequented a man outside of her marriage and had two children by him (Bogoras 1904–1909: 449–56).

"Why is a shaman believed to become more powerful when he is changed into a woman?" the ethnologist Waldemar Jochelson ([1905–1908] 2016: 91) wondered at the turn of the twentieth century, without finding an answer. With more than a century's hindsight, it may be

possible to shed some more light on the matter, bearing in mind what we have already established about the treatment of singularity in Siberian shamanism. If “transformed” people are considered such powerful beings, it is clearly because those around them interpret their visible transgression of categorical gender boundaries as an indication of something else: namely, the ability to transgress other kinds of boundaries and bring about other kinds of transformations. A male-born Chukchi shaman who transforms into a woman is thus also able to break through the boundaries of individual personhood during the “multi-voiced” ritual seances of the dark tent, where the shaman summons several different entities. The disposition toward metamorphosis seen in the shaman’s transgression of gender categories is thus of precisely the same nature as that which allows them to break through the boundaries separating different species of beings.

The phenomenon of “transformed” shamans thus seems to present a further manifestation of what I have previously called a singularity detection device. The deviation from social norms represented by these cross-dressing individuals leads the community to attribute to them a powerful individual essence capable of transcending categorical boundaries. This exceptional mode of individuality is not closed in on itself; rather, it is seen as being open to intense relations with spirits and various nonhuman collectives.

There is no question, then, that the figure of the shaman is clearly recognized by the Chukchi as an individual with certain abilities far superior to those of non-shamans. It would thus make little sense to talk about any kind of “egalitarian” shamanism, since the practice itself supposes an unequal distribution of skills. But in the contexts we have just been discussing, this disparity is conceived as *a difference of degree rather than kind*: shamans are simply more gifted in certain competencies that are nevertheless shared by everyone. It is a form of inequality that does not crystallize into the rigid differentiations of status that characterize hierarchical systems. The question is how to designate this kind of inequality, a form that remains flexible and non-hierarchical.

In the study of organized systems—whether it be the nervous system or those of human and animal societies—researchers use the term “heterarchy” to describe a distribution of functions in which roles can be flexibly exchanged. The organization of neurons in the brain, for example, is not subject to a hierarchical order, but establishes a multitude of possible pathways for the distribution of tasks. In a heterarchical society, the relative power of individuals or groups varies according to the situation, in

a perpetual reconfiguration of values (Ehrenreich, Crumley, and Levy 1995). Neither heterarchies nor hierarchies are egalitarian systems, but the former does allow for a reversibility of functions that the latter cannot. We will apply the notion of heterarchy to shamanic traditions like those of the Chukchi, which cannot be described as hierarchical, but which are not for all that egalitarian. *The world of heterarchical shamanism is one in which there is a continuum of skills between specialists and non-specialists, and where positions are reversible.*

If the Chukchi have a specific need for shamans, it is to more clearly perceive the invisible. It is for this reason that their ritual experts cultivate extraordinary visionary experiences and then recount them to those around them. The following example is from a Chukchi shaman named Korawge:

On the steep bank of a river there exists life. A voice is there, and speaks aloud. I saw the “master” of the voice and spoke with him. He subjected himself to me and sacrificed to me. He came yesterday and answered my questions. The small gray bird with the blue breast sings shaman-songs in the hollow of the bough, calls her spirits, and practices shamanism. The woodpecker strikes his drum in the tree with his drumming nose. Under the axe the tree trembles and wails as a drum under the baton. All these come at my call.

All that exists lives. The lamp walks around. The walls of the house have voices of their own, even the chamber-vessel has a separate land and house. The skins sleeping in the bags talk at night. The antlers lying on the tombs arise at night and walk in procession around the mounds, while the deceased get up and visit the living (Bogoras 1904–1909: 281).

An account like this gives the strong impression that an entire reality—if not the very essence of reality—is hiding behind the visible surface of things that our senses make available to us. With these conditions in mind, it is difficult to imagine the visible as a satisfactory foundation on which to make sense of the world. It should come as no surprise, then, that this virtuosic art of invisible imagery has as its counterpart a relative paucity of visible images. The Chukchi have no tradition of mask making, there are no painted figures on their drums, and no pendants decorating their shamans’ costumes. There is no shortage of representations of spirits, to be sure, but many are non-figurative, no more than a knotted leather lace or a piece of wood. Though the Chukchi almost always

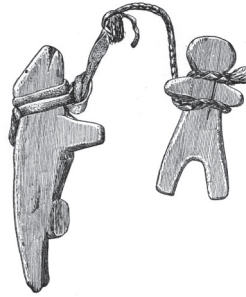


Figure 13. Chukchi Talismans. Bogoras 1904–1909: 344, fig. 242.

carry carved figurines as amulets, these are crudely made objects, and the Chukchi will toss them quite nonchalantly into the fire whenever they decide they have too many of them (figure 13) (Bogoras 1904–1909: 354). Images of spirits are never integrated into larger scenes; invisible entities are never depicted interacting with visible ones, nor are they ever shown interacting with each other. Though the Chukchi have nightly encounters with spirits in their dreams, they do not rely on material images when it comes to preserving these interactions. Nowhere, moreover, do we see any suggestion of an attempt to arrange figures into a hierarchical cosmic order. Rather than using visible images to fix and frame the imaginative capacity of individuals, the Chukchi prefer to foster a more mobile, unpredictable, and openly accessible notion of the invisible.

How does one go about establishing and maintaining relationships with spirits when one is not a ritual specialist? Matters like this are often shrouded in secrecy and difficult to broach in the field, so ethnographic research rarely furnishes much information when it comes to this kind of question. As followers of the historical materialist paradigm, Soviet researchers rarely even tried to investigate the dreams of Siberian hunters. There is, however, a rich body of information on this topic to be found on neighbors of the Chukchi: the Yukaghir.

The Yukaghir are divided into a northern group of pastoral reindeer herders settled on the tundra, and a southern group, living in the forests of the upper Kolyma, who sustain themselves by hunting, fishing, and gathering, and have never adopted any form of animal husbandry. Before the Russian Revolution, the Yukaghir believed that success in hunting depended not only on the skill and willpower of the hunter, but also on the goodwill of the guardian spirits (*pe'jul*) of animals and, in a certain way, on the consent of the animals themselves. A hunter who brings

home a lot of game from the forest is reputed to have developed a special relationship with the *pe'jul*: he is called a “man with a guardian,” which is synonymous with being a lucky hunter. The first rule for staying on friendly terms with the spirit is to respect the animals that offer themselves, taking care not to kill more than necessary and sparing them any unnecessary suffering (Jochelson 1926: 146–50).

During the Soviet period, the authorities set out to modernize and industrialize Yukaghir life, depicting the degree of respect they showed for spirits and animals as a kind of “backwardness.” But this period—under the banners of progress and man’s dominion over an inert nature—was ultimately no more than a parenthesis for the Yukaghir. The collapse of the Soviet regime and the disappearance of the state-owned farms (or *sovkhazes*) meant that the villagers were left to fend for themselves in the taiga, their sole source of sustenance; so maintaining good relations with the inhabitants of the forest world became a necessity once again. In the 2000s, the Danish anthropologist Rane Willerslev conducted an in-depth study among Yukaghir hunters living on the upper Kolyma. In his description, the Yukaghir’s relationship with the spirits profoundly differs from what we have observed among the Tuvans. The Yukaghir believe that, as hunters age and acquire experience, they develop an increasingly intimate familiarity with certain spirits, in particular those they come to know in dreams. Many elders are thus said to be gifted with auxiliary spirits who help and support them (Willerslev 2007: 155–56). These expert hunters demonstrate their intimacy with the spirits of game animals by showing themselves capable of forcing the creatures into submission by exhausting them in the chase. This type of expertise clearly involves an indissoluble combination of knowledge of the animal species and the forest environment, physical strength, and a mystical understanding of the world’s invisible dimensions.

The relationship between the hunter and the spirits he sees in his dreams often takes on a sexual character, as the following dream narrative demonstrates:

They live in a wooden house. There is a barn, too. I assume they keep the animals in the barn. They are always glad to see me, the three sisters. When I arrive, they are a little drunk [presumably, he is referring to the vodka offered when feeding the fire]. They start to play around with my penis, edging up to me. If I’m hunting at the upper part of the river, I’ll take the oldest sister and we’ll go to bed. If I hunt at the

middle part, I'll pick the middle sister. And if I'm hunting at the lower part, I'll go with the youngest one. When I wake up I know that in this season I will have good luck [in hunting] (Willerslev 2007: 173; bracketed text in original).

The hunters' remarkable degree of intimacy with the spirits leads Willerslev to conclude that "the difference between the hunter and the shaman is really a difference of degree, not a matter of absolute opposition, and there is an important sense in which the common hunter is in fact at a stage that is halfway toward full shamanship" (Willerslev 2007: 133). And in fact, Yukaghir hunters do seem to have the kind of stable interpersonal relationships with their spirits that would, in southern Siberia, make them potential shamans. But with its emphasis on an agentive mode of singular individual experience, the regime of imagination we see among the Yukaghir is much closer to that of the Chukchi and thus more suggestive of a heterarchical form of shamanism.

This kind of egalitarian access to spirits is not found everywhere: it is quite foreign to Altaic groups and seems to be confined to a small number of eastern Paleo-Asiatic populations such as the Chukchi, the Koryak, the Yukaghir, and the Itelmen. In North America, on the other hand, this mode of relation is common to a great many peoples (Benedict 1923). Jochelson, for instance, noticed the resemblance between the animal spirits the Yukaghir called *pe'jul* and the guardian spirits of the North American Ojibwa (Jochelson 1926: 146). For the Ojibwa, as we mentioned earlier, a good life, free of sickness, hunger, and misfortune, cannot be achieved through relationships with other humans alone. Strong relationships also have to be forged, through a carefully cultivated dream practice, with the master spirits of the game animals that provide sustenance to the human community. As with the Chukchi, many Ojibwa ritual chants are born of dream experiences—hence the Ojibwa saying: "You will have a long and good life if you dream well" (Hallowell 1966: 282).

For the North American groups that place the most value on individual dream experiences, the boundary between shamans and ordinary people proves particularly difficult to establish, in the same way as it does with the Yukaghir. Anthropologist Marie-Françoise Guédon made a similar observation during her time with the Nabesna, an Athapaskan-speaking population in Alaska: "The general consensus is that a shaman is someone who dreams, that anyone who dreams is a shaman, and that everyone dreams to a greater or lesser extent, hence the

conclusion I have heard many times: ‘everyone is a bit of a shaman,’ even if some are more powerful than others” (Guédon 2005: 47). The value system of Athapaskan groups in general is “both extremely individualistic and ‘democratic,’ since it allows for a distribution of shamanic gifts throughout the community” (2005: 27). Shamans and non-shamans thus belong on a single continuum, where differences in abilities are registered by degree rather than kind.

In short, the same ecology of imagination seems to be shared across the Paleo-Asiatic groups of northeastern Siberia and many of the hunter-gatherer populations of North America, particularly those of the Athapaskan and Algonquian families. There are of course important differences, and the Paleo-Asiatic groups stand out for their use of a particular technique for stimulating non-sensory perceptions that is rarely used in North America: the consumption of psychotropic mushrooms.

Mycophiles and Mycophobes

When the Koryak go *vapaq* hunting, they use a stick to pick up their prey without injuring its foot. In fact, it is important not to inflict any kind of “wound” on the *vapaq*, or you yourself run the risk of being injured at a later time. Some might offer the *vapaq* a few words of flattery when they chance upon it: “Oh, at last I’ve found you, and look how handsome you are!” Others might go so far as to perform a short dance for its pleasure (Plattet 2005: 180).

The recipient of all these compliments and dances is the hallucinogenic mushroom commonly known as fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), and the Koryak are to this day its biggest consumers in the Siberian world. The mushroom is eaten primarily during festivals, though individuals might sometimes consume small quantities for its stimulant effects. A Koryak man in Kamchatka once explained to me that reindeer herders looking after large flocks of several hundred animals will swallow a few pieces of the mushroom to “get high” and then be able to run through the hills all night long.⁸ Taken in larger quantities, the mushroom can cause intense agitation and trigger auditory and visual hallucinations. The psychotropic effects reported by the Chukchi and Koryak generally follow a series of increasingly intense stages (Bogoras 1904–1909: 207):

8. Bogoras made a similar observation among the Chukchi (1904–1909: 206).

the user receives orders from the mushroom spirits to perform absurd actions such as bedding down with the dogs; these same spirits then appear to him in the form of anthropomorphic mushrooms; objects start to appear larger than they usually are; and finally the user loses grip on his visible surroundings and finds himself in another world, surrounded by strange beings and objects. The visual effects are most powerful if you fall asleep immediately after taking the mushroom. A detailed description of these effects has come down to us from Afanasii D'iachkov, a nineteenth-century schoolteacher of Chuvan origin—an ethnically mixed group with both Yukaghir and Chukchi influences. Despite the author's Christian vocabulary—D'iachkov having largely assimilated to Russian society—the force of the images is still quite powerful: “When the intoxication subsides, a man who has taken fly agaric seems as though he has returned from another world. They say the mushroom has shown him heaven and hell, and inspires the fear that it will refuse to return him to earth, throwing him into the abyss of hell (an underground chasm) instead. Sometimes, it takes the individual down a dark precipice and asks him to turn around and look back up, from which point our world looks as though it were no bigger than a little bird's egg” (D'iachkov [1893] 1992: 228).⁹ It is worth pausing a moment to consider the particularities of these striking visions. The individual sees himself descending into an abyss and, when he turns to look back on the path he has traveled, the earth looks small and far away, proof of the distance he has gone. This type of description is typical of the visions reported by hierarchical shamans in Central Siberia during their own cosmic journeys, as we see in this excerpt from the chant of a Yakut shaman, traveling into the sky:

When I look from here, the middle world looks the size of the bottom
of a birch-bark flask.
The big lake has become the size of an arrowhead,
The small lake looks like the hole through a pearl,
The world is far away. (Popov 2008: 123)

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9. According to D'iachkov, anxiety-inducing visions like these are typical of solitary experiences with large doses of the mushroom. As we will see in the Koryak ethnography, the experience is more joyful when the drug is taken collectively, at festivals, where those who ingest it are able to offer one another support.

The image of the world as a small object seen from a great distance is a commonplace in Siberian oral traditions, a suggestive tool for evoking a cosmic perspective. In those regions where the mushroom is eaten, it is possible that these references to objects changing in size and scale result from a neuropharmacological effect typical of the *Amanita muscaria*. The eighteenth-century descriptions of the Itelmen suggest as much: “A small hole seems a great door to them: a spoonful of water, a sea” (Krashennikov [1755] 1949: 428). Some traditions have interpreted these hallucinatory distortions as a change of perspective on the world resulting from a long, celestial journey. It would seem, then, that for the ordinary, non-shamanic population of northeastern Siberia, the consumption of fly agaric offers the opportunity to personally experience the kinds of visions and shifts in perspective that characterize the shamanic journey.

In this sense, the effects of the mushroom play a complementary role to that of dreams for the Chukchi and Yukaghir. As anthropologist Patrick Plattet explains in a recent thesis on the ritual life of the Koryak, the *vapaq* mushroom “speaks” to whoever ingests it, and teaches them their own personal song, which is considered a kind of musical condensation of the person. As the “carrier [...] of a powerful spirit, whose voice can be heard by the humans who consume it, [the mushroom] dictates to each person the path of the self that leads to an out-growing of the individual soul” (Plattet 2005: 258). For the Koryak, a “complete” human is someone who can dance, drum, and sing their personal song—a wordless melody that represents both the singer’s individual personality and the link between their soul and those of animals and ancestors. For our own, comparative purposes, it is possible to describe the Koryak’s consumption of fly agaric as a technique for increasing one’s capacity for non-sensory perception and for stimulating creative inspiration as a means of enriching one’s relationship with the visible and invisible aspects of the environment.

Every autumn, the Koryak herders of the village of Achavaiaim organize a ritual, with no shaman, to mark the return of the reindeer herds from their summer pastures. The festival that Plattet attended in 2002 included around fifteen people, all of whom gathered with their drums in the large tent (*iaranga*) of the woman who had organized the event. On a ritual blanket inside the tent, the organizer had laid out a series of offerings and ceremonial objects that were considered the event’s non-human “guests.” Foremost among them was a collection of fly agarics to be offered by the organizer to the (human) participants, most of whom

consumed three mushrooms over the course of the festival. They would take turns making several circumambulations of the tent's central pole in groups of two or three, each of them singing their own personal song and beating their drum. "With the *iaranga* completely closed," Plattet writes, "the sound is deafening and it becomes difficult to see given the absence of any light source and the accumulation of smoke." Later on, the whole assembly emerges from the tent and begins to circle it on the outside, all the while shouting and beating their drums to scare away evil spirits (Plattet 2005: 255).

This scene provides an impressive picture of a resolutely egalitarian technique for communicating with the invisible. The distribution of roles is not nearly as rigidly defined as it would be in a hierarchical shamanic ritual, in that all the participants *take turns* occupying the positions of singer and spectator. The relational arrangement of the participants accords no single person or group a central or dominant position that would suggest a privileged relationship with the spirits. The woman who welcomes the assembly into her tent has no specific ritual expertise that the others do not; she is simply responsible for the smooth organization of the gathering and its activities. As with the Chukchi, the Koryak drum is a common object found in every household and is by no means reserved for ritual specialists. Similarly with regard to the mushroom: the agaric's psychic effects are available to anyone who wishes to partake in them—and it seems that most do.

Songs, drums, and mushrooms are all considered vectors of direct communication with the spirits. As one of Jochelson's informants explained to him, "the Agaric would tell every man, even if he is not a shaman, what ailed him when he was sick, or explain a dream to him, or show him the upper world or the underground world, or foretell what would happen to him" (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 163).¹⁰

10. It is not the case that Koryak do not recognize any kind of ritual specialization. They do have shamans who conduct the dark-tent ritual, undressed and seated, like their Chukchi counterparts. These shamans ingest fly agaric just like non-shamans, usually at the start of the ritual. But these specialists do not play a major role in Koryak religious life, and, at the outset of the twentieth century, their authority had almost vanished. Jochelson met only two shamans among the Koryak and neither of them enjoyed much respect from their communities (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 84; Lindenau 1983: 124).

Several of the Koryak's neighboring populations—the Itelmen, the Yupik, and the Chukchi—also consumed fly agaric according to similarly egalitarian principles, at least when the mushroom was available. Its scarcity in the tundra gave rise to a trade in which Russian settlers would exchange the precious psychotrope for animal furs brought back by indigenous hunters. As alkaloids are excreted in the urine, it was also common for poorer individuals to collect and consume the urine of those wealthy enough to consume the mushroom, and thus also partake in its intoxicating effects (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 610).¹¹

These fly agaric ceremonies are unknown among the Altaic-speaking peoples, who never consume the mushroom, not even their shamans. Tuvan shamans might drink alcohol or smoke tobacco to enhance their ritual performances, and Evenki specialists also inhale the smoke of marsh Labrador tea (*Ledum palustre*) to much the same end (Shrenk 1903: 126; Shirokogoroff 1935). But even non-psychotropic, culinary mushrooms are disdained by the resolutely *mycophobic* populations of the Altaic world.

People are more open to the practice in northwestern Siberia, but with some nuances. The mushroom is consumed among the Selkup and the Ket, but only by their shamans. They maintain the mushroom would kill any non-shaman who tried to ingest it: a strong deterrent to any unsanctioned experimentation (Donner 1933: 81). The Forest Nenets are of a similar opinion: “Only someone who is familiar with the origin of the fly agaric can eat it ‘with fortunate results,’ but if in his intoxication he does not see the mushroom spirits properly, they may kill him, or he may go astray in the dark” (Lehtisalo 1924, cited by Saar 1991: 167). There is a stark contrast between these conceptions and those of the Chuvan people in northeastern Siberia, who believe, as D’iachkov reported, “that if a man who knows nothing about shamanic practice eats amanita, he will begin to act like a shaman himself” (D’iachkov [1893] 1992: 230). And so, while for the northeastern populations the psychotropic mushroom offers everyone who eats it equal access to visionary experiences, and thus enables even those ignorant of shamanic practices to go on a cosmic journey, the Nenets maintain that the agaric’s effects can only be felt by those already endowed with the kind of personal disposition that would enable them to see spirits—those who are already shamans, in other words. We will see where the Ob-Ugrian speakers fall on the matter later on.

11. For an overview of fly agaric use in Siberia, see Saar 1991.

There seems to be no doubt that open access to fly agaric is incompatible with shamanism in its hierarchical form, seeing as the mushroom provides anyone who takes it with access to profound changes of perspective on the world as well as with face-to-face encounters with the invisible. The imagination expands with extraordinary force under the effects of the agaric, so much so that the individual loses control over it. In our typology, this imagination is clearly of the exploratory kind and would be difficult to fit into too rigid a framework. We should recall that the exploratory imagination plays a decisive role in the interpretation of animal signs and the exploration of other species' inner worlds. So it should come as no surprise that, as the Chukchi have it, eating fly agaric helps them determine where to find game, where to hunt reindeer, and where to canoe to find walrus (Simchenko 1993: 30). In sum, as ethnologist Iurii Simchenko writes, "fly agaric is a way for the simple, non-shamanic man to have a chance at communicating with the other world" (1993: 34). The mushroom turns anyone who ingests it into a permeable being, capable of assuming full responsibility for their relationship with both the visible and invisible aspects of the environment that sustains them.

But, while the mushroom is used exclusively by the shamans of two unambiguously hierarchical groups (the Ket and the Selkup), the question remains of why shamans in the Altaic world decline to use it. The answer is that "true shamans," for these populations, inherit their visionary abilities; they therefore have no need for such external stimulants to the imagination. If the success of a shamanic ritual depended on the effects of a psychotropic drug, it would be difficult to see why a non-shaman could not hypothetically acquire similar visionary abilities by taking it, and thus to recognize a certain porosity in the boundary between open and closed people, whereas a basic premise of hierarchy is that people cannot pass from one category to the other.

The contrast between mycophobic and mycophilic peoples runs deeper than it seems, given that it appears to overlap with the opposition we are beginning to see more clearly between hierarchical and heterarchical shamanism. This is a Siberian confirmation of Lévi-Strauss's intuition, suggestively expressed in an article entitled "Tell Me Which Mushrooms...": "Taking a position for or against mushrooms (one of the last remaining products in the modern economy to be collected in the wild), is just one of the ways—though less insignificant than it might seem—in which mankind chooses and expresses the kind of relationship it has with nature and the world" (Lévi-Strauss 1958).

While the Siberian Far East is heterarchical in orientation, Central Siberia is unquestionably marked by the hierarchical tradition. In Western Siberia, on the edge of Europe, however, the consumption of fly agaric by the Khant and Mansi populations points us clearly in the direction of a resurgence of heterarchical shamanism.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the Khant, along with their Mansi neighbors, practice the dark-tent ritual—something else they have in common with the Paleo-Asiatic peoples of the Pacific. Aside from that, the primary collective celebration of the Ob-Ugrians (the Khant and Mansi) is the bear festival. The festival is organized after a bear hunt to pay homage to the animal: it consists of four or five days of songs, dances, and skits performed by masked actors, before the animal's meat is portioned out and eaten by those assembled. As an essential event for maintaining the hunters' good relations with the forest world, the entire community organizes and participates in the festival, with none of its ritual actions being delegated to a shaman. The event is remarkably similar to the bear festival carried out by the Nivkh, who live 4,500 kilometers to the east, on Sakhalin Island, and who also, it turns out, practice the dark-tent ritual. Like its Khant equivalent, the Nivkh bear festival is a high point of this group's social life and is also centered on the slaughter and collective consumption of a bear, accompanied by several days of song and dance. Even more strict than the Ob-Ugrians, the Nivkh explicitly forbid their shamans from taking part in any ritual action whatsoever (Shrenk 1903: 21, n. 1). All of which suggests an intriguing link between the east and west extremities of Siberia, on either side of the central Altaic world.

In fact, one would be hard pressed to find among the Khant and Mansi anything like the central, well-defined figure the Altaics call a "shaman." The Ob-Ugrians delegate ritual and magical functions across a multitude of specialists with varying styles and skills: there is the dark-tent officiant, the bard who sings epics, the "dream-man" who can dream on demand, the weeping-man who is linked to the world of the dead, and the mushroom-man who uses fly agaric to perform divinations. In the 1930s, 120 ritual specialists were counted among 300 Mansi families! (Kulemzin 2004: 167–68).

Of all these various specialists, ethnologists typically consider the Khant *ëlta-ku*, who uses a drum and is paid for his services, to be closest to the classic figure of the Altaic shaman. His function is generally limited, however, to performing divinations and healing rituals; he plays no part in the bear festival, weddings, or any of the

seasonal sacrifices organized at the start of the hunting season (Jordan 2003: 14).

Historically speaking, the position of these drumming shamans was fairly precarious. On the Agan River, they had no ritual costume, made their own instruments, and had no recognized hereditary status. Nor was there any collective ceremony organized around the animation of their drum and to thus mark their entry into the profession.¹² The shaman's authority was no more secure among the Khant living along the Vasiugan and Vah rivers, located further east. Here his status also depended on his success as a hunter and the accuracy of the advice he gave on the location of game. If a recognized shaman was too often mistaken in such matters, people would refuse to pay him for his rituals and eventually stop consulting him, concluding that his spirits must have left him.¹³

It is important to note that these shamans had no monopoly on the use of drums: in the Sos'va River region, every Mansi family could own one; and for their collective festivals, the Vasiugan Khant used non-shamanic drums made with elk or dog skins, fitted with bells, and held by a simple leather strap. Neither the Mansi nor the Khant organized investiture ceremonies to present their shamans with their instruments; in both groups, instead, the specialist had to make his own drum. The idea of the drum as a riding animal for the shaman's invisible journeys was foreign to all Khant groups, and nowhere in the Ob-Ugrian world was the instrument treated as a particularly sacred object, as it consistently is among the Altaic peoples (Kulemzin 2004: 75; Chernecov 1987: 150, 156). Briefly put, the open access to the drum enjoyed by the different populations of western Siberia is strangely reminiscent of the way the instrument is treated in the Paleo-Asiatic traditions of the North Asian Pacific.

The same parallel applies to the consumption of fly agaric. In Khant communities, anyone who wishes is free to eat the mushroom and try to communicate with the spirits—to find out if they have any kind of special ability in this area. Whoever has eaten it will start singing the song of the fly agaric, in which they indiscreetly reveal all kinds of secrets about themselves and others (Golovnev 1994). Once again, the similarities with the Koryak more than 4,500 kilometers away are remarkable: the

12. On the Agan Khant, see Kulemzin 2004: 64, 71, 79.

13. On the Khant shamans of the Vasiugan and Vah rivers, see Kulemzin 2004: 94.

mushroom is endowed with a spirit, “a fly-agaric-woman,” who inspires the eater to sing a personal song. Because the Ob-Ugrians consider the practice dangerous, however, people are only allowed to eat fly agaric on an individual trial basis, and never collectively. For the Khant, regular ingestion is in fact reserved for individuals with certain functions. Bards, for example, used to ingest it for inspiration before performing their epics. Then there is the mushroom-eater (*pankal-ku*), who consumes a decoction of mushrooms when he is asked to help find a lost object or foretell future events.

The Khant’s drumming shamans sometimes share a fly agaric decoction with a sick patient. With both of them under the effects of the drug, the patient is able to accompany the officiant on a visit to the god of the lower world, *Kali-Torum* (Kulemzin 2004: 56, 185). This custom is entirely exceptional; elsewhere in Siberia, in both hierarchical and heterarchical traditions, it is quite unheard of for a shaman to have anyone accompany them on their journeys, as we shall in fact soon see. In this case both specialist and patient project themselves together into the invisible in what we have defined as an agentive mode, whereas in more typical scenarios, non-shamanic participants are confined to the use of their contemplative imaginations, not unlike movie-goers. In comparison with any of the hierarchical traditions, then, it is fair to say that the Khant have a reasonably liberal attitude toward the use of fly agaric, and this contributes to a more permeable boundary between the categories of shaman and non-shaman.

The Russian ethnologist Vladislav Kulemzin, who has studied the Khant closely, sums up the situation: “for the Khant of the Vah and Vasiugan river basins, shamans were less significant than they had been for many other Siberian societies, where they enjoyed a monopoly on religious cults” (Kulemzin 2004: 119). Though some Khant specialists may have adopted practices that brought them much closer to the hierarchical shamans of the Evenki, the Ob-Ugrian tradition is more generally characterized by the instability of the shamanic function and the expert’s relative lack of identifying paraphernalia, which roundly supports the idea that these populations can be identified with the same heterarchical form of shamanism we have seen practiced among the Paleo-Asiatic peoples of the Pacific.

Now that we have a clearer idea of the respective territories occupied by heterarchical and hierarchical shamanism, in the following section we will take a closer look at how each of them performs the famous cosmic journey taken by the soul.



Figure 14. Khant Shaman, end of the nineteenth century. Finsch 1879: fig. 45.

The Shamanic Journey: A User's Manual

Separating the consciousness from the body and embarking on a mental journey through faraway spaces: such is the essential activity of any shamanic tradition, certainly that which has often seemed most intriguing to Western observers. But what does it mean to detach one's soul from one's body, and what exactly does such a practice look like? How can such a peculiar psychological experience form the basis of large collective ceremonies, let alone an entire cultural complex?

Scholars often talk about the "shamanic journey" as though it were a unified, clearly identifiable phenomenon, like a pilgrimage or an RV trip. But in reality, ethnographic accounts tend to group extremely different behaviors under this heading: one ritual officiant might lie inanimate before an attentive audience; another recounts a dream in which he went to the moon; while a third pretends to take flight, flapping his arms like a bird.

To understand what is really happening when we talk about "shamanic journeys," we need to draw a clear distinction between the *content* and the *form* of the phenomenon. By content we mean the story of the journey, with the shaman as its hero, as it is remembered by the participants after the ritual itself. This includes the succession of interactions the shaman has with the various beings encountered along the way as

well as the different spaces the protagonist traverses. But as the spectators are generally not invited to go on the journey themselves, what enables them to follow this narrative is its *public form*, which is to say, the words, gestures, and objects that serve as interpretive cues enabling non-shamans to imagine the content. While the content of the journey is invisible to non-shamans, the form is accessible to all.

The distinction between form and content is thus essential to answering the question of what really transpires in any given ritual. Without a clear distinction between these two levels, it is difficult to understand how the relationship between them is constructed; this is in fact the underlying purpose of a number of shamanic techniques: to externalize the content of the shaman's experience in a public form that can be shared with the other participants. In examining the various ways in which the diverse shamanic traditions of Siberia construct the relationship between form and content, a further distinction comes to light between two very different types of shamanic travel: the "lying journey" and the "live journey."

In the dark tent of the Chukchi, as we saw in the previous chapter, the shaman sometimes "sinks": that is, he collapses and lies flat on the ground. The tent is then illuminated and the assembly sings for fifteen minutes or so while the shaman remains motionless, as though unconscious. By assuming this position, the shaman signals his soul's entry into the lower world, where he goes in search of a patient's stray soul. His drum, which during this stage of the ritual lies to one side of him, is understood to represent the boat he is at this point traveling in. On awakening, the shaman resumes his chant, then offers the patient his advice for recovery.

This method is quite rare, however; for Chukchi shamans, it is much more common to use dreams as a means of tracking down a patient's lost soul. This involves the ability to visualize while dreaming a cosmic journey during which the shaman retrieves the soul in question. On the following day, he performs a ritual in which he restores the soul by blowing on the patient (Bogoras 1904–1909: 441, 463–64; Vdovin 1981: 208).

Whether the shaman "sinks" before an audience or travels in a dream, those around him receive no direct information about the episodes that take place over the course of his journey. The only access they have to this content is relayed *a posteriori*, through the shaman's account of the experience. The cosmic journey—which is the underlying premise of this ritual device—is entirely grounded in the non-sensory images perceived by the shaman. There is no visual manifestation of the journey, no image

mapping out the itinerary followed, nor even any standard script imposed on the shaman. The only vectors guiding the audience's conception of the officiant's actions are the oral accounts either given by the shaman who experienced the journey or recalled from legendary shamans of times past. Though there are undoubtedly strong commonalities between accounts of different journeys, none has the status of a conventional reference model. There is no established system of "roads" to guide the shaman in his mental peregrinations; all journeys are unique and unpredictable events, obeying a generative pattern rather than a canonical model.

We will designate this type of form-content combination as the "lying journey," a ritual technique having the following characteristics: the temporary atony of the shaman (the officiant's body becomes immobile); an interruption in the shaman's interactions with their immediate surroundings; the transmission of content through subsequent narration. The technique is clearly conducive to the stimulation of vivid mental imagery on the part of the officiant, producing a state where the shaman is unhampered by any sensory afference; but it has the disadvantage of excluding the audience from any direct access to the journey's content.

The lying journey is a typical feature of dark-tent rituals in both Asia and America.¹⁴ But it is important to remember that the dark tent can be conducted without any journey at all—as it is by the Ket and the Selkup, for example—just as the lying journey is sometimes featured in fully fire-lit rituals, as with the Yukaghir and the Saami.

Jochelson was able to observe one such ritual among the Yukaghir of the upper Kolyma, in which the shaman traveled to the "Kingdom of Shadows" to retrieve the soul of a sick patient. Nelbosh, as this shaman was called, was one of the last representatives of the old Yukaghir tradition, such as it must have existed before the Altaic peoples propagated the techniques of hierarchical shamanism in the northeastern region. No professional costume is worn in this ritual, but the shaman does dress in everyday women's clothes and leads the proceedings with a drum of the old Yukaghir type, without a metal cross-brace (we will see later on how this design differs from that of the Altaic drum). The shaman lies down with the drum at his side to represent the "lake" into which his soul must plunge to reach the "Kingdom of Shadows," while the audience patiently waits for him to wake up. The awakening is followed by the restitution of the patient's soul and then the shaman's telling of the adventures that

14. See the references relating to the dark tent cited in the previous chapter. On this practice in various Algonquian traditions, see Le Jeune (1858).

have just taken place. Like their Chukchi neighbors, Yukaghir shamans could go on nocturnal journeys in their dreams and relate their adventures to other members of the community afterwards (Jochelson 1926: 196–99, 210–15).

The lying journey was also used by the Saami shamans of northern Europe, who would collapse beneath their drums and then travel in spirit from one world to another, or ride into the lower world on the back of a fish to retrieve the soul of a patient. This process could last for several hours, during which the audience had to sing and make sure that no flies touched the officiant's body. When the shaman finally came to, he would relate what he had seen and answer the audience's questions (Scheffer 1678: 107–9; Haruzin 1890: 220–22).¹⁵

Both the Yukaghir and the Saami practiced the lying journey in an illuminated space, without the dark tent. It is important to note that the participants in these rituals were careful *not to wake* the officiant, though this kind of patient reserve is not the case with other forms of shamanic travel, as we will soon see. Given its immense extension from Scandinavia to North America (even wider than that of the dark tent), it would seem that the lying journey represents a singularly ancient form of circumpolar shamanism.

In the light tent, the journey is approached in a very different manner, as we saw in the previous chapter with the example of the Selkup ritual. The officiant delivers long chants accompanied by dramatic gestures, mimes, and dances, which allow the audience to follow his or her wanderings as they take place in a parallel world. To borrow some terminology from modern media studies: the spectators in the light tent are able to follow the adventures experienced by the shaman “in real time,” whereas the content of the lying journey unfolds with the audience “off-line” and is then transmitted through a retrospective narration. We will use the term “live journey” to refer to the former type of device, in which case the form is designed to provide non-shaman participants with an immediate image of the journey's content. To this end, the live journey is distinguished by an abundance of complex public cues that guide the audience's imagination.

We will examine the various techniques that characterize the live journey in more detail in the following chapters of this book. But for now, we should note that it is undoubtedly in the Altai mountains of southern

15. Although performed in the light, this ritual has nothing to do with that of the light tent.

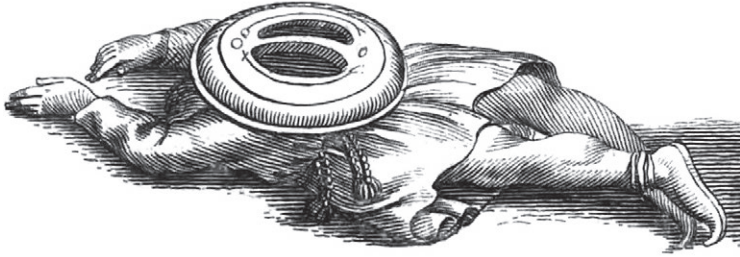


Figure 15. Saami Shaman Performing the Lying Journey, seventeenth century. Scheffer 1678: 108.

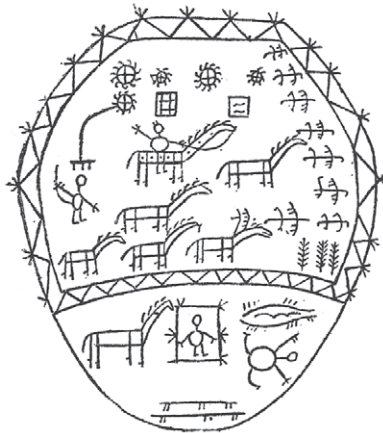


Figure 16. Decorations on a Teleut Drum. Dyrenkova 1949: 109, fig. 6.

Siberia that the shamanic journey has taken on its most standardized forms—those which stand in sharp contrast to the highly individualized experiences typical of the lying method. On the eve of the 1917 Revolution, the Teleut of the northern Altai subsisted on herding, agriculture, and subsidiary hunting.¹⁶ Their shamans wore costumes and owned extraordinary drums covered with dozens of colorful figures (figure 16). Each of these figures occupied a fixed place in a cosmic schema that was known by all of their shamans, with the sun, moon, and stars occupying the drum's upper levels and the earth sitting at its bottom. Among the many anthropo- and zoomorphic figures seen on the upper section,

16. There is a rich literature on Teleut shamanism, among which we should cite: Dyrenkova 1949; Funk 2004, 2005; Bat'ianova 1995.

for example, we find the eagle of the celestial god Ülgén, several horses belonging to various celestial spirits, a spirit accompanying the shaman at the entrance to Ülgén's palace, and a rectangle containing a number of wavy lines. The lines in this rectangle represent the written letters of a decree from Ülgén, which designates the drum's bearer as a true shaman. This image is called a *bichig*, a Mongolian term for the written word. It is somewhat surprising to see this reference to written language on the drums of illiterate shamans; it speaks to the prestige associated with the various Mongolian empires (from the Golden Horde to the Dzungar khanate) that ruled the Teleut territories before ceding them to the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century. Most important is that Teleut shamans conceived of the legitimacy of their status as something conferred by a written document, just as civil servants advertised their authority with the display of imperial missives. The fact that the written lines are horizontal reflects a more recent Russian influence, as opposed to the vertical lines of Mongolian script.

The lower part of the drum features the master spirit of the threshold, as well as the frog and the snake (Dyrenkova 1949; Funk 1997: 43). Through their relative positions and the various associations that each of them carries, these figures refer to the different parts of a tiered and compartmentalized world, one that is structured according to a fixed vertical hierarchy. We should note that none of the principal entities to whom rituals are usually addressed—the god Ülgén, for example—are represented on the drum, only their emissaries and guardians, as well as the traveling companions who guide shamans through the invisible realms.

The journeys undertaken by the souls (*t'ula*) of Teleut shamans follow several conventional itineraries, each made up of a series of stages that are relatively stable from one practitioner to the next; in other words, they follow a common structure that allows for a limited degree of variation only in certain details. Ethnologists have gathered hundreds of pages of the chants that Teleut shamans learn by heart, each of them corresponding to a set itinerary that leads to a specific spirit: there is the song for the road to the god Ülgén, and others for the road to the Master of the Threshold, to Our Father (Adam), to T'öo-han, to the Master of the Sea, to the Fire Mother, to the Solitary Spirit, to the Master of the Drum, and the list goes on. Despite their considerable length, these songs are memorized with relatively little variation from one shaman to the next and form part of a shared sacred geography. The shamanic cosmology of the Teleut divides the universe into a series of distinct regions:

“our earth,” “the earthly path,” “the iron lid,” “the true earth,” over all of which extends the celestial world, which is itself divided into sixteen spheres, each inhabited by different spirits and gods. To visit a spirit, the shaman must go through a number of clearly defined steps.

In addition to his chant, the shaman marks his progress with a series of movements. These gestures are coded with particular rigidity in the horse sacrifice offered to the celestial god Ülgen, a Teleut ritual that has risen to worldwide notoriety as Mircea Eliade’s model for the celestial journey (Verbickii 1893; Radloff 1884; Eliade 1964).¹⁷ This ritual represents the flight of the shaman as he makes his way to present the soul of the sacrificed horse to the celestial deity. To do this, he must pass through a number of celestial layers and meet with the various spirits that inhabit each one, either stopping to converse with them or to offer them gifts. This celestial ascent is staged in a tent with a birch tree at its center. There are nine notches, or “steps” (*tapty*), carved into its trunk, and the top emerges through the tent’s smoke hole. The shaman first mimes flying on the back of a goose, then, to signal to the audience that he is passing from one sky to the next, he climbs to the step corresponding to the intended celestial layer, before descending and circling around the fire. The trunk ladder allows the audience to form a very clear image of the various stages of the shaman’s journey across a distant virtual space, establishing a visible reference point in their immediate surroundings.

In sum, the spectators of the Teleut ritual have a set of indicators at their disposal that allow them to follow the shaman’s actions in real time: the images painted on his drum, which provide a topological framework of the virtual space he travels through; the detailed lyrics of his long chants; and the movements of his body around the immediate surroundings, in particular his turns around the fire and his ascent up the ladder. At no point, however, do we see him lying down and practicing the method of travel used by some shamans to the north. The shaman’s body is thus something like a shadow puppet, allowing the audience to follow a scene unfolding in a different space, at a clear remove from the ritual stage itself. This is in some respects comparable to the way we can follow a ceremony by watching it live on television. But unlike television, these kinds of ritual devices are interactive: the shaman can act in response to the spectators as they cheer him on and repeat the lines of his song.

Teleut practices are a valuable source of information. For Dmitrii Funk, a specialist in this tradition, Teleut shamanism bears some

17. See also the observations of Lot-Falck 1977a.

resemblance to a priestly institution: “The presence of a unified structure of sacrificial rituals, the stability of Teleut shamans’ representations of the universe’s virtual pathways, [...] and the stability of formal principles of the ritual chants in these ceremonies all testify to the advancement of a process whereby shamans come to constitute a distinct category, very close to that of the priesthood in classical polytheistic religions” (Funk 2005: 180). Despite these tendencies, however, Teleut shamans are far from representing anything like a clergy in the strict sense: access to the position of shaman is based on a model of individual destiny and social recognition; knowledge is acquired through visions and dreams; shamans do not relate to their ritual practice as a profession, as they carry out the same subsistence activities as everyone else in the community; shamans consider each other rivals and never come together as a single hierarchical organization (Dyrenkova 1949).

What is truly remarkable about Teleut ritual practice, when considered in comparison to the technique of the lying journey, is its conception of a virtual space organized according to a common geography familiar to all present, which means that the work of the imagination is closely framed by a set of stabilized spatio-temporal mental models. Based on a fixed, internalized body of knowledge that is committed to memory, the imaginative activity of the Teleut ritual depends much more on a canonical model than it does the kind of generative pattern at work in the lying journey. It is striking to note the parallel contrast between the dearth of iconography involved in Chukchi shamanism and the relative explosion of material images at play in the Teleut performance. The rise of visible images goes hand in hand with the stabilization of invisible imagery. The Teleut themselves regard the images on their drums as a tool for cognitive fixation, comparable to the written languages of their Russian Orthodox and Mongolian Buddhist neighbors. One of their myths speaks directly to this last point: of the seventy-seven peoples in existence, the sky god gave writing to seventy-four and denied it to three groups in southern Siberia, the Teleut among them: “As for books,” the sky god told them, “you already have your drums” (Verbickii 1893: 103).

The Teleut tradition represents the live journey in its “purest” form; in other regions, it is more common to see various hybrid forms of travel, with hints of the lying journey occasionally popping up in rituals whose dominant mode is undoubtedly “live.” Yakut shamans, for example, represent their descent into the lower world by falling to the ground and mimicking the calls of a diving loon (*Gavia arctica*), though here the resemblance with the “sinking” Chukchi shaman should not be overstated.

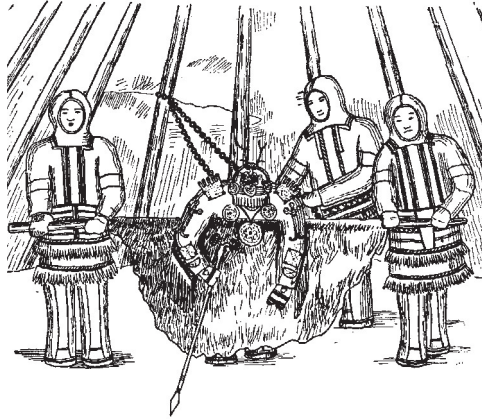


Figure 17. Nganasan Shaman Crosses the “Water of the Dead” by falling onto a polar bear skin draped over a crossbar, while he himself is held up by a chain fastened to his back. Popov 1936: 75, fig. 48.

In the Yakut case, only the fall itself is significant, as the officiant is not actually allowed to stay unconscious on the ground. Some Yakut groups even use a device specifically designed to keep their shamans from doing so, literally holding them up with a pair of straps, or “reins” as they are called, passed under the officiant’s arms. In the Arctic, Nenets and Enets audiences use similar “reins” to prevent their own shamans from falling, an event they would consider disastrous. At the opposite end of Asia, the Udeghe of the lower Amur region firmly held their shamans hanging in the abyss with snake-like straps attached to the belt.¹⁸ This fear of falling resonates with a number of traditional motifs associated with Arctic shamanism. One of them, the water journey, practiced throughout a vast geographical region—from the Scandinavian Saami all the way to the Athapaskan-speaking peoples of North America—is performed in a very particular way in the hierarchical tradition of the Nganasan: instead of lying on the ground, the shaman starts to fall, but is restrained by a chain attached to his back and is held up by a pole with a bearskin stretched across it. He then mimics the movements of a swimming bear to show that he is crossing the “water of the dead” (figure 17). These are all techniques that are quite clearly intended to prevent the officiant from “sinking” in the Chukchi manner.

18. On the Yakut “reins,” see Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 620. On the “reins” used by Samoyedic groups, see Prokofyeva 1963: 126–27. On the Udege snake-straps, see Ivanov 1954: 365.

Other groups that practice in the light tent do allow their shaman to lie all the way down, but with marked reluctance. Evenki shamans in both the Transbaikalian region and along the Yenisei River perform live dances, chants, and mimes, but also lie down and even lose consciousness for a moment when traveling to the lower world. The participants, however, are eager to wake the officiant back up, either with sparks from the fire or by rekindling the fire and forcing him to look at the flames, for fear that he or she might otherwise get “lost” in the lower world. As soon as the shaman regains consciousness, they recount what they have seen and heard in the invisible realm.¹⁹ But lying down is only one of a number of techniques that Evenki shamans put to use in their journeys: there is also the description of their adventures delivered in the chant, the orientation of the officiant’s body in a direction associated with the lower world, the shaman’s gestures, as well as an array of objects placed around the ritual stage and attached to the officiant’s costume. Lying down, furthermore, is by no means indispensable to the Evenki cosmic journey, as it is only used for forays into the lower world and not to the upper or celestial dimensions. As with the Yakut, falling is used as a kind of kinetic signal by the Evenki, indicating to the audience a cosmic descent. By exposing the shaman’s eyes to the sparks or flames of a bright fire, participants produce a vivid visual stimulus to prevent the specialist from sinking into a purely solitary mode of mental imagery. All of this is done to draw the shaman away from the uncontrollable kind of experience that is the lying journey. In fact, some Evenki groups preempt this from happening, just like the Yakut, by securing their shaman with a set of straps fastened to their back (Vasilevich 1969: 255).

As should be clear from this comparative overview, there exist a number of very different ways of exploring the invisible. The lying journey, first of all, is centered on the production of mental imagery in the mind of the shaman. Without a fixed standardized model to guide it, this technique is characterized by a high degree of improvisational freedom on the part of the officiant and an absence of participation from the audience.

19. On the Transbaikalian Evenki, see Shirokogoroff 1935. Shamans among the nomadic Mankova Evenki might remain immobile for up to half an hour, however. The Uda Evenko wake their shamans up as soon as they collapse (Lindenau 1983: 94). On the Evenki of the Podkamannaya Tunguska, see Anisimov 1958: 102–3.

In the live journey, on the other hand, the straps used to stop the shaman from lying down and the sparks used to keep them awake are deliberately designed to curb the officiant's capacity for sensory deprivation and limit the immersive experience it enables. Two significant features stand out from these examples of the live journey: firstly, in these traditions, mental imagery is subjugated to a proliferation of embodied images; and secondly, the organization of the ritual action tends toward a standardized form. Memorized chants and externalized imagery are two kinds of cognitive tools that promote *the stabilization of imaginative experience*.

The standardization of content and the hierarchization of relations are clearly the price to be paid for making the invisible visible to as many people as possible. The live journey effectively coordinates the imaginations of those present and affords ordinary people a window onto the adventures of their shamanic hero. In the process, however, ordinary participants in these traditions lose the possibility of direct exchange with the spirits themselves, which had been a central promise of the dark tent.

Ritual Inequalities and Delegation

The shamanic practices of the Siberian peoples are marked by a number of striking discontinuities, and these have given rise to several classification systems and explanatory frameworks on the part of outside observers. In a vast synthesis that has had a notable influence on French anthropology, Roberte Hamayon has drawn a contrast between “pastoral” and “hunting” shamanism (Hamayon 1990). In her analysis, shamanism in its original form is represented by the hunting societies of the central Siberian taiga, such as those of the Tungus and the Selkup, and is characterized by its prevalent modes of alliance and partnership with the animal spirits of the natural world. This archaic shamanism is rooted in the markedly horizontal social dynamics of these populations, both between humans themselves and between humans and various nonhuman entities of the world at large. Hierarchy thus represents no more than a form of degradation within shamanism.²⁰ We see it emerge in southern

20. Hunting societies are thus representatives of an “archaic, authentic form of shamanism” (Hamayon 1990: 35). “Shamanic society” is “as a general rule, acephalous” and knows no relations of dependance or hierarchy (1990: 739).

Siberia, Hamayon argues, with the introduction of livestock farming and horse-riding, which gave rise to what she calls “pastoral shamanism,” centered on the principle of inheritance and spirits attributed with human, as opposed to animal, personas. For Hamayon, the practices of the Buryat in the Cisbaikai region—whose mixed mode of subsistence combines pastoralism, agriculture, and hunting—provide a clear example of a pastoral shamanism that has recently emerged from of an older tradition of the hunting kind (Hamayon 1984: 89; Hamayon 1990: 106–10). In the analysis of Cisbaikalian shamanism, it should thus be possible to distinguish elements belonging to two heterogeneous strata: an ancient hunting ideology and a more recent pastoral one.

But this scenario is largely contradicted by archeological data. Pastoralism and agriculture were not introduced over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Hamayon proposes, into a Cisbaikalia still populated by hunter-gathers; the well-known Kurykan population—associated with the Kurumchi archeological culture—were already employing these modes of subsistence in the region as early as the sixth century CE, using plows and irrigation canals, and introducing a writing system. Evidence from the Segenut burial mounds and the Shishkino petroglyphs indicates a combination of pastoralism and hunting on horseback in Cisbaikalia around the tenth century. In the periods that followed, elites dressed themselves in precious fabrics and gold jewelry, while commoners wore furs and lived off livestock farming and subsidiary hunting. This semi-sedentary economy was the norm in Cisbaikalia until the Russians arrived in the seventeenth century (Okladnikov 1968: 380–84; Harinskii 2005). But the archeozoological record has shown that pastoralism has an even longer history in the region, dating at least as far back as 1000 BCE (Nomokonova et al. 2010). And still more surprises await us if we go even further back in time. The hierarchization of social relations in Cisbaikalia did not stem, as anthropologists often assume, from the emergence of livestock farming, but preceded it. As Alain Testart has shown, it is in this region that we find “one of the earliest indications of marked inequalities among hunter-gatherers” (Testart 1982: 130). In the burial grounds of the Glazkovo hunter-gatherer culture of the early Bronze Age (3000–2000 BCE), modest graves are found among other tombs containing dozens of prestigious, delicately worked objects made from materials of distant origin: superbly polished jade discs and rings, for example, as well as pearls and some of the earliest metal objects such as knives, needles, and jewelry. These opulent burials are grouped together in elite cemeteries that include a number of children’s tombs, some of

which contain enough wealth to suggest that a higher social rank was transmitted by birth. The wealthy are sometimes also accompanied by sacrificial victims, slaughtered to follow them into the afterlife. These signs of a nascent hereditary hierarchy predate the appearance of livestock in the region by two millennia, which precludes the notion that social inequalities are a result of pastoralism, as the classic evolutionary chronologies would have it (Okladnikov 1955; Shepard 2012).

In southern Siberia, hunting and pastoralism have therefore coexisted for thousands of years, and hierarchical relations are even older than that; to describe hierarchical pastoral shamanism as a recent degradation of the Central Taiga tradition, then, would be inaccurate. There is evidence, however, of a flow of influence in the opposite direction, from the shamanic practices of the steppe toward those of the hunter-gatherers in the taiga. Russian scholars have pointed out, for example, the prevalence of the prestigious figure of the steppe horseman in the shamanic imagery of the forest populations, even though these groups themselves do not ride horses. As we mentioned earlier, Selkup shamans practicing in the light tent will often mount their drums and pretend to ride the instrument as though it were a reindeer: in everyday life, however, the Selkup harness their animals to sledges, as is typical of Samoyedic peoples, and do not usually ride them. The Selkup shaman's main celestial auxiliaries are an iron horse, a bull spirit, and a few sword-wielding soldiers, none of which has anything to do with the vernacular oral tradition of the Selkup, nor for that matter with the forest world in general (Prokof'eva 1981: 60).²¹ In many respects, the shamanic traditions of the central taiga hunting populations represent less a primordial form of shamanism than they do a peripheral one, with much of its inspiration rooted in regions further south, where the forest gives way to the steppe and whose inhabitants subsist on both hunting and herding.

Of course, the shamanic traditions of hunters and herders do exhibit markedly different preoccupations, with the former more focused on

21. Similarly, one of the most common interpretations of the Ket drum is that it represents a riding reindeer, whereas the Ket hardly ride their reindeer at all, but instead harness them (Alekseenko 1984: 78). E. Alekseenko, a specialist on the Ket, believes that this group's shamanic drum originates from contacts between the Ket and Turko-Mongol peoples in the early seventeenth century (Alekseenko 1984: 82). This is hardly surprising, given that the Ket are the only survivors of the Turkic expansion that pushed them northward as it engulfed the other groups of the Yeniseian language family.

wild animals and the latter on livestock, which, as Hamayon points out, lends two very different styles to their respective cosmologies. And yet, because both traditions fall squarely within the hierarchical camp as we have defined it, there is no fundamental difference in the way they distribute the kind of abilities necessary for interacting with the invisible. Tungus hunters and Buryat herders both belong to the same macrofamily of Altaic-speaking peoples, all of whom share a similar hierarchical division of ritual labor. Though anthropologists today are quick to describe theirs as an “acephalous” society, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Tungus population included several prominent families distinguished by their prestigious ancestry, as well as slaves who could be bought and sold or used as units of exchange (Georgi 1776–1777, vol. 3: 41; Lindenau 1983: 79; Bahrushin and Tokarev 1953: 192–94). The Buryat also had slaves, in addition to a veritable hereditary aristocracy. Some legends have it that a number of slaves were allotted to the most prestigious shamans of these groups and subsequently slaughtered to accompany the ritual specialists in death (Okladnikov [1937] 2013: 286–87).²² For both the Tungus and the Buryat, the shamanic status is premised on an ancestral lineage and consecrated with the presentation of a drum and a costume in a ceremony organized by the community. Following their investiture, these shamans are responsible for leading their group’s main seasonal rituals, typically those related to hunting or herding, and they alone are deemed powerful enough to conduct face-to-face interactions with spirits. In both groups, shamans perform in the light tent and never the dark; they go on “live” journeys in their rituals and are forbidden to consume fly agaric.

Steppe traditions thus look relatively similar to those of the central taiga when compared with those of the Paleo-Asiatic peoples to the East, who practice heterarchical shamanism, consume mushrooms, and make use of the dark-tent ritual. Though it represents a decisive threshold for classic theories of social evolution, from this comparative perspective the economic criterion of pastoralism no longer seems to be of great importance: the Koryak and the Chukchi, for example, whose reindeer herds can number up to 3,000 head, still observe heterarchical traditions, whereas Tungus, Selkup, and Ket hunter-gatherers, who

22. Sacrifices like this are not particularly unusual; there is archeological evidence of sacrificed slaves in the tombs of wealthy Yakut lords (Nikolaeva 2016).

rarely keep more than a dozen animals—if any at all—practice a totally hierarchical form of shamanism.

The Danish anthropologist Morten Axel Pedersen, a specialist in Mongolian shamanism, has thus rightly set out to establish a model that departs from Hamayon's criterion of pastoralism and attempts to take into account the Paleo-Asiatic populations of the tundra (Pedersen 2001). For Pedersen, the societies of "northern North Asia"—marked by horizontality, an egalitarian ethos, and bilateral kinship—are representatives of an animist ontology, while those further south are governed by a totemic one—associated with verticality, patrilineal filiation, and a hierarchical ethos inherited from the empires of the Great Steppe and the spread of Buddhism. However, this simple geographical division between "North" and "South" fails to account for the fact that Samoyedic societies, those inhabiting the northern-most reaches of Siberia, organize themselves into exogamous patrilineal clans. As for the role of the shaman, according to this geo-ontological schema, he would be in his element in the North, but look quite out of place in the South, a kind of "animist homunculus," at odds with a rigidly segmented ontological context. The possibility of any hierarchical form of shamanism specific to these southern regions is not considered.

Another Danish anthropologist, Rane Willerslev, has been more sensitive to the differences between the flexible shamanism of northern societies—particularly that of the Yukaghir, with whom he conducted his fieldwork—and the rigid status of shamans in various Mongol and Tungus societies. Willerslev bases this opposition on the same contrast identified by Pedersen, that between northern societies organized into "bands" with bilateral kinship structures and southern societies organized by patriarchal clans: "What we seem to be dealing with, in effect, is two qualitatively different shamanic configurations, which can be seen, at least in part, as reflections of rather different types of social organizations: the patrilineal clan structure of the Mongols and some south Siberian groups, with their strict rules of residence and clan membership, and the bilateral groupings of the Yukaghirs and other circumpolar peoples, marked by a flexible band organization and constantly changing in size and membership" (Willerslev 2007: 135).

However, the causal link that Pedersen and Willerslev presume between clanism and hierarchy comes up against a serious counterexample with the Nivkh (or Gilyak) in the Siberian Far East. The Nivkh are known for their robust exogamous clan structure, sustained by a system of generalized exchange made famous by Lev Shternberg and Claude

Lévi-Strauss (Shternberg [1905] 1999; Lévi-Strauss 1969: 292–309). The members of a Nivkh clan share the same fathers-in-law and the same sons-in-law, the same ancestors, the same bear festival, and the same obligation to avenge the deaths of their clan brothers. But the Nivkh's shamanic practices are unambiguously heterarchical: dark tent, little or no ritual costume, and open access to the drum. The presumption of a necessary link between clanism and social hierarchy in fact derives from the neo-evolutionist models of American cultural ecology, wherein band and clan societies are seen as successive stages on an evolutionary ladder. However, as Alain Testart has repeatedly pointed out, there are numerous examples contradicting this simplified view, starting with the indigenous societies of Australia, which are well known for their exogamous clan structures, but do not accumulate material wealth (Testart 2012: 54–55).

Building on the analyses of Hamayon and Pedersen, Philippe Descola has attempted to interpret the contrasts found in northern Asia as a series of ontological transformations, or *modes of identification*, as he puts it. In his view, the egalitarian relations between human and nonhuman persons seen in the north—particularly among the Chukchi—are indicators of an animist ontology, which gives way, as we move further south into an area where pastoralism is more prevalent, to vertical relationships of protective domination over livestock, which for Descola is indicative of an analogical ontology (rather than a totemic one, as Pedersen proposes). Whereas an animist ontology is premised on reciprocal relations between humans and animals, analogism describes a fragmented world made up of interlocking segments that are hierarchically related to one another (Descola 2013: 373). The contrasts between these two ontologies are reflected in the differences between these groups' shamanic practices: northern shamanism emphasizes collaborative relationships with animal auxiliaries, while southern practices are characterized by certain forms of possession, with the spirit taking a dominant position over the shaman (2013: 375–76).

It is quite difficult, however, to sort different ways of relating to spirits into clear geographical regions, as every shaman communicates with dozens of different spirits—some weak, some powerful—and can develop different kinds of relationships with each one—some friendly, others sycophantic, and still others authoritarian. Collaborative relationships with auxiliaries are thus common to societies in both the south and the north, while scenes suggesting some kind of possession also occur in Chukchi and Itelmen rituals—northern traditions,

that is—most notably in the collective forms described earlier in this chapter.

Furthermore, while the idea of a necessary link between pastoralism and protective domination over nonhuman animals may seem self-evident with regard to a number of pastoral systems, this is not the case for all Siberian peoples, who often grant their livestock a degree of autonomy quite close to that enjoyed by wild animals. The Tozhu Tuvans in southern Siberia, for example, with whom I spent some time, have no shepherds, and the relationship they have with their reindeer is based more on attraction rather than on surveillance. They do not even take action to protect their animals from wolves. Chukchi herders, for their part, have been keeping watch over their herds to prevent them from dispersing ever since the nineteenth century, sometimes day and night—much closer to what we might identify as a relational schema of protective domination (Vdovin 1965: 162; Stépanoff et al. 2017). But this schema could hardly be extended to interhuman relationships given the general fluidity of social relations in Chukchi society. To be clear, hierarchical shamanism is not found among the Chukchi, but it is among the Tozhu, as well as among their Buryat, Mongol, and Tungus neighbors. There is thus no straightforward correlation between hierarchy and pastoralism: as we saw from the Glazkovo burials in Cisbaikalia, the former preceded the latter by two millennia. Descola's opposition between animism and analogism is certainly not without some relevance to the discontinuities of northern Asian shamanic traditions, as long as we are careful not to ground them in homogeneous relational schemas, such as exchange or protective domination, that would supposedly account for all of the internal and external relationships of each population. We will propose some alternative approaches in later chapters when we focus on the figure of the bear and the contrasting modes in which it is represented.

The limitation of all of these theoretical models for explaining the differences between indigenous Siberian religious practices on either economic, social, or ontological bases, is that they attempt to posit the cause of the contrasts between large categorical groupings of different peoples—hunters and herders, northerners and southerners, animists and analogists—before properly setting out the boundaries of these categories in space and time. Before proposing any explanatory scenario that could be applied across the vast, five-thousand-kilometer expanse that is Siberia, it is imperative to establish at least a rough picture of what the major continuities and discontinuities of its different shamanic traditions are. It will thus be necessary to define the basic parameters for

a systematic comparison of the distribution of ritual tasks observed by the different Siberian societies at hand.

In his work on indigenous Amazonian societies, Stephen Hugh-Jones has proposed a useful set of criteria that are more sociological than cosmological. Examining the social status of shamans, looking at the kinds of training they receive, their identifying attributes, and the specific functions they fulfill, Hugh-Jones bases his model on a distinction between “vertical” and “horizontal” shamanism. “Vertical shamanism,” typical of complex, hierarchical societies, emphasizes esoteric knowledge transmitted along paternal lines within a small elite. Shamans in this category disdain psychotropic drugs and are responsible for leading regular collective rituals involving the whole community. They enjoy a quasi-priestly status, coupled with a degree of secular and economic power. “Horizontal shamanism,” which is more typical of less-differentiated societies that are more focused on hunting and warfare, is more democratic, placing a higher value on individual experience and trance states rather than a standardized ritual discourse. Amazonian horizontal shamans do not inherit their status, but they do use psychotropic drugs and tend to act on behalf of individuals rather than collectives. In some societies, these two forms coexist (Hugh-Jones 1994).

The opposition between these two poles of Amazonian shamanism has obvious similarities with what we have observed of hierarchical and heterarchical traditions. That said, there are no examples of Siberian hierarchical shamans forming a socioeconomic or moral elite in the same way that the vertical shamans described by Hugh-Jones do. The main shortcoming of this schema is the rather arbitrary nature of the “vertical–horizontal” denomination. Though anthropologists are often quick to draw on this binary, it has less to do with native representations than it does with the Western image of the family tree, where filiation is represented vertically and alliance horizontally. In Buryat genealogical diagrams, to give a relevant counterexample, generations are not represented as a series of superimposed levels one atop the other, but as concentric circles.

The primary question put forward by Hugh-Jones, however, that of whether or not a community delegates its collective religious actions to a shaman, clearly seems to constitute a decisive criterion for our own purposes. It is possible to identify a series of Siberian peoples who conduct communal seasonal rituals without delegating any specific action to an appointed specialist: in the east, these are the Chukchi as we have seen, but also the Koryak, the Yupik, the Itelmen, and the Nivkh; while

in the west they are the Khant of the Vah and Vasiugan rivers and the Mansi. Several other commonalities among the members of this series have come to light in the course of our overview: the shamanic function is not necessarily hereditary, it does not require validation from an experienced specialist, and is not conferred through an official investiture ceremony. The positions of specialist and non-specialist are porous and reversible, a dynamic supported by the fact that the shaman has no ritual costume and no monopoly on the drum. In terms of practices, the most common interventions led by heterarchical shamans are individual healing rituals and divinations. Among the ritual techniques commonly used by these groups, the dark tent is often the most vaunted and, when a cosmic journey is performed, it is generally done in the lying or off-line mode. Finally, the use of fly agaric is common to all of these populations and is generally permitted for anyone who wishes to try it.²³ The shamanic quality appears to be understood as the manifestation of a radically individual essence (materialized, for example, in the transgression of gender boundaries), and is often transitory: it is an indeterminate quality that resists the rigid integration of the individual into any homogeneous category. Shamans thus seem to constitute less of a social category than a conceptual one, a class of beings grouped together precisely because they defy the logic of ordinary categorical schemas. To borrow a distinction proposed by prehistorian Jacques Pelegrin, heterarchical shamans would be more accurately described as “experts” than as “specialists,” that is, individuals distinguished by a superior mastery of techniques that are accessible to all, with no monopoly over a specialized tool kit (Pelegrin 2007). All of these features, which define heterarchical shamanism, allow us to draw a strong parallel between the populations of East and West Siberia, while at the same time setting these peoples apart from those who occupy the majority of central and southern Siberia.

These latter populations, the Altaic peoples (of the Turkic, Mongolic, and Manchu-Tungusic language families), all practice a hierarchical style of shamanism. In these groups, the shaman’s activities go beyond healing rituals and divinations to include conducting seasonal rituals, such as collective sacrifices, for individual households as well as the community at large (figure 18). The shaman must help to ensure both abundant

23. There are some exceptions to these rules among the cited populations, but as we shall see in chapter 11, in most cases they are easily explained by the cultural domination of the Altaic peoples.



Figure 18. When the Khakas sacrifice a horse to the mountains, it falls to a shaman (here seated on the right) to lead the ceremony. Photo S. D. Mainagashev 1914.

resources for the community and its general security; they are often seen as protectors of their people, fending off attacks from demons and enemy shamans, as the images of weapons and enclosures on their costumes and drums testify (Anisimov 1958). The identity of the hierarchical shaman is typically hereditary, innate, and irreversible, and must be authenticated by a more experienced practitioner. They are distinguished from the non-shamanic members of their communities by the elaborate costumes they wear during rituals and by their exclusive right to own a drum. It is the ritual animation of this instrument, performed during a community-organized investiture ceremony, that officially launches the hierarchical shaman's career. Because of their association with a specialized tool kit, these shamans can be described as "specialists," in Pelegrin's terminology, as opposed to "experts."

The consumption of fly agaric and the dark tent are essentially eschewed by these practitioners. Their archetypal and most highly valued ritual technique is the cosmic journey, performed in real time before a live audience.²⁴ Given that the particularity of a shaman's identity is

24. Owing to the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism beginning in the seventeenth century, in the hierarchical traditions of southern Siberian, the shaman's communal function is sometimes taken on by a rival figure, the lama.

bound up with their status as a bearer of an ancestral self, in the hierarchical context the shamanic essence is mixed: it is a quality that is both individual and at the same time shared across a hereditary line of descent. In each particular hierarchical tradition, shamans share a certain number of common traits: a costume designed according to a standard template, for example, the formal structure and thematic preoccupations of their ritual chants, or a conventional invisible geography. But the standardization of hierarchical shamanic practices is only partial, never reaching anything like the degree of uniformity exhibited by members of a church congregation or clergy. Because these shamans never assemble among themselves and, outside of the ritual context, live similar lives to the non-shamanic members of their communities, it is difficult to speak of these specialists as constituting any kind of social category. Attached to their costumes are several elements associated with their personal histories as well as their particular auxiliary spirits; their ritual techniques are diverse; and their chants are expected to exhibit something of a personal style. They remain profoundly singular beings, with unpredictable temperaments, and are very rarely willing to cooperate with other shamans: tales of fights to the death between shamans are as popular in hierarchical traditions as they are in heterarchical ones. And yet, by comparison with their heterarchical counterparts, there is no doubt that shamans in hierarchical communities exhibit some semblance of homogenization in their practices, which makes it easier to recognize the latter as representatives of a coherent type of men and women. Because it is passed down through generations, the shamanic quality takes on a collective dimension and comes to define a category of uncommon individuals who are distinguished from ordinary members of the community by their having an innate essential quality. With hierarchy, essentialism takes on a categorical form based on a fundamental difference between two types of beings: open people, those endowed with certain abilities; and others who are by nature closed to the invisible. But there is nothing exceptional about this link between essentialist categorization and hierarchy: as David Graeber observes, “the logic of identity is, always and everywhere, entangled in the logic of hierarchy. It is only when certain people are placed above others, or where everyone is being ranked in relation to the king, or the high priest, or Founding Fathers, that one begins to speak of people bound by their essential

The systematic distribution of ritual labor is no less hierarchical in these situations.

nature: about fundamentally different types of human beings” (Graeber 2011: 110).

Heterarchical shamanism	Hierarchical shamanism
Actions performed for the sake of individuals	Community role
No necessary lineage	Hereditary function
No transmission or validation from another shaman	Validation and transmission from shaman to shaman
No investiture ritual	Investiture ritual
Reversible status	Irreversible status
Drum not reserved for shaman	Drum reserved for shaman
No shamanic costume	Shamanic costume
Open use of fly agaric (or <i>Amanita muscaria</i>)	No or restricted use of fly agaric
Dark tent	Light tent
Lying journey	Live journey

Note for table 1, following page: On the Vah-Vasiugan Khant, see Kulemzin 2004. Nenets shamans (*tadebia*) led seasonal collective rituals to ensure hunting and herding success as well as individual healing rituals. In a typical ritual, the officiant performed by firelight and described in a chant his journeys to visit a series of spirits distributed across a vertical hierarchy (Homich 1981). Homich also recalls an atypical performance in the dark tent with binding, clearly conducted as a form of entertainment, in the Taz region, in close proximity to other populations at that time still practicing dark tent rituals of their own (1981: 32). According to Prokofyeva, however, the Nenets do not practice the dark tent ritual. Generally speaking, Nenets shamanism falls within the hierarchical camp, but with some nuances: no investiture ritual, shamans make their own drums, and some non-shamans are also allowed to own drums, but not use them (Prokofyeva 1963: 149-50). On the Selkup, see Prokof'eva 1981; the Ket, see Anuchin 1914; the Yakut, see Seroshevski 1993; the Tuvans, see Stépanoff 2014a and D'iakonova 1981b; on the Upper Kolyma Yukaghir, see Jochelson 1926 and chapter 11 of this book; the Chukchi, see Bogoras 1905–1908. What we know of the traditions indigenous to the Nivkh (prior to the Tungus influence) comes from Shrenk's observations from the 19th century (1903).

Table 1. The Shamanic Practices of Northern Asian Populations.

		West		Central and South				East					
		Vah- Vasiugan Kbant	Nenets	Selkup	Ket	Evenki	Yakut	Tuvans	Upper Kolyma Yukhaghbir	Chukchi	Yupik	Koryak	Nivkh
Hierarchical characteristics	Community role												
	Hereditary status												
	Investiture ritual												
	Drum reserved for shaman												
	Light-tent ritual												
Heterarchical characteristics	Live journey												
	Open consumption of fly agaric												
	Dark-tent ritual												
	Lying journey												

As the table shows, the two forms of shamanism constitute a pair of distinct poles: generally speaking, the hierarchical traits are all shared by a single set of populations, while the heterarchical traits are found in others, suggesting a certain degree of incompatibility between the two. There are groups, however, who exhibit a mixed set of characteristics, notably those living in areas marked by historical contact between various hierarchical and heterarchical traditions: the Selkup and the Ket, for example, for whom some heterarchical elements persist within a generally hierarchical context; or the Nivkh and the Yukaghir, two groups who exhibit certain regional differences among their populations that may provide some indicators of the hierarchical model's historical expansion.

These two poles being established, it is important to remember that none of these populations has ever delegated the entirety of their social relations with the world's nonhuman entities to the care of shamans. Throughout Siberia, people perform their own personal rituals, with a varying degree of complexity, on a daily basis: to track game animals, for example, to honor the mountains, to feed the fire, or to protect their children—all of which are done without any assistance from a shaman. Gestures like these make up the everyday ritual life of any household; they have a complementary relationship with shamanism, but are by no means encompassed by it.

Moreover, even in the hierarchical traditions, all of these groups impose some kind of limit on the powers of their shamans and often organize collective rituals themselves, sometimes introducing other forms of hierarchy in the process. The British anthropologist Caroline Humphrey has shown the profound tension that exists between the ritual labor of the Daur shamans of Manchuria and the very different kind of religious practice seen in the male clan rituals where elders pay homage to the sky, the mountains, and the forests. Similarly, among the Khakas, shamans have never been allowed to take part in the great rituals dedicated to the celestial god Kudai (Iakovlev 1900: 103–4).²⁵ In state societies, like those of the Turko-Mongol empires, collective cults were often taken over by various political authorities and entrusted to the Buddhist Church; shamans, as a result, came to be seen as subversive figures—one hierarchy in place of another (Humphrey 1996).

25. According to Shirokogoroff, the Evenki similarly insist that their shamans have “nothing to do” with Buga, the spirit guardian and dispenser of game animals. Hunters pray and send sacrifices to Buga without involving any shamans.

Further tensions can be observed on the cosmological level. The Nganasan, for example, as the Russian anthropologist Iurii Simchenko has observed, see their own cosmology as split between two domains: the cosmos as seen by “simple folk” and that which is known to the shamans. One can thus trace a sharp divide between secular and shamanic mythologies dealing with the origin of the world, spirits, and the explanation for the existence of death. In contrast to those of the ordinary population, shamanic myths routinely place shamanic spirits and ancestors at the origin of all things, and thus provide a legitimizing discourse for the division of human society into individuals with shamanic abilities and “simple folk.” Non-shamanic myths, however, tend to make heroines of demiurgic “Mother” figures, entities who never feature among the shamans’ ritual interlocutors. Though the Nganasan tradition falls squarely in the hierarchical camp, if a shaman ever dares to address these creators, he may well provoke the wrath of certain non-shamans and find himself publicly punished for it (Simchenko 1996, I: 141, 181–85).

To understand shamanism as the sole religion and worldview of any of these populations is to lose sight of these tensions and the deliberate forms of resistance that different groups use to prevent their shamans from monopolizing control over the community’s relationship with the surrounding world. The basic premise of heterarchical shamanism is that every individual is endowed with sufficient powers to manage his or her own relations with nonhuman entities. When anyone does assume a specialist position, it is because they possess a greater degree of talent in a skillset that is common to all. Their role is closer to that of a translator than a representative. The originality of hierarchical shamanism lies in the idea that the community can *delegate some of its interests to a proxy*, a transference of responsibilities justified by the theory of an unequal distribution of skills between a series of rigidly defined essentialized categories: gifted individuals with open bodies and simpler, closed beings. The shaman is essentialized not only as an individual, but also as a member of a shamanic line of descent, a series of ancestors who make their voice heard through him. A key consequence of this delegation is that it provides ordinary people with a way of negotiating their relations with the nonhuman world by means of a relationship between humans. In hierarchical communities, in other words, ordinary people maintain their relationships with invisible entities through their relationship with a single human, their shaman. To feed the shaman is to feed the spirits. Through the specialist’s representative function, the greater part of the human collective relinquishes certain aspects of its own means of

communication with the outside world. And thus with this hierarchical turn, it is possible to see the human community in a process of turning in on itself. It is for this reason that the question of how this system of relations comes into being represents an anthropological problem of the utmost importance.

Is it possible to discern a link between ritual inequalities and socio-economic ones? It is important not to forget that there is no such thing as a truly egalitarian society: people recognize differences between men and women, and between children and adults all over the world. The real question is *what do they do with these inequalities?*

In Tuva, prior to the communist collectivization project of the 1930s–1950s, wealthy herders could own up to a thousand horses, just as many sheep, and hundreds of cows. People this wealthy generally belonged to a hereditary aristocracy who distinguished themselves with precious clothing and held political office in the administration of the Sino-Manchu Empire. Simpler herders—the poorest of whom had no herds of their own—were bound by birth to a lord (*noian*), to whom they owed tribute and labor (Vainshtein and Mannai-Ool 2001: 269). The poor typically cared for the livestock of wealthy lords and herders; they were allowed to consume its milk, but any profit from the herd was returned to the owners. The inequalities of this system—often described as “feudal”—were of an unquestionably hierarchical nature; they were passed down hereditarily and were rigidly associated with notions of prestige and political power. Lords with closely related titles (*toion* or *noion*) also ruled over other Turko-Mongolic peoples, such the Buryat and the Yakut, in much the same way—a hierarchical social structure that is also found in the organization of several of the Turko-Mongolic pantheons, where the main spirits are called “lords” (*toion*) or “emperors” (*khan* or *khad* in the plural). Should hierarchical shamanism be regarded as a reflection of certain influences from the Xiongnu, ancient Turkic, and Mongolian empires born of steppe pastoralism? Only in part: given the great distance that separates them, presumptions about influences from the different empires of the steppe do not explain much when it comes to the Samoyedic peoples of the Arctic, for example, whose shamanic traditions are also hierarchical. And again, it is important to remember that, in southern Siberia, social hierarchies seem to predate the historical empires of the Turko-Mongols—as is clearly indicated by the cemeteries of the Bronze Age Glazkovo culture, where the ostentation of an elite class can be clearly seen, even among this hunter-gatherer society. Hierarchy

does not imply pastoralism, therefore, nor conversely, as we will see from the Chukchi, does pastoralism imply hierarchy.

On the eve of the 1917 Revolution, the social order of the Chukchi reindeer herders was marked by major economic inequalities, but with very different consequences from those seen in the south. In terms of appearance, however, everything looked much the same, or worse: a few wealthy families owned up to ten thousand reindeer, while most others owned only a hundred or so. Wealthy individuals enjoyed the status of “strong men” (in Bogoras’s translation) and were the only members of the society to exercise any form of authority over other families. They did not, however, constitute a class, or even a distinct social category, as the lords of the southern steppes did. Their authority had nothing to do with a hereditary status or noble titles, but depended only on their ability to maintain a large herd: all it would take was an epizootic outbreak, a frequent and devastating phenomenon among reindeer populations, or the division of the herd among a strong man’s sons, for him to lose his social influence. As long as he had a large herd, he would have been able to feed a number of poor “assistants” in exchange for their labor in the care of his animals. These assistants were treated like family members and, unlike their Tuvan counterparts, received not only food and clothing, but also calves so they could build up their own herds. It was thus not impossible for a resourceful assistant to become the owner of a large herd in his own right, and for the master to end up an assistant himself if he lost enough of his livestock (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 765–66; Bogoras 1904–1909: 616–22). As the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins writes: “The economic consequence of Chukchee ‘exploitation’ is thus the perfect opposite of capitalist exploitation: the effect of assistantship is to provide impoverished families with their own means of livelihood and hence, economic independence. Economically the relationship between master and assistant is mutual aid” (Sahlins 1960: 401). Sahlins’s observation here is profound, as it underlines the importance of individual independence in a way that goes beyond purely economic terms. The same principle of autonomy can be recognized in just as striking a manner in Bogoras’s description of Chukchi kinship relations: “The units of social organization among the Chukchee are quite unstable [...] Even family ties are not absolutely binding, and single persons often break them and leave their family relations. Grown-up sons frequently leave their parents and go away to distant localities in search of a fortune. [...] It may be said that a lone man living by himself forms the real unit of Chukchee society” (Bogoras 1904–1909: 537). If these

claims seem surprising, we see them confirmed in a similar opinion from a nineteenth-century ethnologist: “What is peculiar about the lifestyle of the Chukchi nomads is that they have absolutely no clan or social structure: all men live with their families and all men are their own masters, no one has any right to meddle in anyone else’s affairs” (Gondatti 1897, cited by Vdovin 1965: 194).

Thus, when an individual loses his means of ensuring his own survival, Chukchi society offers him the possibility to regain them without jeopardizing the principle of individual autonomy in his relationship to the world. The situation in which an individual finds himself *dependent* on a wealthy third party is a categorically transitory one.

Despite their different economic regimes, the form of leadership found among the Chukchi reindeer herders is similar to that of their neighbors, the Chukchi and Koryak whale hunters. For the latter, a man’s social influence depends on his strength, courage, and prowess as a hunter. Should the amount of game he procures decrease, he will quickly lose his authority (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 765). In short, for both the Chukchi and Koryak, the relative positions of rich and poor, leader and follower, are not rigid social statuses but transitory, circumstantial, and easily renegotiated situations. Though pastoralism and economic inequality were relatively recent phenomena for the pre-Soviet Chukchi—having been introduced over the course of the eighteenth century—it is clear that they did not mechanically entail the kind of rigid social stratifications that classical models of unilinear evolution would suggest. Such heterarchical social relationships are characteristic of what are often called “transegalitarian” societies, which, importantly, cannot be wholly identified with either hunter-gatherers, for whom no wealth exists (such as the indigenous peoples of Australia), or hierarchical societies such as those based on agricultural modes of subsistence (Owens and Hayden 1997). The internal relationships of human collectives are therefore perfectly continuous with what we have observed of the way relationships between humans and nonhumans are managed in shamanic practices: in both cases, heterarchy allows for a reversibility of positions.

The contrasts between different ecologies of the imagination cannot be understood as simple translations of economic phenomena or styles of kinship; in fact, they cannot easily be reduced to anything other than themselves. The kind of shamanism a society practices clearly has much more to do with its conceptions concerning the individual’s autonomous relationship with the world and the question of whether or not a part of this relationship can be delegated to someone else. We will return

to this matter in the final section of this book as we try to identify the forces that drive a society to pass from one regime to another. First, however, we will take a closer look at the hierarchical regime: how are we to understand the functioning of this categorically unequal distribution of tasks in which the invisible is withheld from the ordinary population and reserved for experts, and where ordinary people tend to negotiate their encounter with the world *by means of delegation*?

PART TWO

Technologies of the Imagination and Hierarchy

Hierarchical shamanism cultivates a particular mode of relating to the world through a kind of *double representation*: the representation of ordinary people by the shaman in his or her negotiations with the nonhuman forces at play in their environment and, inversely, the representation of these nonhuman agents in the visible sphere of everyday life through an abundance of material images. The regime of hierarchical delegation brings ordinary people into a mode of imaginative activity which is predominantly contemplative: they do not interact with the invisible themselves, but they are able to imagine the shaman acting on their behalf in distant worlds. For a shaman to act on behalf of the community, for this kind of delegation to be possible, there must be communicative interfaces in place through which visible and invisible spaces can come into contact and harmonize with one another, where the inaccessible is made visible—not in and of itself, but through tangible traces that can be perceived by those who are only able to see with their eyes.

It is this bidirectional mode of representation between humans and nonhumans that provides the elaborate rituals of the hierarchical world with their impetus. The auxiliary spirits summoned during the opening, centripetal stage of the shamanic seance are understood to arrange themselves in the immediate surroundings and make their presence known to the spectators through various auditory and visual cues: the shaman's cries and utterances, as well as a number of objects that are either made for the occasion or that have a fixed role in the ritual context. The spirits arrive at the ritual from their places of origin following familiar routes, specific pathways that are often used to identify and designate them (spirits with "diurnal," "nocturnal," "southern," or "northern" paths, for example). This initial convergence of spirits is followed by an inverse, centrifugal phase of the ritual, when the shaman's agency is transported off into distant spaces. As my Tuvan friends told me: "He's here, in the yurt, he's not going anywhere, and his soul is off fighting demons in a faraway place."

This bilateral transference has two consequences for how the spatial framework of the ritual is defined: on the one hand, it implies a disjunction between a local space and a distant one; on the other, it postulates a convergence of these two spaces, since the actions performed by the shaman's soul in the distant space are made perceptible on the ritual stage through the chants, dances, and combats performed by his body. If the location of the ritual performance as observed by the audience can be called *an immediate space*, we will use the term *virtual space* to refer to the postulated places that form the invisible frame and backdrop for the

shaman's visible actions. A major premise of the ritual is that these two spaces are placed in contact with one another.

For the ritual of the live journey to be a successful collective experience, the participants must perform a powerful imaginative operation all together. How is it possible that the shaman's actions can be carried out in a distant *there* when they are so obviously performed in an immediate *here*? What techniques does the shaman use to bring the participants into the redefined spatial framework from which the ritual action draws its meaning?

CHAPTER 5

The Celestial Roads of the Ket

The singular universe of the Yeniseian Ket has intrigued generations of researchers since as far back as the eighteenth century. These hunter-fishers, who keep a few reindeer for packing purposes, are the only Paleo-Asiatic group in central Siberia, surrounded on all sides by populations from other linguistic families. Recent genetic studies have shown that, in current populations, the Ket are among the closest relations of the paleolithic inhabitants of Mal'ta, not far from Lake Baikal, and that ancient migrations brought them into contact with the Paleo-Eskimo of Greenland and the Athapaskans of North America (Flegontov, Changmai, et al. 2016). They may be considered descendants of the indigenous populations that inhabited the circumpolar world long before the expansion of the Altaic (Turko-Mongolic and Tungusic) linguistic families.

The Ket language is spoken today by around two hundred people. It is the last survivor of a group of Yeniseian languages that, before the seventeenth century, were spoken across vast territories of western and central Siberia by such peoples as the Assan, the Kott, and the Arin, all of whom have since disappeared, either assimilated by the expansion of the Turkic-speaking peoples coming from the south or pushed further and further north. In 1630, the Krygyz violently put down a revolt led by the Arin and Ket, after which the surviving members of the former group adopted the language and culture of the victors.

Although they held onto their language, the Ket, too, endured the influence of their powerful conquerors from the south, such that their

ritual traditions came to combine some highly original elements—unique within the Siberian context—with other more common features borrowed from the Altaic world. Their practices most notably bring together the dark tent, one sign of an older heterarchical tradition, and the light tent, the essential scene of hierarchical shamanism, which they most likely adopted from various Altaic populations. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the dark tent had dwindled to a form of entertainment, no doubt enjoyed by the public, but disdained by the great shamans, who left it to the novices.

Experienced and esteemed shamans—decked out in costumes as elaborate as any astronaut's spacesuit—are reputed for their ability to fly across worlds, and the light-tent ritual is the occasion when everyone can see them take flight and follow along their celestial odyssey. The Ket art of coordinating imaginations draws on a rich iconography in which several different logics are at play. But before we examine the visual images that surround the ritual stage, it is useful to consider the very singular visual culture of the non-shamanic Ket world.

A War of the Sexes

In Ket mythology, relations between the sexes are marked by ambiguity and violence. One myth, for example, describes a nation composed exclusively of women endowed with *vagina dentata*, who come to hunt down the unfortunate Ket. In one epic narrative, the hero must confront a series of dangers, including the vagina-cave of the “mountain-woman.” A myth collected by the ethnologist Vasilii Ivanovich Anuchin explains the origin of male genitalia, as well as why mushrooms are not to be eaten: “In the beginning, there were only women, no men. Penises grew abundantly in the forest and women would gather them as they desired. A woman kept one in her home, but it got wedged somewhere and neither she nor her neighbors could pull it out; before long they were all brought to tears. The Sky then sent them a man with no penis of his own, who succeeded in freeing it. The grateful women gave him food and drink and, because his hands were full, he wedged the penis between his legs. Getting up to take leave of the women, he realized it had become stuck there. The women rejoiced and kept the man. The penises growing in the forest became mushrooms—Russians eat them” (Anuchin 1914: 9). This myth attributes different origins to men and women and grants the latter a prior existence, during which they lived independently

from men. While men have a celestial origin, women have a terrestrial one; this is consistent with the fact that the Ket characterize all terrestrial spirits as female and refer to them as “Mothers.” Terms designating vertical objects such as poles and masts, on the other hand, belong to the linguistic class of masculine nouns, which are reserved for male entities or any phenomena of social importance (Alekseenko 1989). The ethnologist Hans Findeisen reports that, according to the Ket men he interviewed, women were considered “incomparably inferior” beings, owing to their “impurity” (Findeisen 1931: 308).

By this derogatory outlook, Ket men attempted to contain the threat of a hidden power wielded by women. And the women, in turn, did not hesitate to stoke this fear from time to time. During a festival celebrating the summer solstice, old women would dance naked around a fire, holding their breasts and singing bawdy lyrics like: “If my vulva (*lus*) had teeth, it would rip off your penis (*bys*).” Threats like these, reprising the disturbing theme of the *vagina dentata*, suggest the possibility of a return to mythic times, when women could do as they pleased with penises, there being no men attached.

This war of the sexes is also seen in the antagonisms at play in Ket cosmic myths. The two principal divinities are the god Es’ (“Sky”)—the benevolent personification of the celestial realm—and the malicious goddess Hosedam (“Mother of the sea,” also known as Tygylam, “Mother of the depths/of the north”). Hosedam lives on the “dead island” at the mouth of the Yenisei in the Arctic Ocean—the lower part of the world, in other words—and from there she sends sickness, storms, and other misfortunes. Hosedam kills humans and eats their souls, but she is ignorant of the fact that these same souls reemerge from her excrement and thus enable the births of new humans.

This structural opposition is not confined to the cosmic dimension: it also governs the Ket’s relationship to the geography of their surroundings. The Ket territory is oriented along a single major axis: the Yenisei River, which flows four thousand kilometers from south to north, from the Sayan Mountains in Mongolia all the way to the Arctic Ocean. The north and south of the Ket territory are respectively referred to by the terms *tyha* and *uta*. *Tyha* designates the low part of a mountainous landscape, as well as the downstream direction of a river, but more concretely the term refers to the downstream direction of the Yenisei and thus the north. Conversely, *uta* denotes the high and the elevated part of a watercourse, but again in concrete terms it refers to the upper reaches of the Yenisei and thus the south. The dreary and frigid domain of Hosedam

lies to the north, in the Yenisei lowlands, while the warm, luminous realm of Es' is associated with both the sunrise, thus the east, and the south. The south itself (the "upper part") is the sphere of the living: it is the domain of Tomam a benevolent deity who "burns like fire." She is beautiful, with "cheeks the color of dawn," and is the mother of all summer creatures, migrating birds, and dragonflies.

This general spatial schema is reproduced at the local level in various concrete locations. In each encampment, the tents of the most respected people, like shamans, for example, are situated in the "upper part," which is to say upstream, while the cemetery is located in the "lower part," downstream (Alekseenko 2001: 25). Inside the tent itself, the southeastern area is referred to as the "pure side" (*k'otan*).

These structural oppositions are summarized in the following table:

Es' ("Heaven")	Hosedam ("Mother of the sea")
Male	Female
High (south)	Low (north)
Celestial	Aquatic
Benevolent	Malevolent

Ket mythology does not describe such tensions in a static manner, but rather narrates the passage of its characters from one level to another, in particular the falls that bring about definitive separations. Thus Hosedam was in the first instance the wife of Es' and lived with him in a transparent palace in the seventh sky. But one day she left her husband and took up with grandfather Moon, which is to say, at a lower point in the sky. Enraged, Es' cast her down to the earth where she made her way to the world's lowest regions. Since then, she is master of the cold, of darkness, and of disease (Anuchin 1914: 3–4).

The sexual dualism that characterizes this mythology also lies at the heart of the unique ornamental art developed by the Ket. This graphic art is used to decorate clothes, bags, wooden and birchbark utensils, as well as objects made from bone. Its geometrical character sets it apart from the iconographies of neighboring populations, combining two very simple elementary units: the vertical stroke (I) and the chevron (V), with the fork (Y) as a variant on the latter. The combination of the stroke and the chevron gives us the trident (Ψ). In the simplest compositions, strokes alternate with forks or tridents to form friezes (figures 19 and 20).



Figure 19. Ket Ornamental Motif. Levin and Potapov 1961: 389, table 8, fig. 10.



Figure 20. Ket Ornamental Motif. Anuchin 1914.

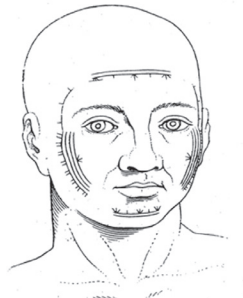


Figure 21. Tungus Facial Tattoo, eighteenth century. Gmelin [1751–1752] 1767: pl. 62.

The motif is an old one and may at one time have been found well beyond the Ket population, as is suggested by its appearance in a Tungus tattoo recorded by the eighteenth-century German scholar, Johann Georg Gmelin (figure 21). These designs have meanings; they represent men and women metonymically figured by their sexual organs: the word used to designate the simple stroke is *bys*, “penis”, and for the chevron *lus*, “vulva” (Anunchin 1914; Findeisen 1931). Figure 19 thus represents an alternating series of female and male genitals. In more precise terms, the fork is the “empty vulva” of a young girl, while the symbol for a married woman is the trident, comprising the superimposed symbols for girl (Y) and man (I). Figure 20 thus represents an alternating chain of married women and men.

The union of the male and female symbols can also be recognized on Ket dwellings, at the peak of their tents. In erecting the tent, the fireplace

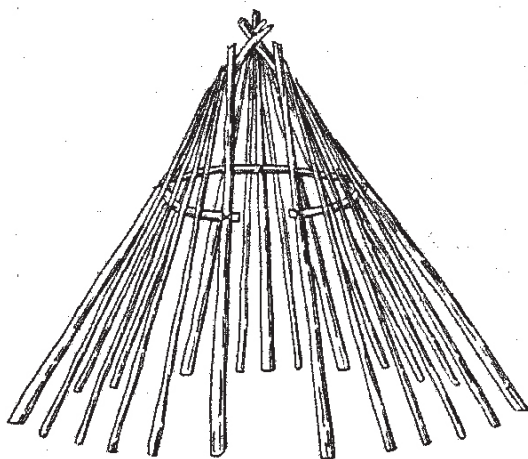


Figure 22. Ket Tent. Alekseenko 1967: 84, table 1, fig. 3.



Figure 23. Representation of a Tent (left) and of an Encampment (right) on a Shamanic Drum. Anuchin 1914: 60, fig. 57.

would first be constructed, then two large, diametrically opposed poles would be put into place, one forked at the end and the other straight. The nesting of these two “central” poles, both longer than the others, placed a distinctive feature at the tent’s peak (figure 22), one which is emphasized in Ket figural renderings of the structure: a diamond topped with a trident (figure 23). It is easy to recognize here the union of the male stroke and the female fork, those characters which, in the graphic arts, are combined to form the symbol of the married woman, which in this context, is consistent with the fact that a woman becomes the mistress of a tent after her marriage. An encampment at large is represented with a series of diamond figures.

On the basis of these elemental motifs, Ket art is comprised of a number of complex decorative forms. The motif found within the alveoli in figure 24 represents reindeer antlers. The ramification of this motif is achieved by subdividing the ends of the female fork. The hexagonal forms themselves stem from the fusion of two facing series of female motifs, as we see clearly in figure 25: the ends of the forks in one series are paired to form the base of a fork in the opposing one.



Figure 24. Painting on Wood. Alekseenko 1967: 248, fig. 4.

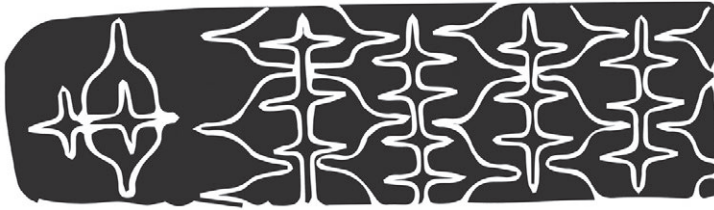


Figure 25. Fabric Embroidery. Anuchin 1914: 85, fig. 106.

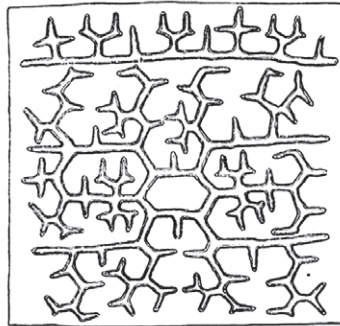


Figure 26. Cartridge Pouch, leather embroidered with reindeer hair. Anuchin 1914: 39, fig. 7.

The design in figure 26 appears to show the process of transformation and fusion through which the opposed sexual symbols (displayed in frieze along the top border) increase in complexity to become reindeer antlers and come together to form the alveoli that provide the frames for other ramified motifs. The same principles of geometrical growth that govern the overarching design also inform, at a local level, each individual ramification. The general effect is that of a fractal figure: a geometrical assemblage whose parts exhibit the same structure as the whole, but on a different scale.

A particular style of growth can be seen in this graphic practice: one that is rhizomatic rather than hierarchical, has no pre-existing order, and exhibits an intrinsic discontinuity between local and higher-order levels. A consistent binary rhythm opposing the male and the female is reproduced *ad infinitum*, resulting in a space that is both fragmented and dense. There is no frame around this network: by all appearances, its development should extend indefinitely into the invisible reaches that lie beyond the boundaries imposed by the edges of its material support.

From a certain perspective, the mode of spatial expanse seen in Ket ornamental art shares some underlying principles with the ritual space of the dark tent. The dark tent, as we remarked earlier, is an acentric, metamorphic, and dyadic space: the officiant is made invisible and the tent is filled with voices belonging to different species of beings, allowing for an unmediated exchange between humans and nonhumans. Ket ornamentation expands without a center in a comparable manner, propagated by an opposition between two principles (male and female) and unfolding by way of various ambiguous figures in which animal motifs arise from human ones.

At the Center of the World, a Human Body

Shamans were prestigious figures for the Ket; they held hereditary roles and possessed a rich set of tools that they acquired through a lengthy progression spanning several years: this included a drum, a costume, and a metal staff, all of which were elaborately decorated with numerous figures. In this shamanic art, we find some of the same graphic motifs encountered in the secular repertory, but here integrated into a very distinctive set of patterns.

The Ket drum used in the light-tent ritual encapsulates a fundamentally centered, structured, and oriented space. In the middle of the drawings on its outer face stands a human figure: this is Doh, the first Ket shaman and the common ancestor of all who held the function after him. Typically, he is shown climbing into the sky, with the moon on his left and the sun on his right (cf. figures 28, 29, 30, and 31). Doh learned his craft from the eagle, and there are many legends recounting the twists and turns of his journeys through different worlds. According to one of them, Doh once needed to depart for the sky in the middle of a ritual; he hurried there with such speed that one of his souls fell from his shamanic costume. Demons got a hold of it and brought it back to Hosedam, who



Figure 27. The Famous Shaman, Der'it, with Ket from the Podkamennaya Tunguska in 1926. Photo by N. V. Sushilin 1926. Krasnoïarsk Regional Museum, NEG 669.



Figure 28. Ket Shamanic Ritual. Photo by Hans Findeisen 1926–1927, Vajda 2010b: 135, fig. 2.

wanted to eat it, but broke a tooth trying. She then nailed it to a tree to keep it from returning to Doh. Without it, he could neither remain on Earth nor die, seeing as his soul was still alive. And this is why he ascended into the sky, standing on his drum as it transformed into a cloud. As the people wept to see him leave, Doh took off his costume and threw it to the grand-daughter who had been his assistant, proclaiming, “Now she will shamanize for you” (Anuchin 1914: 8).

It was Doh then who initiated the hereditary transmission of shamanic powers, and it is for this reason that the ritual chants and legends

recited by Ket shamans end with the words “Thus spoke Doh” (*To’n Doh daskanisha*, Anuchin 1914: 7).

If Doh, the ancestor, occupies such a central place in their practices, it is of course because, in the Ket hierarchical tradition, the shamanic quality is thought of as a hereditary essence. For the Ket, “the art of shamanizing cannot be practiced by just anyone; it cannot be learned, it is something that is innate” (Anuchin 1914: 23). Only the descendant of a shaman, man or woman, can become one him- or herself. Shamanic talent first manifests itself in adolescence, through visions of a triggering spirit, an ancestor, followed by other spirits. The essence of shamanism, as it was first embodied by Doh, is thus reincarnated in the different individual shamans who succeed him. As the specialist on the Ket, Evgeniia Alekseenko, writes: “The gift of shamanism was considered eternal and its representatives—individual shamans—were only provisional links (the length of a human life) in the common, infinite chain of its existence” (Alekseenko 1981: 99).

On the drum shown in figure 29, we see Doh moving across seven concentric circles. Producing a certain projection effect that we will in fact encounter in a number of shamanic drums, the seven circles painted on the drumskin are doubled on the inside of the instrument by a series of metal arcs attached to its frame by straps. They represent the seven superposed circles that comprise the sky. In Ket cosmography, the Earth is encompassed by seven seas, sits over seven subterranean Earths, and is itself surmounted by seven circular celestial strata (Alekseenko 1967: 171 n. 10). The seven circles seen on the drum represent the seven stages of the cosmic voyage that the shaman embarks on in the steps of his ancestor, Doh. On the drum shown in figure 29, we see them from below, so to speak, the highest strata represented by the smallest circle, at the center of the drumskin. The drum in figure 30 takes another tack, showing us the circles in profile, in the form of lateral curves on the painted surface and as seven horizontal straps attached to inside of the drum.

The space of the drum is systematically aligned with the space of the cosmos; its painted surface, moreover, is named the “universe” (*ilwan*). The bottom part of the drum corresponds to the lower regions of the world (*tyha*)—or, in other words, the north—while the top part is associated with the elevated regions, those of the south (Anuchin 1914: 14). The moon, furthermore, is situated to the right of Doh (the left, from his point of view) and the sun on the opposite side, a perfectly logical arrangement if we bear in mind that the moon is associated with the night, and therefore with the setting of the sun, and the sun itself with

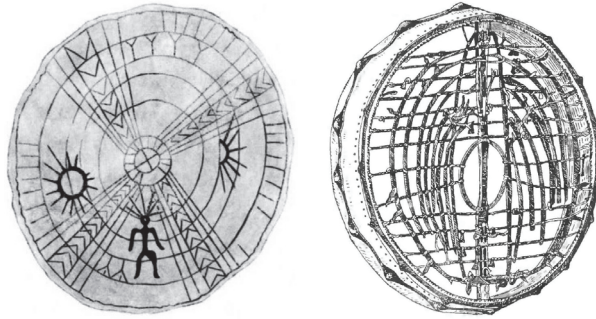


Figure 29. Ket Drum, inner and outer faces. MAE, no. 4034-151. Left – Oppitz 2007: 69, watercolor by Freda Heyden. Right – Prokof'eva 1961b.

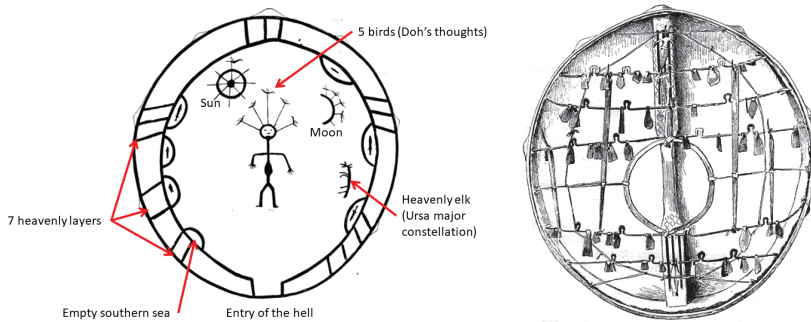


Figure 30. Drum of a Ket Shaman. Anuchin 1914: 52, fig. 39, and 53, fig. 40.

dawn: the east is thus situated on the left-hand side of the drum, from the spectator's point of view, and the west on the right, which is consistent with the north being represented on the bottom.

Clearly nothing is left to chance in the spatial orientation of these shamanic images. A point of comparison from the American continent is illuminating here. In his analysis of the spatio-temporal system of the Yucatec Maya, William Hanks introduced an important distinction between two types of orientation: relative cardinal orientation and absolute cardinal orientation. Relative cardinal orientation is that of everyday life, in which cardinal points designate the relative directions and positions of objects from the point of view of a given speaker. In the Mayan language, speakers describe the position of an object by stating its situation either to the east or the north of another object. Nothing is then northern in and of itself, but only in relation to another object

or to the speaker. Things are different in the cosmological field, where cardinal points are understood in absolute terms as identifiable *regions*: the North, the South, etc. Each of these faraway regions is inhabited by spirits and winds that are each endowed with particular moral qualities. Hanks's study focuses on ritual performances during which the Mayan shaman brings faraway cosmic regions into contact with his immediate surroundings by transposing the absolute system of orientation into the core of the everyday relative system. To this end, in his prayer the officiant invites spirits from the absolute cardinal points to install themselves at the four corners of his domestic altar, so as to anchor—for the duration of the performance—absolute space to the relative space of everyday life (Hanks 1990: 332–51).

Hanks's remarks on the absolute and relative uses of cardinal orientation may illuminate certain aspects of the modes of orientation found in different Siberian languages, and certainly in Ket. Siberian languages often feature geocentric frames of reference that refer to river courses and cardinal points. As we have seen in their myths, the Ket terms *tyba* and *uta* refer respectively to the north—the land of Hosedam—and the south—the land of Es' and Tomam. But in everyday life, the meaning of these terms is relative, signifying simply “high” and “low” in relation to the landscape or the flow of a river: the down- or up-hill side of an encampment, for example. We see here, then, as Hanks does in the Mayan context, a clear distinction between an absolute use of cardinal orientations in the mythical world and a relative, egocentric use of them in everyday linguistic practices.

As the Ket equivalent of the Mayan altar, the drum provides a model for the coupling of the absolute frame of cosmic space and the egocentric frame of the human body, represented in this case by the body of Doh. His head resembles the stars of the sky in which it is typically located, since like them it emits rays; his feet, on the other hand, point toward the north and the entrance to the lower world. The moon, furthermore, associates the left side of Doh's body with darkness, while the sun casts light on his right side. This pairing of the left with the moon and the right with the sun is no accident; it is a constant for the Ket. It is also of significance for the neighboring Selkup, for whom the “right” flank of a tree is its solar side (Prokof'eva 1949).

This association of the world's axes with the vertical and lateral dimensions of the human body does not stop with Doh, but extends to the body of the shaman holding the drum. At the beginning of the light-tent ritual, the shaman is seated, his head hidden by the great drum,

behind the figure of the ancestral Doh, as we see in figures 28 and 31. For all intents and purposes, the public sees only Doh, while in song, however, the shaman begins to describes himself.¹

I am a great shaman,
I take a leach,
I fear nothing,
I do not fear the water spirits,
I am a great shaman,
I fear no bullet,
I was killed by a Russian,
I have drunk,
I have drunk blood.

Singing from behind his instrument, from the spectators' point of view the shaman visually superimposes the body of his ancestor, Doh, over his own and assumes for himself the cosmic associations proposed by the drawings on the drumskin. At the same time, he reproduces the words of Doh in his chant, lending his own voice as a support for his ancestor's words and making a claim to his powers. The visual layering produced by the drum and the drawings on it establishes a close association between the mythic body of Doh, that of the officiant, and the absolute space of the cosmos.

The drum is no stranger to the sexual dualism that, as we have seen, runs through Ket mythology. As is common in the hierarchical world, the instrument is never made by the shaman himself, but by a community of several families. For the Ket, it is the women who prepare the drumskin, while the men attach the metal parts that are passed down through the generations—it is the men, furthermore, who forge new pieces when necessary (Anuchin 1914: 70). The red figures pertaining to the upper world are drawn in ochre by the men, while the black figures that emerge from the lower world are painted in soot by the women (Aleksenko 1984: 80).

On the drum shown in figure 29, we see the female and male sexual symbols that are the basis of the ordinary, non-shamanic decorative arts. Here they most likely represent the inhabitants of the celestial circles, the "sky people." Working inward from the outer edge of the

1. These are the words sung by the Shaman Vas'ka Lesovnik (Ivanov, Moloshnaia et al. 1969: 215).

instrument, the first circle is marked with male symbols, the second with female ones, and the sixth with male symbols. While in non-shamanic art this alternating pattern, which could go on reproducing its oppositions indefinitely, is the effect of a spontaneous mode of expansion with no pre-existing order, on the drum it is subordinated to a hierarchical spatial pattern, entirely organized around a central point within a series of concentric circles and from which four straight lines radiate like roads. With his arms outstretched, Doh's presence creates a vertical axis opposing left and right and a horizontal axis opposing top and bottom. Each part of the design is thus defined by the particular position it occupies in relation to the center, as in a Cartesian coordinate system. While non-shamanic decorative compositions give the impression of diffuse patterns of spontaneous growth, here we see the symbols arranged in a set hierarchical order. At the center of the design is a cross within a circle; this represents the drum itself on a reduced scale. Here the effect is not that of a fractal, but a *mise en abyme*: a single, determinate figure reproduced on different scales, instead of a common generative principle giving rise to various and unpredictable outgrowths. While fractal expansion is limitless, only a design with well-defined contours can be subjected to the formal technique of recursion we see here. The *mise en abyme* leads us to see the figure as a self-sufficient totality, an effect that is underscored by use of the word "universe" to refer to the design on the drum's surface. The image painted on the drum is in a certain sense a *mise en abyme* of the ritual performance itself, since the shaman's gestures reproduce the celestial ascension of his ancestor, Doh, as depicted on the skin of his instrument. The composition thus establishes a hierarchical relationship between the elements of a recursive series, and therefore provides a useful tool for understanding the relationship between the actual shaman and his ancestor. As we will see in the following chapters, the different structural principles at play on this drum can be found in the images used in hierarchical shamanic traditions throughout Siberia: projections between the inner and outer faces, reflexivity of the shamanic function mediated by the figure of the ancestor, and the coordination of a corporeal schema with a cosmic one.

While the convolutions of non-shamanic graphic art expand in a number of different directions, shamanic design is vectorized following set pathways toward specific destinations and infusing space with hierarchy and meaning. On the drum, the infinite balancing of binary oppositions—male and female, sun and moon, day and night—is subordinated to a schema organized around a single center, which is occupied



Figure 31. Shaman Beating a Drum, Ket drawing. Donner 1933: 79, fig. 36.

by the mediating figure of the ancestral Doh. Dualism thus gives way to a triadic schema that is not unlike the ritual logic of the light-tent technique, casting the shaman as an essential mediator between humans and nonhumans. One may even posit that the opposing logics of these two types of images illustrate two different cognitive modes for the transmission of knowledge: structured by a *mise en abyme* of its own schematic principles, the space of the drum mirrors the transmission of a canonical model that is indefinitely reproduced from generation to generation, while the fractal forms of the decorative art follow a basic generative pattern and evoke the spontaneous evolution of individual experience.

Crossing the Seven Circles

As the auxiliary sprits he has called arrive, the shaman starts to converse with them: “Oh it’s you, loon! Not bad ... you’re always faster than the others ... Remember the time we dove together twenty times over, we almost touched the bottom ... So thick with herring it was difficult to move ... You ate well that time! But where’s your brother?” The spirit’s arrival is met with cries from the participants: “Oh, he’s the one who shat in Hosedam’s eyes!”

When all of the spirits are gathered, the journey can begin. The expeditions embarked on by the ancestral shamans in heroic tales are

typically punctuated by seven distinct steps: seven bends in the river to move through or seven tents to visit. In the ritual as well, the shaman climbs into the sky by delivering a chant that is divided into seven parts, each separated by “stops” or “pauses” (*tañun*). To begin his ascension into virtual space, he circles the fire, hopping on both feet and spinning, completing two sunwise rotations, and, as he climbs “above the clouds,” he tells his audience what he sees:

—I’m already high up. I see the Yenisei, three stopovers upstream and three stopovers down [about 100 kilometers]. Here’s a tent. Who’s there? Oh it’s old Sintin ...

—What’s he doing? asks the crowd.

—He’s fixing his trap and sharpening his hooks ... Oh oh, near the lake, I can see a woodland spirit; bah! I hope he stays there like a rotten log! [...] Hey, midge, lift me higher! I want to see further.²

Spoken parts alternate with sung passages, which were unfortunately very rarely written down. A few excerpts were gathered, however, by the German anthropologist, Hans Findeisen, and these give us some idea of the way the shaman communicates the details of his celestial flight to his audience:

Now up high a little duck-like spirit.
Now they’re talking to each other up there.
Now they’re all quacking something.
Now I see the chimney of a *kunc* [spirit] house
From the ground, he is looking into the distance!
In the sky now there are spirits as big as ducks and others like clouds.
High in the sky, now we hear speaking on the eastern shore.
[...]
Now, I see the neck of the reindeer spirit.
And yet, I’m afraid my song is in vain.
It’s as if I were in the dark and as if I didn’t understand.
Es’ [Sky-god] is now looking down on me.
And still, the shamanic rite is pure suffering!
Now, I see how the winter on earth will be.
If we really wanted to go through the great winter hunt on a dry road!
May the squirrel paws now run through the forest for us!

2. “Midge” is an informal term the shaman uses to address his spirits (Anuchin 1914: 29).

[...]

Further,

Now, I'm in the higher world and looking down.

On Mount Qama, you can see smoke coming from a *kunc* house.

(Findeisen 1957: 128–30)

The song creates a powerful play of perspectives: the shaman as he climbs into the sky, his encounters with birds and clouds. He can see the earth beneath his feet and can make out spirits hidden in the forest, given away by the smoke of their fires. He thus communicates to his audience the locations of dangerous places that ought to be avoided, while expressing his own singular perception of a landscape inhabited by invisible beings. His change in perspective is not just spatial, but temporal as well: it allows him to see into the future. As is often the case in Siberia, gaining altitude allows one to perceive what is yet to come. The shaman sees the outcome of the approaching winter hunt—squirrel tracks signal an abundance of furs. But he himself is “looked down on” by the god *Es*. With these alternating points of view and the unfolding succession of images and encounters (“Now ... Now”), he gives his audience the feeling of a progression along a vertical itinerary.

In the pauses between each part of the chant, the shaman rests, smokes, and converses with the participants. Each pause corresponds to one leg of the shaman's journey as he moves from one celestial circle to the next. Every one of these circles is inhabited by a group of seven “sky people” (*es'deng*), lined up in horizontal rows, one on top of the other. As his chant progresses and the shaman is understood to pass from one row to the next, he solicits the “sky people” to join him and help him along the way (Alekseenko 1981). We see these rows of “sky people” represented in the superposed lines of six or seven sexual symbols on the shamanic apron shown in figure 32—and here again we encounter Doh, with the sun to his right and the moon to his left. Just as we saw on the drum, familiar figures from the non-shamanic graphic style are arranged on the garment in relation to a structured cosmic order.

This succession of seven stages, whose sequential order would have been well known to the ritual's audience, gave a certain degree of narrative stability to the performance. A late arrival to a ritual that was already in process could simply ask the other spectators, “How many pauses has he taken?” (*kunche tajun?*), and from this information they would soon find their place, immediately knowing how far the shaman had traveled into the upper world and how many auxiliary spirits he had gathered

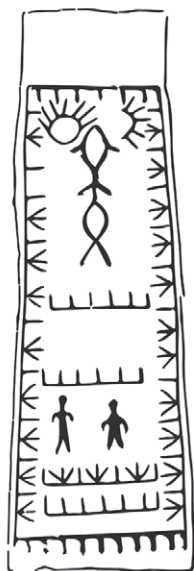


Figure 32. Apron from Ket Shamanic Costume (missing metal pendants).
Anuchin 1914: 37, fig. 4.



Figure 33. Ket Figure of a Master Spirit. RME, no. 255. Grusman 2006: 246.

(Alekseenko 1981: 103). The stability of the itinerary therefore played an important role in the coordination of the audience's imaginative experience, allowing the participants to collectively follow the shaman's adventures in the invisible world.

This principle of division into sets of seven is found everywhere in Ket shamanism. To give just a few examples: every human has seven souls; the shaman acquires his or her tools over seven three-year stages; the seven roads traveled by the shaman are represented by a tree with seven branches.

The aprons worn by Ket shamans are often decorated with embroidered lines or metal strips that divide the face of the garment into seven zones corresponding to the seven celestial layers. The figures of master spirits of certain geographical locations sculpted by the Ket for the spring shamanic rituals also bear seven notches along each side of the chest (figure 33). These various fashions of marking the number seven up and down the torso in fact have a very concrete anatomical point of reference: there are seven ribs stemming from each side of the human sternum. The seven-beat rhythm that structures both the sternum and the celestial strata thus brings human anatomy into resonance with the order of the cosmos.

To the constant balancing of binary oppositions that is expressed in non-shamanic Ket mythology, shamanic practices introduce a principle of progression that is punctuated by a series of superposed stages and layers. The shamanic universe, which is continuous and based on odd numbers, produces certain kinds of imbalances that make it possible to go beyond mythological dualisms: the triad of the sun, moon, and Doh, for example, and the seven-beat rhythm that subsumes the cosmic oppositions traversed by the shaman.

The images painted on the drum would make little sense without the chant, and the chant itself would be difficult to understand without the cross-cut image of the cosmos: the visual figuration on the instrument reflects the words sung by the shaman and vice versa. The spatial rhythm of the designs and the temporal rhythm of the song resonate with one another in the ritual performance and lend a synesthetic rhythm to the mental image of a spatio-temporal itinerary across the celestial circles. The multimodal apparatus of the light tent thus establishes an *abstract rhythmic pattern* that frames and guides the imaginative work of each participant. Nothing at all like this occurs in the dark tent, which has no fixed itinerary and where the invisible entities of the surrounding world present themselves in any order they please.

Because of the coordination established between virtual space and the bodily schema, when the shaman performs a ritual, his movements and position within the space of the tent become cues for his audience, allowing them to understand the content of the actions he performs and to follow the progress of his cosmic journey. The Ket tent is divided into a profane half, referred to as the “back” (*oytè*)—which lies between the fire and west-facing door—and an honorable and pure half, on the other side of the fireplace—which always faces east and is referred to as the “front” (*kotan*) of the tent. In fact, it is a general rule in Siberia that the section furthest from the door, and thus the warmest part of the space, is the more honorable; it is there that the elders sit and where sacred objects are kept. So while the shaman beats his drum in the “back” of the tent, it is clear to all that the virtual space in which his actions are taking place aligns with either the terrestrial world or the inferior one. But as he moves away from the door toward the east and enters the “front” of the tent, the audience understands that he has now taken flight into the upper levels of the universe (Alekseenko 1997: 198; Gemuev, Molodin, and Sokolova 2005: 672). We will see, in the chapters to come, that the organization of domestic space into a reduced model of the universe is a common feature of all hierarchical shamanic traditions.

Finding the Invisible Road

For the nomads of Siberia, herders and hunters alike, itineraries are not measured in units of length like kilometers or leagues, but in stopovers or the staggered legs of a walk. A leg is the distance covered in one day, between two nocturnal stopovers. Its length varies according to the terrain and the season, as well as the riding animals and the size of the herd (Ferret 2005; Shirokogoroff 1935; Kreinovich 1969). In hierarchical traditions, a shaman’s flight through the cosmos is also measured in legs. The voyage of an Evenki shaman is usually punctuated by nine stops, corresponding to the nine worlds that he successively moves through in the course of his song-itinerary. When the journey to retrieve the soul of a sick patient follows a river, for instance, these legs might correspond to a series of rapids that have to be carefully navigated. The drum shown in figure 34 belonged to an experienced shaman, as we can see from the nine bumps around the drum’s frame: called “stopovers” or *ukun*, they indicate that he has mastered the nine phases of the complete shamanic journey. By counting the number of bumps on the drum, spectators will



Figure 34. Evenki Shamanic Drum. MAE, no. 1524-209. Dyrenkova 2012.



Figure 35. Khant Staff Used for Counting Bear Songs. Kulemzin 2004.

immediately know how many worlds a shaman can pass through (Suslov 1993: 124). The drum is held by a central metal cross-brace, which is itself rich with meaning: its four branches represent cosmic roads, and the hole at its center the “navel” of the earth, the opening through which the shaman descends into the lower world. The cross is framed by two concentric metal circles called “enclosures” (*gota*), which represent a protective barrier. The smaller enclosure is attached to the upper branch of the cross with a metal figure representing an insect that guides the shaman in his travels underground.³ Sometimes the metal rods are also marked with nine indentations, another allusion to the nine stages of the shamanic journey.

Some drumskins from the Sym region were decorated with a notched arc, which the Evenki saw as a form of “notation” for the first ritual chant, which the shamans inherited from their ancestor, Gurivul—an equivalent figure to the Kets’ heroic Doh.⁴ But how does a simple notched line painted on a drumskin provide a form of “notation” for a complex

3. Ryckov, inventory of the Saint Petersburg Kunstkamera (MAE), no. 1524-204; Lot-Falck 1961; Vasilevich 1957: 156 n. 1.

4. One image of an Evenki drum bearing notched metal arcs is kept in the archives of the Minusinsk Museum.

song? A similarly saw-toothed stick, still in use today in western Siberia, might put us on the right track (figure 35). When a bear is slain, the Khant organize a great feast in its honor and recite a very long series of chants for the animal. The stick functions as a mnemotechnical device comparable to a rosary, with each notch corresponding to one of the chants. Though not an aid for memorizing the exact words to be uttered, it provides a kind of schematic representation of the number of chants that are performed and allows participants to track the progress of their performance without losing their place.

The protrusions adorning Evenki drums—both the bumps on the instrument's frame and the notches along the arc (which are sometimes drawn, sometimes cast in metal)—no doubt perform a similar function. With each notch corresponding to one leg of the shaman's journey and thus to one part of the song, the arc visually represents an abstract rhythm that merges the progression of the shamanic itinerary with that of the recited chant, ultimately providing a spatio-temporal pattern for tracking the shaman's song-journey.

The notion of a spatio-temporal pattern allows us to understand better some of the other intriguing figures that appear in the hierarchical shaman's tool kit. Among the tools once used by Enets shamans in the Arctic was an object composed of seven small trout-shaped boards called a "platform" (*nar'ò*) (figure 36). These boards made up the "seat" occupied by the officiant during their rituals, and the number of fish no doubt corresponded to the legs of a song-itinerary. Evenki shamans from the Yenisei and Transbaikalia regions used a similar mode of transport: a "raft of fish," made up of planks about one-and-a-half meters in length, each with a fishhead carved at one end. Lying across the raft, the shaman represents his own journey across Lake Baikal as he leads the soul of a sacrificed animal to the lower world. The enigmatic pendants composed of seven metal fish that are found on the costumes of some Evenki shamans are undoubtedly miniature representations of these same rafts (figure 37). In fact images of the seven-fish raft can be found on the costumes of Even shamans as far away as the Khabarovsk region.⁵ It would seem that this

5. A description of the Tungus raft in Transbaikalia can be found in Shirokogoroff (1935: 304) and another of the raft in the Yenisei region by Anisimov (1958: 193); the form can also be seen on an Evenki panel (Ivanov 1954: 210). The Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) holds in its collection a shamanic costume that includes among its metal pendants a kind

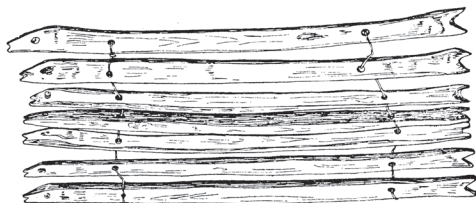


Figure 36. Enets Shaman's "Platform." Prokofyeva 1963: 146.

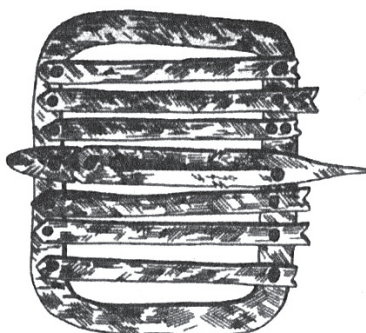


Figure 37. Pendant from an Evenki Shamanic Costume, Transbaikalia. Ivanov 1970: 215, fig. 196.

novel mode of mental transportation made two long treks itself along the two four-thousand-kilometer axes formed by the Yenisei and Amur rivers.

The mnemonic models of the song-itinerary can thus also take the form of fish. Sometimes they are synthesized into a cosmic being whose rhythmic anatomy melds the structure of the universe with the formal composition of the song-itinerary. Such is the case with the monstrous lizard seen in the middle of some Selkup drums, located between the sun and moon (there where their Ket neighbors place the shaman Doh). As an auxiliary spirit of the Selkup shaman, the reptile weaves between celestial bodies, exposing its seven pairs of ribs, which sometimes appear as legs. I will leave it to the reader to verify the omnipresence of the number seven on the Selkup example in figure 38.

of "grill," with one central axis and three bars on one side and none on the other (Lot-Falck 1977b: 62).



Figure 38. Selkup Drum. Oppitz 2007: 73, watercolor by Freda Heyden.

But let us return to the world of the Ket: consider the moment when the young man or woman destined to become a shaman surprises the community with the strange behaviors that are typical of the initial crisis—they cannot keep themselves from singing and dancing at inopportune moments, nor crying, laughing, or rolling around on the ground. As the Ket say, the troubled youngster is “looking for their shamanic road.” This chaotic period lasts for several months, until the aspirant eventually “finds their way.” How, then, does this discovery manifest itself? By the aspirant coming into possession of their own song. Because its structure follows an itinerary across virtual space, mastering a shamanic song means being able to mentally advance along a path. Once the song is settled, the strange behaviors subside, and the novice is considered to have “mastered” their spirits. The aspirant then receives his or her first instruments and accedes to the status of “little shaman.”

This conception of the shamanic song or chant as a kind of trajectory through the invisible is common to many shamanic traditions all over the world; it seems quite likely to constitute an essential feature of shamanism. In Amazonia, for example, as the ethnographer Graham Townsley reports, Yaminahua shamans regard both chants and myths as different kinds of pathways (Townsley 1993: 457). Myths, which are known and recited by everyone in the community, resemble the paths on which one moves around a single village: they are the most frequently used and are wide and open. But shamanic chants are more like the narrower trails that lead away from the village, usually known to only



Figure 39. Shamanic Tree Cross. Anuchin 1914: 61, fig. 59.

one or two hunters. Setting out on one of these trails in pursuit of game requires a certain set of skills; you have to know how to interpret discreet signs—tracks, odors, and sounds—that indicate the presence of animals. Performing shamanic chants likewise requires a specific kind of expertise, for, as Townsley tells us, these are tenuous, ephemeral paths, they are multiple and idiosyncratic.

Although the boreal taiga is a very different environment from the Amazonian tropics, hunting is just as central to the lives of the Ket as it is to the Yaminahua, and this explains a number of things that these two groups have in common. Forest trails play an important role in the traditional Ket way of life. Every family has its own well-trodden track leading to different hunting grounds (Kreinovich 1969). The invisible world of the shamans is made up of seven distinct roads, and it falls to each individual shaman to discover which of them will be his or hers. These roads are thought of as narrow paths, “like ski tracks” (Alekseenko 1981: 103). Some of them are open to all shamans—like the road which leads to the first celestial circle—while others can only be taken by specialists gifted with certain powers. Only the most powerful and experienced among them may follow the road that leads to the seventh celestial circle all the way to its end. Indeed, it is only by accumulating ritual experience and acquiring an ever-growing set of tools that shamans gain mastery over a network of longer and longer mental roads (Alekseenko 1981; Anuchin 1914).

What do we mean when we talk about learning a pathway or route from a psychological point of view? For a shaman, it means ordering the different mental images that emerge chaotically during the initial crisis



Figure 40. Nanai Shamanic Tree. Ivanov 1954: 247.

into a temporal sequence, one that is structured by the image of an itinerary leading from one place to the next and expressed in the form of a chant. In this sense, the process of mastering the ritual song is a mechanism that provides the shaman with a means of controlling non-sensory perceptions, a process the Ket call “mastering the spirits.”

There are several material images that provide the Ket with models for their shamanic roads. The most common is the stylized figure of a tree rooted in the ground, whose long and short branches lead to the different celestial layers. This figure appears most notably on the ritual staffs found in the tool kits of the most prestigious shamans (figure 39).

Roads similarly structure the invisible for the Nanai of the Siberian Far East. Here, an experienced shaman guides a novice by helping him or her to find their bearings. Like those of the Ket, Nanai shamanic roads can also be represented in the guise of a tree: changed into birds, the weaker Nanai shamans perch on the lower branches, while those more seasoned rest higher up (and occasionally relieve themselves on their rivals below!) (Bulgakova 2013: 87, 103–5). Underscoring the importance of arboreal imagery in the mental artistry of their ritual experts, one Nanai myth relates that the first shamanic instruments appeared as leaves on the branches of a tree whose roots were made of snakes and its bark of toads. This image perfectly encapsulates the complex, yet ordered web of connections and metamorphoses through which the contents of dreams and visions are associated with the ritual objects of hierarchical shamanism (figure 40).



Figure 41. Shamanic Map of the Earth Adorning a Ket Shamanic Costume. Anuchin 1914: 78, no. 90.

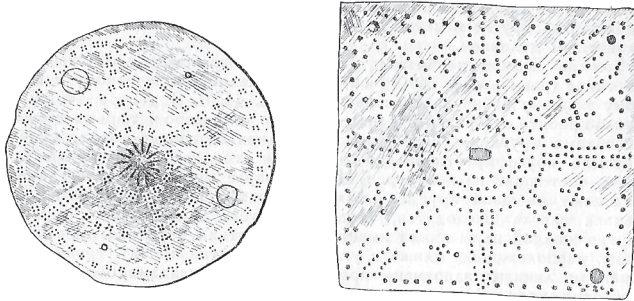


Figure 42. Shamanic Maps of the Sky Featuring the Sun and Moon, from Evenki Shamanic costumes. Ivanov 1954: 149, fig. 44.

The remarkable “shamanic maps” that hang from Ket costumes show us another way in which these roads are represented. The copper disk shown in figure 41 represents the earth, with its seven seas figured by the larger holes. The roads are represented by the six dotted lines that radiate from the center. As Anuchin writes, “it is a schematic map, so to speak, which the shaman uses to orient himself on his journeys” (Anuchin 1914: 78). A similar disk hangs next to it on the costume, this one representing the Milky Way.

Ket shamans were not the only ones to hang maps of the world from their costumes. Some Evenki shamans wore round plaques on their shoulders that represented the upper world, and others, lower down on the body, representing the middle world at the elbow and the lower world on the forearm (figure 42) (Anisimov 1958: 173).

These maps provided not only an abstract, general view of the cosmos; shamans also used them to situate different spirits in relation to one



Figure 43. Shamanic Map of the Sky, from the Transbaikalian Evenki. MAE, no. 1879-22-22, photo by Charles Stépanoff.

another and to mentally envisage the pathways leading to these spirits' dwellings in virtual space. The plate seen in figure 43, for example, is a map of the sky used by a Transbaikalian Evenki shaman, whose pantheon was comprised of spirits borrowed from the Buryat tradition. The dotted lines represent a series of roads made up of stars, each trajectory belonging to a specific celestial spirit. The plate is thus associated with a list of spirits' names that are each assigned to one of the cardinal points: there is White Sky Thunder, for example, who faces off with Sky Lord Boma and his black horse; or there is Blue Streaked Sky, who rides a horse with a blue spot; and on his brown cow, the Sky Master Dadai.⁶

The cosmic maps on metal plates were widely used throughout the world of hierarchical shamanism, not only by the Ket and the Evenki, but also by the Nganasan and the Enets in the Arctic, as well as by the Tuvans of the Altai-Sayan region (Popov 1984; Prokofyeva 1963: 129; D'iakonova 1981a). They allowed the shaman to share with his audience a conventional mental image of the structure of virtual space.

6. Kunstkamera archives, Saint Petersburg, inventory of the 1879 series, pp. 22 ff. (1911 collection by the student A.G. Epov).

CHAPTER 6

A Drum to Find Your Way in the Dark

The drum is an indispensable instrument for shamans across all of northern Eurasia, from the Scandinavian Saami to the Chukchi of the Bering Strait. We have already remarked on its role as a sonic shield against the immediate surroundings and thus in stimulating non-sensory imagery. While in heterarchical shamanism the drum is an ordinary instrument that could be played by anyone communicating with the invisible, in hierarchical traditions it plays a strategic role as a cognitive tool for the collective transmission of cosmic models.

Researchers have often noted the wide variety of semantic references for which the drum is a support. For Evenki shamans, for example, the drum is at once a boat, a live reindeer, and an image of the universe, while in the Altai it is just as often referred to as a camel as it is a horse, a deer, a leopard, an ancestor, and a schema of the cosmos. But it would be wrong to see in this diversity a fortuitous accumulation of heteroclite metaphors borrowed from a chance array of traditions and influences. The drum is multiple by design, not by accident. It embodies what Carlo Severi has called a “complex identity”: a condensation of beings and relations that are incompatible in everyday life, but reunited in ritual contexts (Severi 2015). In its Siberian hierarchical conception, the shamanic drum cuts across ontological categories: it is at one and the same time an object and a living being, a human and an animal; and in its animality, it is both wild and domesticated. It is often treated as a mode of transport or a vessel: with its single skin, it is open on one side and closed on the other, which

allows invisible entities to gather within it over the course of the ritual. In fact, it is not uncommon for shamans to show their drums growing heavier as the ceremony progresses, weighed down by the spirits who come to rest within it. The drum is an open object, as open as the body of the shaman it belongs to.

In its basic constitution, the drum is an assemblage of individualized beings—both animal and vegetable—that are slain and “resurrected.” While in heterarchical traditions the shaman makes his own drum, in the hierarchical world it is the product of a collective endeavor; the shaman gives instructions, but never lends his own hands to the process. The criteria for selecting materials are remarkably consistent across the thousands of kilometers that span Eurasia. The frame is made from a wooden band taken from a tree that is not cut down, but rather kept alive at great effort, consistent with notion of the instrument as a living being. For the Mongols and the Evenki, it should be a tree that has retained a strange shape after being struck by lightning. Much like the Saami in Scandinavia, the Yeniseian Ket and the Selkup choose trees with branches growing on only one side, that which is most exposed to the sun.¹

The shaman has a close connection to the animal whose hide is used to make the drumskin. Depending on the region, it may be an elk, a wild or domestic reindeer, an ibex, or a foal: preferably a wild animal, or at least an untamed one. The fated animal will reveal itself in a dream to the shaman, who will then relay a detail to the hunters—a white patch on its coat, for example—so that they can find it in the forest and kill it. The shaman cannot acquire a drum until the hunters have quite literally tracked down the animal “of his dreams,” which provides them with one manner of verifying his visionary talents. Evenki shamans demonstrate their bond with the predestined animal quite spectacularly. When the hunters finally bring him the slain reindeer, the shaman wraps himself in its freshly removed hide and lets out a deer call. The hunters pretend to shower him with arrows, re-enacting the death of the animal, before handing the hide over to the women who will construct the drumhead (Vasilevich 1969: 252). Here again we see the principle of transsingularity at play, a kind of solidarity established between singular beings

1. On the Mongols, see Merli 2010: 47; on the Evenki, see Rychkov, inventory of the Saint Petersburg Kunstkamera (MAE), no. 1524, and Mazin 1984: 81; on the Saami, see Haruzin 1890: 218; on the Selkup, see Prokof'eva 1949.

belonging to different species and which thus transcends the categorical boundaries that would typically distinguish them.

Once its construction is complete, though, the hierarchical drum is not immediately available for use: it must undergo an “animation” ritual. Until then, the drum is said to be “empty” or to “have no road.”² The Selkup carry this out with a seven-day-long ritual feast, during which the shaman reassembles the dispersed pieces of the reindeer used to make the drumhead and then brings it back to life. The notion of reanimating the slain deer is also central to drum rituals of the Ket, the Nganasan, and the Evenki. Once resuscitated, the deer no longer behaves like a wild animal, but a tamed one, cooperating with its shaman-master just like a domestic reindeer would. The drum is thereafter thought of as the saddled reindeer upon which the shaman sets out on his cosmic journeys; this is the case even among populations such as the Ket and the Selkup, who usually harness their reindeer to sleds and only very rarely mount them.³

In Turko-Mongol traditions, the drum’s double character as both wild and domestic is made even more explicit, as the resurrection ceremony directly mimics the taming of an animal. First the shaman invokes the life of the ungulate from which the skin is taken and then introduces the animal’s soul into the drum, bringing the instrument to life. He then must set about taming it: he straddles the instrument and mimics the bouncing of a restive colt. Once it is docile and cooperative, the drum will be referred to both as a wild animal (ibex, deer) and as a riding horse.

Of course, the drum is also what Western observers take it for at first sight: a musical instrument. It produces sounds; that much is clear. But even in this regard, there is some ambiguity as to how these sounds are perceived. They are often described as noises made by the drum-animal’s galloping hooves: the faster the rhythm, the more vivid the invisible cavalcade of the shaman on his mount. The beats of the drum may also be described as a language of the spirits, incomprehensible to non-shamans. It is in this language that the shaman calls for his spirits at the beginning of the ritual, and it is in this language that the spirits send messages to the human audience, which the shaman will then translate. The

2. On the “empty” drum of the Khakas, see Butanaev 2006: 112, 114. On the Selkup drum “without a road,” see Prokof’eva 1949.

3. “For the Selkup, the drum is a living reindeer on which the shaman undertakes his voyage in the upper world” (Prokof’eva 1949: 350). For the Ket, the drum represents a wild animal and a mounted one at the same time (Aleksenko 1981: 106).

drumstick is sometimes also considered an instrument of these exchanges: Tungusic groups, for example, call the drumstick a “word” (*gis*), while the Mongolian Darhad call it the “interpreter” (*helmerch*).⁴

Another paradox of the hierarchical drum is its status both as a unique, personal instrument and, at the same time, a traditional object. It is, on the one hand, indissolubly associated with its owner: it is made for this shaman and no other, and it is often only the shaman who is allowed to play it. Indeed, those responsible for making the instrument obey precise instructions that the shaman receives in his or her dreams (Funk 2005: 24). In certain respects, the drum could even be said to constitute a kind of double of its owner. According to the prevailing custom in most hierarchical traditions, the instrument is destroyed when the shaman dies. The Teleut say that “When the shaman dies, the drum dies as well” (Dyrenkova 1949: 186; Funk 2005: 203). And the Tubalar maintain that when an instrument’s owner dies in an invisible battle with another shaman, blood flows from the drumskin (Potapov 1947: 160).⁵ But the relationship is reciprocal: if the drum breaks, the shaman will know that his days are numbered. The Soviet ethnologist Leonid Potapov recalled an interview with a Shor shaman who, because he had just worn out the last drum granted him by the god Ülgen, was convinced that he did not have long to live. Potapov was surprised to learn that his informant did indeed die the day after their meeting (1947: 152).

But in hierarchical shamanism, the individual is never understood as a self-centered atom, closed off to the outside world. The singularity of the shaman—that which makes them such exceptional beings—is constituted through their relationships with those who lived before them. The authenticity of their powers is often validated by the level of precision with which the instructions they receive in their dreams conform to traditional practices. A new shaman’s oneiric experience is supposed to communicate a recognizable model inherited from his or her ancestors. As a result of this internationalization of tradition, the drums of a given population display a high degree of continuity in structure, form and materials, even if some individual variations may appear (Hlopina 1978: 78). In hierarchical traditions, although the drum is broken when the shaman dies, not all of its elements are lost: the metal pieces of the instrument

4. On the Tungusic groups, see Vasilevich 1969: 253; and Shirokogoroff 1935: 298; on the Darhad, see Badamxatan 1986: 167.

5. The Enets pierce the drumskin when the shaman dies (Prokofyeva 1963: 149).

are recovered by the deceased shaman's family, in the hope that they will soon be used in the fabrication of a successor's drum. Sometimes they are retrieved from the place where the drum was laid to rest, once the organic pieces have decomposed (Krashevskii 2009: 74). The Nganasan provide an extremely enlightening commentary on this subject: "the spirit of the drum resides in its internal metal parts, while the wood and the skin are only pieces of clothing that are regularly changed" (2009: 74).

A new drum is thus a new object, but one made from structural elements recovered from an older instrument. This process presents a striking parallel with Siberian conceptions of life: animals and humans are composed partly of flesh and blood, perishable elements that are born anew with each individual, but also of more durable bones, parts that survive the death of the individual and are considered carriers of an identity that is passed on from generation to generation. It is for this reason that, as Éveline Lot-Falck pointed out, Siberian hunters handle animal bones with a scrupulous respect, seeing them as a kind of receptacle for a life force from which the game animal might be reborn (Lot-Falck 1953: 205–18). Just as bones transmit life and the essence of the species across the births and deaths of each of its representatives, the same goes for the drum: beyond the disintegration of the wood and leather of each concrete instrument, the metal parts ensure the survival of the stable structure of an *abstract ancestral model*.

Now this relation between incarnation and model likewise applies to the shaman's body itself: the shaman is conceived of as the bearer of a singular, hereditary essence that animates their visible appearance and behavior, an essence that, for a number of different peoples, is housed in his skeleton, which is itself made up of exceptional bones. For both the shaman and the drum, death is only a kind of molting stage through which a fundamental identity is perpetuated. The regular renewal of the drum during the shaman's lifetime, with the metal parts retained and the painting on its skin reproduced, provides a cyclical image of this molting-resurrection process.

To a certain extent, a similar relationship between an abstract ancestral model and its individual incarnation can be seen in the relationship between mental images and the painted ones at work in these practices. Those who paint the figures on the shaman's drum carefully follow descriptions of images that have appeared in the shaman's dreams. But, at the same time, it is reported that the painted designs quite precisely reproduce those that covered the drum of the shaman's ancestor. As one Selkup practitioner explained, the image on his instrument had previously



Figure 44. Painting a Drum, Altai, 1920s or 1930s. Photo by Nadezhda Petrovna Dyrenkova 2012: 316, fig. 11.

covered the drum of his grandfather, who had in turn inherited it from his own father (Prokof'eva 1949). This double obligation to the shaman's personal oneiric visions as well as to the ancestral model implies that the shaman must have internalized the ancestral drawings to such an extent that they haunted his dreams. This requirement illustrates the work that goes into aligning individual oneiric experiences with canonical models. The figures live a hybrid life, alternating between an externalized existence as images painted on the drum of a living shaman, and then, after his death, an internalized existence as mental images in the memories of his entourage—his future successor most important among them—until they are once again materialized on the newly made drum of a novice shaman.

The drum, in short, is a multiplier of references and allegiances: it is at the same time an instrument and a living being, human and animal, domestic and wild, material and mental. It is by definition an object designed to break through the limits of the ontological categories into which ordinary things and beings are divided, and it does so across the ages, by coming back to life from generation to generation. It is no surprise, then, to see it take on, in ritual performances, the role of a ferryman between worlds.

For a Sensorimotor Approach to the Image

In 2011, I found myself in a small consulting room, examining the shamanic collections of the National Museum at Abakan, capital of the Republic of Khakassia, which houses a number of drums confiscated

during the violent repression of shamans in the 1930s. I was studying the figures on a drum laid out on the table before me. Equipped with handling gloves and a desk lamp, and, looking down over the decorated surface, I photographed it as one would a painting, trying to obtain as sharp, well-defined images as possible. I took details of each part: top, bottom, left, right. Then just as I was putting the instrument away, I turned it over and gripped its handle as a shaman would have. Suddenly I saw the painted figures from the other side of the instrument, backlit by the lamp. The silhouettes of animals, trees, and horsemen jumped out at me with the distinct contours of shadow puppets. I put my head inside the instrument, just as the old shamans would have done, and I found myself surrounded by these characters, floating and caracoling in the air around me. For the first time, and unexpectedly, I had seen the images not as an outside observer, but from a shaman's point of view: *from inside* the instrument. Taken aback, I reproduced the experience more deliberately, this time to photograph the figures as I had seen them, in reverse, and I've repeated this peculiar technique in different museums ever since. Each time I have the moving impression of seeing the images as no else one has, not since the night of the last ritual carried out by the drum's owner, before being arrested and sent to a concentration camp. What researchers had taken for the left and right sides of the instrument were in fact its right and left from the shaman's point of view. It was this experience that convinced me of the shortcomings of describing the figures on the drum from an outsider's point of view, as we would a painting, and that a reversal of this vantage point, putting oneself in the place of the shaman holding the instrument, was indispensable for fully understanding how the drum worked.

Ethnographic publications typically reproduce the figures on the drum as they are seen from the front, as a two-dimensional image, without showing the back or sides of the instrument. These depthless paintings are typically interpreted as illustrations of various beliefs and concepts. Ethnologists such as the Russian Sergei Ivanov, the Hungarian Vilmos Diószegi, and the French Éveline Lot-Falck all tried to identify the original meaning of each figure by integrating it into a local "worldview" (Ivanov 1955; Lot-Falck 1961; Diószegi 1978; Lot-Falck and Diószegi 1973), an approach that leans with remarkable frequency on the metaphor of the "reflection." One author, for example, maintains that the designs "*reflect* representations of the surrounding world and its spirits" (Basilov 1984: 87, *italics added*). Another endeavors to illuminate the "ideological background" that the figures "reflect" (Diószegi [1978]



Figure 45: Figures Seen in Reverse, through the Skin of a Khakas Drum. Khakassia National Museum, Abakan, no. 4656-26. Photo by Charles Stépanoff.

1998: 251). A third has it that “in the language of these drawings, a kind of pictographic writing, the theological postulates of Altaian shamanism were *reflected* on the surface of the drum skin” (Potapov 1991: 123, *italics added*). The role of the mirror is similarly attributed to the designs on Saami drums, which “have a great value in *reflecting* common beliefs and ways of life among the ancient Saami people” (Sommarström 1991: 165, *italics added*). In scientific analyses such as these, the drum becomes a reflective surface, a screen deprived of depth.

This approach runs up against a number of difficulties as soon as we observe that the drums never provide more than an incomplete and biased overview of a population’s pantheon. Varying in some respects from shaman to shaman, the drums never depict the principal divinities but instead feature minor figures that even the shamans themselves sometimes struggle to identify. Semiotic readings, which reduce the designs to iconic inscriptions of beliefs about the world, take it for granted that the relationship between the pictorial and the mental is a transparent one, as the “reflection” metaphor would indeed suggest. In reducing the designs to expressions of a hypothetical collective ideology, these approaches detach them from the instruments on which they are painted and thereby also from the contexts in which they are used.

The shamans’ own explanations of the designs on their drums suggest an entirely different way of understanding these instruments. Curiously, these commentaries have not received the attention they deserve in specialist studies, most likely because they rarely sit well with the semiotic functions often assigned to the images. Some Khakas shamans claim

that the designs on their drums help them to “find their way on their journeys” and to “move forward” (Potapov 1981: 134–35; Kenin-Lopsan 1995: 310). Evenki shamans likewise maintain that they allow them “to find their way in the dark lands” (Ivanov 1954: 177). No notion here of the drums conveying a message or “reflecting” ideas, but rather their use as an aid to orientation, a little like compasses of the invisible. But what does it mean “to find your way” if not to establish a certain coordination between your own body and the space surrounding it? The statements of those who use the drums thus suggest that the designs might be more clearly understood in light of the body–space relationship in the particular context of the ritual performance.

What is at stake here, to quote Carlo Severi, is the difference between “a typology of representations” and “a logic of relations represented by an image embedded within a tradition” (2011: 11). In his analysis of the pictographic drawings employed in Meso and South American shamanic traditions, Severi stresses that their role is not to provide a semiotic representation of a worldview; rather these drawings comprise an “art of memory” that is central to the ritual performance. Their spatial organization is in fact closely bound up with the sequential order of the chants they are used to memorize. They can therefore not be properly interpreted without taking into account the relationship between a relatively stable iconography and the structured use of ritual speech.

It is not possible to decode the images on a Siberian drum in quite the same way as an Amerindian pictograph: the manner in which the various figures are arranged across the round surface of the instrument makes it difficult to read them in linear succession, and it is thus impossible to place them in direct parallel with the successive parts of a chant. Moreover, a single drum is used to accompany a large number of shamanic songs, while each Amerindian pictograph transcribes one particular song or myth. In Siberian hierarchical traditions, furthermore, the shaman’s gestures on the ritual stage are no less important than their chants when it comes to evoking the invisible space that is the mental setting for the action that unfolds. This requires an understanding of the relationship between words and images that goes well beyond the pictographic: taking the role of gesture into account means adopting a *sensorimotor* approach to this iconography. Semiotic accounts are grounded in an intellectualist conception of the imagination, seen as a reservoir of representations. But as we have learned from neuroscience, the imagination is an “ideomotor” faculty that engages the motor response of the subject in the world. The approach I am proposing here is premised on the idea

that the individual's relationship to virtual space, just like the individual's relationship to immediate space, is grounded in motor activity and active sensory perceptions (Berthoz 2002; Warnier 1999). One necessary consequence of this is that the drum can no longer be treated as a surface and must be resituated in its three-dimensional context: as an integrated object in a network of gestures and songs. My hypothesis is that the images on the drums play a major role in reconfiguring the shared spatial framework from which the shaman's chants and gestural actions draw their meaning. A closer look at the unique qualities of shamanic chants will help demonstrate this.

The Vertigo of Reflexivity

Shamanic songs are rife with intense images, sudden shifts, and troubling hermeticisms, all of which contribute to their inimitable style. Their most characteristic feature, however, is neither their poetry nor their esoterism, but rather the seemingly egocentric passages in which the singer describes himself, with clear references to his own biography, the actions he is performing, and the song itself as he sings it. These descriptive passages often evoke the period of crisis that launched the shaman's career. According to Lévi-Strauss, every shamanic ritual is a "re-enactment of the 'call,' or the initial crisis which brought him the revelation of his condition. [...] The shaman does not limit himself to reproducing or miming certain events. He actually relives them in all their vividness, originality, and violence" (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 180–81).⁶

In a Kuna song analyzed by Carlo Severi, the shaman describes a series of preparatory actions carried out in advance of the ritual. Though these actions were performed in the recent past, they are recounted in the song using the present tense. The self-description, both of the speaker and of the words he sings, lends the shamanic song a markedly reflexive character that serves to pluralize the shaman's role as a ritual locutor, one endowed with a multiplicity of voices (Severi 2015: 164–82).

The reflexivity of shamanic songs described by Americanist anthropologists has much in common with what we find in Siberia. When a Tuvan individual is identified by his or her community as someone undergoing the initial crisis, they are not bestowed with the full status of

6. Translation modified by the present translator.

shaman until they recognize themselves as such and manifest this with a chant affirming that “I am a shaman.” A perfect illustration is provided by the following passage from the chant of a late-nineteenth-century Tofa (Eastern Tuvan) shaman:

I am the one who shamanizes,
My big drum advances victorious.
When night falls, I shamanize a bit and I die!
Here I come, my Benevolent ones [referring to the spirits],
Before dawn, I will die victorious.
There is nothing I do not see or do not know.
I am suffering and I am going to shamanize.
Before the patient,
I stand, o Benevolent one!
Anything else,
I know not how, o Benevolent one!
All over the Earth,
I shamanize, o Benevolent one!
I have the stag as my mount!
Shamanizing, I cross
The near and the far, o Benevolent one!
I see, o Benevolent one,
The stars above shine!
I see, o Benevolent one,
The high holy mountain!
(Katanov 1907: 650–51, no. 184)⁷

The singer proclaims his talent as a shaman, his victories, his power to roam the earth and fly to the stars, and even his ability to die and live again. Such boasts are common in Tuvan shamanic chants, and they differ starkly in this respect from the characteristic modesty of non-shamanic Tuvan songs, which typically lament unrequited love and the woes of everyday life. But the apparent egocentrism of these proclamations is misleading, given that they actually refer to times and spaces far removed from the here and now. The powers boasted in the song do not originate in the shaman himself, but flow from the ancestors of whom he is the mere offspring:

7. Song collected in 1890. This is a more literal translation than Katanov's, based on the original in the Tofa language (Karagas).

The shamanity of the ancestor-fathers has fallen to me
I am the offspring of six shamans [...]
I am a glorious shaman!
(Kenin-Lopsan 1995: 310)

As a shaman, he is only as powerful as his ancestors before him. Similarly, the words and gestures he performs during the ritual are not his alone; they do not emanate from his own free will, but reproduce those of his predecessors, and it is for this reason that they have such power. As she beats her drum and shakes, the contemporary Tuvan shaman, Ondarmaa, addresses her ancestors in the following manner:

Help me, me your shaman,
Come down from the lower Sky.
You shook my shoulders, my neck,
My *albys* [spirits], my root-spirit,
You shook my scapula,
My destiny-root, my lower Sky.

These lines interweave a number of different temporal references. On the one hand, “You shook my shoulders, my neck” refers to the scene currently unfolding as the shaman dances and sways while playing the drum. She signals, in other words, that she is not in control of her movements, but is herself being moved by the spirits. But the same utterance also refers to a past moment: the turbulent period of the triggering crisis, in the throes of which she came to realize she was a shaman. Here, then, is a Siberian confirmation of Lévi-Strauss’s intuition that the ritual re-enacts the shaman’s initial crisis. But the references do not stop there; to anyone in the audience, these words will sound like a formulation typical of shamanic chants and they will have a clear sense that other shamans have sung them before—indeed in the following chapter we will encounter these same formulas in old Khakas chants. The singer thus partly reproduces the words of past shamans, her ancestors, as they in turn would have addressed them to their own predecessors. In Siberian hierarchical traditions, therefore, the voice of the shaman is multiplied through its insertion into a long chain of inheritance.

This multiplicity on the part of the officiant is no secret to the ritual’s other participants: as the Evenki of the Podkamennaya Tunguska tell us: “It’s not the shaman who is dancing, but the demons he has in him” (Suslov 1993: 131). For the Selkup, the imitation of the ancestor’s chant

is so thorough that when a young shaman sings, his listeners assure him that the voice they are hearing is that of the grandfather to whom he is heir. In the Selkup language, furthermore, the shamanic chant is even called the “voice.” In the following example—a chant sung by a novice Selkup shaman—the voice of the officiant (here named “grandson”) is subtly interwoven with that of his shamanic ancestor (here named “grandfather”), who urges his descendant to reproduce his words and gestures. In this complex dialog, the descendant learns to merge his own point of view with that of his ancestor, who looks upon him as he sings. In this excerpt, the italicized text can be attributed to the ancestor, while the subject of the roman text is the singer himself.

*Thus, it seems, grandson, it seems
always sing!*

My grey grandfather's [spirits], you,
grandfather, I see:

seven, it seems, bears
grandfather is always checking,
always, it seems, he is singing.

*Grandson, it seems, always,
always think
how I asked you.*

Grandfather, it seems, your grandfather,
your grandfather, there this I asked you:

*Grandson, it seems, always,
always shamanize.*

Grandfather's [songs] you always you I shall sing.

Let your grandfather take
while singing, it seems,
he will put on the shaman dress.

*Grandson, it seems, forward
Begin to slide hopping always.*

The restless bear grandmothers [auxiliary spirits of the grandfather],
the mind has been frozen, I shall begin to slide hopping.

The restless, it seems, bear grandfather
is sliding hopping, it seems.

*Always grandson is checking,
he began sliding hopping, always,
always he is checking. Let you rock,
always you will rock,
always rock opposite my place.*

Always spit [=man], it seems,
you will rock, it seems,
the restless grey grandfather,
nearby I shall rock myself.⁸

It eventually becomes impossible to determine who is speaking: the grandfather or the grandson. Both of them claim to be acting as the other. With experience, the shaman will end up fully assuming, without dialog, the voice of his ancestor's complex song-itineraries.

The message transmitted to the listener by these self-descriptive and reflexive passages from shamanic songs can be summed up as follows: "I am a shaman; what has happened to me proves this; I have a shamanic body; I speak the words of my ancestors." The song endows the shaman with the status of a "complex locutor," who fuses his actual self with that of an ancestor whose words he has inherited. In this sense, the song expresses in a lyrical manner the simultaneously singular and hereditary *shamanic essence* that lies at the heart of hierarchical traditions. As we will see, both the principle of reflexivity and the expression of the shamanic essence that are realized in the ritual chant have their iconic equivalent in the drum.

One of the simplest ways of decorating a shamanic drum is to paint an image of its inner structure on its skin: a cross-brace for example, or a ring, handle, or cross-tie. Most often it is the metal parts of the instrument that are represented in this way, producing a kind of X-ray effect as though the skin of the instrument were transparent (figure 46). A well-prepared skin is in fact translucent, and, when held before a fire, the drum's inner structure becomes visible from the outside, just as the designs on the outer surface can be seen by the shaman on the other side of the instrument. It is no accident that it is the metal parts that are displayed in this manner; as we know, it is these pieces that are inherited from the drum of an ancestor. The designs on the outer surface give a visible form then to the instrument's ancestral skeleton. This *principle of projection* recalls what in prehistoric art has been called the radiographic or X-ray style: animals represented in this mode are depicted with their internal organs, hearts, trachea, and sometimes certain bones visibly displayed. On the drum, just like these animals, a usually hidden essence of life and identity is thus made visible.

Sometimes the ancestral drum is drawn in miniature on the skin of the newer instrument, like a reduced model of the object itself. On the drum

8. Chant published by Kazakevitch 2001. Italics added.

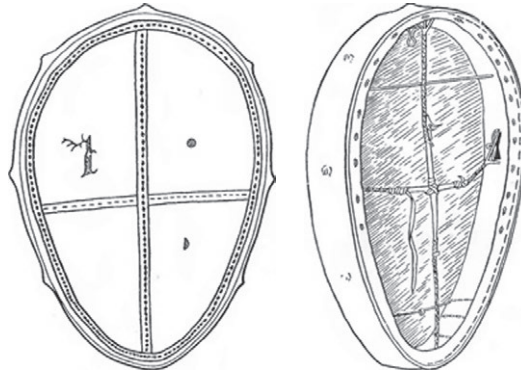


Figure 46. Dolgan Drum. Prokof'eva 1961b: 484, table 9, fig. 1.

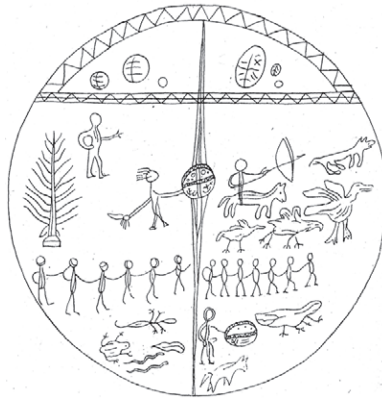


Figure 47. Koibal Drum. Katanov 1897.

from the Minusinsk Valley shown in figure 47, two shamans can be made out: the owner of the instrument on the bottom and his shaman-ancestor above, each holding their own drum. The painted drums present the same precise structure as the actual instrument they sit on. This *mise en abyme* effect is recurrent: we see it, for example, in the far eastern stretches of Siberia, in the Udeghe designs from the Amur River region shown in figure 48. In this case, there are two miniaturized images of drums on the inner face of the drumhead. Another two can be seen in the image to the right, on the lower part of the instrument's case, which are clearly recognizable from their central cross-pieces; and on each quadrant of these two painted drums is yet another instrument in miniature. Images of drums on images of drums, and all of them painted on a drum: a recursive chain

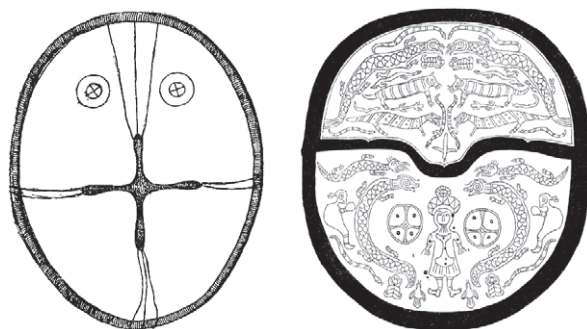


Figure 48. Left: Udeghe Drum, inner face. Ivanov 1954: 372, fig. 221. Right: Udeghe Drum Case in Engraved Birchbark. Ivanov 1954: 375, fig. 224.



Figure 49. Drum of Saami Shaman. Manker 1950: figs. 709 and 710.

that could go on forever. The character placed between the two drums on the bottom half of the case is a shaman wearing his ritual costume. Another two drums are held by two smaller characters seen in profile on either side of him: they are “hunchbacked dwarf shamans.”

At the other end of Eurasia, the drums of the Scandinavian Saami are just as famous for the abundance of figures on their skins and were at one time found in curiosity cabinets all over Europe. The example shown in figure 49 gives another demonstration of the X-ray style, with the inner cross structure made visible on the instrument’s outer face. The image of a drum can be made out among the figures on the lower left of the instrument, this one seen from the inside, with its cross structure and a few pendants visible. Images of drums like these frequently appear on the skins of Saami instruments and are sometimes depicted being held

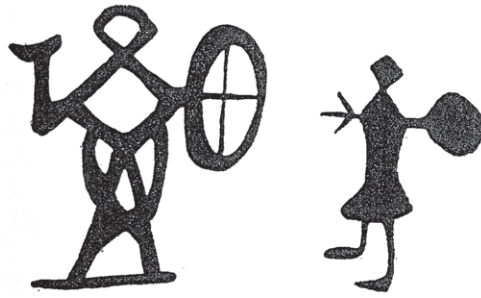


Figure 50. Figures of Shamans on Saami Drums. Manker 1950: fig. 36.

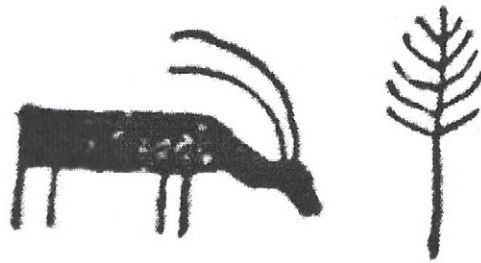


Figure 51. Stag and Birch Tree on an Altaian Drum. Anohin 1924: 60, fig. 68.

by a shaman (figure 50). For the Saami, whose drums are often used for divinatory purposes, this drawing signals the validity of the instrument's predictions.⁹ The image of the drum painted on a drum thus effectively says: "I am a real drum who tells the truth."

It is quite common for Siberian drums to depict the living beings from which the different components of the instrument were taken: the tree from which the frame was made and the animal whose hide was used to make the drumskin. On some Tuvan drums, this is an ibex engraved on the handle and straddled by the shaman (Potapov 1969: 356). On Khakas and Altai drums, images of the trees and animals used to make the instrument are typically painted onto the skin (figure 51). Once these figures have been painted, only the shaman is allowed to touch the instrument, for they indicate that the animal's soul has taken up residence within it (Anohin 1924: 56; Butanaev 2006: 97).

9. "Zaubertrommel, welches Zeichen angibt, dass die Zaubertrommel war weissagt" (Manker 1950, II: 55).



Figure 52. Altaian Drum. Prokof'eva 1961b: 481, table 6, fig 2.

These different ways of exhibiting an ancestral model make the drum a singularly reflexive object that furnishes a perfect image of its own embeddedness within a tradition: each shaman follows the model of his ancestor, who in turn followed the model of his own ancestor, and so on. By displaying its relationship to its origin on its own body, the drum acts as a temporal mediator, showing how the past animates the present, but also how a performance reinvigorates and renews a traditional model. The drum achieves on an iconic level what the shaman's chant does on a discursive one: it is an outward projection of something hidden, one that gives visual form to the simultaneously singular and hereditary essence, ever new and ever repeated, that sets hierarchical shamans apart.

The drums of the Altai, in southern Siberia, apply these principles of projection and reflexivity with remarkable virtuosity. One of the Altaian names for the drum is *chalu*, meaning "soul," as it is considered a carrier for the soul of the ancestor. And, indeed, it is difficult to ignore the presence of this ancestral figure when looking at an Altaian drum: he is the central figure, with his head and legs carved into the handle and his arms represented by the metal cross-piece. The ribbons attached to the handle unmistakably evoke the ancestor's multicolored shamanic costume.

On the extraordinary example shown in figure 52, the ancestor is first seen on the inside of the drum, on the sculpted handle of the instrument; then you realize that the same image is projected as a shadow onto the inner face of the drumskin, where it is also painted. The cross-piece and its pendants are easy to make out on the painted

version, and here rainbows emerge from the ribs of the figure sculpted onto the handle. Turning the instrument over, the same image is projected a second time onto the front of the drumhead, again with pendants and rainbows, though the latter here have spirits dancing on them—daughters of the god Ülgen. Here as well, on the outward face, the ancestor's large head is surrounded by the sun, moon, and stars. The shaman himself is depicted standing next to a drum on the left-hand side of the instrument, under the rainbows; he is also shown at the base of the handle on the other side. On the front of the instrument, he is seen conducting a sacrifice, the other protagonists of which are represented under the rainbows on the right: the victim (a horse), a sacred birch tree, and an assistant. It is not uncommon to find models of ritual scenes such as this on Altaian drums, nor is it rare on those of the Khakas or Evenki, the drum thus providing a mode of transmission for the rules of certain ritual performances.¹⁰ The painted ensemble shown in figure 52 presents some features that are already familiar to us: the insertion of the ancestor's body into a cosmic structure recalls the composition of Ket drums a thousand miles to the north.

The superimposition of images on the Altaian drum should be considered in relation to a similar effect produced in the shamanic chant that is performed while playing the instrument. Here is how an Altaian shaman addresses his song to his ancestor Tostogosh:

My maternal uncle, white Tostogosh!
Master of the white drum,
White drum who has a friend.
The great sands with three humps,
Jezim-bi with ears of earth.
Lord thunder with seven doors,
You have slid on the Lake of Milk
You have built steps up Sümer Mountain
Sixty-two lunar rainbows,
Arise from your spine and neck.
Seventy-two Earth rainbows
Arise at the ends of your sleeves.
(Anohin 1924: 129)

10. Some Evenki drums bear a schematic model of ritual constructions called *turu* (Shirokogoroff 1935).

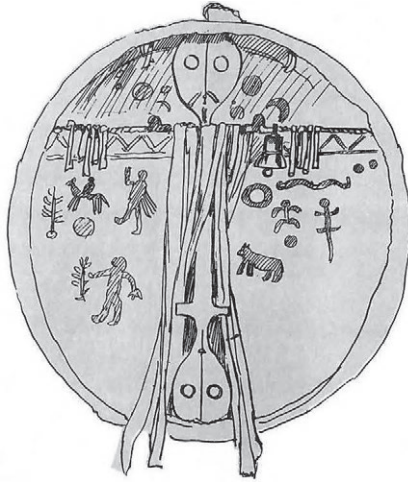


Figure 53. Shamanic Drum, inner face. Northern Altai. Potapov 1991: pl. 2.

The reference to Tostogosh as “master of the drum” at the start of this passage unambiguously evokes the instrument’s anthropomorphic handle. The lines that follow are a series of mixed references to anatomy and various features of the local landscape: the sands are shaped like camel’s humps, the spirit’s ears are made of earth, he has built steps on a holy mountain that is inaccessible to humans, and rainbows grow from his torso. The allusion to the central image of the drum is clear. The superimposed visible images on the instrument and the interwoven metaphors of the song respond to one another in a manner that consolidates the figure of the ancestor’s cosmic body.

The owner of the drum himself is presented in the form of a small bronze figure located in the groin of his ancestor. This connection to the ancestor’s genital power is clearly expressed in some of the typical formulas of shamanic songs: “I am the progeny of the hereditary shaman / I am the seed of the diviner” (Dyrenkova 1949: 175), or: “When our custom appeared / We, the seed that remained” (Anohin 1924: 99). For the northern Altai, the association between the ancestor and his descendant is symbolized by a double-headed handle: the upper head represents the ancestor and the lower one the current shaman, who appears to be born from the ancestor’s legs (figure 53) (Dyrenkova 2012: 292).

In a vertiginous *mise en abyme* effect, the outer face of the Altaian drum shown in figure 54 (right) features four reduced images of its own compositional structure, while its inner face (left) shows five drums,

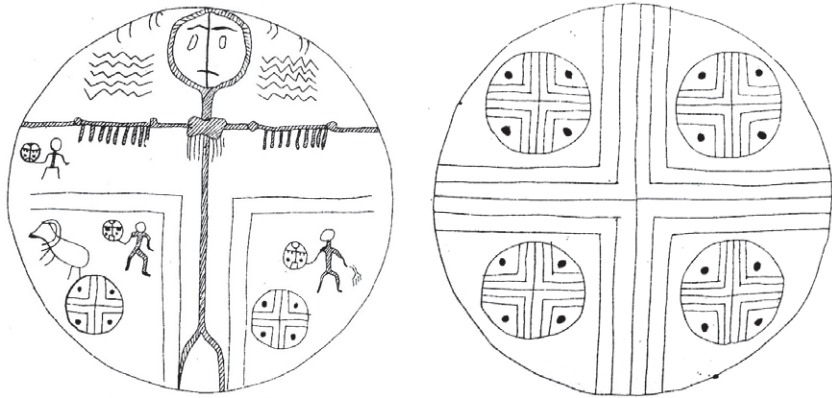


Figure 54. Altaian Drum, inner and outer faces. Potanin 1883, IV: table 6.

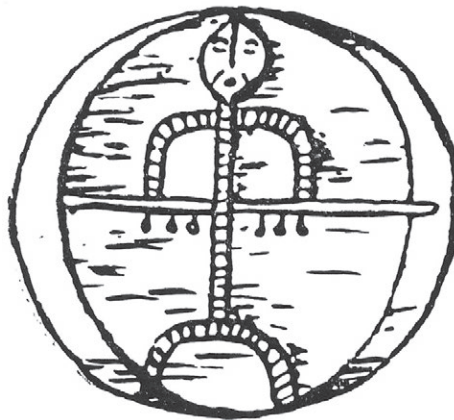


Figure 55. Drum of a Baraba Tatar Shaman, beginning of the eighteenth century. Lindenau 1983: 148, fig. 11.

three of which are held in the hands of shamans. None of these figures, to be clear, are individualized portraits. They are not particular persons, but rather represent the relational principle between the shaman and his ancestor, between the actual performance and its transgenerational model. This explains the great stability of these images across time and space. Indeed, drums with faces similar to those of the Altai could be found in the eighteenth century among the Tatars of the Baraba steppe, between the Ob and Irtysh rivers, before Islam finally ousted any remaining shamanic traditions from the region (figure 55).



Figure 56. Altaian Shaman, end of the nineteenth century. Altai State Museum of Regional Study.

A photograph dating from the end of the nineteenth century gives us some idea of the astonishing impression made by an Altaian shaman in full regalia (figure 56). His head ensconced in the instrument, he shows the audience the image of his cosmic ancestor at the center of the design and, just above his right arm, an image of himself beating the drum. We see this concrete individual re-enacting an eternal scene. The shaman has shielded himself from his surroundings, the only image he has before his half-closed eyes is that of the drawings he is able to see through the instrument's transparent skin: floating, indecisive figures that guide his visions.

The drum is an interface in which time and space come together, overlap, and coordinate with one another. It brings the past into the present and cracks open a doorway onto cosmic space in the fabric of the immediate surroundings.

Bestriding a Drum

These weavings of space and time are not abstract metaphors; they are not, in other words, representations of a "worldview." On the contrary, the drums are carriers of sensorimotor cues for the actions and movements

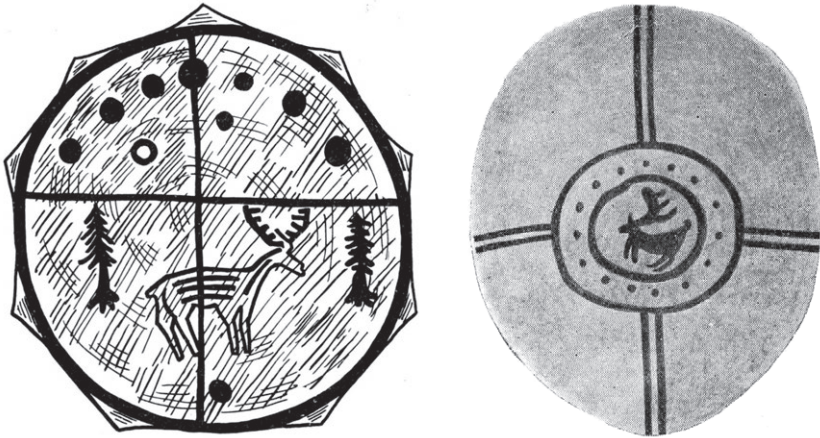


Figure 57. Left: Drum Belonging to the Tuvan Shaman, Shoonchur (outer face). Vainshtein 1991: 257, fig. 113. Right: Dolgan Drum (inner face). Ivanov 1954: 104, fig. 6-3.

performed by the shaman that we will now attempt to elucidate. Let us start with an enigma.

The two drums in figure 57 are quite similar in composition: at the center of both is a deer—the image of the animal from which the instrument was made—superimposed on a cross. This resemblance is all the more striking because these instruments belonged to shamans living 2,500 kilometers apart: one from eastern Tuva, living in the Sayan Mountains near Mongolia, the other a Dolgan shaman, from the Siberian Arctic. The one notable difference between them is that the two animals appear to be looking in opposite directions. This is only an apparent opposition, however: the Dolgan illustration is applied to the inside of the drum, while on the Tuvan example it is painted on the front. So, from the point of view of the shaman holding the instrument, the two animals are looking in the same direction; and as the skins of the instruments are often translucent, this would be easily seen if the two drums were presented against an adequate light source. To avoid any further ambiguity, it helps to borrow from heraldic terminology, in which the right and left sides of a coat of arms are respectively referred to as the dexter and sinister from the point of view of the knight who wears it. I will thus use the terms dexter and sinister to refer to the right and left parts of the drum *from the point of view of the shaman holding the instrument in front of him*, and not from the point of view of an outside observer.

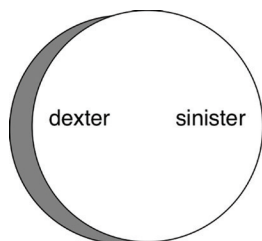


Figure 58. Dexter and Sinister of the Drum, outer face. Drawing by Charles Stépanoff.

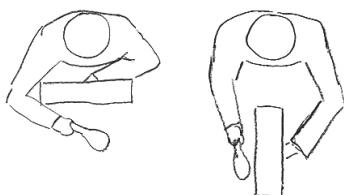


Figure 59. Left, Beating the Drum Slowly; Right, Beating the Drum Quickly and Loud. Drawing by Charles Stépanoff.

This example again underscores the need to consider the designs in relation to their material support (the drum) and not as two-dimensional graphic works, in other words, iconographically. It should not be forgotten that the deer represent the animals whose hides are used as the support for the painting itself! It is only by placing the image on the drum that we are able to recognize the two deer as indeed looking in the same direction, not from the point of view of an outside observer, but—and this is what counts—from the point of view of the drum itself.

Is this common direction a coincidence, or did the designers follow a rule of orientation that held sway in both of these cultures 2,500 kilometers apart? Despite the generally symmetrical shape of the drum, whether circular or ovoid, might there also be some kind of underlying asymmetry between the instrument's left and right sides? The stability of this compositional orientation is intriguing, but until now no specialist of Siberian shamanism has attempted to explain it. Since the tradition of painted drums has been extinct for several decades among both the eastern Tuvans and the Dolgan, it has become very difficult to obtain any new information on the question. In 1963, Shoonchur, the Tuvan shaman who owned the drum shown on the left, was interviewed by the Soviet ethnologist Sev'ian Izrrailevich Vainshtein, who filmed him and published the image of his drum. According to Vainshtein, Shoonchur was at that time the last remaining Tuvan shaman.

In the 2000s, however, I met an excellent connoisseur of the old eastern Tuvan traditions, the shaman Boranak Ereksen, who at that time lived in a small white house in the devastated town of Kyzyl, with its broken-up roads and industrial ruins covered in faded Soviet slogans. Originally from eastern Tuva (Kungurtug), he was descended from an old line of shamans and practiced a few divination and healing rituals himself. It so happened that his shamanic dispositions had been discovered by the same Shoonchur whose drum is reproduced in figure 57. To my good fortune, Boranak remembered the instrument well; he had even seen it in use. When I asked him one day why the deer on Shoonchur's drum was facing this way, he looked at me as though I had just posed a surprisingly silly question, one with an obvious answer. Indulging me nonetheless, he replied with a smile: "Well that's the direction we go in! You hold the drum from the inside, with your left hand, so on the outside the deer's head is facing forward!"

To him it would have been no less strange if I had naively asked why the Tuvans ride horses looking in the same direction as the animal and not the opposite. This simple remark from a man who knew how to use a drum opened up an entire universe of shamanic imagery that had eluded researchers up until this point.

Imagine the gestures a shaman makes while playing the drum. The instrument is always held in the left hand and the drumstick in the right. The shaman usually starts out seated, with his head inside the drum, which is at this point parallel to the axis of his shoulders (figure 59; see also figures 67 and 68). His drumbeats are soft, produced by a right arm that has to stretch all the way around the frame of the drum; wider, more ample movements are not possible in this uncomfortable position. One traveler who attended a Tofa ritual described this moment as follows: the shaman was seated near the hearth, "eyes half-closed, he hid from the fire beneath his drum and became completely visible through its translucent skin" (Chudinov 1931, cited by Mel'nikova 1994). At this point, all the shaman can see are the painted images backlit by the fire, as the skin's vibrations course through him. Visual and auditory stimuli are at this moment obstructed, favoring the stimulation of mental imagery.

After this introductory phase of the ritual, once the spirits have arrived, the shaman stands up and beats the drum harder and harder. To do this he must turn his drum so that its surface becomes perpendicular to the axis of his shoulders, which allows him to move his arms faster and more powerfully. The animal represented on the skin is now facing



Figure 60. Yakut Shaman Straddling a Drum. *Žornickaja* 1978.

the same direction as the officiant. When the shaman turns to the right or left, the animal turns in the same direction. As we've already noted, the drum is often thought of as a mount, and indeed, when the shaman has set off on his journey, he sometimes places his instrument between his legs and straddles it (figures 60 and 69). Since the drum is held with the left hand, the drumskin necessarily rests against the shaman's right leg so that, from the shaman's point of view, its sinister part is in front and its dexter behind. From this angle, it is easy to see the advantage of having the animal's head on the drum's sinister side. With the shaman sitting astride the instrument, the association between the drum's sinister and the left side of the shaman's body is supplanted by an association between the drum's sinister and the shaman's front, just as the dexter is no longer associated with his right side, but his rear.

In his response to my question, Boranak was drawing on his own memories of the concrete gestures that made up the shamanic practices of the region he came from. This kind of embodied knowledge is extremely rich, but often difficult to access: since "it all goes without saying," people do not naturally tend to talk about it. Moreover, implicit knowledge of this sort does not long survive the disappearance of the practices themselves, unlike painted images, written texts, or religious monuments, which archeologists and historians are able to study and comment on for a much longer period. But that notwithstanding, attempting to reconstruct these techniques of the body is central to a new interpretation of the shamanic arts of Siberia that this book is formulating.

The sinister orientation of the figures is an almost constant feature of Altaian, Teleut, and Khakas drums as well. Though these instruments are decorated with a far greater number of figures than the Tuvan or Dolgan examples, it is usually possible to identify among them an image of the animal from which the instrument's skin was taken; and this animal invariably walks toward the drum's sinister. The rich compositions on these instruments thus appear to be more complex versions of the drumskins that feature a centralized image of the deer. A closer look at certain Khakas drums reveals an extremely telling detail in this regard: a few partial hairs sometimes remain on the deer-hide drumhead, and their orientation shows that the skin has been fastened in such a way that the animal's head would lie to the drum's sinister side and its hindquarters to the dexter. A handwritten inventory from the Saint Petersburg *Kunstkamera* contains a precise explanation of this phenomenon from a Khakas shaman, whose drum was acquired in 1913: "The shaman rides the deer, which is why the front part of the hide is oriented in the same direction as all of the figures."¹¹ This way of seeing things confirms the interpretation that the Tuvan shaman Boranak gave me a century later.

The sinister march of the figures introduces an asymmetry on the drum whereby the sinister side of the instrument is associated with the front of the shaman's body and the dexter with its rear. Recall though that, in the previous chapter, we made note of another form of asymmetry which associates the drum's sinister with the left side of the shaman's body and the dexter with his right: on Ket drums, the prototypical shaman, Doh, has a sun at his right side and a moon at his left. Asymmetries like this between left and right are often emphasized with colors. One Selkup drum described by the ethnologist Ekaterina Prokofiev displays a systematic bipartition between the dexter side as light and celestial and the sinister side as dark and low (Prokof'eva 1949: 347). Similar to Ket examples, a sun shines on the drum's dexter side and a moon on the sinister. Numerous other figures adorn the inside of the frame: on the dexter side, eight red reindeer climb toward the top of the drum. On the sinister side, that of the moon, eight black bears move toward the bottom. Now, for the Selkup—as for many neighboring peoples—the reindeer has celestial connotations as a bounding animal whose antlers seem to trace a pathway. The bear on the other hand, which spends half the year asleep underground, is a chthonian being; it is of the lower world. The

11. *Kunstkamera* MAE, Saint Petersburg, inventory 2164-1; see Ivanov 1955: 180.

colors black and red, obtained from soot and ochre respectively, are the two natural pigments most often found on Siberian drums, and the contrast between them is typically used to represent the opposition between darkness and light. The sinister side is thus clearly associated with downward movement on this drum, while the dexter is conversely associated with upward movement.

An Evenki drum, held in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, features a remarkably similar series of oppositions, though here applied not to the inside of the frame but on the outside of the drum-skin (figure 61). The now-familiar effects of projection and reflexivity are immediately apparent on this example, originally from the Stanovoy Mountains in the Siberian Far East: the four metal fasteners inside the frame are doubled on the outer face of the drumhead by four painted shapes topped by three red diamonds located at the four vertices of the oval. The red and black outlines painted around the edge of the drumhead echo the instrument's contours and thus reproduce the shape of the object on its own surface, as though the skin were decorated with an image of the drum's own abstract model.¹²

As Éveline Lot-Falck rightly remarked about this particular instrument, "the colors (the right side red, the left side black) translate the opposition between day and night, east and west, and at the same time the celestial and subterranean regions, as each of the two directions presides over the supra- or infra-terrestrial zones" (Lot-Falck 1961: 37). How can a simple drum achieve so much? On its dexter side, a line of red reindeer climbs up toward a sun placed at the top of the instrument. Opposite, along the sinister edge, a herd of black reindeer descends toward a moon at the very bottom of the oval. The sinister part of the instrument, and with it the left side of the shaman's body, is thus coupled with a descent toward the night and the lower zones of the world, which evokes the west. By contrast, the dexter part of the drum and the right side of the shaman's body are associated with an upward movement toward the light and the upper zones of the world, evoking the east.

Given that the orientation of the human body is constantly changing, it may seem strange to associate cardinal points with left and right. But of course, structurally opposed moral and geographical values are attributed to the left and right sides of the body in a great number of cultures all over the world. On this topic, a brilliant explanation of the

12. The interpretation of internal circles as models was proposed by Oppitz 1992.

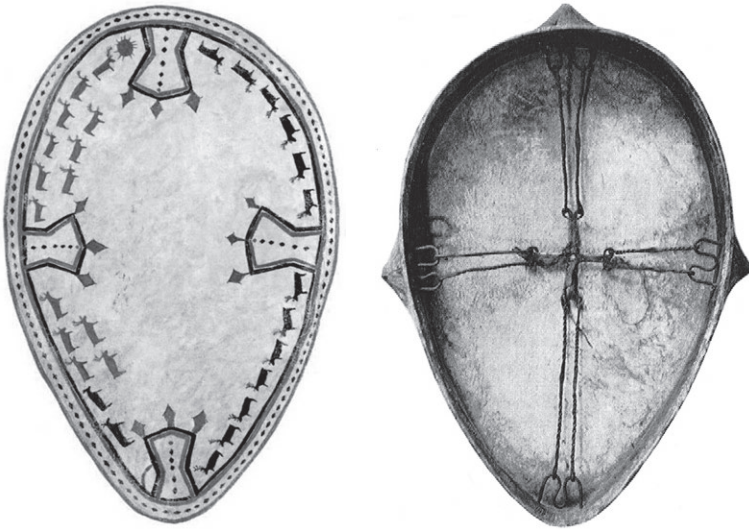


Figure 61. Evenki Drum. MQB, no. 71.1887.42.3. Left – Oppitz 2007: 53, watercolor by Freda Heyden. Right – Lot-Falck 1961: s.n.

remarkably unequal status conferred on the two human hands can be found in Robert Hertz's 1909 article, "The Pre-Eminence of the Right Hand: A Study in Religious Polarity." For Hertz, the superior hierarchical status of the right hand in relation to the left derives from a transposition onto the body of the fundamental opposition between the sacred and the profane that structures traditional religious concepts and practices. Value oppositions between the sacred, the light, the south, the east, the high, and the male, on the one hand, and the profane, the dark, the north, the west, the low and the female, on the other, can be widely observed across cosmologies and social organizations alike. Just as society, and indeed the entire universe, has a sacred, noble, male side and a female, weak, passive side, so does the body: its right and its left. It is true that for the majority of individuals (right-handed people), the right hand takes primacy over the left due, as we know, to the left hemisphere of the brain taking primacy over the right. But, as Hertz explains, the biological advantage of the right hand is slight and ambiguous at best; it is human cultures that transform the distinction into a radical one by integrating it into dualist cosmologies (Hertz 1909: 566).

We can thus observe configurations strangely reminiscent of those found on shamanic drums in cultures far removed from Siberia. Just as the Ket ancestral figure, Doh, is depicted with the moon to his left and



Figure 62. The Christ with the sun on his right and the moon on his left. Fifteenth century, Saint-Sauveur Cathedral, Aix-en-Provence.

the sun to his right (see figure 30), Christ is often portrayed with the sun on his right and the moon on his left in images of the Crucifixion; to his right are also the Penitent or good thief and the founding Saints of the new Church, while to his left are the Impenitent or bad thief along with some representatives of the Synagogue (figure 62). Through the intermediary of fifth- and sixth-century Syrian artists, this positioning of the astral bodies in Christian iconography was inherited from ancient religious traditions of the East (see Hauteceur 1921), which suggests that historical links with northern Asian traditions are not altogether unthinkable. Unexpectedly, there may be a distant kinship between the iconography of Christ and that of Doh in the remote Siberian taiga.

But again, it would be reductive to understand the systematically orientated compositions on the drums simply as microcosmic figurations of a dualistic worldview. The drum is an object used in a dynamic performance that is full of movement, transmitting not just ideas and imaginative models, but sensorimotor schemas as well. In their rituals, shamans often circumambulate and spin, movements that might suggest an attempt to disconnect from or obfuscate spatial orientation. But this is not at all the case. Spinning in one direction as opposed to another is a way of putting the body in harmony or disharmony with cosmic movements. Alexandra Lavrillier has recently gathered some valuable information on this subject from the Evenki of the Stanovoy Mountains, the same region from which the Quai Branly drum was taken at the end of the nineteenth century: "The act of spinning is associated with the course of the sun, which is itself linked to the unfolding of life. This is stated very clearly by the Evenki themselves, who specify that only shamans can spin in the opposite direction to the hands of a watch, which is, in other words, the opposite direction of the daily trajectory made by the sun: 'he does this,' they explain, 'when he is headed to the world of the dead!'" (Lavrillier 2005b: 129–30). To be clear, when you spin or rotate yourself, or when you circle an object, you can either follow the sequence east, south, west, north, in which case you are going *sunwise* (or clockwise, as we are more used to hearing), or you can turn in the opposite direction, east, north, west, south, in which case you are going *anti-sunwise* (against the sun or counter-clockwise). Turning sunwise is often associated with ascending, as is seen in the following words of an Evenki shaman, as he sets off with his spirits in pursuit of a celestial reindeer:

I go in the direction of the sun's course
Children, go with the sun!
I want to go according to the sun
I want to go according to the sun!
(Vasilevich 1996: 158)

Turning sunwise to ascend into the upper world, and in the opposite direction to descend into the lower world, is a technique employed by a number of Siberian peoples, as we will see later on. Importantly, these movements implicate the left and right sides of the body in different ways. Successively traversing the points of the compass in the same way as the sun over the course of a day means turning to the right, and

therefore putting the right side of the body at the center of the movement. If you walk around an object in this direction, you place it on your right-hand side, which is a way of honoring it. This is why, in northern Asia, in both shamanic and Buddhist traditions—not to mention many others around the world—circumambulations around sacred monuments follow the direction of the sun. On the other hand, though, to carry out a movement in the opposite direction is to place the left side of the body at the center of the movement, along with all of the darker associations it carries: night, inferiority, impurity. Taking these astronomical aspects into account, it seems that the cosmic values associated with right and left are not as arbitrary as Hertz would have us believe.

This all gives a clearer sense of how the drum can transmit sensorimotor cues: the asymmetry of the designs found on the left and right sides of the instrument does more than reflect a fixed spatial pattern. It also imparts a moral, affective, and cosmic charge to the shaman's movements on the ritual stage, and, almost certainly, to his own proprioception—his perception, that is, of his own body.

By returning the shamanic designs to the three-dimensional context of the drum object and the ritual action, we are able to see the drum as a spatio-temporal interface that weaves together different spaces and times, and provides a modeling tool that functions on several different levels. It is at one and the same time:

- an ontological model for thinking the relationship between a living embodiment and an underlying hereditary essence;
- an epistemic model of the relationship between a performance and the tradition in which it is embedded; and
- a sensorimotor model that articulates bodily perception and virtual space.

In the following chapter, we will delve deeper into a more specific context in an attempt to understand how, in the performance of the shamanic ritual, a virtual space is made to emerge from the convergence of images, gestures, and chants.

CHAPTER 7

A Cosmic Journey from Home

The Drums of the Khakas¹

Khakas drums are among the richest of Siberia, teeming with multi-colored figures circulating between mountains and stars. Formerly known as the Minusinsk Tatars, the Khakas are a Turkic-speaking people comprised of several groups—the Kachin, the Beltir, the Kyzyl, the Sagai, and the Koibal—settled in the upper Yenisei basin in the northern foothills of the Sayan Mountains. Their traditional economy is based on pastoral farming and subsidiary hunting. The Khakas were formally Christianized beginning in the nineteenth century, but the Orthodox Church was unable to significantly reduce their shamanic practices. The traditional fabrication of drums only ceased in the 1930s, during the period of bloody Soviet repression.²

There are fifty Khakas drums with legible designs on their skins on the inventories of Russian museum collections. This amounts to some fifteen hundred figures in total (Ivanov 1955: 178). Between the end of the nineteenth and middle of the twentieth centuries, detailed commentaries from shamans explaining the designs on their drums were collected by a number of Russian ethnologists (Klemenc 1890; Potapov 1981), but also by researchers who themselves belonged to the Khakas

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1. This chapter is a substantially modified version of a previously published article: Stépanoff 2013.
 2. On the repression of Khakas shamans, see Stépanoff 2009.

ethnic group: Nikolai Fedorovich Katanov, S. D. Mainagashev, and Viktor Iakovlevich Butanaev, whom I myself met in the Republic of Khakassia (Katanov 1897, 1907, 2000; Butanaev 2006; Mainagashev, archives of the Saint Petersburg Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography). As the Khakas shamans themselves put it, the designs on their drums help them to “move forward” and “to find their way along their journey” (Potapov 1981: 134–35). To understand how this enigmatic tool for “finding your way” works, we will attempt to decipher the role the figures play in the context of the shamanic ritual; for this we will draw on ethnographic descriptions as well the invaluable photographs taken by Ø. M. Olsen and S. D. Mainagashev before the Soviet persecutions.

The drum (*tüür*) is the Khakas shaman’s main instrument, and each one is crafted for a particular individual. When shamanic qualities are recognized in a Khakas person, it is through the ritual animation of their drum that they officially assume their new role. The drums are round, with a diameter of at least seventy centimeters. The vertical birch handle is pierced with triangular holes from top to bottom, and it is through these holes that spirits are believed to enter the drum as the shaman summons them and then reemerge on the other side at the end of the shamanic seance. Bells, pendants, and ribbons hang from a metal rod that runs horizontally through the handle. The drumhead is made from an animal skin: a gelding, deer, or ibex. The drumstick (*orba*) is made from a deer antler, covered with fur, and adorned with ribbons.

Turning now to the black, red, and white figures that cover the outer surface of the drumskin, we will try to decipher the logic of their distribution. In the most common configuration, a horizontal band with a triangular zigzag running through it cuts across the circle of the drum just above its diameter (figure 64). If you compare the front and back of the drum, you see that this band is placed at the level of the metal cross-piece on the inside of the instrument, an internal part which is projected onto the outside of the drum following the X-ray principle discussed in the previous chapter (figure 63). Shamans explain that this band represents the superposed layers of the earth and the zigzags, mountains. The larger section of the drum—below the band—holds the terrestrial, aquatic, and subterranean regions, while the smaller section above corresponds to the celestial world. The latter is enclosed by a rainbow that runs along the upper rim of the drum and which also contains a zigzag. A host of birds, mammals, reptiles, trees, horsemen, archers, and stars populate these spaces; some of them occupy the same position on almost



Figure 63. Khakas Drum, inner and outer faces. MAE, no. 8761-8301. Left – Oppitz 2007: 19. Right – Kasten 2009: 157, fig. 1



Figure 64. Khakas Drum (Sagai). Ivanov 1955: 197, fig. 14.

every drum, while others are more mobile. We will familiarize ourselves with them one section at a time.

The top of the upper section is filled with celestial objects: the sun, the moon, the constellation Orion (called the “Three Does”), the evening star (*Ir Solbany*), the morning star (*Tan Solbany*), and Ursa Major (*Chedigen*). These stars are said to lie beneath the dwelling of Kudai, the celestial creator god, who is never himself depicted. Birds fly beneath them (two black eagles, a cuckoo, sometimes white birds), often placed

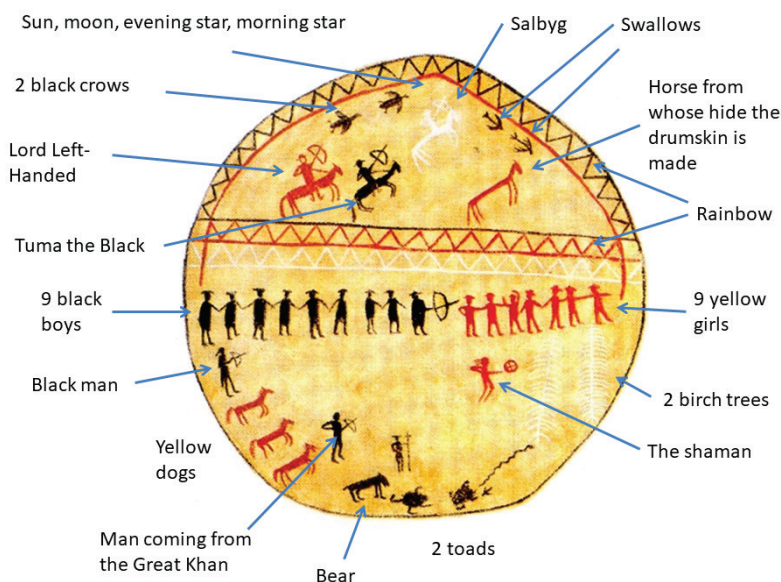


Figure 65. Khakas Drum (the identification of figures from the inventory of the Saint Petersburg Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography). MAE, no. 2390-1. Oppitz 2007.

on the sinister side of the drum, near the tops of one or two trees. As the shamans explain, these birds help them travel into the sky as well as treat eye diseases.

Several riders are seen in profile: often a white rider on a white horse on his way to the sky god, Kudai, and a red rider, armed with a bow, who rides a red horse: this is the spirit, Lord Left-Handed (*Han Solagai*). According to the chants that shamans address to him, he is the son of the Chinese Emperor and lives in the land of the Tuvans. Not far from these riders is a deer, ibex, or horse, the animal whose hide was used to create the drumskin. As we have seen, this is a particularly important figure: it signals that the soul (*chula*) of the animal is present in the drum and thus that the instrument itself is alive (Ivanov 1955: 202; Butanaev 2006: 97).

On the drum's lower section, we see a procession of various black figures: riders, horses, and some characters on foot, who are generally considered to be servants or envoys of Lord Erlik, master of the lower world, where the dead dwell. The fearsome Tuma the Black prances among them, rider-protector of Friesian horses. In chants he is

described as a “black Mongol” who rode in from his homeland with a black snake for a riding crop. He is called upon to protect livestock from disease (Katanov 2000: 371; Butanaev 2006: 60; Ivanov 1955: 204). A swarm of black animals occupies the very bottom of the drum: a bear, frogs, snakes, lizards, and fish. Amphibians and reptiles point the way, for the shaman, to Erlik, though they themselves answer to a spirit known as the “yellow master of sheep.” They are most often called upon to heal leg ailments and female pathologies, while pikes cure abdominal diseases and dropsy.

A few important figures can be placed on either the upper or lower section of the drum. The two birch trees, for example, might be placed above or below the dividing band, but almost always on the instrument’s sinister side. According to the shamans, these trees enable them to “climb up into the sky.” Another row of human characters can be seen holding hands: these are the “seven yellow girls of the mountain,” sometimes accompanied by “nine black boys.” Children of the master spirits of the mountains, they act as go-betweens in the shaman’s negotiations with their fathers. Finally, as we see elsewhere in the Altai-Sayan region, the shaman himself is often depicted among the other figures, armed with either a bow or his drum.

Perhaps surprising in this overview is the notable absence of the most important members of the Khakas “pantheon,” those to whom shamanic rituals are primarily dedicated; nowhere on the drums do we see the masters of the mountains, the celestial god Kudai, or the god of the lower world, Erlik. The beings we do see depicted are instead the servants and intermediaries of these powerful lords. They are the expert guides to the roads whose destinations, like their masters, are not represented on the drums; they are like markers encountered along various mental itineraries across the invisible. It would be wrong, then, to see the drum as a map of the world in a Euclidean sense: as an image of a territory from an aerial vantage point. It is more like a vector field, bringing together the starting points of several different trajectories. More than a map, the drum functions like a car’s GPS, which, rather than giving the driver an aerial view of the territory to be covered, provides them with the successive stages of a journey, one after the other. The drum similarly acts as a virtual guide, holding a repertory of potential itineraries in reserve. It thus encapsulates a mode of spatial cognition that is quite typical of nomadic traditions, one that is structured by routes and pathways as opposed to the territories and borders that organize the cartographic systems of sedentary cultures.



Figure 66. Kyshtym Tatar Drum, from the Manuscript of Daniel Messerschmidt, end of the eighteenth century. Ivanov 1979: 140, fig. 151.³

The general organization of figures as we have just described it is an old one: in figure 66, we see it in a more elementary form, in an eighteenth-century sketch of a Kyshtym Tatar drum. Because of its age and simplicity, this drum could be considered an *Urform* from which are derived not only the compositions of modern Khakas drums, but also those of neighboring Turkic Tatar peoples such as the Teleut and the Shor. The drums of all of these groups—which could be considered a “Tatar” type—are characterized by remarkably consistent vertical and horizontal polarizations. The top and bottom sectors of the drumhead oppose the celestial and the terrestrial, the dry and the wet, the light and the dark. A correspondence between this top–bottom partition of the drum and the human body is expressed through the illnesses that some of the figures are called on to treat: birds, depicted toward the upper edge of the instrument, treat the head; while the animals in the lower section specialize in the stomach and legs.

3. In his manuscript, Messerschmidt suggests that this drum belonged to the Kyshtym Tatar. It was incorrectly attributed to the Barabin Turks by Strahlenberg in 1730, as Ivanov has shown (1979: 143–45). Several authors, such as Lot-Falck and Diószegi (1973), and myself (Stépanoff 2013), have at one time accepted Strahlenberg’s false attribution. But it is in fact a drum belonging to the ancestors of the Khakas.

As one shaman recounted, during his drum's animation ritual he heard the spirit of Mount Kara-tag say to him: "You will heal people; heal pure illnesses with the protector of horses and impure illnesses with the protector of sheep, lizards and other helpers" (Potapov 1981: 133). "Pure" illnesses, which affect the upper part of the body, are therefore treated by the master spirits of horses, the riders represented on the middle and upper parts of the drum. On the other hand, "impure" illnesses, those of the lower part of the body, particularly gynecological diseases, fall to the master of sheep, who, as we have seen, is of a kind with the amphibians and reptiles on the lower part of the instrument. The correspondence between the vertical axis of the drum and that of the human body, established through the spatial organization of the landscape and its inhabitants, is thus quite clear.

But the figures on the drum are also carefully positioned along the horizontal axis. We have already observed the striking regularity with which, on most drums of the Turkic world, figures are turned toward the sinister side of the instrument. As I argued in the previous chapter, this recurrence can only be explained by considering the gestures and postures of the shaman in the ritual context: the animals and other characters are meant to move in the same direction as the shaman when he straddles his drum-mount (figure 69).

Another recurrent feature pertaining to the left-right organization of Khakas drums is that trees are generally located on the instrument's sinister side, an observation first made by Sergei Ivanov, though he was unable to explain it (Ivanov 1955: 215). They stand in diametrical opposition to the horsemen who occupy the dexter section and move toward the center. This opposition appears with remarkable stability at least as early as the eighteenth century, as we see in the Kyshtym drum (figure 66), and is still represented in modern Teleut and South Altaian drums. Though it has been a common feature of Tatar drums for several centuries, unfortunately no ethnologist has ever asked a shaman about this particular aspect of the instruments' spatial arrangement. But once again, things become clearer if we look at the figures not as paintings, but as the surface of a three-dimensional object associated with certain techniques of the body.

The shaman holds the birch-wood handle of the drum in his left hand; it is crafted from the wood of the same tree that is depicted on the sinister edge of the instrument. That this drawing represents the very birch tree from whose wood the handle is crafted is something that Altaian shamans have stated very clearly (Anohin 1924: 56).

The officiant wields his drumstick, which is referred to as a “crop” (*hymchy*), in his right hand, fittingly so in fact, as it is in this hand that Turko-Mongol horsemen always hold their riding crop. The shaman’s right arm is thus associated with the rhythm of horseback riding, while the connotations of his relatively immobile left arm are closer to stability and birch wood. This division of labor between the left and right hands is ubiquitous in the Turko-Mongol shamanism of Siberia, which explains the consistency of this pattern in so many populations over multiple centuries: riders on the dexter side of the drum and trees on the sinister.

As is the case elsewhere in Siberia, Khakas shamans begin the ritual by gently beating the drum in a seated position, facing the fire with their heads resting inside the frame of the instrument (figures 67 and 68). As the shaman begins to perceive the auxiliary spirits presenting themselves, he beats the drum harder, sings louder, and eventually stands up, which marks the beginning of the “journey” (*chörerger*) he and his auxiliaries embark on to the nearby mountains, the sky, or the lower world, as the case may be. Let us put ourselves in his place: when his head is inside the drum, he sees the drawings backlit by the fire (figure 45) and with his face thus hidden behind the drumskin, he cuts himself off from ordinary sensory experience to ostensibly enter a new field of perceptions and relations. He allows the drawings and the beating of the drum—whose skin resonates powerfully next to his ears—to overwhelm his senses of sound and vision. He thus sees the silhouettes of the birch trees to his left and the riders to his right. For both the officiant and his audience, the sinister part of the painted drumskin is clearly associated with his left arm and the dexter with his right.

The arrangement of the figures along the sinister–dexter axis is structured by two sets of evocations, then, which align with the two positions in which the shaman holds the drum, as illustrated in figure 59. This arrangement is linked to the lateral axis of the shaman’s body through a relationship of projection. The association of the drum with the shaman’s body is made particularly clear by the Khakas’s Altaian neighbors, who, as we have seen in the two previous chapters, organize the paintings on their instruments around a central anthropomorphic figure representing the shaman’s ancestor. The superposition of the shaman’s body on the face of the drum is also clearly illustrated on the Oglahy petroglyph from the Khakas region, on which the metal cross-piece of the drum stands in for the shaman’s arms; here as well, a tree is depicted on his left-hand



Figure 67. A Khakas Shaman (Kachin). The right side of the shaman moves, while the left side is still. MAE no. 257-29, photo by P. E. Ostrovskih 1984.



Figure 68. A Khakas Shaman Facing the Fire. Norwegian National Library, NBR-OEO: 00041, photo by Ø. M. Olsen 1914.



Figure 69. A Khakas Shaman Straddling His Drum, early twentieth century. MAE no. 2410-78, photo. By S. D. Mainagashev.

side—unsurprisingly, for reasons we have discussed (figure 70). In the course of a ritual, this body-drum projection is seen when the instrument is held parallel to the line of the shaman's shoulders, and thus when the shaman is striking the drumhead softly.

But the orientation of each individual figure toward the sinister side of the drum aligns with another major position in which the shaman holds the instrument: when he straddles it like a riding animal, or put more simply, when the instrument is perpendicular to the axis of the shoulders and the officiant is able to beat harder and faster. In this position, the drum is then no longer the shaman's double, but his horse-companion, and from this vantage point the sinister part of the instrument aligns with the front of shaman's body and the dexter part with his rear. These two modes of relation between the shaman's body and his instrument—parallel identification and perpendicular complementarity—are not in contradiction, but rather correspond to the two polarized positions between which the shaman moves back and forth over the course of the ritual as he alternates between moments of rest and activity.



Figure 70. Oglahy Petroglyph, Khakassia, fourteenth–sixteenth century. The figure is wearing the cap typically worn by Khakas shamans. The metal cross-piece, with its dangling pendants, fuses with the figure's arms. As usual, the tree is placed along the shaman's left arm. Kyzlasov and Leont'ev 1980: 144.

The Spirits in the Yurt

In addition to the deep connections between the drum and the shaman's body, another series of correspondences can be drawn between the arrangement of spirits depicted on the drum and the organization of the Khakas yurt, where many of the same entities are represented. In fact, shamans often refer to the organization of the yurt when explaining the various figures on their instruments. In one such commentary, for example, a shaman named Petrov identifies a character on the lowest part of his drum as the "master of water," and goes on to explain that the heads of families honor this entity by placing a dish of hot lamb meat near the door of their yurts, "so that its steam wafts towards the master of water." Indeed, as you enter the yurt, water is always kept to the right-hand side of the door. Petrov also explained that the seven stars on the upper part of his drum are evoked by shamans in the chant addressed to the *kök yzyk*, an amulet installed away from the door, in the south or southwestern part of the yurt. Two other shamans, interviewed fifty years apart from one another, refer to the bear at the bottom of their drums as the "guardian of the yurt's entrance" (Katanov 1907, vol. 1: 565; Potapov 1981: 135).



Figure 71. The Female Side of a Sagai Yurt. Minusinsk Regional Museum, photo by N. V. Fedorov, 1912.

Are these associations between the figures on drums and the space of the yurt fortuitous, or are they indicative of a general correspondence? If this correspondence is a systematic one, it would mean that the drum is coordinated both with the body of the shaman and the space that surrounds him, which might shed light on its function as an instrument of “orientation,” as the shamans emphasize.

Indeed, the yurt and the drum are both circles with a fixed spatial orientation. For the nomadic peoples of northern Asia, regularly changing the concrete site they inhabit has nothing to do with the type of wanderlust and spatial instability that sedentary peoples imagine it does. Far from it. There are abstract principles that govern the orientation and organization of domestic space, and these are applied with consistency and rigor in whatever concrete location they may be. That the Khakas retained the traditional spatial layout of their homes when, over the course of the nineteenth century, they abandoned their felt yurts for polygonal wooden structures is a testament to the enduring force of these principles.

The yurt is a highly polarized space; it is divided into four main zones in which each object and activity has its designated place (figure 72). As is typical of Turkic people’s homes, the doorway opens onto the east—*isker* in Khakas, meaning “in front.” The fireplace occupies the center of

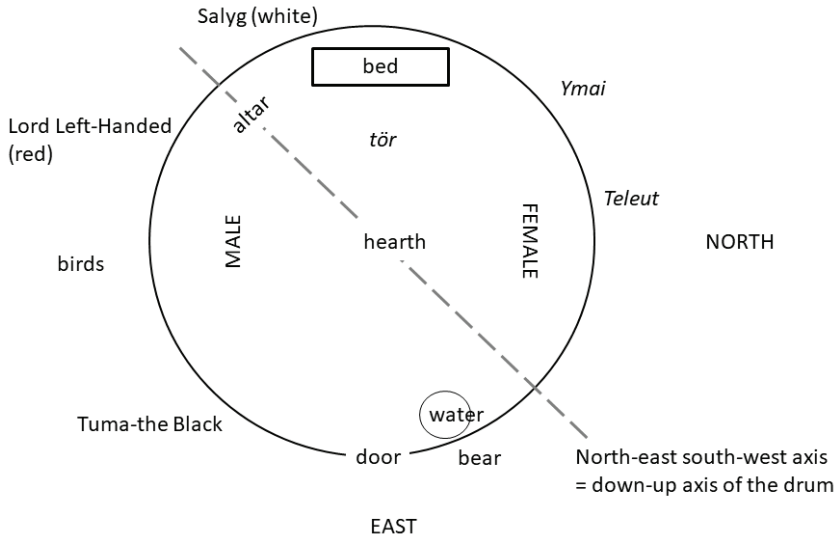


Figure 72. Positions of the Spirits in the Yurt. The northeast to southwest axis corresponds to the top-bottom axis of the drum. The names of spirits represented in the yurt but not on the drum are italicized.

the yurt, with a smoke hole above it, in the roof. On the other side of the fire, opposite the door, is the honorable section of the yurt, *tör*, where the masters' bed is laid out. This is where elders and important guests sit, in principle with the light of the rising sun upon them, and it is from the vantage of these people that the values attributed to the other parts of the interior space are determined. To their right lies the pure, masculine side of the yurt: *üstünzaryh* in Khakas, the "high side" (*üstü sary*), a term that also designates the south. Opposite, to their left, is the feminine and impure side, the *altynzaryh*, literally the "low side" (*alty sary*), a term that also designates the north. Along the southern walls rest the tools used in masculine activities: rifles to the southwest and horse harnesses to the southeast, near the door. Along the northern walls are the implements used by women: shelves of crockery and kitchen utensils (figure 71). If the south is "high" and the north is "low," as was the case for the Ket, this is due to the geography of the Khakas landscape, which, like that of the Ket, is drained by the Yenisei as it flows down from the Tuva steppes in the south and toward the Arctic.

The door and the honorable corner (*tör*) are also polarized by a second, subtler vertical opposition. While the south-north opposition

is expressed very clearly in the Khakas language with the contrast *üstü-alty*—which designates a distinct, superposed top and bottom—the west–east opposition is expressed by a pair of semantically close terms: *chogar* and *töbin*, which respectively refer to a top and bottom that are not stacked one on top of the other, but spread along the slope of a mountain or river (Radlov 1893–1911, vol. 3: 410; Anzhiganova 2006: 982). As the honorable part, *tör*, is to the west of the door, it is “higher” (*chogar*) than the latter. The *tör* is sometimes called the “front of the fire” (*ot pazy*), while the doorway is the “rear of the fire” (*ot soo*).⁴ For the Altai, this opposition is expressed with the terms “head of the fire” (*ottyn bazhy*) and “legs of the fire” (*ottyn budy*). In both the Altaian and Tuvan contexts, when an overly modest guest remains near the door, his hosts call out “Sit higher” (Örü *oturur*), inviting him to take a place in the *tör* (Tadina 2006).

As a result, the contrast that separates the northeast quarter, which is doubly inferior, from the southwest quarter, which is doubly superior, is a radical one.⁵ The domestic altar, called the “place of the celestial god, Kudai,” is installed in the southwestern section. Here the Khakas hang sacred objects: orthodox icons and, when a shaman is present, the drum. In the opposite, northeastern corner are buckets of water and dairy products. Like the drum, then, the yurt is divided by an opposition between the celestial high and the aquatic low.

The layout of the yurt is closely tied to the structure of the world. It is a microcosmic representation of the macrocosm, which at the same time offers a human-scale model for understanding the cosmos itself: for example, the Khakas describe the sky as the domed ceiling of a yurt, with the North Star as its smoke hole. The spatial order of the yurt is further enriched by the complex associations bound up with the amulets on its walls, which represent the spirit-protectors of humans and livestock. Each individual amulet is placed in a precise location, receives specific offerings, and is understood to provide particular kinds of care or protection (Adrianov 1909; Butanaev 2003; Katanov 1907; L'vova et al. 1988: 58). The northern walls are home to the spirits associated with women, “evil spirits” according to the men, who look on them with suspicion: there is the “Teleut woman spirit” (*tileg-tös*), for example, who addresses

4. Personal communication with the Khakas anthropologist, Viktor Butanaev, September 30, 2011.

5. Cf. the polarization of the Mongol yurt, which is instead oriented toward the south (Hamayon 1979).

diseases that affect cow udders and stomach aches, and there is the bear located to the northeast (Iakovlev 1900: 107; Katanov 1907, vol. 1: 425). Not all of these amulets have counterparts on the drum: Mother Ymai, for instance, protector of women and children, is located in the north-western section of the house, on the feminine side of the honorable corner. She is, however, related to one constant feature of Khakas drums: the birch trees situated on the instrument's sinister side. As one shaman explained: "When we were born of our father Ülgen [creator god, equivalent to Kudai], these two birch trees were sent to the Earth with Mother Ymai" (Katanov 1907: 565). On the other side of the yurt, the southern walls are home to the spirits of the horsemen, Tuma the Black and Lord Left-Handed, whom we have already encountered on the surface of the drum. They are placed in the southern half of the yurt because it is from this direction that they are understood to have come, across the steppes of Tuva and Mongolia. The "Teleut woman spirit," also known as the "northern spirit" (*altynzary tös*), sits across from them on the northern wall, along with the "Tungus spirit" (*toŋaza tös*), who is responsible for the north winds. Their position in the Khakas yurt also conforms to the relative geographical locations of the populations they are associated with: the Teleut are located to the northwest of the Khakas territory and the Tungus inhabit the entire northern part of the Siberian taiga. Several other representatives of the taiga—bears, foxes, and polecats—can also be found along the northern wall of the yurt. In short, the entire geography of the Khakas territory and its surroundings are on display in the home. Unlike the domestic spaces of modern societies, in which the spheres of the domestic and the wild are thoroughly insulated from one another, the yurt is not a globe closed-in on itself; to the contrary, with its amulets it is a space shot through with points of departure into the surrounding forests and steppes.

Turning now to the specific uses of the amulets, we find that spirits represented in the northeastern section of the yurt are called on to treat illnesses affecting the lower parts of the body, while those in the south-western section correspond to the upper body. In conjunction with the yurt's eastern orientation, the series of amulets creates a set of implicit correspondences between the layout of the dwelling, the human body, the surrounding landscape, and another, more expansive geography: a network of entwined references that makes the obvious parallel between the yurt and the drum difficult to dispute. Let us now attempt to superpose the two cosmic circles to see if we cannot discover their common organizational principles.

The primary opposition structuring the circle of spirits around the yurt is that between the altar of celestial Kudai in the southwestern corner and the bear spirit in the northeast, near the water bucket. To be clear, the bear is located on the female (north) side of the door. Because it hibernates in a den, the plantigrade mammal is often associated with the lower world, darkness, and femininity in hierarchical traditions. In the Khakas yurt, the animal is represented by a stick covered in bear fur and adorned with a bronze ring, which is likely meant to evoke the entrance to its den and the points of communication between the different worlds that the bear is thought to watch over: namely the door and the lower orifices of the body. Fed by an old woman, the bear is invoked to fight diarrhea and venereal diseases.

The figures located in the lower section of the drum, such as Tuma the Black and the serpent, are found in the eastern, northeastern, and northern parts of the yurt. The “three black men,” also represented on the instrument’s lower portion, are known as “intermediaries” of the Teleut woman spirit, who is again housed in the yurt’s northern section (Katanov 1907, vol. 1: 598, 611).

The upper section of the instrument thus corresponds to the western, southwestern, and southern regions of the yurt. The stars on the drum, located “below the house of Kudai,” obviously have their equivalent in the yurt with Kudai’s altar. The birds (*hus tös*), which on the drum are painted just below the stars, can be found in the southern part of the yurt; they are called on to treat the head, eyes, ears, and teeth (figure 73). The white or red horsemen, like Lord Left-Handed, who ride across the upper section of the instrument, can be found in the yurt’s southern and western sections. The white rider Salbyg, seen at the very top of the drum shown in figure 65, belongs in the western section of the yurt, between the bed and the altar (Adrianov 1909: 524; Ivanov 1955: 204). In short, it seems clear from superimposing the two circles that the top–bottom axis of the drum is equivalent to the southwest–northeast axis of the yurt, both axes sharing a common set of oppositions: celestial–subterranean, dry–wet, light–dark. This is not surprising given that, when it is not in use, the drum hangs in the southwestern part of the home; it is as they are seen from this vantage point that the spirits of the yurt appear to be projected onto the instrument.

What, then, of the drum’s left–right axis and the opposition of the rider and birch tree? The cast of steppe riders concentrated on the dexter side of the drum is gathered in the southern half of the yurt. The birch trees on the sinister side of the drum are linked to the goddess Ymai,



Figure 73. Khakas Cuckoo Spirit. MQB no. 71.1 943,27.429.

who sits in the northwestern corner. A number of further references to the forest world, both animal and human, congregate along the yurt's northern wall: the fox, the polecat, as well as the Tungusic spirit. It would seem, then, that the rider–birch opposition on the drum is converted into a contrast between domestic and wild animals along the yurt's south–north axis, and thus by extension, a further contrast between the steppe and the taiga. The dexter part of the drum thus corresponds to the southern part of the yurt, and the sinister part to the north.

The Ritual and Its Frames of Reference

If the yurt and the drum share so many corresponding features, it is because these two circular surfaces are organized according to common spatial schemas, which align them with a landscape that is at once visible and invisible. So much so, in fact, that it is possible to read the drum as a kind of graphic model of the yurt and what goes on inside it. A shaman can be seen dancing, for example, near the center of the Khakas instrument shown in figure 65: on his left, he is accompanied by seven red figures known as “the yellow girls,” and on his right by nine black figures known as “the black boys.”⁶ The collective dances performed during shamanic rituals closely resembled the configuration of characters depicted

6. Description from inventory no. 2390-1, Saint Petersburg Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography.

here. The shaman would sometimes ask nine boys to stand in the male side of the yurt, and seven girls in the female side, and they would all dance together. In his chant, the shaman would refer to the “yellow girls” and the “black boys” with the same terms used to describe the figures on the drum, children of the master of the mountain (Gmelin [1751–1752] 1767: 336–37; Butanaev 2006: 195). The children are not meant to embody these spirits, but simply to help the shaman represent the action he is performing in virtual space. The drum in figure 65 is in this sense a realistic model of this ritual staging, one that further corroborates the correspondence between the dexter–sinister opposition on the drum and the male and female sides of the yurt.

The matter can be further elucidated with a closer examination of a ritual performed at the beginning of the twentieth century by a Khakas shaman called Pituk. Drawing on ethnologist Viktor Butanaev’s description, it is possible to identify a series of *frames of reference* in the immediate surroundings of the ritual performance that correspond with the various entities the shaman invokes.⁷ Pituk performed the ritual in the yurt of a sick man in his care, with the patient surrounded by family. His diagnosis was that the man had lost his soul (*but*) and that a pathogenic spirit (*aina*) had taken advantage of the situation to inhabit his body. The objective of the healing procedure was therefore to recover the patient’s soul and drive out the evil spirit.

To begin with, the shaman stands by the door and starts to invoke his auxiliaries:

Spirits of my father-khan,
Messengers of my mother-khan,
My people who shook my shoulders and neck,

You make me jump till I split my soles,
You make me scream till my voice breaks.
My *odzhan* [spirits] holding the drumstick,
Wrap yourselves around my right hand.
My *tüben* [spirits] holding the drum,
Surround my left hand.

In this classic example of an introductory passage, the shaman calls upon his spirits in generic terms; he acknowledges that he has inherited

7. A description of this ritual can be found in Butanaev 2006: 196–207.



Figure 74. Ritual in a Khakas Yurt: the shaman faces the door in the eastern part of the yurt, 1914. Norwegian National Library, NBR-OEO: 00042, photo by Ø. M. Olsen, 1914.

these spirits from his ancestors, and recalls the suffering he has endured in the process. The line “My people who shook my shoulders and neck” is an almost word-for-word match for one we heard from a contemporary Tuvan shaman in the previous chapter (cf. above p. 216). As we observed in the former case, the phrase simultaneously evokes the adolescent shamanic crisis and the present movements of the officiant as he sings and dances. The invocation continues with a description of the ritual costume:

The strips of my costume
Are twisted like reeds;
Fifty bells on my armored costume,
You sing like birds.

The shaman then begins a more precise invocation of individual spirits:

My serpents like whistling arrows,
Like arrows, are shot.
My coarse frogs,
Flying in the yellow light,
My frogs with splayed fingers,
My bears with twisted paws.

The animals mentioned in this passage—snakes, frogs, and bears—are all found in the lowest stratum of the ecosystem. They are also associated with three frames of reference that are in the immediate vicinity of the ritual stage. Snakes, for example, are represented at the bottom of the costume in the form of strips of fabric. But snakes and bears are also represented by the amulets placed near the door of the yurt, where the shaman stands when he utters these words. Finally, all three of these species are usually painted on the bottom part of the drum-skin. The chant thus progresses from a direct description of the costume (“the strips of my costume”) to a possible reference to the drawings on the drum and the amulets on the walls of the yurt, thus mobilizing three different frames of reference belonging to the immediate surroundings. He continues:

My Teleut spirit, soul of the herd,
Brown bear, watching through a ring,
My bird spirits, soul of man;
At the head of the head furniture [*pas paraan*],
Soul of the small child’s head,
Great mother Ymai,
From the white shells, the bronze button,
You spin threads of red silk.

Now the chant unambiguously refers to the space of the yurt. The Teleut spirit, who is not featured on the shaman’s costume or drum, has her amulet in the northern part of the domestic space. The bear referred to in the second line is, in this instance, clearly the bear of the yurt, given that the “ring” evoked in this passage is one of the elements of this animal’s amulet. The bear thus appears twice: once in the referential frame of the drum, next to the snakes and frogs, and then in its amulet form on the walls of the yurt. Next, the description of the goddess Ymai refers to

the “head of the head furniture,” or in other words, the area surrounding the place of honor (*tör*). The chant goes on:

Created by the Chinese khan,
From the famous Tuva,
Down from Mount Sabyna,
You, whose arrows never fall short,
You shoot without missing, Lord Left-Handed.

From black Mongolia,
Tied to the steel stake at the center of the earth,
Tuma the Black with a face blacker than earth.
Roots of black earth,
Stars of the great sky,
Open the road as you ascend.

Here the shaman names the riders located, as we know, on the dexter side of the drum and in the southern section of the yurt. The last three lines evoke an upward movement, from the black earth to the sky. As he pronounces these words, the shaman moves away from the door and advances toward the place of honor, crossing the yurt from east to west.

Now facing the hearth as he stands in the honorable corner of the yurt, he praises the mother spirit of fire and then sings out: “May the Three Does [Orion] bring happiness!” The audience responds: “Yes, let it be so. May the Skies bring it to us. May they not break the soul!” The key referential space for this exchange of prayers is the sky (*Kudai*), represented in the yurt by the sky altar, before which the shaman now stands, and on the uppermost section of drum, where the Three Does—the stars of Orion’s belt—are often depicted.

The itinerary described in the shaman’s chant therefore follows an associative pathway across the yurt’s main axis of opposition, passing from the lowest beings (such as the bear) in the “low” (northern) part of the dwelling to the highest being of the home’s “low” side, Ymai, before evoking the riders belonging to the “high” (southern) part of the yurt and eventually reaching the celestial entities, the most eminent occupants of the space’s “high” section. The ascension described in the shaman’s chant corresponds to his physical movement from the door to the honorable corner.

The shaman then circles the fire three times, indicating a change of scene. The participants offer libations while the officiant begins to invoke



Figure 75. Shaman Standing in the Honorable Section of the Yurt, in front of the altar and facing the fire in the southwest corner of the space. Norwegian National Library, NBR-OEO: 00040, photo by Ø. M. Olsen, 1914.

the spirits of the surrounding mountains. It is from them that the shaman retrieves the patient's soul and with this accomplished, he makes the gesture of storing it within his drum. He then brings the patient with him to the door and utters these words:

Now you're a frog, leap!
Now you're a snake, slither!
Stop being a demon [*aina*] who will not detach itself and never leaves,
Stop being an ever-bothersome devil [*irlik*],
Down low [*töbin*] with the demon's head,
Raise up high [*chogar*] the lunar human's head,
Down low [*töbin*] with the invisible ones,
Raise up high [*chogar*] the solar humans.⁸

8. In shamanic chants, humans are qualified as either solar or lunar, as opposed to the inhabitants of the lower world, who have neither sun nor moon.

The frog and snake of this passage clearly refer to the door of the yurt, where the shaman and patient now stand, but also to the bottom of the drum where these animals are depicted. In the first lines, the addressee of these words is ambiguous; it is at once the patient and the pathogenic demon lodged within him. The two entities are then commanded to separate from one another, as the officiant commands the demon to return to the lower world (*töbin*) that it should never have left (“Down low with the demon’s head”). He must also bring the patient back up (*chogar*) to the middle world (“Raise up high the human head”).

The chant then moves on to an invocation of the stars, the celestial entities that are diametrically opposed to the preceding bear and serpent. This new leap from the lowest point to the highest is followed by a descent back through the yurt’s amulets. The shaman names Ymai, “at the head of the head furniture,” then the intermediary spirits—the “Teleut woman spirit to the north” and opposite her, the “bird spirit to the south”—and then ends up back down near the door, with the bear and its “old ring.”

After this verbal back-and-forth between the lowest and the highest points of the yurt comes the decisive, final action of the soul’s (*but*) restitution. The shaman carries out this transfer by “pouring” the soul into a serving of milk and then giving it to the patient to drink. With an invocation of the celestial creator spirits, the officiant then takes the patient on the same journey from the door to the altar that he himself performed at the start of the ritual, leading him from the dark depths of the bear in the northeast to the celestial light of the altar in the southwest. The formula “Raise up high the human head” (*chogar*) simultaneously resonates with the structure of cosmic space and that of the yurt. As was previously mentioned, *chogar*, or “up,” can also mean west, and the term *üstü* is both “up” and “south,” so the ascending aspect of the movement toward the altar in the southwestern part of the yurt is doubly emphasized. We see then that the vertical terminology of the shamanic journey is directly bound up with the terminology and references associated with the different parts of the domestic space.

Pituk’s healing technique is based on the creation of a complex space that encompasses an abundance of potential evocations and provides the framework for a series of movements that realign a disrupted cosmic topology. The patient’s few steps from the door to the altar are perceived as a cosmic movement, an ascent from the lower world to the middle, human world. Meanwhile the pathogenic presences that had settled in his body are left somewhere near the bear, whose job is it to keep them in their place.

A shamanic ritual is an apparatus for producing a state of co-presence between the shaman, his patients, and invisible spirits (Hanks 2009). The Khakas “shamanic journey” proceeds by gradually enriching the visible space in which the audience is situated in order to create a modified spatial framework. A virtual space emerges in the first stages of the ritual as the shaman, in his chant, refers to a number of spirits associated with distant landscapes that are beyond the frame of the audience’s immediate surroundings—the Mongolian steppe, the sky, the lower world; a spatial frame of reference thus emerges that is distinct from the here and now. These entities are represented in the immediate vicinity of the ritual stage by indexical projections onto the surfaces of the various frames of reference at hand: the shamanic costume, the drum, the walls of the yurt. These points of connection are activated over the course of the chant as it moves between the different frames of reference and entwines them in ambiguous relations of identification and projection.

Examining the drum’s relationship to the Khakas yurt provides us with a better understanding of how the designs on the skin of the instrument help shamans “find their way.” With the virtual space of the cosmos, the layout of the house, and the shamanic body entwined with one another on the spatial schema of the drum in his hands, the officiant can easily use the movements of his body around the space of the yurt to situate himself anywhere in the universe. Using his proprioception, the sensations transmitted by his right and left hands, the shaman is able to derive an array of asymmetries between left and right, stability and movement, trees and riders, taiga and steppe, as well as the various pathways and trajectories they evoke. The shaman must therefore memorize his drawings not just visually, but also synesthetically, coupling them with the perception of his motor functions. The findings of neuroscientific research concerning the activity of motor areas of the brain during imagined actions has given us a better understanding of how this is possible. It is clear, then, that shamanic designs are much less an expressive outlet for local beliefs than they are a subtle and effective technology for transmitting and stabilizing models for a sensorimotor coordination of the body in a hybridized space, one that embeds the cosmic order within the structures of everyday life.

CHAPTER 8

The Costume: A Body-World

Anthropologists have often understood the costumes worn by Siberian hierarchical shamans for their great cosmic expeditions—clanking, clattering, and abounding in shimmering colors and spinning shapes—in the same way as they have their drums: as objects that represent various doctrines and ideas. The costume has thus been seen as a kind of catechism for peoples without writing. The thesis expounded in this chapter is rather that the costume should be understood as one of the technologies of the imagination that are central to hierarchical shamanism: what matters most is not so much what the costume *represents* as what it allows one *to do and experience in the invisible*. Like the drum, it is an instrument of mental coordination; but it is one that is directly centered on the body of the shaman who wears it.

The Emblem of Hierarchy

The ritual costume is the most obvious distinguishing feature of hierarchical shamanism; unlike the drum, it does not feature in heterarchical traditions. As one ethnologist quite aptly observes of the Chukchi and Yupik, “the lack of a separate category of professional shaman is consistent with the lack of a shamanistic costume” (Serov 1988: 246). Although the drum is closely associated with the person of the shaman, in some hierarchical traditions ordinary people attending the ritual are occasionally

allowed to use it. This is not the case with the costume, however: nowhere is a non-shaman permitted to don a shaman's costume.¹ These restrictions are particularly strict in southern Siberia. For the Khakas, non-shamans, and especially women, are forbidden to touch or even look at the costume, on pain of falling ill.² Even today in urban Tuvan shamanism, the costume is stored in the shaman's consulting room and no non-shaman ever touches it. As Sergei Shirokogoroff writes, "The costume is a placing for the shaman's spirits, so that when he or she puts it on, the spirit will come into the shaman almost without fail. The costume must therefore not be put on by people who cannot master the spirits" (Shirokogoroff 1935: 302).

Unlike the drum, the costume is closely associated with the particular qualities of the body for which it is tailored, as well as for the role that this body performs. As we will see further on in this chapter, one of the costume's functions is to make visible the exceptional character of the shamanic body, which is profoundly different from that of an ordinary person.

And yet, the costume is more than a simple marker of the shaman's social prestige, like that of a judge or a barrister; it is an instrument, a weapon, even a companion. If we compare it to the equipment worn by military personnel, it has more to do with weaponry than it does the *kepi* or *beret*. Just as soldiers only carry their heaviest weapons in particular circumstances—when a given mission calls for it—shamans only don their cloaks and headdresses for complex operations that require them, their cosmic journeys above all.³ Some specialists renowned for their powers wear different costumes for different kinds of intervention. Tuvan shamans, for example, might first acquire a red costume, then a black one that enables them to take the "black road" leading to the lower world. The Nganasan great shamans had one costume for traveling in

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1. Though certain parts of the costume, such as the headdress or the belt hung with bells, can be worn by non-shamans in the Udeghe tradition.
 2. On the Khakas, see Butanaev 2006: 83; on the Tuvans, see D'iakonova 1981b: 138–39.
 3. On the Altaians, see Anohin 1924: 331; on the Nenets, the Enets, and the Nganasan, see Homich 1981: 14; Prokof'eva 1971: 13. Yakut shamans only wear their costumes for ritual actions consisting of invocations and prayers, such as those that take place during the great collective festival, *Ysyiah*, or during rituals dedicated to entities related to the Earth-Mother (Prokof'eva 1971).

the upper world, another for the lower world, and a third for the middle world, each one including a cloak, an apron, a headdress, a pair of boots, and gloves.⁴

As Waldemar Jochelson recalls, “The shaman tied all the straps on his coat, apron and foot-wear like a man preparing for a long journey” (Jochelson 1926: 206). When the shaman puts on his equipment, he looks something like an astronaut fastening himself into his spacesuit before setting off into space.

What is it that makes the costume a necessary part of these journeys into the invisible? We should bear in mind that a journey like this is a very specific kind of mental operation that involves performing actions whose logical framework is a faraway, virtual space. As the shaman Boronak Ereksen explained to me, “There are important things that can’t be done without a costume. It offers a lot of protection and it brings us strength. Without it, we can’t understand much at all [*bildinmes*].” This last point is somewhat surprising considering the chaotic impression the costume generally makes at first sight. How is it that this eclectic hodge-podge of equipment can help us “understand” anything?

The Imagery Window

As we have seen, Nganasan shamans go through a mental journey during their initial crises, in the course of which they receive a new body and a new pair of eyes that allow them to see what ordinary eyes cannot. The implanted shamanic eyes were represented on some ceremonial headdresses by copper rings adorned with beads. These rings were called the shaman’s “shadow eyes” or “eyes of the soul” (Popov 1984; Simchenko 1996, I: 153). At the other end of the Yenisei territory 2,500 kilometers south of the Nganasan, the headdresses worn by Tuvan shamans were also decorated with a pair of eyes, here represented by beads, buttons, or embroidery. One Tuvan shaman told me that the eyes on his headdress help him “to see what others don’t.” Even further south, eyes adorn the headdresses of Darhad and Duha shamans in Mongolia (Badamxatan 1986: 161; Badamxatan 1987: 121). And three thousand kilometers to

4. On the Tuvans, see D’iakonova 1981b: 138–39; on the Nganasan, see Prokof’eva 1971: 15. Some Selkup and Evenki shamans wear reindeer-skin costumes to travel in the upper world and bearskin to travel to the lower world (Vasilevich 1969: 238; Prokof’eva 1949: 363).

the east, on the Pacific coast, Udeghe shamans also wear headdresses adorned with eyes that enable them to “see what ordinary people do not see” (Ivanov 1954: 359).

The eastern Nenets covered their shaman’s face with a piece of cloth that also had images of eyes on it. As Ekaterina Prokofiev writes, this veil hides the shaman’s eyes “because it is not with the eyes of the body that they enter the spirit world” (Prokof’eva 1971: 11).⁵

When the shaman’s vision is not obscured by a veil, his eyes are covered by a fringe of leather, cloth, or fur strips that hang down from the headdress, a device common to a large number of peoples with hierarchical traditions: the Nganasan, the Evenki, the Even, the Khakas, the Tuvans, the Altai, the Mongols, the Nanai, and the Udeghe (Badamxatan 1986; Ivanov 1954). Rather than making such fringes from various fabrics, some Yakut shamans, who would typically wear their hair long, would use it to cover their face when performing rituals (Jochelson 1926: 184).

What makes these cloaking devices so indispensable? From the audience’s point of view, the fringe puts a kind of parentheses around the specialist’s face for the duration of the ritual, though without totally concealing it as a mask would. Tuvan and Nganasan headdresses overlay a second face on top of the first, blurring but not erasing it (Stépanoff 2014a). From the shaman’s point of view, it filters and attenuates ocular visual perceptions, without eliminating them altogether. Of course, on the ritual stage of the yurt, the shaman is frequently standing up, moving around the fire, and dancing; falling is often considered a very unfortunate sign and should be avoided. It is therefore essential that he can, from time to time, look around and find his bearings in the immediate surroundings. And the fringe has precisely this advantage: it opens up the field of vision when there is movement and closes during moments of immobility, when the shaman can totally immerse himself in mental imagery without risk of injury. The fringe can thus be lowered or swept aside during the ritual, according to the shaman’s needs. When “traveling” among the spirits, the Nganasan shaman pulls his fringe over his eyes; but he pushes it back when he returns to the human world (Hristoforova 2003). It thus allows him to let in visual perceptions or

5. Enets shamans also possessed eye bands on which two eyes are represented: these are the “eyes of the soul” of the shaman, with which he “see[s] the road to the other world, where the shaman often goes to save stolen souls, to enter in the struggle with evil spirits” (Prokofyeva 1963: 140).



Figure 76. Nganasan Shaman, Tubiaku Kosterkin, 1989. Photo by H. Relve.

eclipse them at will, either to stimulate or mute the production of mental imagery. In short, the fringe acts as a window that can be opened or shut to the flow of non-sensory perceptions.

The fringe, then, is a key feature of the ritual apparatus of hierarchical shamanism. It gives the shaman privileged access to mental imagery. Only the officiant wears a fringe, which mutes his visual perceptions like a kind of personal dark tent; nothing at all, on the other hand, is provided to help non-shamans develop mental images. That said, the shaman's vision is not entirely suppressed, as is the case in the dark-tent ritual—the function of which was to entirely replace visual perceptions with

mental imagery purely and simply. The point of the fringe, on the other hand, is to provide a point of *articulation* between visual perception and mental imagery, and, by extension, between immediate and virtual space.

“A World-Conquering Time-Machine”

Like the drum, the costume crosses categorical boundaries; it is a polysemic and complex object by nature, so reducing it to a single, original meaning would be to obliterate its inherent complexity. The Nganasan costume, for example, represents the shaman's body through his eyes and skeleton; but it also incorporates reindeer body-parts such as hooves, antlers, and the animal's penis, as well as cosmic images such as the sun and moon, and numerous representations of anthropo- and zoomorphic spirits: reindeer, swans, crows, cranes, bullfinches (Lambert 2002–2003: 245; Popov 1984). The costumes of Orochon Evenki shamans from the Amur region are similarly structured around the shaman's skeleton, to which are appended various images of stars and animals, including the fearsome Siberian tiger. Why display the shaman's skeleton in this way? As the ethnologist Anatolii Mazin reminds us, the shaman's skeleton “is essentially different from the skeleton of an ordinary person” (Mazin 1984: 73). As we saw in Part One, bones are often thought to carry the particular essence that sets the hierarchical shaman apart from birth. The image of the skeleton thus displays this usually invisible essence of the shamanic body to the outside world, turning the costume itself into a kind of exoskeleton. The costume is not a new, magical body that the shaman receives from the spirits and behind which he disappears as if behind a mask or disguise. Rather the costume would seem to result from an outward projection of certain elements of the shaman's own body. The costume thus reflects the same principle of projection (the X-ray style) according to which the internal metal structure of the drum was painted onto the instrument's skin. As with the drum, the metal parts of a costume are typically recovered from that of a deceased shaman and sewn onto the accoutrements of his successor. The metal skeleton thus clearly represents the idea of an essence that is both hereditary and individualized, reborn in a similar, renewed form with each generation.

The costume also advertises another distinguishing aspect of the shaman's body: its openness, a body from which the soul can easily escape in order to roam the invisible. Around the edges of the costume, there are often fringes made up of multiple strips of cloth and covered with

long ribbons and straps. These bands, which can sometimes number in the hundreds, are often meant to symbolize bird feathers or snakes. The Eastern Tuvan costume in the Musée du Quai Branly is adorned with several tufts of five bands, each one splitting into several leather strands at the bottom of the cloak (Beffa and Delaby 1999: 69–72). Together, they form a forest of colorful branches. Some of these bands have eyes: these are snakes. When the wearer spins around, they rise up fluttering through the air, animated by centrifugal force. “The shaman began to hop, bow and spin,” one Russian traveler wrote, after attending a ritual in the early twentieth century in the same region where this costume was later acquired: “and the long straps of his costume swept over the fire, slapping the faces of all the spectators sitting on the ground, filling the whole yurt” (Chudinov 1931, cited by Mel’nikova 1994). The spinning costume inflates the shaman’s field of presence with its forest of arborescent bands, whirling around him and dissolving the boundaries between inside and out. Morten Axel Pedersen rightly notes that the costume “seems to be perceived as a *hyper surface*, which, far from maintaining the boundaries of the wearer’s person, has the effect of opening her up towards the cosmos” (Pedersen 2007: 152–53). In Mongolia and the Altai-Sayan region, the traditional secular outfit consists of a two-paneled garment closed by a belt; it thus reinforces the boundaries of the person, containing any leakage from within and protecting against attacks from without. The shamanic costume, on the other hand, is a field of openings: a stringy, porous interface traversed by centrifugal and centripetal forces. The shaman’s alternating states of spinning and immobility produce a series of successive expansions and contractions in a kind of cosmic palpitation.

All kinds of images are superimposed onto the anatomical structure depicted on the cloak. In Turkic and Mongolic languages, the cloak is often referred to as a “suit of armor” (*huiag*), intended to protect the shaman during their cosmic journeys. The diversity of the images on the costumes of Daur shamans in Manchuria is particularly remarkable: seventy-two small mirrors represent the walls of a fortified city; eight large mirrors stand for the city gates through which the shaman’s soul can enter; sixty bells represent the guards of the fortifications; birds on the shoulders are the city’s messengers, and on the back we see the sun and moon, as well as birds, trees, flowers, a mountain, a river, and a big stag; lower down are twelve bands symbolizing the months of the year and the paths of the spirits; 365 cowrie shells represent the days of the year and provide the shaman with armor; and finally there is a series of

strips figuring his ribs and joints. Onto the image of the shamanic skeleton, a typical feature of northern Asian shamanic traditions, is grafted the image of a landscape in which the depiction of the city, under the influence of Buddhism, comes to represent the lower world. With so many spatial and temporal references as sources of its power, it is easy to understand why anthropologist Caroline Humphrey refers to the costume as a “world-conquering time-machine” (Humphrey and Urgunge 1996: 270).

The costumes also go back in time by preserving the memory of a network of clients. When an Evenki shaman of the Podkamennaya Tunguska needs to heal a sick person, he often asks the patient’s family to sacrifice a reindeer, and a small band is made from the animal’s hide. These bands are then sewn onto the lower part of his costume so that the shaman can “remember” his donors. The more of these strips the shaman has on his costume, the greater his authority (Suslov 1931: 94). How do these straps help shamans to “remember” their various benefactors? In the southern regions of Siberia as well, grateful Tuvan, Darhad, and Daur clients would attach ribbons to the shaman’s costume. Now, for the Mongolian Darhad, the type of knot and the number of loops used to tie the band to the costume would record the type of animal sacrificed (either a sheep, goat, cow, or horse) as well as its age and sex.⁶ Each one therefore corresponded to a ritual that was precisely committed to memory. The costume thus functioned as a kind of accounting table—not unlike the famous Quipu used by the administrators of the Incan Empire—or at least a mnemonic tool whereby the shaman could not only see his network of patients, but also show it off, given that throughout the hierarchical world, the shaman’s authority can be measured by the abundance of the ribbons and pendants on his costume.

In sum, the costume brings several different referential clusters into coordination with one another, the most frequent of which are the shaman’s body, the body of an ancestor or an animal, the militaristic register of armor and combat, representations of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic spirits, the layered order of the universe, and the network of relations between the shaman and their clients. Between these superposed referential registers is woven a series of associations; threaded throughout the costume’s bands and straps is the fabric of human and nonhuman relationships that make the shaman a “knot of knots,”

6. On the Tuvans, see D’iakonova 1981b: 133. On the Darhad and the Daur, see Humphrey and Urgunge 1996: 269–70; Pederson 2007.

in Caroline Humphrey's felicitous expression (Humphrey and Urgunge 1996: 270).

It became clear in our examination of shamanic drums that, while the instrument is symmetrical in shape, the design and sometimes even the direction of the hairs on the stretched skin exhibit a fundamental asymmetry along the lateral axis. Now, this polarization is not only cosmographic; it also carries certain sensorimotor indications pertaining to the coordination of immediate and virtual space affected by the shaman's movements.

A close look at Siberian ceremonial costumes reveals that they too are rife with polarizing asymmetries. The Altai costume shown in figure 77, for example, is decorated with a half-moon on the left shoulder and a sun on the right (cf. Anohin 1924: 41). The sun and moon are displayed in exactly the same manner on a Selkup costume from the collection of the *Kunstkamera* in Saint Petersburg (MAE no. 3871-1; Prokof'eva 1949: 361). They are not always placed on the shoulders, however: while handling an old Ket costume in the same collection, I noticed a sun embroidered on the upper right-hand corner of the apron and a moon lower down on the left-hand side (from the point of view of the person wearing it) (MAE no. 4034-166). The boots belonging to this costume were lavishly decorated with embroidery and metal ornaments, each of them identical at first glance: but on closer inspection I noticed that the right boot bore a radiant sun and the left, a moon (figure 79). Again and again, the costume seems to be repeating to the wearer the same cosmo-corporeal maxim: "Day is on your right, night is on your left."

These repeated asymmetries are obviously no accident and have in fact been explained in clear terms by an Enets shaman, Savone; given that his master was a Ket specialist, his comments may shed some light on Ket and Selkup costumes as well. His costume was divided into two halves: "the side of the sun" on the right and the "Barochi side" on the left, named for a forest-dwelling monster-spirit. Like the Ket example in Saint Petersburg, Savone's costume also included a pair of boots that were similarly distinguished: the right boot was called the "sun boot" and the left the "monster boot." His gloves, too, differed from one another: the right glove with five fingers is the "hand of the sun," while the left, with only three fingers, represents the hand of the monster Barochi, who has only one leg and one three-fingered hand (Prokofyeva 1963: 135, 143). The same asymmetry between the two gloves is found among the Nganasan, who offer a similar explanation for it. The left glove enables the shaman to pass himself off as a three-fingered demon when descending



Figure 77. Back of Altaian Shaman's Costume. Watercolor, 1914. Anohin archives, f. 11 op. 1, MAE.

into the lower world, whereas with the right glove he “extracts himself from hell,” thus carrying out an upward movement (Popov 1984: 123; Lambert 2002–2003: 367). The left hand, in other words, is associated with what is inferior and obscure, and the right with ascendance.

The Nganasan furthermore developed a far more spectacular form of lateral asymmetry than the number of fingers on their gloves. Some of their costumes were entirely bipartite, consisting of a red right half and a



Figure 78. Boots of a Ket Shaman. MAE no. 4034-166 (detail), photo by Charles Stépanoff.

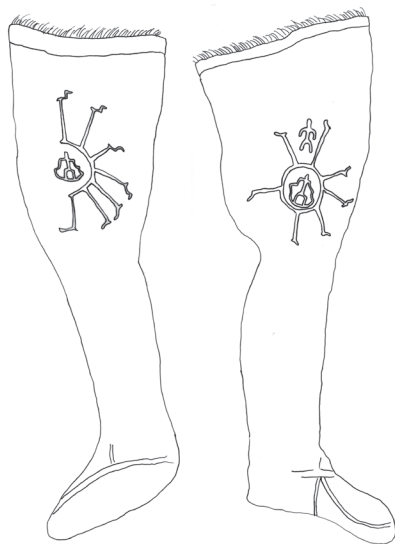


Figure 79. Boots of a Ket Shaman, the right one with a sun, the left with a half-moon (on the outer face of each boot). MAE no. 4034-166, drawing by Charles Stépanoff.

black left half, the red being associated with the sun and springtime, and the black with darkness and winter.⁷

Following the sensorimotor approach with which we examined the drums, we will relate the lateral polarization displayed by the costumes to the movements of the shaman's body. The Samoyed make a clear distinction between movements performed in the "direction of the sun" and movements performed in the "direction of the shadow," those that are anti-solar in other words, and which are thought to be sources of misfortune (Lambert 2002–2003: 101, 387, 392). Now, as we discussed in chapter 6, a counter-sunwise rotation puts the body's left-hand side at its center, whereas a sunwise rotation centers the right. The cosmic resonance of these gestures is given one of its clearest forms of expression in the bipartite Nganasan costumes. These materialize the oppositions associated with the body's lateral axis—light and shadow, up and down. It was couplings such as these that made the meaning of the shaman's movements so immediately comprehensible to the audience.

We find remarkably similar principles of lateralization and chromatic opposition if we follow the Yenisei back up toward its source in southern Siberia. According to the descriptions given to me by the Eastern Tuvan shaman Boranak, before the Soviet repressions the costumes worn in his region had red straps on the right side of the back and black straps on the left, an unexpected parallel with the bipartite design of Nganasan costumes. The shaman would wave his red straps to treat the sick, while the black straps were used to do "black things," such as capturing and punishing enemies.

The shamanic costumes of the Mongolian Darhad also feature a bundle of straps on each shoulder, as well as a third in the middle of the back. The right-hand bundle corresponds to the more benevolent spirits of the west, while the left-hand bundle is dedicated to the harmful spirits of the east. The link between the bodily schema and the absolute orientation of mythology is all the more obvious and rigid given that, in the Mongolian system of cardinal directions, which is oriented toward the south, "right" and "west" are expressed by the same word, *baruun*, just as the word *zuun* designates both "left" and "east." On the left-hand bundle, so-called "harmful" arrows are attached: these are metal pendants (*bolbogo*) that

7. This chromatic bipartition was an invention of the shaman Diuhadie's children (Lambert 2002–2003: 368–69). At the end of the nineteenth century, Tret'iakov (1871) still describes the costume in its entirety as an alder-shade of red.



Figure 80. Ritual Cloak of the Nganasan Shaman Tubiaku Kosterkin, from the early twentieth century. Front view above, back view below. Taimyr Museum, Simankova 2008: 15.

spiral in on themselves in the counter-sunwise direction. This detail confirms the fundamental link between the left side of the body and the anti-solar rotation. In Mongolian shamanism, *holbogo* pendants wound in the sunwise direction represent calm and good deeds, whereas anti-solar bells are thought to be more powerful and are dedicated to aggressive

and cruel actions (Badamxatan 1986: 161; Putev and Purvee 2008: 201). The arrangement of these ornaments and bells shows us once again, this time within the confines of the Mongolian world, that the values associated with the right side are solar and beneficent, while those associated with the left are malefic.

The hierarchical costume is governed by two principles, one of *projection* and another of *coordination*. Through a radiographic effect, the costume projects the shaman's skeleton—which houses the essence of the shamanic body—outward onto its outer surface. But superimposed onto this image of the bodily schema is an interwoven profusion of other cosmic and ancestral references that turn the costume into a machine for coordinating spaces and times.

CHAPTER 9

Yakut Technologies of Virtual Space

The Yakut—or Sakha, as they call themselves—are a pastoral people originally from the Baikal region, who migrated north, down the Lena Valley, between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries AD.¹ The Yakut's expansion accelerated in step with the Russian colonization of Siberia, displacing the territory's autochthonous hunter-gather populations in the process, and continues to this day. Unlike the Yukaghir, the Yakut population was relatively resistant to the epidemics that resulted from Russian contact, and their integration into colonial trade networks quickly made them a key presence in several regions. In the nineteenth century, some Yakut even took part in the Russian colonization of Alaska, before it was sold to the USA.

Today the Yakut are the dominant ethnic group of the Republic of Yakutia (or Sakha), a central Siberian territory as vast as India, but with a population a thousand times smaller. The Yakut successfully introduced the herding and breeding of horses and cows into the subarctic zone, at latitudes far greater than anywhere else in the world. This Turkic-speaking people, dominated until the revolution by an aristocratic elite of wealthy lords (*toion*), practiced a typically hierarchical form of shamanism and had a significant role in its spread throughout northern Siberia.

Yakut shamans mobilized a series of imaginative cues in their ritual performances that allowed participants to coordinate the immediate

1. This chapter is a substantially modified version of an earlier article; Stépanoff 2014b.

surroundings with the virtual space invoked by the officiant. In this chapter, we will examine the different ways these cues function. They can be divided into three types of *vectors*, as I will call them: (1) linguistic vectors, which modify the ritual's discursive frame of reference; (2) kinesthetic vectors, which coordinate gestures on the ritual stage with movements in virtual space; and (3) material vectors found on the costume and across the ritual stage, which bring different spaces (immediate and virtual) into alignment with one another. Together, these three types of cues form a technology of the imagination that allows those present to participate collectively in a singular spatial experience.

The Yakut have been the subject of excellent ethnographic and linguistic descriptions since as far back as the eighteenth century.² Their cosmic topology is based on the coupling of a horizontal plane of cardinal points with a vertical order of distinct worlds layered one on top of the other. Horizontal space is organized around a series of "directions" (*dieki*): as with the Khakas, east is referred to as "the front" (*ilin*) and west, "the back" (*arġaa*); *xotu* designates north, which is sometimes also called *xaŋas*, meaning "the left side"; and *soġuruu*, south, which can also be called *uŋa*, "the right side." Like the Khakas and Ket systems, the south is associated with a higher position and the north with a lower one, mirroring the courses of the Siberian rivers that flow downward—which is to say north—toward the Arctic Ocean. Thus the term *xotu* designates both north and a downward direction: *enie xotu*, "downhill," *örüs xotu*, "downriver" (Jochelson 1933: 103–4). These few terms alone give us a glimpse of the relationship between the horizontal plane of orientation (north–south, east–west), a vertical one (down–up), as well as a bodily schema (left–right, front–back): all of these are latent correspondences in the Yakut language that, as we will see, are mobilized and transformed in the shamanic performance.

On its vertical axis, the world is divided into three levels: the "land above" (*üöhee doidu*), the "land in the middle" (*orto doidu*) or the earth in other words, and the "land below" (*allaraa doidu*). The upper world is made up of several domed "skies" (*xallaan*), also known as "levels" (*xattygas*, from the Turkic root *bat*, "story" or "floor"). Traditionally there are nine domes, but sometimes seven or three, and this number can vary

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2. Yakut shamanism was violently repressed during the Soviet period. Under the influence of Yakut intellectuals, it began to resurface in the 1990s, though in a new form that abandoned the sensorimotor techniques that concern us here.

with the successive parallelisms of a single invocation: “Clear sky stacked three layers tall, high clear sky nine layers tall” (Ėrgis 1974: 124). The exact number is less important than the image of a tiered or layered sky.

Beneath the earth lies the “land below,” a region populated by dangerous spirits and monstrous beings, and lit only by the dim glow of a chipped sun and moon. The stratified arrangement of lakes and various spirit dwellings that make up this lower world—one on top of the other—suggests a tiered structure similar to that of the sky. Each of these superposed layers is ruled by a different lord (*toion*).

The Yakut developed a precise system for projecting these vertically stacked layers onto a horizontal plane, one that allowed them to situate themselves, wherever they might be, in relation to the residence of any given spirit and from this to derive certain divinatory techniques (figure 82). From data collected in the 1740s, the German scholar Jacob Lindenau was able to use a wind rose, also known as a compass rose, to visualize the meticulously conceived positions of Yakut spirits in relation to the cardinal points (figure 81) (Lindenau 1983: 43). Though the spirits’ positions varied across different regions and over time, the values associated with each direction remained stable. The north is home to subterranean and evil female spirits, such as the “lady with the long stick,” who inflicts humans with syphilis. The “demons from below” (*allaraa abaahy*) are situated in the northwest and the north, the area considered to be the “entrance to hell” (Ėrgis 1974: 136; Lindenau 1983: 42, 136; Hudiakov 1969: 415–16). The west is the direction associated with death, toward which bodies are laid to rest. To the east, between the summer sunrise (northeast) and the winter sunrise (southeast), are the celestial spirits of good fortune and wealth: the *Aiyy*, or “Creators.” The supreme creator, *Ūrūŋ Aiyy Toion* (“Lord Luminous Creator”), inhabits the ninth and highest layer of the sky. On the horizontal axis, he is located in the east, and offerings to him are made facing this direction. The fearsome *Uluu Toion* (“Great Lord”)—leader of the “demons from above” (*iöhee abaahy*) and creator of shamans—resides on a lower celestial layer, to the south or west on the horizontal plane. Shamans deal with this ambiguous being, the source of many evils, far more often than with the Creator (Alekseev 1975: 77; Lindenau 1983: 37, 42; Troshchanskii 1902: 33). The powerful celestial spirits who hail from the south are capable of as much harm as good. But the strongest opposition is that between the evil, low northwest and the benevolent, high southeast (Jochelson 1933; Lindenau 1983: 41; Maj 2006: 277; Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 639, 648).

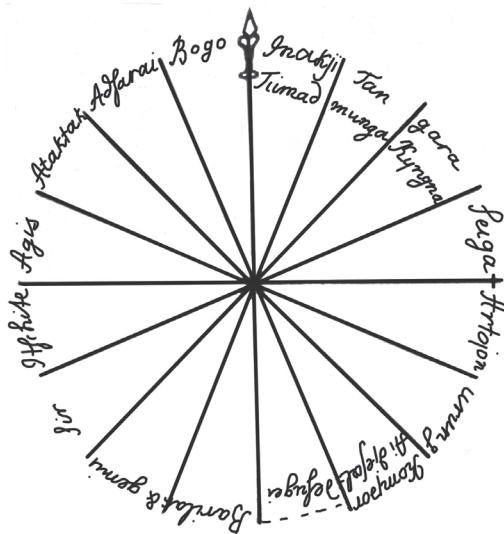


Figure 81. The Residences of Yakut Divinities Organized According to the Cardinal Points (north represented at the top of the circle). Lindenau 1983.

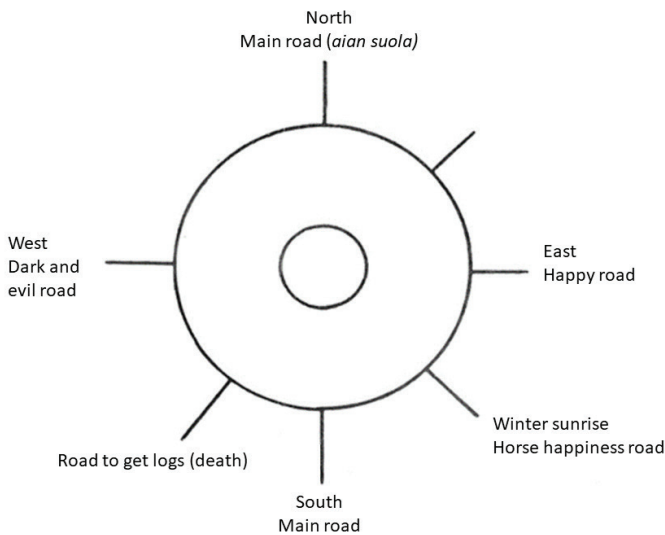


Figure 82: Yakut Drawing Used for Divination Using an Awl, from the Nam (Namsty) district. The direction the awl points in is interpreted according to the values traditionally associated with each cardinal point. After Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 647, fig. 167.

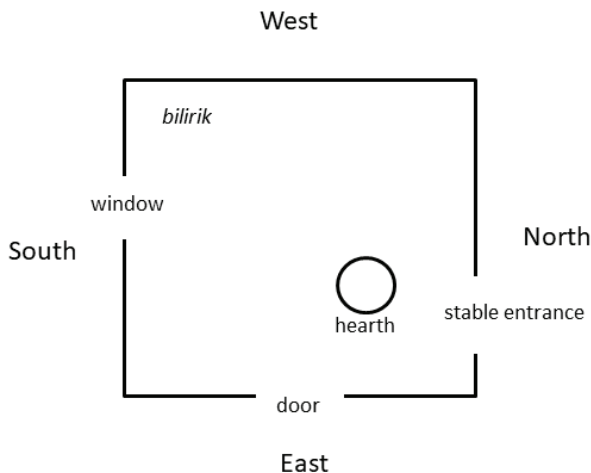


Figure 83. Layout of a Yakut House.

This horizontal cosmic schema also governs the organization of domestic space. As was customary for Turkic-speaking groups before the Soviet period, the door of the Yakut house traditionally opened onto the sunrise—toward the east, in other words—like that of the Khakas yurt. The walls were lined with benches reserved for different people according to their age, sex, and status (figure 83). The place of honor, *bilirik*, lay to the southwest. A window opened onto the south, and on the northern side was a stable (*xoton*), separated from the rest of the space by a dividing wall. Like the Khakas house, the north side (or *xan̄as*, meaning “left”) belonged to the women, and the south side (*ūŋa* meaning “right”), to the men (Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 342).

It would be misleading, though, to say that the structure of the universe is projected onto the domestic space, for the Yakut sometimes express the relationship inversely, referring to the layout of the house in order to describe the relative positions of the spirits in the sky and lower world. The celestial spirit Kahtyr-Kaġhtan-Burai-Toion, for example, is located “to the south, in the *bilirik* corner.” The son of Satan (*satana uola*), on the other hand, can be found underground, “north of the *bilirik*” (Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 637, 639). The house is not a copy of the cosmos, no more than the cosmos is a copy of the house, rather the same abstract moral topology guides the affective perception of the two parallel spaces on two different scales.

A Cosmic Choreography

Yakut shamans often have to “go on long journeys” in the course of their performances (*aian aiannaa-*, as they put it in their chants), to meet with spirits in the upper or lower worlds and retrieve the soul of a sick person, ask for livestock, or present the spirit with the soul of a sacrificial victim. Consider the following ritual performed by the Dolgan, a Yakut-speaking people from the Taymyr Peninsula with both Yakut and Tungus origins. When treating a patient, the shaman must first expel the evil spirit causing the illness from the patient’s body and take it back to where it came from. He must then find the patient’s soul, which has escaped from his body, and which, once recovered, will have to be purified by the Lord Creator, Aiyy Toion, in the ninth sky. Along the path to the creator are nine *olox* (pauses, or rests) or *kerdii* (levels), one for each of the nine celestial strata. Similar to the seven stops of the Ket song-itinerary, these stations are something like “clouds” inhabited by “bird-people,” whose job it is to inspect shamans on their way up to the land of light and to ward off evil or ill-intentioned individuals. Much to the audience’s amusement, the *olox* spirits force the shaman to publicly confess his misdeeds, his marital infidelities in particular. These stops provide the typical formal structure of the Yakut shamanic chants that describe the officiants’ upward or downward journeys. The longest rituals can contain up to twenty-seven (three times nine) of these “rests” (Vasil’ev 1910a: 280–82; Popov 2008: 52; Ksenofontov 1931: 135).

These complex, multi-scene storylines are played out in a small area, for the most part with the shaman as the only actor.³ What procedures does the shaman have at his disposal for helping participants perceive the interplay between immediate and virtual space that is so essential to understanding the shamanic journey?

In certain Indigenous traditions of Meso and South America, shamans employ sophisticated linguistic devices in their ritual chants to achieve a kind of “spatial condensation” of the everyday world and that of myth (Townsend 1993; Déléage 2009). In my earlier chapter on Ket shamanism (chapter 5), I drew on the distinction, made in William Hanks’s work on the Yucatec Maya, between the relative orientation of everyday

3. That said, other participants do take on roles that are important for the organization and success of the ritual; assistants and groups of young men and women sometimes surround the shaman. But for the most part, these individuals only repeat or imitate the words and gestures of the officiant.

life and the absolute orientation of myths (Hanks 1990: 298–304). A central process of the divination ritual performed by Mayan shamans is the “linking” of the north, south, and other cosmic regions of absolute orientation, with the north, south, etc., of the relative orientation of everyday space. This “linking” process is achieved by temporarily expunging all of the deictic elements from the shaman’s speech—words that refer to the immediate context of enunciation, such as “me,” “now,” “this.” In these prayers, the shaman will never refer to the location of the performance with a deictic like “here”; he will instead use a formula such as “there on the earth of sin.” Space is thus no longer egocentrically organized with reference to the speaker’s position, but is instead conceived in absolute terms, in relation to a cosmic order.

The linguistic devices employed by Yakut shamans have some points in common with those of their Mayan counterparts. A clear shift in the use of deictics can be observed when the Yakut shaman invokes his spirits at the beginning of the ritual. In a ceremony performed for a couple struggling to conceive a child, the shaman presents his clients to a spirit in the following terms: “The Yakut, gray *Urianhai*, have unfulfilled wishes, they are uncertain people” (Popov 2008: 87). In ordinary circumstances, the shaman may well refer to his clients as “these people here.” But no such demonstratives are used to represent them in the ritual context; the only term identifying them here is an archaic ethnonym, *Urianhai*, which the Yakut use to refer to themselves in their epics. The color gray, furthermore, is typically associated with the middle world in shamanic chants. The clients thus hear themselves described from the outside, as though they were removed from immediate context (the “here” and “now” of deixis): they are situated in an absolute cosmic architecture, but not at its center. Hearing themselves referred to in this way, the couple is encouraged to look upon themselves from this external point of view and to put some distance between themselves and their troubles, an effect I have written about elsewhere in contemporary Tuvan rituals (Stépanoff 2014a).

In addition to his patients, the officiant also gives a detailed description of himself at the beginning of his invocations. This sung self-portrait often initiates a powerful play of perspectives across both time and space. He evokes his own biography, recalling the ordeals the spirits put him through in his youth, in various worlds, before he fully realized himself as a shaman. He also describes his immediate surroundings on the ritual stage, as well as the chant he is in the process of singing, and his gestures as they unfold; the effect is similar to that of the reflexive doubling of

the enunciator described by Carlo Severi in relation to Kuna shamanism, which we discussed in chapter 6 (Severi 2015). The following example demonstrates the unusual spatial position that the officiant describes himself as occupying in these reflexive passages.

On the back of the immense earth-mother [*doidu iiem*] with nine circles,
On the humps of the vertebrae of the colored earth with eight circles,
I sit stretched out, sitting with dark mother-night,
Sitting together with blind and dark mother-night,
With a seat [*olboxtonon*] as big as a ten-fathom millstone [*bylas*],
As big as a lake, I sit [*olorommun*].

My people, nine boys living in the gray middle world, come over here [*bettex*]!
Eight young men living in the underworld and from the eight clans,
come over here!
Be the helping force!
(Popov 2008: 235, 236)

In the first part of this passage, the shaman describes his present location and “seat” (*olbox*), meaning the horsehide on which he rests. These lines trigger a remarkable distancing effect: the shaman does not describe himself as “here,” near the fireplace as the audience sees him, but “on the back of the earth-mother.” This image conjures up an extended reality that stretches beneath this “back” of the earth (where is the belly?) and off into other invisible depths. Replacing the egocentric frame of reference with an absolute architecture of superposed places, the shaman presents the audience with a transition away from a human point of view and toward that of his invisible interlocutors located in distant spaces. This is what explains the absence of deictics like “here,” “there,” and “this” from the first sentence of the above passage.

In the second part of the passage—the invocation that follows this self-description—the spirits are grouped according to their place of origin: some come from the “middle world,” others from the “lower world.” The evocation of these territories reinforces the image of the cosmos’s layered structure, which provides the spatial framework for the rest of the ritual. It is in this newly defined framework that the directional deictic *bettex*, “over here”—as in the command “come over here” from the closing lines of the invocation—is inscribed. But what this new “here” refers

to is ambiguous: it refers only in part to the immediate space shared by the audience; more importantly, it evokes the space now anchored in the person of the shaman, this “I” that was reconfigured in cosmic terms in the previous sentence.

With this framework in place, it is not much later in the chant that the officiant announces his departure: “I’m going on a long journey, staggering along, I’m singing out, I’m wandering, I’m roaming, here I come! (Popov 2008) This formulation juxtaposes the shaman’s actions that are visible to the audience (his dancing and singing) with those that are invisible to humans, but seen by the invisible interlocutors evoked in the song (he sets off on a journey). The final “here I come” (*emine tuguj*) is just as ambiguous as the “here” (*bettex*) of the earlier passage: it simultaneously refers to a visible and an invisible realm of reality, and thus suggests a kind of mixed mode of perception and agency, what Hanks calls a “field of co-presence,” between humans and spirits.

Both as a locutor and as a body, the hierarchical shaman’s “self” acts as a hinge between an immediate, real space and a distant, virtual one. This central position is supported by a rich form of gestural expression.

Hierarchical shamans developed a detailed kinesthetic code in their performances, a set of gestural communicative conventions that their audience would have easily understood. The movements with which the officiant strikes his drum, for example, as well as the sounds produced, provide information about his movements in virtual space. Extending the notion of the drum as the shaman’s mount or riding animal, the rhythms he strikes often evoke the hoofbeats of a horse, as was clear to the ethnologist Andrei Popov when he made the following notations—in which periods indicate beats and dashes indicate pauses—to record the percussive representations of the animal’s movements.

Trot:_....._.....

Fast pace: _.._.._..

The shaman coming to a halt: _.._..... (Popov 2008: 52–53)

Though only recently published, the ethnographic studies Popov conducted in the 1920s provide valuable insights into the nonlinguistic communicative codes used by Yakut shamans. The officiant begins the ritual from his “seat” (*olbox*), a horse or reindeer hide laid out near the hearth. When he jumps up and kicks the skin aside, he indicates that he is setting out on his journey and leaving the middle world. Now

standing, he turns to face the direction he must go in, or in other words, toward the cardinal point where the spirit he is addressing resides.

As he *ascends to the celestial strata*, the shaman jumps, shakes his head and throws it back, and holds his drum high in front of him. Smaller hops represent movements through *the middle world*, during which he holds the drum close to his chest. The shaman signals his *descent into the lower world* by bending down, holding the drum at ground level and even straddling it; here his jumps are faster and more impetuous than those that signal his journeys into the upper and middle worlds. Raising or lowering the drum to indicate the journey's destination is an easy technique for the audience to interpret, one that is also practiced by the Shor and the Khingan Tungus, among others (Hlopina 1992: 143).

When the Yakut shaman breaks off his dance and sits down in the middle of a celestial journey, the audience understands that he has arrived at a stopping place or *olox*. He greets the spirits that reside there, asks them not to hinder his progress, and describes the various gifts he has brought with him. Eventually he stands up to signal he is ascending once more (Popov 2008; Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 622; Vitashevskii 1918: 170).

At times, the shaman stands with a hand across his brow, as if to shield his eyes from a bright light, and peers into the distance (figure 84). When he is ascending into the sky, the audience understands that upward glances are cast "straight ahead," over the road that remains to be traveled. Downward glances, on the other hand, mean the shaman is "looking back," over the distance that now lies behind him (Vitashevskii 1918: 171).

Believed to have reached a certain height, some shamans mime their relative position by turning to face the audience, squinting as if looking across a great distance, and singing a passage such as the following:

I have made nine stops [*olox*] since I left my home, moving away little by little.

When I look from here [*mantan*], I see that the middle world has become as large as the bottom of a birchbark canteen.

The big lake has become the size of an arrowhead,

The little lake like the hole through a pearl,

This land is far away.

(Popov 2008: 123)

These words vividly describe how small the earth has become from an elevated point of view. Shamans mentally mastered the effect of aerial perspective long before the Russians sent Gagarin into space!



Figure 84. Yakut Shaman Scrutinizing His Invisible Road. Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 621, fig. 154.

Having crossed the sky from one end to the other, they must come back down; this can be indicated in a number of ways. One “descent” technique that we have already come across is spinning in an anti-solar direction—to turn, in other words, in the opposite direction to the sun’s course across the sky, thus placing the left side of the body at the movement’s center. This technique can be applied at any of the celestial stages or levels. In one ritual recorded by Popov, the shaman first climbed up into the “higher land” with an offering of horses for the Creator Aiyy Toion. Having completed this task and paid tribute to the god, he

hopped round on one foot counter-sunwise and declared: "After a long journey, after flying from a faraway place, dragging myself away from a distant place and singing back from this foreign shore, then rushing back from where I had been—I have arrived, here I am!" (Popov 2008: 348, 351). Or the shaman might spin in an anti-solar direction and say, "Here I go, I'm coming down quickly, faster, faster, running, scampering! I'm turning into a loon and spreading my wings." Then squawking like the loon (*Gavia arctica*), he throws down his drum and drops to the ground with his arms outstretched. From these gestures, it is understood that he has swooped downwards like a loon plunging into the watery depths after a fish (2008: 303). The shaman uses the same techniques to perform his descent from the middle world into the lower world: rotating in an anti-solar direction or imitating a diving loon.⁴

None of these gestural signals are exclusive to Yakut shamans. Spinning can signal a change in the shaman's altitude throughout Siberia, as we have seen with the Teleut and Evenki. Dropping to the ground also signals the shaman's descent into the lower world for the Evenki and the Manchu (Shirokogoroff 1935: 314), just as it does for the circumpolar groups who practice the lying journey.

It is clear that certain movements in the cosmic choreography of Yakut shamans establish a parallel between the vertical order of the universe and the officiant's body. The position of the shaman's arms and head, for example, is one indication of which particular invisible space the current action is set in: the upper world when the arms and head are raised high, the middle world when the arms are at chest level, and the lower world when they are brought to the floor (when the shaman falls and lies on the ground).

Spinning or rotating the body is a more indirect reference. In the earlier chapter on shamanic drums, we saw that turning to the left—and thus placing the left side of the body at the center of the movement—is bound up with the successive passing of the cardinal points in the direction opposite to the diurnal path of the sun; to spin to one's left, in other words, is to successively face west, south, east, north, and so on.

4. On the imitation of the loon, see Ksenofontov 1931; Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 622; Vasil'ev 1910b. On spinning in an anti-solar direction, see Popov 1981: 256. According to Lindenau's observations from the eighteenth century, Yakut non-shamans would visit the tombs of the deceased a year after a death and circle them in an anti-solar direction; these were the only objects circled in this direction (Lindenau 1983: 42).

For the Yakut, like other peoples of northern Asia, the right and left sides of the body are charged with an array of contrasting values, and the resultant polarity has an appreciable influence on everyday practices as well as shamanic ones, down to the basic techniques for the keeping of livestock. When a woman milks a cow—this being a female activity—she approaches the animal from her left. A mare, on the other hand, can be milked by both men and women, but this action is performed with the animal to the right side of one's body (Ferret 2005: 152–53).⁵ It is likewise customary to have a horse on one's right side when mounting it, a rule still strictly adhered to in the West. The issue is not, I would argue, which is the appropriate side of the animal to approach, as is often asserted, but which side of the human body should be presented to it. Cattle are animals sacrificed to the spirits of the lower world, and horses to the spirits of the upper world (Hudiakov 1969: 239); it is for this reason that the former are approached from the left side of the human body and the latter from the right. With this in mind, it makes sense that spinning to the left carries negative connotations and is understood to represent a descent. In both directions though, sunwise or counter-sunwise, the spinning movement establishes an orthogonal projection between the horizontal plane of immediate space and the vertical axis of virtual space.

In both cases—the parallel projection realized by raising and lowering the arms and head, and the orthogonal projection realized by turning the body to the left or right—the shaman causes the virtual spatial framework for his actions to emerge from his own body. The particularities of the immediate visible surroundings play no part in the emergence of virtual space; they are bracketed and forgotten. In what we could call this “egocentric” mode, the shaman's visible gymnastics are used to synthesize his movements in virtual space. We will later discuss another type of coordination deployed in the shamanic ritual, which we call “geocentric,” and which projects the virtual space into the immediate visible vicinity of the ritual stage.

But we first need to understand how these couplings between the shamanic body and the invisible worlds, which imbue the ritual gestures with their cosmic significance, are brought about.

The costumes worn by Yakut shamans are extraordinarily elaborate. Though Western observers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

5. That Yakut women were forbidden from sitting on the right-hand side of a horse-skin rug coheres with these observations (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 53 n. 3).

saw them as shapeless jumbles of trinkets, they are in fact organized according to a series of precise and fairly stable principles. The back of the costume is closely coordinated with the vertical order of the cosmos, which is represented by a number of metal pendants carefully arranged across horizontal leather strips (usually numbering nine) (Hudiakov 1969). As one Yakut shaman from Nahar explained, the figures on the shoulders of his costume represent Siberian cranes and seagulls, and thus associate the upper torso with the aerial world (Vasil'ev 1910c). In the middle of the second strip from the top is a plate representing the sun. Hanging next to it on the same strip is another round plate engraved with a few figures; the owner of the costume calls this ornament "the shaman's seat" (*oiuun oloġo*) (figure 85, see also figure 92). As the owner explained, it is on this seat, which he described as a black cloud (*nai bara bylyt*), that the shaman rises to the sky or descends into the lower world. On the left side of the next band—the third from the top—is a semicircular plate representing the "chipped moon" of the lower world. And on the same strip is a larger disk with a hole in its center, which the shaman refers to as the "main mother-earth" (*aan iie doidu*), meaning the middle world. This disk shows the earth as seen from the shaman's cloud-seat as he flies up into the upper worlds: "It stays behind him, shining white like the round plate on the headdress of a noble lady" (1910c). The hole in the center of this disk, we are told, is an image of the opening (*oibon*) in the earth that leads to the lower world. With these four figures, the back of the costume provides a glimpse of the cosmic space that frames the ritual performances. That the "earth" plate represents the aerial point-of-view of the shaman in flight—the earth as seen from the *olox* plate that hangs next to it—tells us that the relative positions of these ornaments on the costume correspond to their relative positions in cosmic space. The moon's position below and to the left of the sun is noteworthy in this regard, a pattern we have already encountered among other groups.

The back of this costume, then, is less like a map of the world's tripartite structure than it is a vector diagram, in which various routes and positions are associated with one another along a vertical axis as well as a horizontal one. In this respect it has much in common with the painted drums of the Khakas that we discussed at length in chapter 7. The Yakut, however, leave their drums bare, suggesting that the costume plays the same role for them that the instrument does for the Khakas.

Close examination of the costume also reveals other meaningful asymmetries between the left and right sides of the body. As we observed above, on the back of the Nahar costume the moon is located

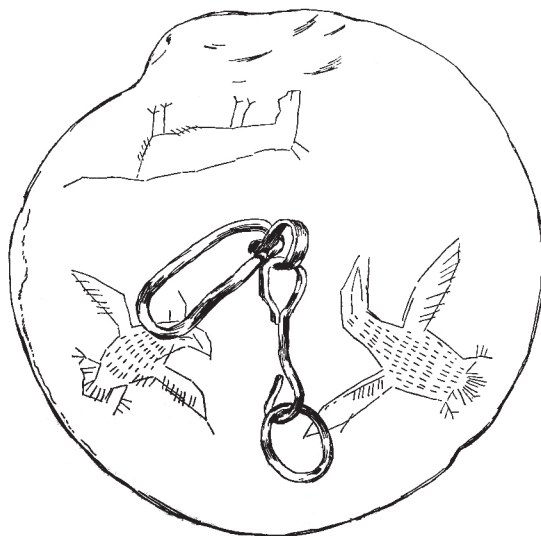


Figure 85. *Oiuun Oloġo*. Representation of the Shaman's Seat, on which he ascends to the upper world and descends into the lower world. Vasil'ev 1910b: 19, fig. 18.

to the lower left of the sun. On the other side, across the chest, are two metal representations of nipples, with the left one clearly smaller than the right (figure 87). The same asymmetry between the left and right nipple is found on a Yakut costume in the American Museum of Natural History, again with the left nipple noticeably smaller than the right one (figure 88). The key to this enigma lies in an observation made by Ivan Hudiakov, a young man exiled to Siberia in the 1860s and who explored Yakut culture at great length: the larger disk on the right breast represents the “sun” (*kün*), while the smaller disk on the left represents the “moon” (*yī*) (Hudiakov 1969: 311).⁶ How is it that these objects represent celestial bodies at the same time as they do nipples? The apparent contradiction vanishes as soon as we accept that the function of these plates is to establish a close connection between the cosmic order and the shaman's body schema. Further on in Hudiakov's observations, we

6. The same lateral contrast was observed by Popov, who describes the “moon of disease” (*ölüü yia*) on the left side of the costume and the “Creator sun” (*aiyy küne*) on the right. However, in the drawing accompanying his text, these positions are reversed (Popov 2008: 59, 61).



Figure 86. Yakut Costume. Pekarskii and Vasil'ev 1910: s.n.

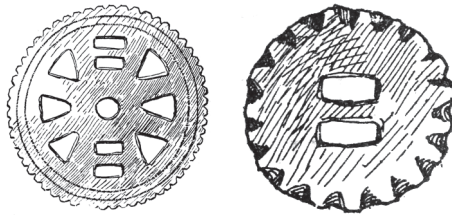


Figure 87. Representation of Breasts on the Costume of the Nahar Shaman. On the left, the plate attached to the right breast of the cloak; on the right, the plate attached to the left breast. Vasil'ev 1910b: 32–33, figs. 30 and 31.

encounter another familiar pairing: the left side of the shaman's body is associated with the moon, and thus the night, and the right side with the sun, and therefore the day. This coupling is represented on both the front and back of the Nahar shaman's costume. The fact that we have already seen this detail on Ket and Selkup costumes speaks to the astonishing coherence of hierarchical traditions, which transcends the limits of the different linguistic families to which the Ket, Selkup, and Yakut belong.



Figure 88. Yakut Shaman's Costume, from the front. Jochelson 1933: 113, fig. 10.

With the sun on right side of the shaman's body and the moon on his left, the costume materializes a latent set of associations in the Yakut system of orientation: in the Yakut language, the north (the region that the sun never visits) can also be called the "left" (*hanyas*), while the south, the "home of the sun" (*kün ortoto*), can also be called the "right" (*unja*) (Pekarskii 1907–1939: 2260).

Hudiakov calls attention to another asymmetry: on the right shoulder of the costume he describes is a metal image of *iie kytalyga*, the "mother of Siberian cranes" (*Grus leucogeranus*), while on the left shoulder sits a loon. The position of these two birds high up on the torso conforms to the typical projection of the vertical order of the world onto the vertical axis of the shaman's body, but the types of movement each bird represents are very different. The Siberian crane, which migrates every year between India and Yakutia, can fly great distances without resting; the loon, on the other hand, is known for its nose-dives into bodies of water. The placement of the two birds once again pairs the shaman's right side with an upward movement and his left with a downward one.

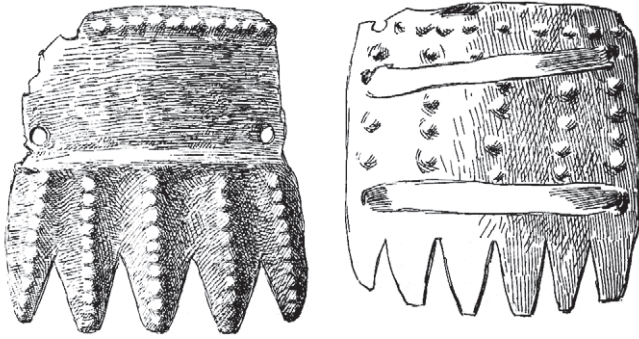


Figure 89. Metal Hands on the Nahar Shaman's Costume. Vasil'ev 1910b: 12, figs. 10 and 11.

Another detail of the Nahar costume recalls the gloves worn by Samoyed shamans, the left one having five fingers and the right four. On this Yakut costume, a metal plate representing a hand is attached to the end of each sleeve (figure 89). Like the Samoyed gloves, the left hand differs from the right: not because of a lack of fingers, but an excess—it has six, a peculiarity that most likely expresses the association of dark, dangerous forces with the left side of the shaman's body.

Numerous other metal pieces combine to depict a skeleton that is at one and the same time that of the officiant and an ancestor. As is the case in other hierarchical traditions, the Yakut costume combines modes of projection and coordination by superimposing cosmic references over the shaman's body; this imbues his gestures with an extraordinary power of evocation. When he raises his drum, he brings it to the level of the metal plates associated with the upper, celestial levels of the universe. Raising and lowering the drum and drumstick, the shaman's arms function like the needle of an altimeter scanning the cosmic dial that is the ritual costume.

Spatial Apparatus

With the costume, the coordination of immediate and virtual space is realized by inscribing the cosmic order onto the shaman's body. But beyond this fundamentally egocentric mode, which is largely based on the shaman's own proprioception, there are other apparatus that work by systematically projecting virtual space onto the ritual stage and its

surroundings. This process is sometimes achieved simply by mentally bringing the different spaces into alignment and sometimes with the help of certain material cues. In the following pages we will look at a few examples of this kind of apparatus, which I call “*geocentric*,” as opposed to “*egocentric*.”

The spirit of a deceased female shaman called “Slob-with-the-walking-stick” has settled inside the body of a Yakut woman and caused her to fall ill (Hudiakov 1969: 338–46). It falls to the shaman to convince the pathogenic spirit to remove itself from the patient’s body and then lead it to the sea of sicknesses in the lower world. To signal his descent, he mimes the downward flow of a river, then dances, jumps, and shouts “Hak-hak” as he dives, like a loon, toward the foot of the “left post,” or the northern corner of the edifice, in other words. When he gets back up, he addresses the spirit directly, singing: “I’ve brought you back to your city. Let the solar soul go back to the sun. Go off and disappear into your sea.” With these words, the shaman makes it known that he has successfully led the spirit back to the underground sea, and that it is time for him to return with the patient’s soul to the middle world which the sun shines upon. He then dances back to the “main window,” in the southern corner of the house, singing: “My people of the sun, I have come, I have freed myself from the [Slob-with-the-walking-stick’s] demonic breath.”

To depict his descent into the lower world, the shaman has chosen simply to move toward the north or northwest corner of the house, which is considered the “left, evil, and dark part” of the dwelling. It makes sense, then, that to come back up to the “solar world” he need only turn to face the south or southeast (Ksenofontov 1931: 134, 139). Whereas Khakas shamans ascend and descend by moving along the east–west axis, Yakut shamans prefer the north–south one. The relative north of the house thus becomes the absolute north of the cosmos—the lower region of the universe where the sea of sicknesses lies—while the southern corner of the house becomes the absolute south—the elevated, solar region.

In this example, the shaman’s words and movements suffice to secure the mental coordination of virtual and immediate space. But in other cases, the operation is supported by material vectors.

Before the Soviet repressions, travelers through the forests of Yakutia would often come across the strange sight of animal skins floating in the branches overhead: horse or cow hides stretched over a pole and hung in unusually shaped trees (figures 90 and 91). This pole, or *kerex kuochai*, represents the path the animal follows toward the spirit for whom it has



Figure 90. The Shamanic Sacrifice of a Horse, *Kerex Kuochai*. The skin is suspended with the dismembered carcass still on the ground. A ladder lies on the ground. MAE archives, f. 14, op. 1, d. 13, no. 8, drawing by A. Popov, 1927.



Figure 91. Skin of a Sacrificed Bull. Yakut. MAE no. 4568-106.

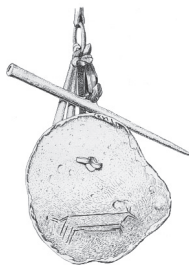


Figure 92. Detail from a Yakut Costume. Pekarskii and Vasil'ev 1910: 111, fig. 18.

been sacrificed. If the offering is made for a “demon from above,” the tip of the *kuochai* points upward and toward the south; for a “demon from below,” on the other hand, the tip points downward and toward the north. During the sacrifice ritual, the shaman climbs the tree by ladder, hangs the victim’s skin over the *kuochai* pole, then sits astride it to show that he is taking the animal to the honored spirit (Pekarskii and Popov 1927, cited by Maj 2006: 366; Popov 2008: 282–92; Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 624–25).

As a kind of cosmic compass, the *kuochai* provides an effective tool for conceiving the coordination of horizontal and vertical orientations. Thus, it is hardly surprising that miniature *kuochai* are featured on some Yakut costumes (Troshchanskii 1902: fig. 1a). It is clearly a *kuochai* that we see in figure 92, attached to the top of a plate representing the “shaman’s seat” (*oiuun oloḡo*). The fusion of these two objects on the costume provides a condensed image of the shaman’s ability to move and orient himself amid the cosmic framework comprised by the other plates.

Other apparatus are more complex: take the set of wooden Dolgan sculptures that we see in figure 93 (Vasil'ev 1910a: 279–82). The nine poles topped by birds and placed in a line represent the “stops” (*olox*) or “clouds” (*bylyt*) along the shaman’s route to the ninth sky, where he goes to ask the Creator to purify his patient’s soul (*kut*). The birds on the tallest poles, the inhabitants of each stop, sit on small platforms bearing a little cup. When in his chant the shaman announces his arrival at one of these cloud-stops, he fills the cup with reindeer milk and offers it to the spirit residing there.

Rows of wooden birds can also be used to represent the stages along the paths a shaman follows when leading a sacrificed cow to the realm of the intended spirit, as we see in the photograph of a Yakut cow sacrifice (figure 94) (Seroshevskii [1896] 1993: 623).

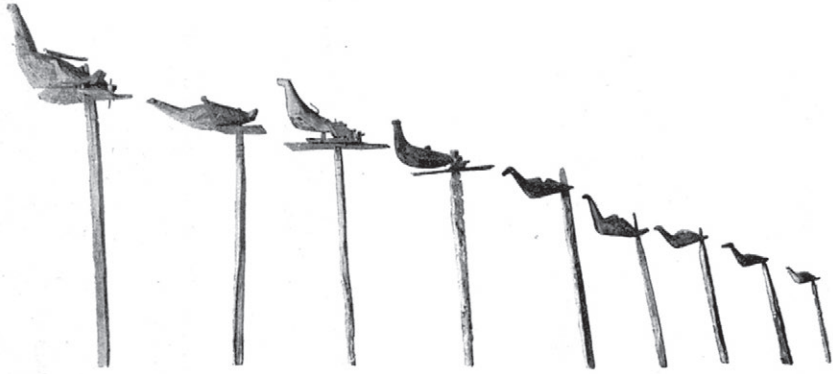


Figure 93. Spatial Apparatus Used in a Healing Ritual (Dolgan, Katanga Region). Vasil'ev 1910a: fig. 13.



Figure 94. Yakut Cow Sacrifice, early twentieth century. MAE no. 4568-106.

The shaman sometimes completes this apparatus by asking children to surround him for support. Nine boys stand to his right and nine girls to his left—a typical arrangement of the sexes that recalls certain Khakas rituals—and together they repeat the shaman's chants and imitate his movements. In his chant, the shaman compares the children to the

cranes that accompany him on his journey, and they mime the officiant's auxiliary spirits, without, however, fully embodying them, as it is well understood that the action is unfolding in distant places (Alekseev 1975: 90–91; Popov 2008: 121).

Posts and trees are powerful geocentric vectors for conceptualizing the cosmic journey, and the Yakut are among the many northern Asian peoples who make use of them. The Evenki, too, erect a post when sacrificing a reindeer and call it by its Yakut name, *serge*. It is sometimes marked with nine notches, representing the nine celestial layers, and surrounded with images of the sun and moon. Evenki practices also incorporate the *turu*, a tree used to represent the shaman's path into the sky (Vasilevich 1957). Similarly, in the Lower Amur region, the *turu* or *daru* is a pole used by the Nanai shamans and their spirits—"like a radio antenna"—to move and communicate between worlds (Smoliak 1991: 26).

In the Arctic, according to Popov, Nganasan shamans hoist themselves "like gymnasts" up their tent posts to signal their ascent to the ninth celestial layer. Once at the top, they stick their head out through the smoke hole and converse with the deity who lives there (Popov 1936: 74). Teleut shamans in the Altai, as we have seen, climb posts to show their journey's progress through the celestial strata. As part of their investiture rituals, furthermore, Shor and Buryat shamans prove their ability to move across worlds by climbing trees marked with notches (Shternberg 1927: 19–20, 23; Hangalov 1958–1960, vol. I: 382; Hlopina 1992: 142–43). In recent times, the Buryat of Mongolia have revitalized this tradition: their shamans must run for hours to the point of exhaustion, then climb to the top of a tree and sing like a cuckoo before leaping to the ground (Shimamura 2014: 218).

The use of posts and trees as axes of communication between Earth and sky is not unknown in heterarchical traditions. On various ceremonial occasions, the Chukchi and Yupik would erect a large post inside their dwellings, with the top protruding through the structure's smoke hole. While some participants beat their drum, others circle the pole in a sunwise direction (Bogoras 1904–1909: 281–82, 369). It is clear, then, that the vertical axis plays a role in heterarchical traditions; these practices cannot therefore be described as "horizontal" shamanism, though it is true that in none of these heterarchical practices do we see the shaman, or anyone else for that matter, attempt to climb the post as hierarchical specialists do.

The rituals of hierarchical shamanism implement a hybrid spatial framework in order to align the participants' immediate visible surroundings with a virtual space—the postulated invisible stage of the ritual action and anchorage point of the officiant's auxiliary spirits.

The linguistic, gestural, and material vectors that work to align these two spaces are organized around a set of common principles and interconnected by a number of reciprocal points of reference. The nine-layered vertical structure displayed on the back of the Yakut costume corresponds to the structure of the journey-song divided into nine *olox* stages. The interconnections between the different cues, across their diverse forms and material supports, form a technology of the imagination that allows participants to collectively think the complex spatial context where the shaman's agency meets with that of the spirits he summons and the gods he visits.

The conceptual effort behind this hybridized spatial framework is effective only if it is collective. The shaman must obtain the audience's participation in this singular imaginative operation of seeing the distant in the near and the cosmic in the everyday. This cognitive and imaginative participation is an important primer for the participants' broader emotional involvement in the performance. To be able to understand the shaman's gestures—rather than perceiving them as senseless, tedious gesticulations, as Western travelers did for so long—one has to mentally co-construct the invisible space they open up.

Multimodal Navels

As the reader will have noticed, certain figures and patterns have cropped up over and over again on this journey through Siberian technologies of the imagination, in a variety of different forms and on a number of different material supports: on instruments, cloaks, even boots; and sometimes incorporated into larger, more complex configurations of discourse, built environments, and movements.

These correspondences can be seen not only between different concrete objects, but also between artifacts and other semiotic modalities of the shamanic tradition: chants, the organization of the ritual setting, shamanic movements, to name a few. With the Ket, for example, we observed that the number seven creates a rhythmic structure encompassing the shaman's chants and the images adorning his drum and costume. Do the designs on the instrument determine the structure of the chant?

Does the drum replicate the images found on the costume? Or is it the other way around? In reality, no one medium has priority over the others. Each of these different concrete forms seems to refer to something else: a common abstract spatio-temporal schema. This multimodality is central to what distinguishes hierarchical traditions from heterarchical ones and the modesty of the latter's methods, largely based in orality.

Take, for example, the tool kit of an Evenki shaman: in the center of the drum's metal cross-piece is a hole that is called a "navel" (*chunguree*); another "navel" is found in the center of the shaman's apron. Representing a threshold between worlds, this navel appears in a third location, a complex ritual apparatus called the "shamanic tent," which the Evenki employed in a number of different regions throughout Siberia.⁷ Preparations for the "tent" would begin several days in advance of the ritual, with participants carving dozens of one- to two-meter-long wooden figures of fish, birds, elks, mammoths, and various anthropomorphic spirits. The apparatus as a whole is structured around the image of a cosmic river that flows down from the upper world in the east, crosses the middle world, and ends in the lower world in the west. The sculptures are installed around a conical tent with a young larch tree, the *туру*, emerging from its peak; this represents the "navel of the world" through which the shaman ascends into the upper world. The tent itself represents the middle world, halfway along the river, and the *туру* stands at its center, roots plunging down into the lower world and foliage reaching up into the skies. The door opens toward the east, onto a double row of trees planted with their tops in the ground and their roots in the air: these are the trees of the upper world; their roots reach into the sky and their foliage grows downward toward the middle world. On the other side of the tent, two symmetrical rows of trees stretch westward; these are stood upright with their roots in the ground: they are the trees of the lower world. The trees lined up along the banks of the invisible river are accompanied by carved anthro- and zoomorphic figures, stand-ins for various spirits of the upper and lower worlds. In hierarchical rituals, the river is a classic technique for integrating the vertical order of the cosmos, with its layers stacked on top of one another, and the horizontal axis of the cardinal points.

The image of the navel is one among many striking correlations between the layout of this apparatus and the shamanic costume. For

7. My description is based on Anisimov (1963) and the observations made by Makarenko in the 1910s, recently published by Klicenko (2013).

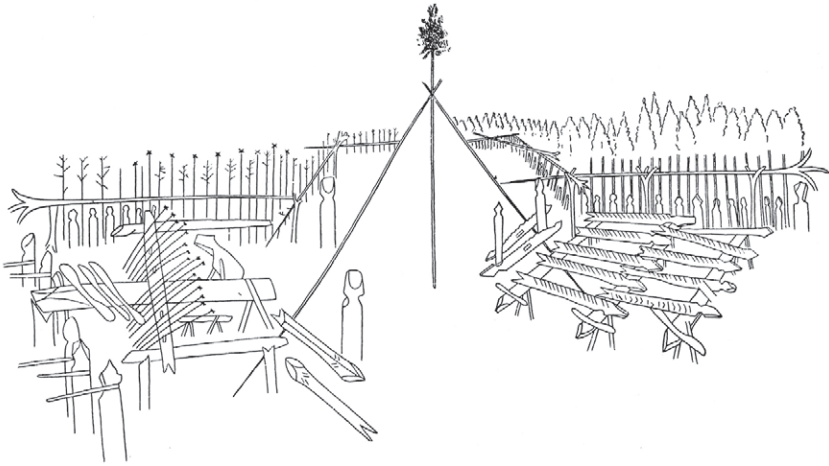


Figure 95. The Shamanic Tent Apparatus, *Podkamennaya Tunguska Evenki*. Anisimov 1963: 94, fig. 8a.

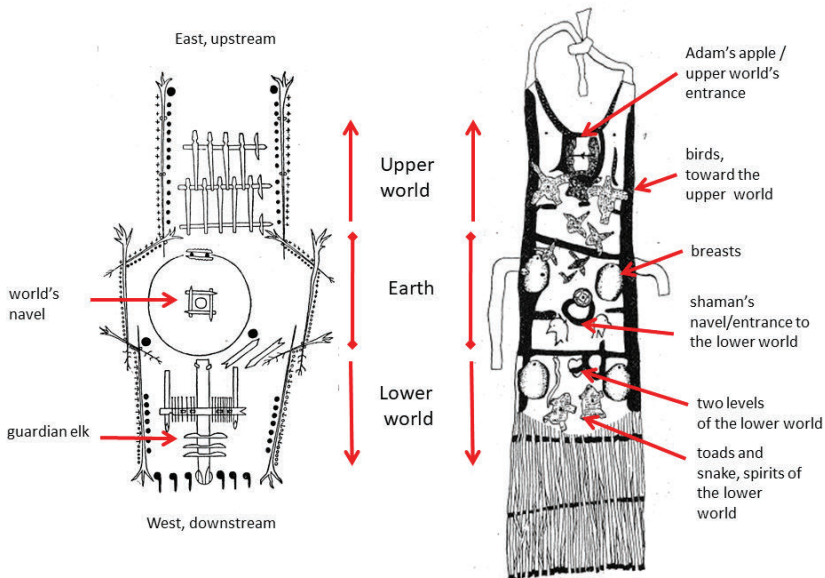


Figure 96. Correlations between the Layout of the Shamanic Tent (left) and the Apron (right). Left – Anisimov 1963: 95, fig 8b. Right – Mazin 1984: 73–74, 159.

example, certain figures from the shamanic tent, such as the *turu* tree or the elk-guardian of the lower world, reappear as metal pendants attached to the costume (Anisimov 1958: 174, fig. 20). On a broader scale, there is a topological correspondence between the ritual apparatus of the tent and the shaman's costume, in particular the apron, which is a typical feature of the ordinary, non-shamanic Evenki wardrobe. The apron of an Orochon-Evenki shaman shown in figure 96 offers a remarkable demonstration of the garment's role in associating the shaman's body with the cosmos. It is made up of two superimposed layers: the black embroidered lines representing parts of the body and, layered over them, a number of metal pendants representing different elements of the universe. On the embroidered representation of the shaman's throat hangs a metal form representing a passageway to the celestial world, guarded by two birds. Over the embroidered navel of the shaman is a circular metal ornament understood to be the entrance to the lower world, guarded by toads and snakes. If we examine them side by side (figure 96), we see that both the apron and the shamanic tent are organized around a central circle from which ascending and descending paths lead to the different layers of the universe. Both are actualizations of the same abstract spatio-temporal schema, not in the sense of a photocopied mechanical reproduction of an original, but more like a biological reproduction, reviving and propagating new instances of a common vital form.

CHAPTER 10

The Bear: From One Ontology to Another

The environments we moderns live in are devoid of predators. The most serious threats in our surroundings are posed by humans themselves, as well as their machines, which reinforces a very particular vision of man as being at the top of all pyramids and hierarchies.¹

But there are many parts of the world where this is not the case, where humans can be hunted by powerful, fast-moving animals. We know that, in these regions, humans are not always doing the eating and nonhumans are not always being eaten; the reverse could happen at any moment. There are three animals in northern Asia that sometimes prey on humans: the Siberian tiger, the wolf, and the bear. Though not the most dangerous, the bear is the largest and most common, and thus has a special status for all of the region's indigenous populations.

The Fallen Master of the Forest

All hunters are familiar with some of the bear's human-like traits: its great intelligence, the resemblance of its plantigrade tracks to human footprints, the upright posture it sometimes adopts, the strangely human shape of the body concealed by its fur. Siberian hunters nickname

1. This chapter is a revision of an earlier text, Stépanoff (2010), incorporating some new ethnographic data.

the animal “grandfather,” “man of the forest,” or “hairy man,” and often credit it with the ability to understand human speech. As an omnivorous predator, the bear is their main competitor; it is thus a surprisingly complex figure: a potential man-eater and, at the same time, an ally in the wilderness, who rules over the forest and lets humans share its game; it is often the animal incarnation of an ancestor, but also a type of game itself, a source of food and magical powers.

Because of their supposed kinship, the relationship between humans and bears is elaborately codified. The Tozhu, for example, with whom I did some fieldwork, prefer the terms *haiyrakan* (“benevolent one”) or *irei* (“grandfather”) in everyday speech over the word *adyg*, which refers more literally to the bear as a nonhuman animal. In fact, it is said that the bear has “an ear in the ground” (*cher kulaktyg*), meaning that, through the ground, it hears everything that is said, which is why naming the “animal” risks attracting its attention and angering it. The Tozhu never brag about killing a bear, in case vengeance fall on the hunter or his children. Unless it comes too close to human habitations, it is not an animal that hunters usually go out looking for. The opportunity to kill a bear has to present itself—it is not deliberately sought out—and when it does, it is understood that the animal is willingly giving itself up. When a hunter discovers a bear’s den in the forest, he will invite not only his relatives but also hunters from other camps and villages to take part in the expedition or “pay a visit” (*aaldaar*) to the forest—a euphemism quite clear to all involved, as any explicit talk of killing a bear should be avoided. With a courageous and experienced elder in charge of the expedition, the hunters plant sharp stakes in front of the den’s opening to prevent the enraged animal from charging out when they rouse it from its sleep. The elder then utters a few words, something like: “Please, master of the Taiga, we’ve come to visit you. Please wake up. We have come to visit you. Don’t shout, don’t scream, don’t think to harm us.” Or: “Let him be gentle, we’re lucky for what the earth has given us” (*“Bo oran biske berip turar olchazy-dyr, chymchak bolzun,”* Tozhu interview, 2008).

To fire a rifle into the den before waking its slumbering inhabitant would be considered disloyal or aggressive, so the hunters first poke the bear with a stick to wake it up or send a dog into the den. When the angry bear emerges, the elder, who stands across from the opening, shoots it. The consequences of a missed shot can be dire, but otherwise the bear is then butchered: the fur goes to the hunter who spotted the den, the back and head to the elder who fired the shot, and the bile—used for

medicinal purposes—to a distinguished guest. The meat is taken back to the village and shared among relatives and neighbors, according to age.

Older ethnographic sources report that the Tozhu used to follow a custom widespread in Siberia: they would dance around the body, cawing, to convince the bear that it was being eaten by crows and not humans (Vainshtein 1961). These days, they hang small pieces of fat and meat from a tree near the site of the slaughter and, when this offering is put in place, formally announce: “This share is for the birds of the mountain country!” This should be seen as a way of thanking and encouraging the crows, who, according to the hunters, sometimes guide them to the hiding places of larger animals—deer or bears. The bear’s head is handled differently: first the meat is cooked and distributed, then the hunter who received the skull blackens it with charcoal, wraps it in white cloth, and hangs it from a tree.

It was with tears in his eyes that one hunter described to me the shame he felt for having on one occasion “received too much.” He and his party had discovered a den and sent in a dog to wake the bear, who then charged out furiously and was shot by my interlocutor. The dog was sent back in and out came another bear. The hunters were delighted at first to see their luck doubled. But then the dog was sent in once more and drove out a cub, which had to be shot because it no longer had a mother to feed it. And then, to the hunters’ dismay, the dog brought back out yet another cub, which was also shot. The now horrified hunters all joined in with libations and juniper fumigations, saying prayers (*chalbaryg*) to ask “forgiveness for having found so many bears.” The hunter who told me about this event, still distraught, was given one of the skulls, which he hung in the forest from a personal sacred tree. But why kill all these bears, one might ask, if the hunters themselves felt such sorrow and remorse that the episode would haunt them for years to come? The problem is that finding a bear is not a personal decision, but a matter of good luck (*olcha*); it is a gift that cannot be refused, no matter how guilty you may feel about it. It is a blessing offered by the mountains, the forest, the bear itself. Those who fail to honor such good fortune risk seeing it denied them in the future.

Bear paws are dried and kept as talismans, hung from bedposts or doorframes at the house entrance. They often belong to the mistress of the house and are handed down from mother to daughter over several generations. Hung over an entranceway, the paw is supposed to protect a house from pathogenic spirits. It can also be attached to a cradle, with the words: “May the master of the Taiga protect and watch over

my child, and may it grow up disease free” (*“Meen uruun aaryg-arzbyk chok össün, taiga eezi karatap kamgalap chorzun,”* Tozhu interview, 2008).² It is also used to help women in childbirth and to cure mastitis. Hung near a bed, on the female side of the yurt and not far from the door, it occupies the same position as the bear amulet in the Khakas dwelling, which is used to treat diarrhea as well as venereal and other female diseases. The Telenghit hang bear paws from the left (female) side of door-frame to represent the spirit Karash, son of Erlik, emperor of the lower world. The bear—sometimes a servant of Erlik’s—is clearly located on the female and low side of the house’s topological system, whose points of intersection with the bodily schema and the cosmic order we have already discussed. In our conversations about hunting, I have heard both the Tuvans and the Khakas refer to the bear as “the master of the forest”; but in other circumstances the animal seems to be demoted to the lowest rank of the cosmos.³ It seems that when hunters come face-to-face with a bear, they grant it an almost sovereign power of agency, but the animal loses its autonomy and dignity when situated in the topological order of the house. Here it is seen as a chthonian animal that spends half of the year underground and is therefore associated with the bottom layers of the world and, by analogy, the lower orifices of the body, as well as the female body more generally and the particular diseases that affect it. The master of the forest is also the patron saint of diarrhea and childbirth.

The bear’s demotion is also represented on shamanic drums. The Khakas example shown in figure 97 is divided into two halves, as is typical of this group’s instruments: in the upper section are stars, birds, and other celestial entities, while beings from the earth and the subterranean world are confined to the lower part of the drumskin. The “masters of the mountains” are represented on this instrument as horsemen. Their sons and daughters stand in a row in the lower section, just below the dividing line, surrounded by dogs and herds of horses.

Gathered at the very bottom of the instrument, we see a swarm of fish, snakes, and frogs, “servants” of Emperor Erlik, a deity too dignified to be represented. Among them walks the bear, who is thus here depicted as another of Erlik’s submissives, and not as the “master of the forest.”

2. On the paw’s role in childbirth and as a treatment for mastitis, see D’iakonova 1981b: 148.

3. A demotion it is tempting to compare to that seen in the Medieval West, the bear as “fallen king” described by Michel Pastoureau (2011).



Figure 97. Figures on a Khakas Drum. Ivanov 1955: 208, fig. 20.



Figure 98. Evenki Drum. Ivanov 1954: 175.

These negative associations go well beyond the Turko-Mongolic world: we have already encountered black bears on the bottom part of a Selkup drum. Selkup shamans, furthermore, would put on bearskin costumes when traveling to the lower world. Evenki hunters, on the other hand, think of the plantigrade animal as a culture hero: it was the bear who gave mankind fire, tools, and domesticated reindeer. But there is a discrepancy between this conception and the shamanic iconography

seen on Evenki drums; on the instrument reproduced in figure 98, the bear is painted in black and placed on the nocturnal part of the drum (the sinister side), near the moon, while all the other figures are painted in red ochre (Anisimov 1958: 129).

If we frame the discrepancy according to the *modes of identification* elaborated by Philippe Descola, we could say that, for societies practicing hierarchical shamanism, the bear is alternately perceived from an “animist” position from which it is honored, and an “analogical” one that relativizes or even degrades its status (Descola 2013). During the hunt, the bear is treated as a being that understands human language and with whom one should respect certain social relations. The care taken with the body once the animal has been slain ensures the preservation of its soul and its future rebirth. All of this evokes an animist conception of the animal. But as it is represented in both domestic space and shamanic imagery, the bear is just one part of a cosmic system divided into several hierarchically organized levels—segregated layers pierced only by trees, ladders, rainbows, and the various other back-channels shamans use to move between celestial and infernal empires. Such a cosmography closely resembles what Descola describes as an analogical system, characterized, on the one hand, by a breakdown of beings into separate, heterogeneous categories and, on the other, the use of analogical correspondences between these domains to build connections between them. Indeed, many characteristics of Siberian hierarchical societies—the interplay between microcosm and macrocosm as well as that between the body and the home, the use of cosmograms, and the integration of the part within the whole—are typical of analogical systems.

Among the Mountain People

Beyond the hierarchical world, ceremonies honoring the bear were a central part of social and ritual life for a number of heterarchical societies: the Ugrian of the Ob River in western Siberia, for example, and the Nivkh in the Siberian Far East. The latter present a textbook case of the animist worldview.

Speakers of an isolated Paleo-Asiatic language, at the beginning of the twentieth century the Nivkh population numbered some five thousand people settled in the lower Amur Valley and on the island of Sakhalin, just north of Japan. For the most part sedentary, they subsisted

on fishing, hunting, and gathering. Their only domestic animals were sled dogs, which were sometimes sacrificed and eaten.

The Russian ethnologist Lev Shternberg formulated a remarkably original theory of animism from his time with the Nivkh during a period of exile he spent on Sakhalin in the late nineteenth century (1889–1897). While Edward Tylor defined animism as “the belief in spiritual beings,” Shternberg sums up the “animist” worldview as follows: “Animals and spirits are different from humans only because they appear to them in different guises.” The animist sees the world as “a symbiosis of beings that differ only in their outward appearances while being similar in nature. For him, the world is a single society of men, animals and spirits” (Shternberg 1927: 48–49). Thus in animism, familiar oppositions between the intentional and the natural, the human and the animal, give way to the overarching contrast between a diversity of appearances and a common inner principle, one that allows relations between the different species to take on a social character. Shternberg’s conception thus has a strong affinity with contemporary anthropological definitions of animism.

The Nivkh recognize numerous animal species as having lives similar to their own. The notion of humanity itself, in fact, is in no way reserved for the Nivkh alone. They offer a remarkable illustration on the Asian continent of what Amazonianist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “cosmological deixis.” According to Viveiros de Castro, the terms that some Amazonian societies use to name themselves, which are usually translated as “the people” or “mankind,” refer less to the human species as a determinate category than they do a subject position, which would better rendered as “we” or “us” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 476–77). Similarly the ethnonym *nivhgu* (plural of *nivh*) is usually glossed as “the people,” though it could be more literally translated as “those of my village” (Beffa 1982: 16). But the Nivkh do not believe that they are the only ones to consider themselves an “us” living in a village: their oral and ritual traditions refer to several other *nivhgu* collectives that are closely associated with the particular environments they inhabit. There are, for example, the *tly nivhgu*—“those whose village is in the sky” or, more simply, “the sky people”—who cast their fishing rods down through the clouds to catch humans. “The sea people” are the orcas, who, when out of sight of the Nivkh, sometimes remove their “shells” and play on the beach as humans dressed in white. As for “the mountain people” (*pal nivhgu*), they are the bears, who the Nivkh consider their main trading partners. Quite logically, then, in their own

conversations “the mountain people” are believed to talk about humans as “lowland people.” The only thing that distinguishes these different types of “people” from one another is their typical environment, their social milieu in other words.

Here’s an abridged account of how the Nivkh learned that bears are “mountain people” and that they are in fact deceased humans disguised in furs.

One autumn, long ago, a Nivkh man went hunting. Suddenly there was a mighty wind and a storm burst. The man could no longer see anything; he was lost. He wandered around, with nothing to eat or drink. He came across some bear tracks and followed them, intending to kill the animal. He walked for a long time, all the way to the den. He threw stakes into it, but to no avail, then said to himself in despair: “What misfortune, all I can do now is die!” He entered the den and discovered a brightly lit human dwelling. The people there treated him well, fed him, and he stayed there, living with them. When springtime came, the den’s inhabitants said: “Our friends from the lowlands are coming to visit us the day after tomorrow. Who will go with our comrades down to the lowlands?” They peered out through the den’s entrance and the hero recognized some hunter-friends from his village. A woman stepped forward, put on a bear fur, and went out. She put up a bit of a fight but soon let herself be killed, not wanting to injure any of the hunters unnecessarily. They cut her up, cooked the meat, and ate it. The man thought: “I understand now: these are people just like us. I’ve seen how we kill them and eat their flesh. So we eat the meat of people like us. We didn’t know that bears are people too. If I ever go back, I’ll explain this all. I’m going to stay here a little longer, I want to learn how the mountain people live.” Four days later, the woman returned with dogs and food: the dogs were those that had been sacrificed to the slain bear and the food given to her as an offering. The woman took the hero aside and said: “Do you still think you got here because you lost your way in the woods? We played a trick on you. We led you astray so we could take you in and explain our ways to you. Don’t think of us as different. Everyone here is your elder, and me, I am your wife, that’s why I talk and joke around with you. Now you know the laws of the mountain people. Go down to your village and tell the Nivkh. Your tale will become a legend.” This bear-woman was the hunter’s deceased wife. The next day, the man went down to his village and was greeted with joy, and he shared all he had learned. Ever since, people have known that the bear is a

mountain person and that mountain people live in clans (adapted from Kreinovich 1973: 170–75).

In everyday life, the Nivkh employed a number of interpretative schemes that varied according to different practical circumstances. The bear, usually called *t'hyf*, was only referred to as a “mountain man” in specific contexts: in ritual discourse, for example, or in legends, where the animal is depicted among its own people and as it lives in its own environment—as a subject embedded in a network of social relations of the same order as those that bind humans together. When the bear “puts on his fur coat”—a widespread motif in both Siberian and Indigenous American animism—it willingly dons a creaturely form that signals its position as a willing game animal.

For the Nivkh, the bodily forms that different kinds of beings assume are not determined by the fixed perspectives built into their identity as members of a particular species, but by the positions they occupy in the dynamic play of relations between them. A being with whom you establish a social relationship appears to you in human form; but when you enter into a relationship of violence and predation with that same being, it becomes for you, both relationally and visually, an animal. In folktales, humans can appear to bears in either human or bear form depending on where the interaction takes place and on the intentions, hostile or friendly, of the protagonists. When a weak and bad-tempered man stumbles unexpectedly upon the home of the “mountain people,” they tie him to posts and do to him what would be done to one of their own at the Nivkh “bear festival”; in these circumstances, the bears see the human as a game animal. This contextual mode of identifying bodies has remarkable consequences for the way different beings are represented.

The “bear festival” was a culminating point of Nivkh social life. Following the death of a child, the father would capture a bear cub and raise it in a cage. Sometimes the child’s mother would even breast-feed it. When three years had passed, the animal would be put to death over the course of a feast that lasted several days. The head, still covered in fur, would be placed in the honorable part of the house next to a figurine embodying the animal’s soul. This wooden sculpture represented either a bear seated in a human position and dressed in Nivkh clothing or, in some cases, a distinctly anthropomorphic character. During the feast, fish, sugar, and tobacco would be placed in front of the figurine, just as they would have been for a distinguished guest. Sometimes a young

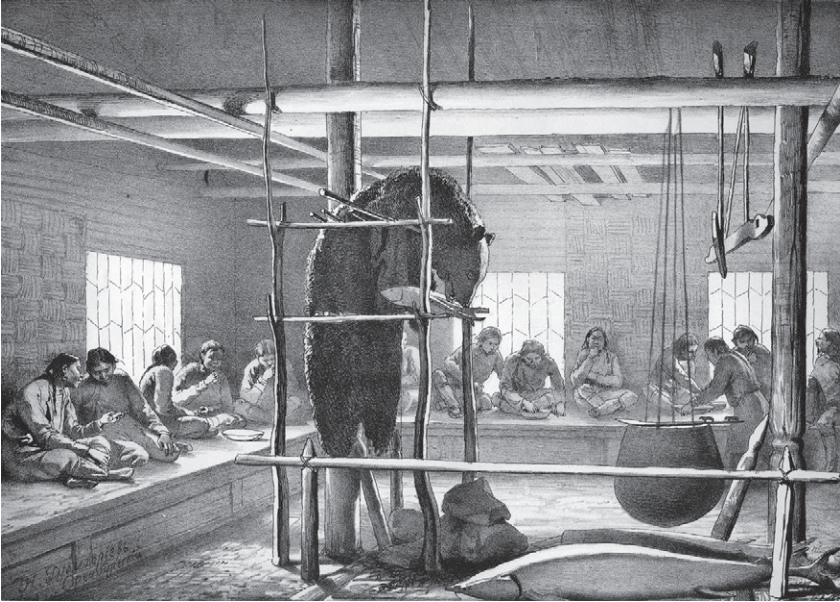


Figure 99. Bear Remains (Head and Hide), Honored and Fed During the Nivkh Bear Festival, middle of the nineteenth century. Shrenk 1903: pl. 49.

boy would play the role of the bear's soul, and the attendees would address him as they would the animal (Shrenk 1903: 82; Shternberg 1916: 185–87; Kreinovich 1973: 219).

Meanwhile, the elders would have cut the animal's flesh into pieces and used various sacred instruments to prepare the meat. Some serving dishes, made for the occasion, were decorated with sculpted realistic figures, which would present a kind of pictographic chronicle of the events surrounding the bear's death. If the animal had been hunted, the itinerary of the expedition and chase would be represented by the bear's footprints along with those of the hunters and their dogs. When the slain animal had been raised in the camp, it would be depicted at certain stages of the ritual, in chains or already butchered.⁴ The serving dish from the Musée du Quai Branly collection (figure 100) features two bears superposed, showing that the two animals were killed at the same time.

Between the figurine in the honorable corner and the dishes used to serve the animal's flesh, the bear festival thus mobilizes two concomitant

4. "The sculpture on the dishes attempts to render the position of the bear at different moments in the festival" (Shrenk 1903: 84).



Figure 100. Nivkh Platter Used in the Bear Festival, early twentieth century. MQB no. 71.1966.46.61.

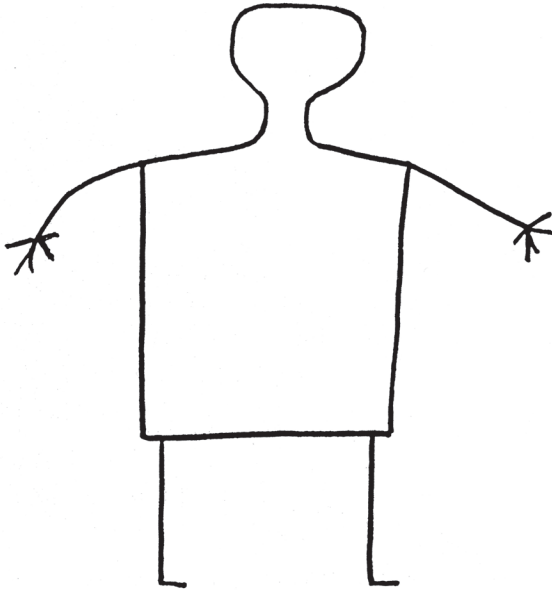


Figure 101. Ket Anthropomorphic Representation of a Bear, from the Podkamennaya Tunguska. Alekseenko 1968: fig. 1.

figurations of the same being, one relating to its soul, the other to its body. But rather than as receptacles for the two substances that make up the animal (aligning with the mind-matter dualism of a modern, naturalist ontology), these different modes of figuration are better understood as materializations of the relational aspects in which the bear is conceived. As a visitor to the “lowland” from the “mountain,” the animal

has its rightful place on the bench of honor, where it is fed. Though living a long way from the Nivkh, another Paleo-Asiatic people, the Ket in western Siberia, also adopted cubs and held a bear festival, albeit a less elaborate one. Remarkably, the Ket also made an anthropomorphic image of the deceased bear's soul and placed it in the honorable section of their tents, where it was offered food and gifts (figure 101). Both the Ket and the Nivkh thought of certain bears as recently deceased humans come back to visit them, and shared a number of related customs—they observed identical practices, for example, for taking revenge on a bear that had killed a human (Aleksenko 1968: 183–87; Kreinovich 1969). Both groups also practiced the dark-tent ritual, which, when considered alongside these other points of similarity with the Nivkh, would seem to confirm that the Ket belonged at one time to the heterarchical world and that their hierarchical shamanic practices were borrowed from other, Altaic cultures. This hypothesis is further reinforced by recent paleogenomic findings that bring to light historical ties between the Ket and the Paleo-Asiatic populations of the Pacific (see chapter 3).

But in the Nivkh festival, the bear is not only fed, it is at the same time eaten. According to what we might call a “rule of context-dependent bodies,” the physical appearance in which a being presents itself to you depends on the type of relationship you have with it. Thus, on the serving dishes, the bear is depicted in zoomorphic form, assuming the relational position of a game animal, a being that is killed and consumed by humans. Here as well, we should note, the bear's ears are usually visible, while they are very rarely shown in images of the bear as a “mountain person,” like those displayed in the honorable corner of the house. The bear's eyes, on the other hand, are usually depicted on the latter anthropomorphic images, but not on the former zoomorphic representations. This contrast is readily explained: while the bear's eyes resemble those of humans and thus represent a common feature between the two species, the bear's ears—placed on the top of the head as opposed to its sides—are clear markers of a nonhuman body (Ostrovskii 1997: 103–4).

These two figurative styles encapsulate the paradox of the bear festival: the simultaneous treatment of the animal as a distinguished guest and as a culinary delicacy. In an animist system, it is vital to follow meticulous ritual procedures so as not to eat the animal as a subject, but simply as harvested meat (Fausto 2007). The anthropomorphic figurine shows that the subjective aspect of the bear is set aside and treated with due hospitality, while what is eaten is no more than inanimate flesh.

The tamed animal—now a hybrid being affiliated with both the human and bear communities—is given a fundamental role in the festival as a mediator between worlds, seeing as its soul is supposed to share the food offerings with the bears of the mountain and thus help to maintain good relations between bears and humans. The attribution of this mediating function represents a clear difference between this festival and any sacrificial practice: the slain animal is not offered up to any divine beings but is itself the recipient of gifts. As a mediator between the human and the animal, the visible and the invisible, life and death, the bear's function has more in common with the role played by shamans in hierarchical societies; indeed, the potential rivalry between the tamed bear and the shaman is a compelling explanation for why Nivkh shamans were forbidden to participate in the bear festival.

Comparing Nivkh bear iconography to that of the Turkic-speaking populations of the Altai-Sayan region (the Tuvans and Khakas) provides some interesting insights into different ways of conceptualizing human and nonhuman relations. Nivkh iconography is marked by the dualism between an animal body and an anthropomorphic soul, as well as by a clear principle of individuation. Each image of a bear represents a particular animal and may even include pictographic drawings that contain details of the specific hunting expedition in which that individual was captured or killed. The image records a specific encounter with a bear in which the animal is represented as a nonhuman person. Something different is going on in Altaic customs. While the Nivkh see the bear as a being "from above," in the Altai-Sayan region it is associated with the world "below." While the Nivkh place the bear's remains in the honorable corner of the home during the feast, in Altai-Sayan houses they are left in the least prestigious area. Nowhere in the Altai-Sayan world, we might add, is the bear represented as a specific individual, not in the home nor on the drum. Its image on the instrument is reduced to a stereotype, a symbol caught up in an ordered network of evocations, and thus always refers to something other than the bear itself: to the god of the lower world, to night, to femininity.

It would be rash, however, to conclude from all this that the imaginative regime of the heterarchical world should be strictly identified with animism and the hierarchical one with analogism. In hierarchical traditions, the animistic attitudes that frame hunting practices coexist with analogical cosmic schemas that structure domestic space and shamanic rituals. It is possible to recognize many central features of the Nivkh-bear relationship shifted to a marginal position in Altai-Sayan societies,

and vice versa. Both the Altai and the Khakas held bear festivals, for example, but the animation rite performed for the shamanic drum had a far greater federating role for these groups. Like many other hierarchical societies, the Altai and Khakas also told myths that portrayed the bear as a man disguised as an animal. The Altai attributed souls to wild animals and made figurines of them to help reproduce game; but making these animistic images was a secret practice that was exclusive to hunters. Conversely, the Nivkh sometimes referred to bears not as “mountain men,” but as the dogs of a mountain master spirit, repositioning them as the pets of an anthropomorphic entity.

Animism permeates the whole of northern Asia, and its influence is acutely felt in both hunting and herding contexts, where the technical and ritual treatment of animals easily lend themselves to an exploration of nonhuman subjectivity (Stépanoff et al. 2017). Analogism, on the other hand, is confined to the hierarchical world and is seen most clearly in ritual techniques that attempt to organize the cosmos holistically.

PART THREE

The Great Expansion of Hierarchy

CHAPTER 11

A Continent-Wide Expansion

In the previous section of this book, we explored the workings of several hierarchical models for coordinating a collective relationship with the invisible. But where did these powerful techniques come from? If the dark tent and other conventions of the heterarchical tradition represent an older circumpolar substratum that extends across Siberia and well beyond the Bering Strait, how did the hierarchical regimes of northern Asia come to marginalize it so thoroughly? The existing literature offers no ready-made explanations, nor even any compelling avenues to pursue; the habit of considering shamanic traditions immutable relics from the dawn of time is so strong that authors have rarely troubled themselves over their historical origins or development. But it is, nonetheless, of the utmost importance to understand why and how communities come to take up the various hierarchical regimes of imagination through which they delegate important aspects of their relationship with the world.

On the Trail of Ostentation: Transparent Chests

We will begin our line of inquiry by looking into a singular way of representing the shamanic body. One of the most striking features of hierarchical costumes stems from the principles of projection and coordination: the depiction, on the outside of the costume, of the specialist's

body, often his skeleton or other specific organs—in short, those parts encapsulating the essence of what makes the shaman different from ordinary humans. This feature reinforces essentialist conceptions regarding certain physical qualities of the hierarchical shaman's body. Though there are several ways of doing this on the costume, one stands out for the extraordinary distance it seems to have spread: this is the image of a thorax with a circle at its center.

In the Sayan Mountains—on the border of Siberia and Mongolia—the image of a thorax is embroidered in white reindeer fur on the costumes of Tofalar, Dukha, and Tozhu shamans, sometimes with a metal disk at its center (Vainshtein 1961: 185; Vasil'ev 1910b: 76; Badamxatan 1987: 122). If we head further north, down the Yenisei River, we meet the Evenki shamans of the Podkamennaya Tunguska, who also have an embroidered thorax on their aprons (Prokof'eva 1971: 24). Still further downstream are the Samoyedic-speaking Selkup and, if we continue all the way to the Yenisei Gulf, we find the Enets on the left bank of the river and the Nganasan on the right: the shamans of each of these groups wear aprons decorated with an embroidered thorax and central circle with various metal pendants hanging above it (figure 102).

The ribs are often made of metal and accompanied by a disk, as is the case with the Dolgan, for example, as well as some Evenki groups from the eastern Baikal region.¹ For the Yakut, who dominate much of central Siberia, and several other Evenki groups, the metal ribs are attached to the left and right panels of the coat for lack of space on the apron, where there are instead images of the breasts and navel, among other things. The same basic pattern is even found on the costumes of Daur shamans in Manchuria, where among a multitude of dazzling pendants are twelve black bands representing human ribs and joints (Humphrey and Urgunge 1996: 204–5). From the Altai to the Arctic, from the Yenisei to Manchuria, the stability of the pattern is striking: another testimony to the coherence of the hierarchical world.

The figure is perhaps most clearly articulated in a relatively recent petroglyph (no more than a few centuries old) found in Ukyr, in the Kuda steppe of the Cisbaikal region (figure 103).

In many regions, the open circle in the middle of the chest is referred to as the shaman's "navel."² On the Yakut apron shown in figure 104, for

1. The Barguzin and Nerchinsk regions: Shirokogoroff 1935: 289.
2. On the Orochen Evenki, the Yakut, and the Enets, see Prokof'eva 1971: 15; on the Nganasan, see Popov 1984.



Figure 102. Left: Female Tofa Shaman (Karagas), 1910. Vasil'ev 1910b: 73, fig. 15. Right: Apron of a Nganasan Shaman, stripped of its metal ornaments. RME no. 146-31, Grusman 2006: 143.

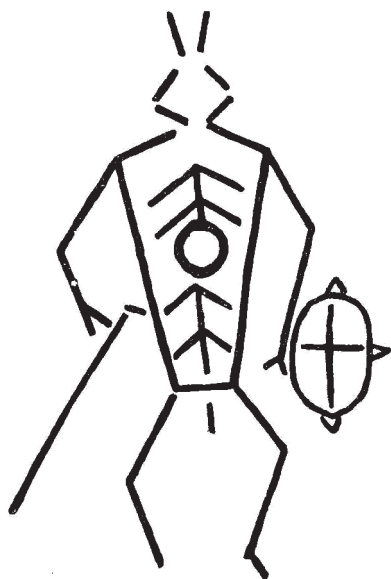


Figure 103. Ukyr Petroglyph in the Cisbaikal Region. Mihailov 1987: 97.

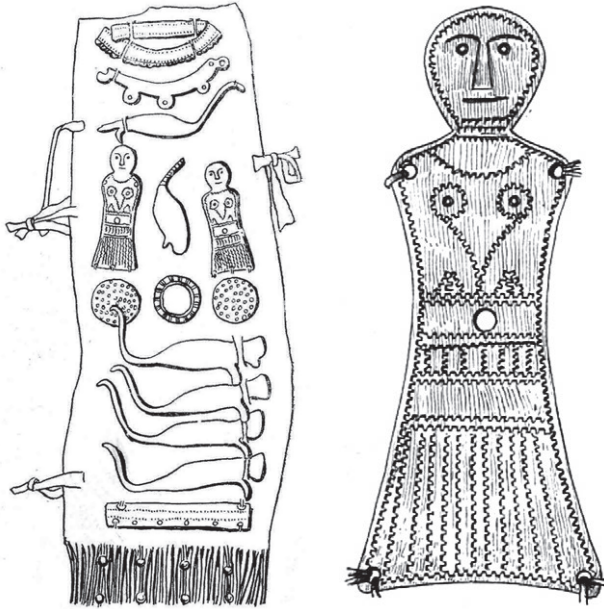


Figure 104. Left: Apron of a Yakut Shaman's Costume with a hole in the center between two plates representing breasts. Right: Metal Plate Representing an Ancestral Shaman, or *emeget*, with the same hole in the navel. Pekarskii and Vasil'ev 1910: 98, 102.

example, the navel is represented by an actual hole framed by a metal ring sewn into the middle of the garment. The owner would stab himself through this opening to prove that his body had “holes” (*oibon*) under the skin, and thus demonstrate that “he is no charlatan, but a genuine shaman” (Popov 1947: 289; cf. Seroshevskii [1896] 1996: 608; Popov 2008: 60). One amusing Yakut story tells of a man who unexpectedly discovered his shamanic calling when, one bright sunny day, he noticed holes in his shadow and thus learned that he had an “open” body. Remarkably, the metal plates hanging from the same apron—both of which depict the shaman's ancestor (*emeget*)—also have a hole at the figure's navel (see figure 104, right): a vertiginous *mise en abyme* of the hereditary transmission of this particular feature of the shamanic body.

It is possible that this recurrent image was inspired by real cases of an anatomical variation known as a *sternal foramen*—a hole in the sternum, in other words, usually located between the third and fourth pairs of ribs—a not uncommon congenital anomaly, affecting one person in twenty (Yekeler et al. 2006).

The Yakut example above echoes something we were able to observe in the previous section of this book, namely that the bones and organs represented on the apron share the surface with several images of animals, celestial bodies, and birds that refer to spaces beyond the shamanic body. But how did this schematization of the body and universe—and the modes of projection and coordination on which it is based—reach so many different populations? This image may offer us a valuable way of tracing the paths of expansion that such essentialist representations of the professional shaman, and thus hierarchical shamanism itself, followed across northern Asia.

The Apron's Conquest

One avenue is suggested by the ordinary material support of the image: the apron, a very particular item of clothing covering the chest and stomach.³ For some groups, the apron is a perfectly ordinary garment that might be worn every day, while for others it is quite an unusual item that only features in the shamanic costume. It is reasonable to presume that the shamanic apron originated with the former.

Siberian coats fall into two main categories: the paneled coat, which you put on one arm at a time, and the parka, which does not open and is slipped on over the head, like a dress. The parka offers better protection from the cold and wind: it is worn by Arctic groups such as the Nenets (to whom we owe the word “parka”) and the Eskimo (who gave us the variant “anorak”) (Levin and Potapov 1961). The apron is used to cover the gap left between the flaps of an open coat and thus cannot have originated in the Arctic regions where the parka is worn.

While for the Ket, Selkup, Nganasan, Enets, Yakut, Buryat, and Daur, the apron is a part of the shamanic costume but does not feature in ordinary dress, it is an integral part of the everyday wardrobe for the Tungus and the Yukaghir. Because the Yukaghir have been steadily losing territory over the last millennium, the expansion of the shamanic apron cannot have originated with them. It is therefore to the Tungus

3. In the Tofolar and Tozhu costume, the apron may be either a distinct individual element or an embroidered figure on the left panel of the costume, which folds over the chest and fastens on the right side of the body. In the latter case, it is intended to imitate an apron, as is clear from the false buttons that appear to fasten it on the left-hand side (Prokof'eva 1971: 74).

(the Evenki and the Even)—who in fact contributed to the Yukaghir's decline—that our inquiry must turn.

The Tungus kaftan is made from a whole deer skin, with a few supplemental pieces added on to make the sleeves. The skin is not usually large enough for the coat to close, which is why an apron is essential to protect the owner's chest and stomach from the cold (Prokof'eva 1971: 24).⁴ The cut of the shamanic costume roughly follows that of the ordinary outfit and, if you put aside its metal ornaments, it is more or less identical to the costumes worn by the Yenisei Evenki during their major ritual ceremonies.

It is for these reasons that both Glafira Vasilevich and Ekaterina Prokofiev have argued that the shamanic costumes of numerous central Siberian groups and beyond stem from the Tungus ceremonial costume (Prokof'eva 1971: 34; Vasilevich 1949: 60–61). We know from the archeology of Glazkovo burial sites that the Tungus-style apron was already worn by Bronze Age hunter-gatherers in the Baikal region of southern Siberia (Okladnikov 1955). That is one of the reasons why the Tungus are thought to have come from this region. As highly mobile hunter-gatherers who traveled on reindeer, the Tungus penetrated some extraordinarily vast territories as they migrated throughout the Siberian taiga. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, for example, they encroached on the territories of the Ket—Paleo-Asiatic hunter-gatherers, who did not at this time raise reindeer and who had already fled various Turkic-speaking populations—and the Tungus quickly gained the upper hand: as James Forsyth writes, “Culturally [...] the Kets were dominated by the Tungus, so that by the 1680s, they were much reduced as a distinct ethnic group” (Forsyth 1992: 58). With the Tungus expansion, the shamanic apron spread down the Yenisei to the shores of the Arctic, through the Ket, Selkup, Enets, and Nganasan populations; into northeastern Siberia along the Lena, reaching the Yakut and Dolgan; and finally along the Amur, into Manchuria and all the way to the Pacific, to the Udeghe, Neghidai, and Daur. The apron became such an essential item for Udeghe shamans that they feared losing their voice or even their life if someone were to tear it. The rib-adorned apron worn by

4. That the apron is commonly associated with the Tungus is apparent in the Nganasan vocabulary: on the Nganasan costume there is an ornament resembling the Tungus apron which is called a *bojjamo*, a term derived from the Tungus *beieme*, “human.”

Buryat shamans also appears to have been borrowed from their Tungus neighbors (Ivanov 1954: 359–61; Prokof'eva 1971).

The apron and kaftan were vehicles for ritual techniques and particular ways of understanding what a shaman is. For a number of groups with heterarchical traditions, it was this Altaic influence that imposed the rise of hierarchical shamanism. This was probably the case for the Selkup and the Ket, both of whose shamanic traditions include clear references to the Turkic and Mongolian horsemen of the steppe. And this is certainly what happened to the Yukaghir, as we shall see.

The Fall of Heterarchy

Because the transformation of their shamanic practices was recent enough to have been partially observed and described by ethnologists, the case of the Yukaghir is particularly illuminating. Members of the Paleo-Asiatic linguistic family, the Yukaghir and their ancestors once formed a powerful group of hunter-fishers who dominated the whole of northeastern Siberia. From the Lena River to the Pacific, the twelve tribes comprising the group occupied a territory half the size of Europe. But unlike their Yakut neighbors, they had no lords to rule over their lands: the only figures with any authority were “elders,” “great hunters,” and shamans. Their decline was staggeringly brutal. Starting in the seventeenth century, the combination of Russian colonization and the expansion of the Tungus, Yakut, and then Chukchi herding populations led to the annihilation or assimilation of most of the Yukaghir tribes. Having long been isolated, the Yukaghir were less immune than the Altaic groups, who had been in contact with populations to the south and west since the Bronze Age, and therefore more vulnerable than the Yakut to the virulent pathogens brought by contact with the Russians. Recurrent and devastating smallpox epidemics drove their mortality rate as high as sixty percent. The declining population of game animals, driven away by the growing herds of their neighbors, led to terrible famines, severe enough in some cases to reduce the Yukaghir to cannibalism. Furthermore, the Tungus would attack Yukaghir groups and enslave their prisoners. Ultimately, the Yukaghir population fell almost tenfold, from four-and-a-half thousand in the seventeenth century to just five hundred by the end of the nineteenth century, with their territory reduced to the Kolyma basin. By the beginning of the twentieth century, they had largely abandoned their own language for Tungus (Even), Yakut,

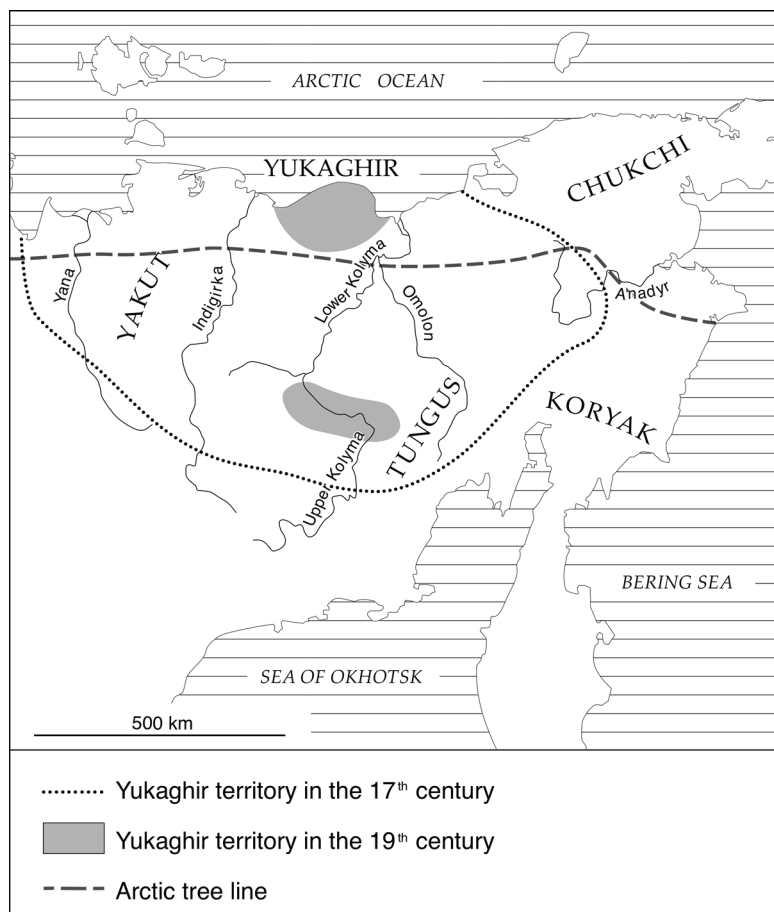


Figure 105. Autochthonous Populations of Northeast Siberia at the end of the nineteenth century. After Jochelson 1926.

Russian, and Chukchi (Gogolev et al. 1975: 16–18, 28–29; Jochelson 1926: 59–60; Bahrushin and Tokarev 1953: 192).

In the tundra regions of the lower Kolyma, the Yukaghir adopted the Tungus way of life, based largely on reindeer herding. Further south though, in the taiga, the Yukaghir of the upper Kolyma still maintain an economy based on fishing, hunting, and gathering, and remain one of the few Siberian populations not to have taken up reindeer herding, not even as a mode of transport.

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, before the Tungus influence became omnipresent, Yukaghir shamanism resembled that of

the other Paleo-Asiatic cultures of northeastern Siberia: the Chukchi and the Koryak. Each family had their own drum and were free to use it to perform their own domestic rituals. These drums were similar to those of the Koryak: round and with a central handle made from braided strips of sinew stretched across the wooden frame to form a Saint Andrew's cross. Made of wood, leather, and sinew, and very rarely featuring any metal pendants, the drum could have been constructed by any family without great difficulty (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 56; Jochelson 1926: 195; Bogoraz 1910: 7).

There were no ornaments—cosmic or otherwise—on the costumes of the old Yukaghir shamans, all of whom were men. Some embroidery and tassels, typically found on women's clothing, gave the costume a certain feminine aspect, but this was all that distinguished it from the ordinary male outfit. The coat was sewn in the Yukaghir way, with furs on the outside, creating a beautiful play of colors with the different natural shades of hair, and with no fur on the inside, as was the Tungus style. A practice typical of heterarchical groups, which the old Yukaghir shared with their Koryak and Chukchi neighbors, was the regular consumption of fly agaric mushrooms (as well as the urine of those intoxicated by it) to inspire visions and chants (Jochelson 1926: 419; Georgi 1776–1777, vol. 3: 71).

But the shamanism of the old Yukaghir also seems to have had some hierarchical features, suggesting a less egalitarian tradition than those of the Koryak and Chukchi. First of all, the shamanic status was hereditary, handed down from father to son, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Yukaghir worshipped relics of their former shamans, not something ever attested among their neighbors. When a shaman died, those close to him would put on special gloves and masks to cut up his remains. The heart and stomach were dried and worn as talismans by the shaman's relatives. A mannequin was made from the skull and bones and was dressed like a living person. These mannequins—or “elders” as they were called—were kept in the house, fed, and consulted before any important action was taken: it was a good omen if the skeleton seemed light when lifted, but not if it felt heavy, a sign that you would do better to change course. Disrespecting these “elders” was punishable by death.⁵ In the eighteenth century, Jakob Lindenau reported that the Yukaghir were using the skin of deceased shamans to make their drums,

5. According to Lindenau, in the eighteenth century some Russians believed in divinatory practices with shamanic skeletons (Lindenau 1983: 154–55). For a detailed description, see Jochelson 1926: 165.

instruments that were probably passed on to the specialist's descendants. But does this kind of ancestor worship represent a distinctly hierarchical turn? In some cases, the funerary treatment of shamans was continuous with practices previously applied to the general population and then abandoned under Russian colonial influence: such is the case with the Central Siberian practice of leaving bodies on raised platforms. One seventeenth-century traveler, Isbrand Ides, did indeed assert that the Yukaghir practice of preserving bones in their houses could have been applied to any deceased relative, describing the phenomenon in detail with no mention of any particular social status.⁶ The Indigenous groups of northeastern Australia similarly made mummies by eviscerating and drying their dead, thus obtaining mummified bodies that they would then take with them wherever they went (Elkin 1964: 401). It is thus not impossible that the funerary treatment of shamans observed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the vestige of a practice that, prior to Russian colonization, had applied to all deceased.

Another potentially crucial clue to the Yukaghir's hierarchical turn is the evidence collected by Waldemar Jochelson suggesting that the shaman may have played a social role in his clan community. Shamans were called upon not only to perform therapeutic rituals for individuals, but also to make forecasts before wars or hunting expeditions. At the start of the hunting season, they would perform a ritual to ask the master spirits of the earth and certain animal species for the souls of game animals, which they would then hand over to the hunters. This is reminiscent of the hunting rituals performed by Evenki shamans (discussed in chapter 4, p. 107), with the notable difference that the Yukaghir shaman utilized the lying journey, not the live one (Jochelson 1926: 12, 210–12). The hunters would put on their hunting clothes and pass under an arch made from branches, a practice very close to another Evenki ritual, the *chichipkan*.⁷ It is possible, therefore, that the collective functions played by Yukaghir shamans in the nineteenth century already reflected influences from the Tungus and Yakut.

It seems, then, that the older Yukaghir tradition presented certain hierarchical characteristics—hereditary transmission, for example—in a

6. "When any of their relatives dies, [they] cut off all the flesh of his corpse to the bones" (Ides 1705: 106).

7. For the Yukaghir practice, see Jochelson 1926: 212. For a description of the *chichipkan* ritual as practiced by the Orochon Evenki, see Mazin 1984: 32, 53; and as practiced by the Northern Yakut, see Gurvich 1977.

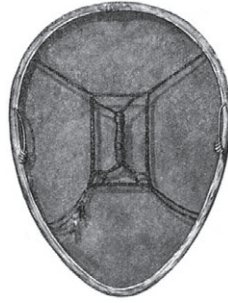


Figure 106. Old Yukaghir Drum in the Autochthonous Style. The handle is made in the traditional manner, but the ovoid elongation of the frame shows a Tungus influence. Prokof'eva 1961b: 466, table 16.

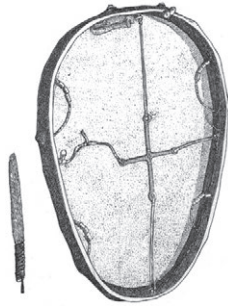


Figure 107. Yukaghir Drum in the New Style. The elongated shape, central cross-piece, and lateral resonators are typical of drums of the Tungus-Yakut type. Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 56.

context where features more typical of egalitarian traditions still abounded: open access to the ritual drum, the absence of a decorated costume coordinating the body with the cosmos, use of the lying journey, the possibility for hunters to acquire auxiliary spirits, and the consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms. What are we to make of such a curious mix?

The paradox can be partly resolved if we take into account the seasonality of these opposing trends. In an important theoretical article from 2015, David Wengrow and David Graeber highlight the reversible nature of authority in certain hunter-gatherer societies living in environments marked by strong seasonal variations. Sometimes an entire mode of social organization, as well as the social roles derived from it, can change from one season to the next. Variations like these present a challenge to rigid classificatory schemas that would label such societies

as “simple” or “complex,” or as a “band” or “tribe,” as the case may be (Wengrow and Graeber 2015). Consider, then, the forest-dwelling Yukaghir of the upper Kolyma. During the winter, they lived in hamlets of half-buried log houses, then dispersed in spring, living nomadically in tents as they fished and hunted. Occasionally they would come back together, forming tent villages, for large collective hunts, for instance, when they would trap migrating herds of wild reindeer. During these periods of concentration, collective endeavors would be led by prestigious individuals—the great hunters and elders. And it was during such gatherings that shamans were invited to perform rituals. Their mode of subsistence thus alternated between periods of concentration and cooperative action, which were marked by a more hierarchical mode of social organization led by authority figures, and periods of dispersal when each isolated family had to rely on its own ability to feed itself (Jochelson 1926: 212; Gogolev et al. 1975: 35–42; Bat’ianova and Turaev 2010: 643). It is likely that this alternation was reflected in ritual practices, with a succession of more hierarchical periods—when hunters entrusted certain responsibilities to the shaman—and more egalitarian ones when each hunter relied on his own dreams and relations with auxiliary spirits to ensure his success (as we saw in chapter 4). In sum, what Russian ethnographers have called the “episodic” nature of the Yukaghir shaman’s authority (Bat’ianova and Turaev 2010: 644) was not in fact grounded in any genuine hierarchical status, but was instead a manifestation of a heterarchical distribution of power.

Things changed over the course of the nineteenth century, especially in the tundra where the northern Yukaghir adopted the Tungus way of life, with reindeer herding as their economic foundation, and all of the shamanic tools and techniques that came with it, sweeping their old traditions aside. According to ethnologist Vladilen Tugolukov, by the early twentieth century “the Yukaghir had acquired all of the attributes of professional shamanism from the Tungus” (Tugolukov 1979: 119). There was, however, a fascinating transitional period during which local traditions coexisted with the new Tungus lifestyle. There were two types of drum, for example: the old round drum and a new Tungus-style instrument—oblong, with a larger vertical axis (ninety centimeters), and a central metal cross-piece (figure 104). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the schoolteacher Afanasii D’iachkov reported that elongated drums adorned with metal elements were being used in “shamanic rituals,” while the old metal-free round drums were used for “everyday entertainment or games” (D’iachkov [1893] 1992: 237). In other words,

new- and old-style drums were playing complementary roles: the former as the instrument of professional shamans, while the latter were used for domestic ritual practices deemed less serious. In the coexistence of these two drums, we thus see a coincidence of hierarchy and heterarchy, which seem to have temporarily operated side by side.

Why, then, was the old style finally ousted by the new? The notion of “everyday entertainment” offers a clue as to how we should understand this evolution. The old equipment and practices depreciated in value precisely because of their everydayness and general accessibility. Compared to the new drums and costumes, replete with metal decorations, the old tools seemed banal and mediocre.

The period of coexistence was brief. Heterarchical shamanism had collapsed by the final years of the nineteenth century. While visiting abandoned Yukaghir dwellings in the Olomon valley—whose owners had no doubt perished in famines or epidemics—the members of an expedition led by Waldemar Bogoras were surprised to discover a drum in every house. “They were so many sorcerers!” a Russian team member exclaimed; having only known shamanism in its modern, hierarchical form, the man had no notion that a drum might belong to anyone other than a shaman (Bogoras 1910: 7). When you are used to hierarchy, heterarchical communities can seem like they are made up entirely of magicians.

The Tungus drum that took over is reserved for shamans; it is large, with an elongated shape, and has resonators on its shell. The metal cross-piece stretching across the middle of the instrument is delicately wrought; with a hole in each of its four branches and another in the center—only a skilled blacksmith could have made it. The straps attaching the cross-piece to the frame are fastened at the oval’s four apexes, forming clear horizontal and vertical axes that stand out due to the instrument’s oval shape (figure 107). The contrast between the round shape of the old instrument and the oval shape of the new is not insignificant. Whereas the old, round drum has no fixed top or bottom and can thus be held as one pleases, the elongated oval is a polarized space with a clear top, bottom, left, right, and center. We are already familiar with the complex associations bound up with the cross-piece; the central hole is referred to as a “navel” and represents a passageway to the lower world. With its hierarchical space, the new instrument easily lends itself to a projection of the human body schema, as is clearly seen in the Yakut image of a spirit whose chest is made of a drum (figure 108).

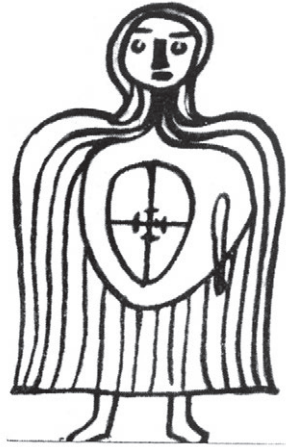


Figure 108. Forest Spirit, Yakut drawing from the eighteenth century. Lindenau 1983: 38.

At the same time as they adopted the oval instrument, the northern Yukaghir shamans traded in their old, feminine outfit for the more prestigious Altaic costume. Though tailored in the Tungus style, the new coat featured a number of metal figurines borrowed from the Yakut: the sun and moon are among them, along with an ancestral figure, the shaman's heart and vertebrae, and several zoomorphic auxiliary spirits (Jochelson 1926: 169–79).

With its feminine elements, the old Yukaghir costume was rooted in the Paleo-Asiatic tradition of the cross-dressing shaman, those who changed their sexual identity in the process of their initial crises. The singularity of the shamanic figure was in this vein implicitly defined as a kind of indeterminacy in relation to intuitive categories. This profoundly atypical status is one possible reason why the Yukaghir kept relics of their shamans, in the same way that in the Paleolithic era certain individuals with physical anomalies received special funerary treatment. The new costume, by contrast, emphasized the shaman's membership in a professional class defined positively by its own attributes. The various pendants on the new-style costume realized two foundational hierarchical principles that the old costume did not: the outward projection of the shaman's internal organs and the coordination of their body with the cosmic order.

With its assortment of charms and medals, the new costume brought with it a whole vocabulary as well as a rigid cosmological architecture

translated directly from the Yakut into the Yukaghir language. Though performed in Yukaghir, the chants sung by the tundra shamans evoke, for example, the “eight directions” of the Yakut language, which allude to the octagonal log houses of the semi-sedentary Yakut and make little sense in the circular tents of the nomadic Yukaghir of the tundra. The chants also feature transpositions of such typical Yakut figures as “Lord Light Creator” (*Ürüŋ Aiyŋ Toion*), the supreme being of the Yakut pantheon (Jochelson 1926: 207). But how could this figure, modeled on a quasi-feudal chief-based social organization, be transposed to a society without political leaders or any notion of a creator—its own vague notion of a supreme being is simply called “something”? Indeed, the Yukaghir word for “creator” is borrowed directly from the Yakut *aiy*. The title “lord” is rendered in Yukaghir as *hai'chie*, “grandfather,” which is hardly the same thing. The result is *na'waye aiy' hai'chie*, “light *aiy* grandfather.”

Finally, it should be noted that the Yukaghir had stopped consuming fly agaric by the beginning of the twentieth century. From the recollections of Yukaghir individuals as well as numerous eighteenth-century sources, there is no doubt that this psychotropic substance was once consumed quite widely in the community. But use of the mushroom declined with the expansion of hierarchical shamanism, which would have been at odds with a practice that allowed just anyone to open the doors of non-sensory perception and make a quasi-shaman of themselves without too much difficulty.

Though there is no question as to the hierarchical paradigm's triumph in the tundra, we should not forget that the southern Yukaghir of the taiga, who never adopted the pastoral lifestyle of the Tungus, managed to hold on to their old shamanic customs, at least in part. Still around the early twentieth century, Jochelson met a shaman called Nelbosh in the taiga of the upper Kolyma, who practiced without a costume and accompanied himself on an old-style Yukaghir drum with no metal parts. His rituals still incorporated the lying journey, as practiced in northeastern Siberia and North America. It is not that the southern, forest-dwelling Yukaghir were indifferent to the appeal of hierarchical shamanism. When they needed an effective practitioner, they preferred to solicit the manifestly more prestigious shamans of their Tungus neighbors. Nelbosh himself, who was one of the last representatives of the old Yukaghir ritual tradition, was loath to call himself a shaman (Jochelson 1926: 196). It seems that the southern Yukaghir were indeed drawn to their neighbors' techniques; but they still did not use them in their own ritual practices. How, then, can we explain this difference

between the tundra and the taiga? Why didn't the southern Yukaghir start to model their shamans after the Tungus style that so appealed to them? We will try to answer these questions in the final chapter of this book.

In the meantime, though, it should be made clear that the story of the Yukaghir is not an isolated case. Transitions from heterarchical to hierarchical regimes have occurred in many parts of northern Eurasia over the last few centuries. At the other, western end of Siberia, the Tungus had a comparable influence on the ritual practices of the Khant. As we noted earlier, in the Khant tradition, the drum was not exclusively reserved for the shaman: at collective festivals, they used simple drums held by a central strap. Shamanic drums, on the other hand, were equipped with a forked wooden handle. But when the nomadic Tungus spread into their territory, the Khant found that the newly arrived, richly outfitted shamans appeared stronger than their own, and they became very popular. Some Khant shamans adopted the Tungus-style drum and, along with it, the great collective animation ceremony through which the hierarchical drum is rendered effective (Kulemzin 2004: 75–77). Thus, with the Khant and the Yukaghir—two communities separated by no less than four thousand kilometers, at either end of the immense Tungus expanse—we see similar periods of coexistence between two different kinds of drum: a round, secular instrument held with leather straps and used for “entertainment,” and another Tungus-inspired shamanic one, fitted with various metal elements and elongated to represent a carefully oriented, hierarchical space.

In the central Siberian Arctic, the Enets present a different configuration of these same elements. Though their own shamans were hierarchical, at the beginning of the twentieth century it was still possible for non-shamans to own a drum, which was kept in the family's sacred sledge along with other religious objects. Ordinary people never played these instruments, however; instead, they would give them to shamans to use when they came to visit (Prokofyeva 1963). It is possible that, at an earlier time, ordinary people would not have hesitated to use these drums themselves.

The relationship between Tungus influences and the professionalization of shamanism—observed among the Yukaghir, the Khant, and possibly the Enets as well—is just as prevalent in southeastern Siberia. In the mid nineteenth century, the Nivkh had a small number of shamans and did not consider them particularly powerful. A Paleo-Asiatic population settled across the lower Amur, the Pacific coast, and Sakhalin

Island, the Nivkh exhibited several hallmarks of a heterarchical tradition in their ritual practices: as with the Chukchi, one of the main rituals of Nivkh shamans was the dark tent, and it was treated as a source of prestige; Nivkh drums, furthermore, were not reserved for shamans and could be kept in the homes of ordinary people. According to Leopold von Schrenk, who spent time among the Nivkh in the 1850s, “many know how to dance, play drums, and do everything that shamans do in the performance of their duties. From time to time, they will willingly perform any of these actions, and never consider it a sin to do so, even though they themselves are by no means shamans. Anyone can perform shamanic dances or whatever else a shaman does, without it being considered sacrilegious” (Schrenk 1903: 121).

As for their costume, the only ritual ornament worn by Nivkh shamans was a belt adorned with metal bells and pendants. But even this object was borrowed from neighboring populations, as is indicated by the fact that the Nivkh called it by a Tungus name, *yangpa*. They owed this belt to their western neighbors, the Ulch, a Tungus-speaking group whose shamanic practices fall squarely in the hierarchical camp. The Ulch make an essentialist distinction between “true shamans,” who are able to journey to the land of the dead, and “false shamans,” who are really just *sol'de nej*, “ordinary people”. Such an opposition between true and false practitioners contrasts sharply with the continuum of skills that Schrenk observed among the Nivkh (Schrenk 1903: 124, 126–28).

Schrenk noticed that shamans were more elaborately outfitted the further inland he traveled up the Amur River and from this he concluded that shamanism must have originated in the middle of the continent then spread down the Amur to the Nivkh. More precisely it was the hierarchical form of shamanism practiced by the Tungus that spread down the Amur, replacing the older egalitarian traditions as it went. As the dark-tent ritual was unknown to the Tungus, it could not have been they who introduced it to the Nivkh; it must have pre-existed their arrival as one of the Nivkh's own native traditions. The expansion of the hierarchical model was swift: seventy years after Schrenk's visit, in the 1920s, the Soviet ethnologist Ehurim Kreinovich encountered a characteristically Tungus form of shamanism with only a few Nivkh adaptations. The once-prestigious dark-tent ritual had completely disappeared, replaced by others performed in the light. The drum had disappeared from Nivkh houses and become an instrument reserved exclusively for the shaman, to whom it was solemnly presented at the time of his investiture ritual (Kreinovich 1973).

Wherever the nomadic Tungus spread in the taiga and tundra of northern Asia, they introduced a new form of relationship with the invisible that gradually replaced the more egalitarian local traditions. Though they were already expanding at the time of contact, the Tungus and Yakut suffered a great deal from the violent effects of Russian colonialism, but ultimately fared much better than the continent's sedentary hunter-gatherer groups. Thanks to their mobility as reindeer herders and horsemen, they found it easier to adapt, fleeing epidemics and acting as guides to the Cossacks on their own eastward expansion (accompanying them all the way to Alaska in the case of the Yakut). In the mid nineteenth century, with approval from the Russian administration, inland Tungus groups (the Even) settled on Koryak territory in the Kamchatka peninsula. Further south, at about the same time, the Evenki (another Tungus group) and the Yakut were gaining a foothold on Sakhalin Island (Kirillova 2012; Ermolova 1984: 128–32).

To the Russians, the hierarchical chieftaincies of the Yakut represented a stable and comprehensible form of social organization, and it made sense to treat the *toion*, or “lords,” as representatives of their clans and to entrust them with collecting the fur tax, or *iasak*, on the empire's behalf. But as they moved further east, the Russians tried to reproduce this Yakut model among peoples to whom it was entirely foreign; as they established representatives to negotiate with, the Russians introduced the term *toion* to the Koryak and Itelmen of the Kamchatka peninsula, and eventually the Tlingit in faraway Alaska.⁸ As Jochelson writes, “The officials mistook the loose social structure of the Koryak for a fully developed social organization, like that of other Siberian peoples (the Yakut or Tungus, for instance), whose elders were elected by the members of the clan or occupied hereditary positions” (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 767). In so doing, they introduced a principle of “representation” that was unfamiliar to the Indigenous populations they encountered. In a certain way, then, the Yakut Lord Light Creator (*Ürüñ Aiyy Toion*) owes his entry into the Yukaghir pantheon to the Russian colonial expansion.

It is not my intention, however, to argue for any kind of diffusionist explanation that would reduce this entire transformation to a simple transfer of ideas and social models from one region to another. Northern

8. As Krasheninnikov writes regarding the Itelmen, “In every settlement, the Russian Empress has established a chief, or *Toion* as they are called, who has authority to decide any case, except on matters of life or death” (1768: 23). On the Tlingit *toion*, see Dean 1995.

Europe saw a similar transformation, for example, without any help from the Tungus.

According to travelers who visited Lapland in the seventeenth century, each Saami family had its own ritual drum and used it in ceremonies conducted by the heads of families, without any help from an outside specialist. In various divination techniques, a household would come together to interrogate the drum with regard to certain courses of action: before a sacrifice, for example, to determine which method would satisfy the spirits. Later, however, drums gradually became the exclusive property of the Saami shamans, or *noid*. As ethnologist Nikolai Haruzin writes, the heads of families and clans ceded to their shamans “first the duty of knowing the will of the ancestors, then their obligations as priests and perhaps even as practitioners of all forms of magic: eventually, the *noid* became a distinct class” (Haruzin 1890: 216; cf. Scheffer 1678: 81; and Manker 1968: 31).⁹ With all of the prohibitions that came along with Christianization, Saami shamanism had all but disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century, and thus it is hard to know what exactly led to this form of professionalization among them. What is certain is that, over the last few centuries, in several regions of northern Eurasia, from the shores of the Pacific to Scandinavia, the right to communicate with the invisible and the techniques for doing so, which were once accessible to a large part of a given population, were gradually delegated to a small group of specialists who were seen as intrinsically different from ordinary people.

9. Haruzin's choice of the word “class” is probably an exaggeration; because shamans did not marry among themselves, it would be more accurate to describe them in terms of having a *social status*.

CHAPTER 12

Why Hierarchy?

A man and a woman lived together with a boy and a girl. A famine struck, so severe that the man and woman decided to abandon their children in the forest, thinking they would die. Sometime later, however, the old couple came across the boy in the village where they lived. He was holding two sticks and shamanizing. The boy would tell one person where his horse had run off to and then would heal another. People gathered around him and he told them: "Make me a drum. Bend the frame, fit it with a birch handle, stretch a skin, and I'll be your shaman." They made him a drum and a rabbit-skin beater descended from the sky, then he began to play (Klemenc 1890: 35).

The Matur Shor told this myth to explain the origin of shamanic practices, and it captures some important principles of hierarchical shamanism quite clearly. First of all are the uncommon talents displayed by this Siberian Tom Thumb: he can perform divinations and cures, which he no doubt learned from the spirits during his long stay in the forest. What else could explain his survival if not their assistance? On his return to the village, he proposes a kind of contract to its inhabitants: if they make him a drum, he will put his talents at their service. This exchange encapsulates a central idea of hierarchical traditions: that the community and specialist have a reciprocal obligation to one another.

Why is it that some communities established consecrated specialists, while others remained faithful to a flexible and equitable distribution of access to the invisible? In this chapter, we will try to better understand

the practical and economic implications for a community of acquiring a shaman and to identify the necessary conditions for hierarchy to become established.

A Collective Investment

An individual's commitment to the shamanic path will keep them from any productive activity for a long time. With the frequent flights into the forest or tundra, the tumultuous irruptions and frequent mishaps that characterize the initial crisis period, it is difficult to rely on a young person in such circumstances when it comes to domestic chores or herding duties. In the following passage, Bogoras gives us some idea of the concern a Chukchi family might experience when an adolescent starts to show a shamanic predisposition:

The young apprentice loses interest in everyday life. He abandons all activity, eats little and has no appetite, talks to no one and won't even respond to questions. He spends most of his time sleeping. In some cases, he stays indoors, never leaving his home. But in others he goes off alone, under the pretext of hunting or looking after the herd. You need to keep a constant eye on him, as the young eccentric often lies down in the snow and falls asleep for a day or two, sometimes beneath a layer of snow blown over him by the wind. He'll wake up later with no idea how much time has passed (Bogoraz 1910: 14).

This behavior stands in stark contrast to the responsible attitude expected of Chukchi children and adolescents, who are typically trusted with reindeer herds from a very early age. The shaman remains an unpredictable individual later in life, too, uninterested in material necessities, typically living off the generosity of others or the gifts he receives in exchange for his shamanic services.

Faced with a child showing signs of the initial crisis, a family could either encourage or try to dissuade them, sometimes with various polluting techniques thought to drive away the spirits. Bogoras observed that parents' reactions often depended on their economic situation. Parents of smaller families would try hardest to stop a child from embarking on the shamanic path; it would be too costly to lose an able body in this way. Admittedly, resisting a shamanic calling can be a perilous tack to take: if the spirits will it, the adolescent might run off a hundred kilometers

into the tundra. “Strong” families, with many children and large herds, typically have a very different attitude: “They are less afraid of losing a young man. On the contrary, the idea of acquiring a shaman of their own has its appeal to them, to ensure the family’s happiness and wellbeing in the face of enemy spirits” (Bogoraz 1910: 13). As these examples suggest, supporting a shaman represents a kind of *investment* for the community, one that would be difficult to imagine without a reasonably stable access to material resources.

For the Chukchi, the investment is informal, without any long-term obligations. There are no rituals to mark the shaman’s entry into the profession, and he makes his own drum, as is the case in other heterarchical traditions.¹ He becomes a shaman gradually as his reputation grows and more people come to consult him. Individuals can judge for themselves whether or not to recognize someone as a shaman. You could say it is a statistical position, not unlike that of a pop star in Western society. There is no investiture ceremony for pop stars, and the status fades as the fans wane in number. If the shaman’s reputation dwindles, people simply stop coming to him, and the community will eventually grow less tolerant of his idleness.

Hierarchical shamans are no better than heterarchical ones when it comes to the basic tasks of day-to-day survival. Evenki shamans are poor hunters, for example, afraid to approach big game for fear that an enemy shaman or pathogenic spirit might be lurking beneath its fur. Female shamans are known to neglect the tasks usually delegated to women: leather work and sewing.

Shamans are seen as near invalids, and they and their families often rely on others to take care of them. The group must be able to “afford” a ritual specialist (Shirokogoroff 1935: 302, 378–79); for in hierarchical traditions, the collective investment goes well beyond the obligation to simply feed the shaman, as with the Chukchi; it involves much more. The iron and bronze elements on the hierarchical costume and drum, for example, are made from expensive materials that require a blacksmith, whose labor must also be remunerated, and this implies a communal investment. In hierarchical shamanism, the specialist never acquires his own equipment; a network of relatives and close associates either makes

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1. To take an example from Shternberg, one Nivkh shaman received the following injunction from a spirit in a dream: “Make yourself a drum and everything else a shaman needs. Beat the drum and chant” (Shternberg 1933: 77).

it for him or comes together in order to obtain it. "Since the shamans are acting on behalf of their clans, the making of a costume is a clan affair, and the clansmen contribute to it," explains Shirokogoroff (1935: 301). One of the hallmarks of hierarchical shamanism is the collective investiture ceremony, which generally consists in the presentation and "animation" of the specialist's drum. Given that without this collective ceremony the drum is considered inactive, the event provides an effective way of dissuading the shaman from making his own drum, as heterarchical practitioners do.

The Selkup regard this prohibition with particular severity: a shaman who uses a drum that has not been through the appropriate ceremony will immediately see his instrument break and then he will fall ill. Their animation ceremony is a large collective festival that takes place over ten days in spring, upon the return of the migrating birds. The shaman calls on all his relatives, however distant, and tells them, "Come to my house, I'm going to animate a drum." When all are assembled, the instrument's recipient must demonstrate, in the company of an experienced shaman, that he can "see" and describe in his chants the tree and reindeer used to make the instrument. He must mentally gather the reindeer's body parts, reassemble them, and then reanimate the creature, thus bringing his drum "to life." The narration of this mental process is meant to give the audience proof of the shaman's visionary talents.

On the tenth day of the festival, reindeer are killed along with geese and ducks—the migratory birds upon whose return to the taiga the ceremony can begin. The ritual concludes with a large feast, with enough food for everyone to eat their fill and there still be leftovers. The event would have represented a considerable expense and would have required, as the ethnographic accounts make clear, a certain opulence on the part of the shaman and his family. The immediate family would have probably owned a large enough herd to be able to provide the reindeer to feed the guests.

As a result, the consecrated drum was considered to be jointly owned by the entire network of relatives who had contributed to the ceremony, and the specialist's relatives even had a vital link to the instrument. If one of the shaman's relatives died, the drum was also considered dead and would have to be replaced by a new one. The instrument was effectively thought of as a kind of guardian for the souls of the relatives belonging to this network. The death of any of these individuals indicated a failure on the part of the instrument, and a new one had to be made (Prokof'ev 1930; Prokof'eva 1981: 56–57).

As in heterarchical traditions, individual judgments as to a shaman's efficacy are fundamental in hierarchical shamanism; but they must converge toward a consensus and ultimately a collective decision. The community makes a commitment to the shaman when it formally recognizes their qualities and organizes a ceremony to establish their status, in the course of which the specialist receives their ritual equipment. This formal decision is usually preceded by a test of some sort. The Evenki might ask the aspirant to perform divinations and test the accuracy of his predictions, concerning, for example, the particular details of the animal the hunters would bring back from the forest in order to make the future drum (Anisimov 1958; Shirokogoroff 1935). Earlier we mentioned the tests undergone by Nganasan shamans, who had to shoot an object while blindfolded. It was with tests like these that the community ensured itself that the candidate had the necessary abilities to provide them with some kind of return on their investment.

Reciprocally, the group's level of investment was linked to the shaman's degree of authority. The Buryat shamans of Cisbaikalia underwent several successive consecration ceremonies, in anticipation of which they would collect from the community offerings of livestock to be sacrificed, as well as alcohol, and money. "The size of the offering depended directly on the shaman's degree of experience and thus their reputation," as Matvei Hangalov (1958–1960, vol. 1: 375–81) writes. Only the most affluent communities were able to put their shamans through all nine consecration ceremonies and confer the highest degree of prestige. In the eyes of the Russians, the extravagance involved in these final ceremonies verged on insanity, with sixty sheep and several mares put to slaughter. Though their traditional practices were interrupted during the long period of socialism, the Mongolian Buryat have recently resumed these ceremonies and slaughter a horse for their great shamans (Shimamura 2014: 206). The authority represented by the hierarchical shaman's ornaments thus reciprocally indicates the prosperity of the group, an observation that could also be made of the Evenki: as Laurence Delaby (1977: 99) writes, "The richness of the costume depended on the wealth of the group, and on the energy the shaman put into procuring pendants."

Putting their shamans through as many as nine costly consecration ceremonies was a way for the Buryat to keep a check on the shamans' power, refusing to give them a definitive *carte blanche* with their status. This practice was common to a number of populations, who recognized a hierarchy of ranks through which shamans would climb over the course of their lives. Ket shamans passed through a *cursus honorum* of seven

stages, over the course of which they would receive various tools and instruments: first the drumstick, then the drum, followed by the headband, apron, boots, gloves, the staff, a costume and crown, and, in rare cases reserved for the oldest and most famous shamans, a second drum (Anuchin 1914; Alekseenko 1981).

Each of these different objects progressively intensified the shaman's relationship with the spirits and allowed them to embark on increasingly complex mental journeys. The antlered crown, for example, allowed the specialist to undertake a celestial journey. On the other hand, an individual showing signs of a shamanic disposition, but unable to convince those around them, would not even receive the first instrument, the drumstick, a refusal that would definitively shut down any further possibility of exploring the invisible. This is a far cry from the freedom enjoyed by the Chukchi, for whom anyone can make a drum and play it whenever the fancy strikes them, whether a shaman or not.

To climb the ranks, the Ket shaman must demonstrate his powers with concrete results: the number of patients successfully cured and correct predictions about where to hunt. When positive results earn them a promotion, they are told, "It's time you got that item." Mistakes, on the other hand, are rarely forgiven, and, whatever the justification ("I saw it wrong"), it will take a long time for the shaman to recover their reputation. What becomes of shamans who use their abilities for the wrong reasons or when their powers begin to fail them? In mythological accounts, they are sometimes put to death (Anuchin 1914: 26). Whether or not these executions ever really happened, stories like these would have reminded shamans of the community's high expectations.

The Nanai of the lower Amur region provide a rather edifying confirmation of this idea. With an economy based largely on fishing, the Nanai lived in sedentary villages and were divided into several patrilineal clans. When, over the years, a shaman had acquired a sufficient degree of authority, they could claim the status of their clan's "great shaman" (*kasata*), who was responsible for conducting funeral rites. The distinguishing accessory of these specialists was a headdress comprised of a metal crown bearing deer antlers and covered in furs. Each Nanai clan had its own invisible geography, with its own village of the dead accessed via its own secret roads. As Tatiana Bulgakova (2013: 44) points out, "The space of dreams (the same spiritual space the shaman is believed to penetrate in his or her ceremonies) is believed to be collective and to



Figure 109. Buryat Shaman, early twentieth century. MAE no. 2474-5, photo by A. G. Epov.

belong to the clan, or rather to a certain lineage.” Anyone can access this space in their dreams, but only the shaman can go there voluntarily and carry out actions. It is the exclusive role of the “great shaman” to lead the dead there. Only one such figure is elected by the clan and they alone are allowed to wear a bear-fur headdress, representing the animal who guides them along the paths to the lower world. Before their investiture, they visit each of the clan’s villages—accompanied by two or three assistants—to persuade the different families to contribute to the cost of the ceremony: nine pigs must be slaughtered and offered up to each of the clan’s spirits, and every year thereafter, another pig is sacrificed (Delaby 1977: 51–52; 1998).

As the sole overseer of the *post mortem* fate of souls, the great shaman had a monopoly on certain ritual actions that were essential to the clan’s continuity. In this regard, their function could be likened to that of a clan priest, but the status differed in other respects. The community did not support the great shaman with anything like a regular income. In societies with priests, on the other hand, paying taxes to support the clergy is considered an obligation for the lay population, regardless of the priest’s charisma, popularity, or efficacy. The status and privileges enjoyed by the great shaman, however, were subject to their personal ability to convince

the community of their capacities. As Delaby writes, “[the Nanai] do not hesitate to beat the clan shaman half to death if they fail in their divinations and thereby show themselves incompetent to lead the souls of the deceased to the village of the dead” (1998: 78). The community does not invest in a priestly guild, but in singular individuals who are required to demonstrate their talent again and again.

The commitment made in the animation ceremony thus goes in two directions. When they provide for the ceremony’s expenses and present various accessories to the aspirant, the community pledges to recognize the individual as a true shaman; the shaman, for their part, agrees to go on demonstrating their talents and to put them to use for the benefit of the community.

The Shaman’s Debt

One procedure recurs with striking regularity among several different Turkic-speaking peoples and the Ket as well: during the investiture ceremony, before the shaman has animated the drum, the participants take turns holding the instrument and playing it like a shaman (Alekseenko 1981: 98; Stépanoff 2014a: 208–9). This is the only moment when non-shamans are permitted to use it; once the shaman has brought the instrument to life, only they can play it. The Soviet ethnologists saw this gesture as a holdover from an older, egalitarian form of shamanism. But bearing in mind that this event unfolds while the instrument is still an inanimate object, and that only the shaman can handle it once it has been given a soul, it would seem that it only emphasizes the profound inequality between ordinary members of the community and the expert. Staging this differentiation as a part of the investiture ritual creates a relationship of asymmetry and complementarity between the two parties, juxtaposing the closed bodies of the ordinary participants and the open body of the specialist. Those who gather to participate in the proceedings recognize an individual as their shaman at the same time as they acknowledge their own incompetence, their blindness to the invisible. The event thus establishes a *reciprocal dependency*.

We could say that the investiture ceremony places the shaman in debt to those who have made the event possible. Evenki shamans can be called upon at any time by a household with a sick family member: they have no right to refuse and must set off immediately (Shirokogoroff

1935: 380). During their investiture ceremonies, Yakut shamans “pledge to be the protector of the unfortunate, the father of the poor, the mother of orphans” (Priklonskii 1886: 96).

It would be hard to find such a notion of indebtedness and obligation on the part of the shaman in a heterarchical context. Strikingly, in a society such as the Chukchi’s, which is largely based on a gift economy where food and other goods circulate and are widely shared, shamans systematically demand immediate payment for their participation in rituals, be they individual healing rites or seasonal family occasions, typically citing the hunger of the spirits to explain this.

In hierarchical traditions, on the other hand, shamans could be required to perform certain rituals free of charge. For the Ket and Buryat, only individual healing rituals were paid for, while the shaman’s participation in major ceremonies for a territorial or clan community was free of charge (Alekseenko 1981: 94; Hamayon 1990: 645–46). Evenki shamans were paid neither for collective ceremonies nor for healing rituals performed for members of their own clan, and could ask for a gratuity only in the form of meat, fur, or alcohol when serving other groups (Vasilevich 1969: 252–53; Shirokogoroff 1935: 379). Performing services without payment was obviously a *quid pro quo* for the community’s investment in the shaman’s consecration ceremony, as well as the year-round material needs of the specialist. Some Buryat groups even forbade their shamans from treating patients from other communities (Potanin 1883, 4: 68–69).

Married to the Spirit or the Clan?

What are the material and psychological conditions necessary for a group to take on a collective investment in a hierarchical shaman? The enigma explored in the previous chapter may again provide a useful avenue here: the Yukaghir herders on the tundra adopted hierarchical shamanism, while the southern, forest-dwelling group did not. Why was this? Was there something that prevented the Yukaghir hunters in the forest from banding together in such a collective endeavor? We are going to pursue a different tack here, a particularly revealing set of customs in which the forest and tundra groups differed: marriage prestations.

In the taiga, when a young Yukaghir man wishes to marry a young woman, he goes to her father’s house and, without saying a word, starts working. If the help and game he contributes to the household are well

received, he will know that he has been accepted. That night, the son-in-law will sleep in the father's house, bringing his bow, gun, and clothes with him. The next day, he has become a new member of the family, without further ceremony. No nuptials need be organized to bring the families of the young couple together: in sum, the agreement concerns only the son- and father-in-law, and no transfer of property takes place between them. In this kind of uxori-local household, the husband lives in the home of his parents-in-law and remains at the service of this family's elders for as long as they are alive. Importantly, he must turn over anything he obtains from hunting to his parents-in-law, and they in turn distribute it (Jochelson 1926: 87–92).

This matrimonial regime is not very common. In a wide-ranging comparison of ethnographic data from societies on every continent, Alain Testart and his team have shown that marriages are almost always subject to prestations in the form of either material goods or services. The transfer of goods between the husband's family and the wife's depends on the kind of wealth and the rights over a person that one can expect to obtain in a given social context (Testart, Govoroff, and Lécirvain 2002; Testart 2012: 242–53). As a general rule, societies that demand goods in exchange for a bride also recognize *wergild*—payment, in other words, made in compensation for the murder of an individual, with the purpose of avoiding a vendetta. Having integrated material wealth into social relations, these societies “agree that a man's life is equivalent to a certain sum of goods” (Testart 2012: 219), a principle that underlies both marriage prestation and compensatory payments for crimes committed. Comparing the customs of Amazonian and Melanesian societies, Philippe Descola has coined the term “heterosubstitution” to designate the exchange of material wealth for bodies (of women or the dead), in contrast to “homosubstitution,” which prevails in societies where women are only exchanged for women and murders are only avenged by murders (Descola 2001).

The marriage prestations practiced by the forest Yukaghir consist of services rendered in exchange for a bride in a manner that implies a “life-long obligation” on the part of the husband to his father-in-law, as Testart writes with reference to indigenous Australian groups, where a husband remains in the service of his wife's family for as long as his mother-in-law lives.

But things are quite different for the reindeer-herding Yukaghir of the tundra. Here the suitor is required to work for his fiancé's father for

one to three years. After that, a go-between comes to negotiate on the behalf of suitor's family, and the concerned parties agree on the number of reindeer that will need to be offered in exchange for the young woman. Once this transaction has been settled, the bride is taken to the young man's camp along with her dowry, typically consisting of a procession of reindeer and sleighs. The exchange takes place in a ceremony involving both families (Jochelson 1926: 92–96). This prestation regime borrows elements from several neighboring groups: brideservice, the suitor's fixed period of work for the father-in-law, is common to the Koryak and Chukchi; the payment of bridewealth, the exchange of goods for a bride, is typical of the Tungus and, more generally, the Altaic traditions. Sandwiched between the Paleo-Asiatic groups on the Pacific coast and the Altaic populations further inland, the simplest explanation for this is that the tundra Yukaghir had to satisfy fathers-in-law on both sides.

The payment of bridewealth and a dowry involve negotiations and transfers of property between the two families and thus ultimately a collective investment of wealth on the part of the group to the benefit of one of its members. For the young man, the payment of bridewealth has the advantage of excusing him from serving his father-in-law; he is thus able to obtain rights over a wife and her offspring in exchange for goods. Tungus men were thus able to marry Yukaghir women without submitting to the custom of working for their father-in-law. But such an exchange imposes other obligations on the groom with regard to his own family; later in life he himself will have to contribute to the marriage prestations of his own younger relatives.

An important difference between the tundra and taiga Yukaghir is that the former have goods to trade: their domestic reindeer. One of the major advantages of owning livestock is precisely the potential it represents for matrimonial exchanges with other groups. Because the Yukaghir of the taiga have no livestock and thus do not accumulate exchangeable goods, a suitor has only his labor to offer in exchange for a bride. If we accept Testart's hypothesis of a logical link between the payment of bridewealth with material goods and *wergild* paid as compensation for murder, it is important to note that the tundra Yukaghir must have adopted the former practice relatively recently, as the latter is unknown to both the tundra and taiga populations. A murder must be avenged by the killing of the culprit, or otherwise compensated by giving a bride to one of the victim's relatives (Jochelson 1926: 132–33).

The matrimonial practices of the tundra Yukaghir indicate not only that they recognize the role of wealth on the economic level, but also that they admit, on the social level, a *principle of generalized substitution*. This principle refers not only to what Descola calls heterosubstitution—the possibility of substituting goods for a person—but also to the fact that a matchmaker or the elders of a family can stand in (or substitute themselves) for a groom in the negotiation process with the future father-in-law. In this context, we should understand substitution in a broader sense: the substitute is not only the object offered in exchange for a person, but also the person who acts as a substitute for the protagonist in the process of organizing the exchange.

To the forest Yukaghir, this form of substitution is just as foreign as the notion of economic wealth based on the accumulation of exchangeable goods like reindeer. And it is precisely this southern group who refused to adopt the hierarchical shamanism assumed by their cousins in the tundra. Is this a coincidence, or is there some unsuspected connection between a group's collective investment in a shaman and the practice of paying for a bride with material wealth? The Cisbaikalian Buryat provide some useful pieces of information on this question. For them, a shaman must carry a hereditary essence, or *udha*. It is said that the ancestors choose an individual from among their descendants who is subject to visions: he sees himself carried up into the sky, where he meets the master of the middle world and his nine charming wives—the daughters of Solbon, the morning star. Over the course of several years, these visions of celestial journeys become more and more elaborate; eventually he will form a bond with a spirit-woman and she will become his regular mistress.

When the more experienced shamans judge from his behavior and his accounts of these journeys that the aspirant is ready, the ceremony organized to mark his investiture in a number of ways resembles a wedding between the shaman and the spirit. Not unlike the Nanai custom, three days before the ceremony, the future shaman travels to each of the villages inhabited by his clan members in order to obtain gifts: colorful ceremonial scarves, precious furs, fermented milk, and livestock—we have already mentioned the degree of extravagance these contributions can reach. These gifts are interpreted as *kalym*, the Turko-Mongol term used in Siberia to designate bridewealth, but they represent, in this case, the price paid by the shaman for his celestial lover. Indeed, the families of Buryat grooms do pay a matrimonial compensation to the bride's family, and the bride's family in turn contributes a dowry, as is typical of Altaic

peoples. The members of the groom's family contribute to the payment made to the bride's family and, in return, share in the gifts received when a woman from their group is given to another.

The shaman's investiture ceremony draws a large crowd, before whom the novice must climb a tree to represent a celestial journey in which he offers his relatives' gifts of fermented milk and a sacrificial goat to his fiancée's family in the invisible world. As one Buryat man explains: "The ritual is not an ordinary collective sacrifice, but the shaman's wedding, his marriage to his celestial fiancée, whom he found in the sky" (Shternberg 1927: 20). But the attendees enjoy themselves just as they would at any other wedding, with three days of dancing and drinking.

In the Altai, the investiture ceremonies of Shor shamans were also performed in the style of a wedding. For the Shor, when a young man obsessed by erotic dreams of a spirit-girl with "seven braids," or sometimes "seven breasts," is recognized as a shaman-in-the-making, a great-uncle or grandfather makes him a ritual drum, which embodies his celestial bride. Painted on the instrument are dozens of figures representing spirits as well as various signs and references to the cosmic order. At the start of the ceremony, the young man's family members gather with gifts of beer, food, and clothing, just as they would for a matrimonial exchange. Two older family members play the role of the "parents-in-law" and hold their "daughter" (the drum, modestly draped with a feminine scarf) close. Then the apprentice arrives, on the occasion of his investiture addressed as the "son-in-law," and performs the ceremonial wedding exchange with his "parents-in-law." As the feast begins, he seizes the drum and runs away, mimicking a marriage by abduction. All of this takes place under the exclusive supervision of the novice's male relatives. Another ceremony, in which the novice climbs a tree to symbolize a celestial ascent, similar to the Buryat rite, is carried out later on to conclude the wedding. Thereafter, the shaman's erotic dreams cease, and his spirit-wife only visits him when he summons her in a ritual context (Shternberg 1927: 22–23; Dyrenkova 2012: 343–47). The nuptial ceremony thus cools the ardor of the novice's oniric passion.

Sexual relations before marriage, like those between Buryat and Shor shamans and their celestial partners, are common and largely accepted in southern Siberia. Young people are quite free to meet and enjoy themselves at night-time parties (*naadanah* in Buryat, *oitulaash* in Tuvan), and young couples will sometimes arrange for the boy to kidnap the girl in



Figure 110. Shor Shaman. RME no. 6287-1, photo by L. P. Potapov, 1927.

the hope that their parents will then allow them to marry (Abaeva and Zhukovskaia 2004: 196–97; Starynkevich 1930: 223). If it is broadly accepted that sex goes on before marriage, what then, if anything, does a matrimonial arrangement bring to a relationship? The answer is obvious: a lot of people—relatives and friends of the bride and groom, who participate in the festivities and contribute to the marriage prestations. From that point on, the relationship between the two lovers no longer concerns them alone, but a much larger circle of blood-relatives and in-laws. Marriage transforms a dyadic relationship between a woman and a man into a triadic one, with the community coming to represent a third term. The institution of marriage prestations means that the couple is dependent on the goodwill and economic situation of the relatives who pay the *kalym* and dowry. For a father, the wealth of a suitor's family is often more important than his daughter's feelings (Lindenau 1983: 87). As Testart and his colleagues observe: "The payment of bridewealth [...] is an institution that guarantees the authority and power of one generation over another and is a potential source of conflict between them" (2002: 169).

This is exactly what happens at the shaman's wedding. While the relationship is secret during the initial crisis period—given that the novice's affections are directed toward a being that no ordinary person

can see—the investiture rite brings this invisible entity into the visible world in the form of the figures materialized by the drum and the images painted on it, as well as the tree the shaman must climb. So here as well, with the elders overseeing the organization and financing of the ceremony, the dyadic relationship is transformed into a triadic one involving the whole community.

Amorous relationships between shamans and spirits are known in heterarchical traditions as well. For example, the most powerful Chukchi shamans, the cross-dressing “soft men,” are believed to be protected by their fearsome spirit husbands. But non-transvestite shamans too, whether male or female, sometimes count a spirit spouse among their auxiliaries. One female shaman introduced Bogoras to her husband in the form of a strangely shaped and vaguely anthropomorphic stone. She loved him far more than her human husband and claimed that the stone had fathered most of her children (Bogoras 1904–1909: 452). In a more recent work, Rane Willerslev (2007: 131) tells of a Yukaghir shaman (or *a'lma*) who claimed to be the lover of two spirit girls with whom he shared his bed.

Now, in the hierarchical world these types of love relationships are sometimes subject to a public marriage ceremony. In this event, the performance presents humans and nonhumans as two groups negotiating a matrimonial alliance in the form of a transactional exchange. This face-to-face situation thus implies a certain conception of humanity as a distinct collective that is separate from the rest of the world, even if the purpose of this conceptual distinction is to articulate a form of alliance between humans and nonhumans. It is important to note that no such conception of humanity is seen in heterarchical traditions.

The amorous relationship between shamans and spirits was central to the psychoanalytically inspired work of Lev Shternberg, as it also was to the structural approach proposed by Roberte Hamayon (Shternberg 1925; Hamayon 1990). But in assimilating sexuality and marriage as a single symbolic trope, they failed to take note of the control over the shaman's invisible love-life that the organization of a wedding at the elders' expense represents. Though the investiture ceremony stages a marriage between the shaman and a spirit, its concrete outcome is to establish the shaman's dependence on his clan, to whom he is now indebted for the payment of the *kalym*. Investiture rituals in the form of a marriage ceremony are known only among the Buryat, the Shor, and possibly the Nganasan and Selkup (Hamayon 1990: 459, 465, 473–77; Lambert

2002–2003: “Noces chamaniques” chapter), all four of whom pay bride-wealth to settle matrimonial alliances and observe a hierarchical and hereditarily transmitted form of shamanism. Unsurprisingly, on the other hand, there are no nuptial investitures in the heterarchical traditions of the northeast, where no shamanic investitures are ever organized by the community and marriages are rarely marked with a ceremony.

The question, then, is why do Shor and Buryat shamans accept such a prosaic end to their amorous dreamlife? No doubt because this conclusion cleverly comes in the form of gifts and wedding presents. Though you cannot refuse a gift, it carries an obligation. By giving the investiture ceremony the form of a wedding, the community casts itself in the role of the generous benefactor and public witness to the shaman’s bond with his spirits. It also surreptitiously places itself at the origin of a relationship it did not bring into being.

We first observed the correlation between bridewealth and the collective investiture of the shaman among the Yukaghir and then saw it confirmed by the Buryat and Shor. But does the rule hold throughout northern Asia? The payment of bridewealth is not traditionally practiced among the Paleo-Asiatic populations on the Pacific coast. It is simply unheard of among the Chukchi, Koryak, Itelmen, and the Yupik of the Bering Strait, for all of whom brideservice is the rule: the suitor is expected to live for two or three years with his future father-in-law, watching his reindeer or hunting for him. As with the forest Yukaghir in the taiga, matchmakers are sometimes employed, but more often than not the young man comes alone and sets to work for the parents of his beloved. For the duration of the son-in-law’s service, his stamina, hunting skills, and zeal for herding are put to the test. All marriages are accompanied by some form of transaction in these regimes. The Chukchi make fun of the Tungus and Yakut for buying their brides “as though they were reindeer.” And though wealthy Chukchi and Koryak suitors would of course gladly pay in livestock, custom obliges them to go through the drudgery of working for their father-in-law (Bogoras 1904–1909: 583–86; Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 740; Bat’ianova and Turaev 2010: 349, 549, 608). Though the Chukchi probably do accumulate exchangeable forms of wealth, they do not recognize the *principle of substitution* according to which material goods can be exchanged for a human life. Such would run quite contrary to the notion of personal autonomy, which, as we have seen, lies at the heart of Chukchi economic and social life just as it does to their way

of conceiving of their relationship to the world at large. It is up to each individual to earn his bride by the sweat of his brow. We should draw a strong anthropological conclusion from this: the existence of wealth in a given society does not necessarily entail the adoption of the principle of substitution.

Further south, the indigenous traditions of the Nivkh fall firmly in the heterarchical camp: dark tent, shared access to the drum, little or no costume. Traditional Nivkh matrimonial alliances follow the rule of generalized exchange between exogamous clans: clan A gives its women to clan B, which gives its women to clan C, and so on, and no form of payment is required. But not all marriages conform to this model; in these cases, the suitor either works for his father-in-law or his family offers gifts—often precious goods from China or Japan. Bride purchase became more widespread during the nineteenth century, as trade relations began to develop with neighboring powers. Another way in which wealth came to interfere in social relations was the introduction of wergild. Traditionally, for the Nivkh, blood called out for blood, and the killing of a clan member automatically triggered a punitive expedition to the murderer's village. In the 1850s, you were thought to expose yourself to the worst of misfortunes if you failed to respect the obligation to avenge a slain relative. But around the turn of the twentieth century, it became acceptable in certain cases for intermediaries to intervene and negotiate a form of compensation with an exchange of crockery, weapons, and fabrics. This kind of peaceful resolution was nonetheless seen as a dishonorable departure from the norm and a potential outrage to the soul of the deceased, so the Nivkh still staged a noisy fight between the enemy clans and slaughtered dogs so that blood still stained the soil (Shrenk 1903: 24; Shternberg 1999 [1905]: 161–68; Kreinovich 1973: 289). Substitution was still not easily accepted.

As Shternberg pointed out, while the payment of bridewealth was frowned upon on Sakhalin Island, the practice was perfectly acceptable on the mainland, where the Nivkh openly traded and formed matrimonial alliances with neighboring Tungus populations (Shternberg 1999 [1905]: 141). Now, as we have seen, it was among the same mainland Nivkh that hierarchical shamanism first took root. As with the Yukaghir, bridewealth and hierarchical shamanism went hand in hand.

Table 2. Marriage Prestations in Siberia.²

	WEST			CENTER AND SOUTH					EAST					
	Khant	Nenets		Selkup	Ket	Evenki	Yakut	Tuvans	Buryat	Upper Kolyma Yukaghir	Chukchi	Yupik	Koryak	Nivkh
Hierarchical shamanism														
Bridewealth prevalent														

2. The *kalyim* (bridewealth) paid by the Khant could consist of a variety of objects, depending on available resources: livestock, money, clothes, fabric, flour, or alcohol. There are some attestations of suitors working for their fathers-in-law, but this seems to have been an older and rare practice (Gemuev, Molodin, and Sokolova 2005: 151–52). For the Nenets, at the start of the eighteenth century, the *kalyim* varied from five to twenty reindeer (Georgi 1776–1777, vol. 3: 13). It increased with the expansion of pastoralism and could have been as high as 100 reindeer by the 1770s (Zuev 1947: 61). For the Selkup, hunters pay a *kalyim* in furs, and herders in reindeer. Money and clothes are also used. The dowry is less important than the *kalyim* (Gemuev, Molodin, and Sokolova 2005: 360). The Ket pay a *kalyim* of squirrel furs gathered by the groom’s father and brothers (Gemuev, Molodin, and Sokolova 2005: 699). In the eighteenth century, Evenki grooms (Tungus) had to provide a *kalyim* of reindeer, furs, weapons, and money. These gifts were shared between the bride’s father and the others members of her clan (Lindenau 1983: 86; Vasilevich 1969: 157–58). In the eighteenth century, the Yakut *kalyim* could reach several dozen heads of livestock. The dowry was equal to half the *kalyim* (Lindenau 1983: 32). Among the Cisbaikalian Buryat in the eighteenth century: “a Buryat trades his daughter like the Tatars, for a certain amount of money or a certain number of animals, and will not let her go until the buyer has paid” (Gmelin 1767, 1: 204). On the Tuvans, see Potapov 1969: 236; the Yukaghir, see Jochelson 1926: 87–92; the Chukchi, see Bogoras 1904–1909: 586. On the Yupik, see Bat’ianova and Turaev 2010: 608; the Koryak,

As this comparative overview shows, the societies of northeastern Siberia, which practice a typically heterarchical form of shamanism, favor reciprocal, blood-for-blood revenge and brideservice in the arrangement of matrimonial alliances. Societies with hierarchical traditions, on the contrary (the Altaic and Samoyedic speaking peoples, as well as the Ket), exchange goods to both compensate for spilled blood and to confirm marriages. This is true among pastoral, hunter-gatherer, and fishing populations alike.³ Labor in exchange for a bride may exist here and there as a humiliating possibility for suitors too poor to pay, but in this situation, the groom's service is seen as a kind of substitute payment. Contrary to one of Testart's claims—though his team never had full access to the Siberian data—the practice of exchanging goods does not overlap with that of animal husbandry: consider, for example, the practice of paying *kalym* not in livestock but in squirrel or sable furs,

see Bat'ianova and Turaev 2010: 349; the Nivkh, see Shrenk 1903: 24; Kreinovich 1973: 289. In a critique of this book that pays particular attention to this table, Laurent Berger (2021) suggests that a Cisbaikalian tradition contradicts my analysis: in this version the shamanic status is reversible and non-hereditary, and brideservice is prevalent. This scenario has no basis in the ethnographic data and contradicts what we know of the Cisbaikalian Evenki and Buryat populations, who combine hereditary hierarchical shamanism with a dominant custom of bridewealth (on the Buryat, see above; on the Evenki, see Klark 1863: 93; and Levin 1936: 77). Other forms of marriage such as exchanging brides for brides or the groom's labor power are seen only as a means to avoid paying bridewealth when circumstances dictate.

3. On the topic of wergild (*golovshchina* in Russian), the eighteenth-century sources give us some idea of the different judicial practices in force in various locales prior to the imposition of the Russian judicial system. The Buryat and the Yakut demanded from one to several hundred head of livestock in compensation for a murder, as well as a young woman and several slaves. For Samoyedic groups, a typical wergild was a certain number of reindeer and a young woman, sometimes the murderer's daughter (Miller 2009: 164–66). For the Tungus, it was customary for the murderer to be whipped and to pay the victim's family a certain amount of food (Georgi 1776–1777, vol. 3: 47) or otherwise slaves or reindeer (Lindenau 1983: 79). In State societies, like the Tuvans who lived under the Sino-Manchu empire until its collapse in 1913, justice was dealt out by public administrators. Sanctions ranged from paying compensation in livestock to public whipping and the amputation of limbs (Vainshtein and Mannai-Ool 2001, 1: 222).

common among hierarchical hunter-gatherers such as the Selkup, Ket, Tungus, and Shor; reindeer herders such as the Koryak and Chukchi, on the other hand, generally eschew the practice of exchanging goods.⁴ In addition to livestock, wealth may also exist in the form of food stocks among hunter-fishers, but this does not seem to entail matrimonial property transfers, as is illustrated by the Itelmen and the forest Yukaghir, who both practice brideservice.⁵ It seems, then, that the economic factor of wealth is secondary to the ideological factor that is the principle of substitution.

Substitution, understood in opposition to autonomy, can clearly be read through the development of slavery in Altaic societies. Prior to the Russian colonial expansion, slavery was widespread throughout Siberia, but it took many different forms. The Paleo-Asiatic populations of the northeast would periodically capture women and children during raids they carried out on other ethnic groups, and keep them as slaves; but these captives were never entrusted with any major economic role. They were prisoners more than they were a distinct social class. The Altaics, on the other hand, took slaves in their own ethnic groups. The many slaves that existed among the Yakut did constitute a veritable social category; having fallen into bondage through debt, they could be sold, offered as wergild, and put to death to accompany their masters into the grave. The Tungus sometimes exchanged slaves as *kalym*, in addition to livestock (Shrenk 1903: 17, 21; Bahrushin and Tokarev 1953: 149–75, 193).⁶ It is noteworthy that the Nivkh, whose indigenous shamanic tradition is heterarchical, forbade internal slavery, though this was not the case among their Tungus neighbors, the Ulch, from whom the Nivkh borrowed certain hierarchical techniques (Shrenk 1903: 16; Zolotarev 1939: 50). A correlation between internal slavery and hierarchical shamanism thus seems possible.

The kinds of transaction associated with the *kalym* are by no means a recent invention in the Altaic world, and it would be wrong to see them as by-products of colonization and capitalism, as is in fact the case with the Nivkh. According to a ninth-century Chinese chronicle, the payment of bridewealth among the Yenisei Kyrgyz (ancestors of the Khakas)

4. See table 2. On the Shor's practice of bride-purchase with squirrel furs, see Dyrenkova 2012: 257.
5. On the Yukaghir, see above; on the Itelmen, see Krasheninnikov 1768: 111–12.
6. Historical sources and funerary archeology confirm the presence of sacrificial victims in the tombs of elite Yakut (Nikolaeva 2016: 202, 246).

could reach a thousand head of livestock for a wealthy family (Bichurin 1950: 353). In this same text, moreover, we find the earliest historical mention of Siberian shamanism, a description of the Kyrgyz ritual specialists, or *kam*. Both facts (marriage prestations and ritual specialists) are cited side by side as characteristic features of the same culture. The two major exceptions to this pattern are the Khant and the Mansi, since their heterarchical traditions coexist with the dominant practice of paying bridewealth; but they still observe an older, though now rare, custom of working for the father-in-law without payment. “Why pay if you’re going to work?” as the Mansi say. Furthermore, the absence of wergild among both the Khant and Mansi suggests that the principle of substitution is for them a relatively recent adoption (Chernecov 1987: 41, 200; Miller 2009: 165).

But it is clear from our overview of Siberian marriage prestation that a general correlation does seem to exist between the principle of substitution—of which the custom of bridewealth is a prevailing manifestation—and the particular delegation of power that characterizes hierarchical shamanism. Whether the shaman is cast as the obligated fiancé of the group or as its marriage broker, nuptial imagery involving the payment of bridewealth serves as an effective model for thinking about the web of delegation, substitution, and debt through which hierarchical shamanism mediates the relationship between humans and the nonhuman worlds that surround them.

American anthropologist Jane F. Collier (1988) has noted a series of comparable correlations between modes of marriage prestation and relationships with the invisible in her comparative study of the Great Plains societies of North America. In this context, when men are required to obtain their brides through service and hunting contributions—as is the case for the Comanche—the young groom is not indebted to his elders and remains both materially and spiritually autonomous. On the political level, in these societies where brideservice is practiced, leaders do not have the authority to give orders.

On the other hand, in societies where bridewealth is exchanged—among the Cheyenne for example—young people depend on the material support of their elders to get married and are forever indebted to them. In these societies, the elders control the transmission of ritual knowledge from one generation to the next, and the secret laws of the universe are revealed in exchange for gifts of valuables. Humans thus depend on those who came before them: elders in the visible world and ancestral spirits in the invisible.

In terms of religious life, societies where brideservice is the norm seem to place great importance on individual vision quests, while those that exchange bridewealth control the transmission of knowledge through secret initiatory practices.

On the Plains, each of these societies owns horses, and the Comanche, who practice brideservice, are owners of the largest herds, meaning that the domestication and breeding of livestock are not a causal factor in the emergence of bridewealth. The parallel with our own Siberian context is striking, and we should draw the same conclusions: societies that value individual autonomy do so in both human relationships and in how they conceive of access to the invisible. Wherever delegation and substitution prevail, the regime of imagination becomes more rigid.

Reining in Dreams

Turning back to Siberia, in the hierarchical world, shamanic investiture ceremonies have major consequences for a community's overarching regime of imagination. It is through this event that the community takes hold of the shaman's non-sensory perceptions and gives them a fixed visible form. It directs the exploratory imagination of the young man in the grip of the initial crisis—shaken by visions, dreams, and fainting spells—by surrounding him with a host of conventional material cues—figurines and paintings—of its own making. As we have seen, the surface of the drum is often the material support for an extremely detailed schematization of the cosmos and the pathways that traverse it. By surrounding the shaman with a forest of visual figures, the collective helps him delimit the forms his dreams and obsessions take and think them through the model of an ancestral norm. *The community pushes him to pass from the exploratory imagination of different worlds—the mode that characterizes the period of crisis—to a guided imaginative experience following traditional spatio-temporal schemas.*

An important step toward becoming a shaman is acquiring detailed knowledge of traditional invisible roads. In a number of societies, each clan has its own particular road or roads that belong to it. On the Amur River, each Nanai clan has its own oneiric geography, which serves as a collective backdrop for the dreams of its individual members, and the roads that traverse this dreamscape inspire the songs or chants that are shared by the members of that clan. Shamans are individuals with a superior mastery of this geography, including its secret regions, and are

able to mentally navigate it at will. This collective mental framework is strict: deviating from it can constitute a serious source of crisis. One Nanai girl who was beginning to manifest a shamanic calling reported dreams and sang songs that failed to correspond to the sacred geography of her patrilineal clan. Indignant, her father began to suspect that the girl was not his legitimate child and, faced with the oneiric evidence, his wife had no choice but to confess the child's adulterous origin (Bulgakova 2013: 44–45). This anecdote highlights the astonishing normative stability of the dream-inspired songs, which present a stark contrast to the spontaneity and innovation that characterize the personal dream songs of the Koryak and Chukchi traditions, which follow more flexible generative patterns.

The invisible roads and rivers of hierarchical worlds establish *canonical models of mental images*. They are the exclusive property of a group and are painstakingly passed down among its members. These canonical patterns constitute a stabilized mental patrimony through which the community sustains its relationship with its past, its territory, and the invisible beings who inhabit it. In this context, shamans are something like the librarians of these invisible archives, or cartographers of their group's mental geography. They must have the imaginative capacity to combine two sets of qualities that do not necessarily go hand in hand: the vividness and emotional power of the images they perceive and fidelity to a culturally transmitted model, precise in its details and particularities. *When ordinary people delegate responsibility for their relationship with the invisible to the shaman, they impose on the specialist a collectively defined invisible that makes the coordination of imaginaries in the ritual context possible.*

It is important not to think of this reining in of the shaman's dreams as the act of a repressive clan, brutally suppressing the creativity of an inspired individual. In reality, the mental models of hierarchical traditions travel in both directions, between the shaman and ordinary people. And while they might direct and frame each person's dreamlife, they also underpin and enrich it. It would be just as wrong to say that the hierarchical mode of relation is imposed on the collective by the shaman as it would be to say that the collective imposes this mode on its specialist: both contribute to reproducing a relational schema that unites them in a bond of reciprocal dependence.

CONCLUSION

The Invisible, Images, and Hierarchy

Shamans and video-gamers have a lot more in common than one might think at first glance. Whenever gamers log into their platform, they become protagonists in a world with its own geography, its own history, and its own rules; just as the shaman, setting out on a ritual journey, casts himself as an epic hero, crossing mountains and ascending into the clouds to meet with spirits. Both withdraw their attention from their immediate surroundings and submerge themselves in a parallel universe—a virtual space, as it could be described in both cases—that is somehow distinct from the space around them even as it is immediately present to them. Of course, there is some kind of immersive experience involved in reading a novel or watching a film as well, but gamers and shamans go much further: they enter into the virtual space, move around in it, perform actions, meet friends, and fight monsters. All kinds of unforeseen events may get in the way of their mission. They use what we have called the agentive imagination, not just a contemplative one. Furthermore, the imaginative activity in both cases involves a network of agents: the gamers logged onto a single server are emotionally engaged with one another in a common virtual platform which, in the case of popular MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games), might include thousands of participants. The linguistic exchanges between players engender a modified deixis: phrases such as “Look at me!” or “Watch out, there’s an enemy behind you!” are only coherent within the virtual space of the game, and make no reference to any of the player’s immediate

surroundings (Keating and Sunakawa 2010; Thomas and Brown 2009). The participants in a shamanic ritual coordinate their imaginative activities in a similar way, so that they can partake in a shared experience of the unpredictable twists and turns that characterize encounters with spirits, even in hierarchical contexts where the majority of the participants are not directly involved in the interaction. Both cognitively and linguistically, ritual performances and video games create a here-and-now that is anchored in a distinct parallel space. Video games and shamanic rituals are perhaps the most remarkable manifestations we have of humans' astonishing skill for immersing themselves and acting collectively in shared virtual worlds.

But there are also profound differences between the imaginative ecologies of video games and shamanic practices. With artificial intelligence, graphics cards, and cable networks, the cognitive technologies of videogames are extremely powerful: they produce complex interfaces that provide players with all of the audiovisual details they need to navigate the virtual environment. Shamanic cognitive technologies, on the other hand, are much more sparing, consisting largely of various evocative cues: voices in the dark tent; partial images and suggestive movements in the light tent. By comparison, the invasive cues employed by video games guide and frame the human imagination in a much more rigid manner.

Of course, making a successful video game is not something just anyone can do; it is a productive activity that relies on an established industry, one that represents a considerable market on a global scale and is based on a division of labor between manufacturers, organized into large studios, and consumers, who pay to use the former's creations. Although players are active in the virtual world, and can even make modifications to large online games, they never rise to the status of "creator."¹ Video games are thus based on a strongly hierarchical distribution of tasks, which entrusts the work of the exploratory imagination to professional creators, while consumers are in principle confined to the workings of the guided imagination.

This partition is not the case for shamanic practices: for example, shamans present themselves as receivers rather than creators of their song-itineraries; they do not invent them, but rather receive them from

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1. Game studios' efforts to recruit players from gaming communities to participate in improving, distributing, and maintaining games do little to disturb this division of labor: players pay producers and never the inverse.

the spirits. From an anthropological point of view, there is one more remarkable difference between these practices that we should note: the virtual worlds of video games are not typically thought to have much relevance for the everyday world. If a video-game player kills or saves someone in the game, it will have no impact on his or her criminal record or social status. Video games are based on a dualistic ontology that sets a boundary between fiction and real life, between the imaginary and the real. Confusing the two is tantamount to a pathological loss of bearings that gaming addicts need to be wary of. The shamanic universe, on the other hand, is not hermetically separated from the immediate space of the ritual stage, but is instead an extension of it. It is premised not on the dichotomy between reality and fiction, but on the complementarity of the visible and the invisible. The point of the pathways traveled by shamans, as well as the spirits they interact with, is to create channels of communication between immediate and virtual space. The actions performed during the ritual are clearly intended to have an effect on the participants' lives, whether it is to heal, save, bring happiness, or re-establish ties that have been severed with nonhuman persons. As we have seen in numerous examples, the shamanic ritual activates a series of links to the cardinal points that are inscribed within the dwelling where the performance takes place; it draws the entities of the surrounding landscape into the space of the tent, gives voice to the animals that populate the surrounding forest, and makes heard the voices of the past. It explores the world from the point of view of the mountain, the river, the bear, and the tree-dwelling ancestor. In short, the shamanic imagination extends what appears to be one of the primordial functions of the human imagination going all the way back to *Homo erectus*: *to enrich and deepen the relationship between humans and their environment*.

Industrial technologies of the imagination clearly have no such objective. The fantastic characters found in video games have nothing to do with the forests around the arcade, and gamers do not turn their screens in the direction of the setting sun, the Big Dipper, or the course of the nearest river. These technologies do not turn the human imagination toward nonhuman worlds, but rather capture and absorb it into their own fictional universes.

It was André Leroi-Gourhan who first identified the entangled relationships between the three principal phenomena that we see here: the cooption of imaginative cues, the hierarchization of the division of labor, and estrangement from the environment. With his profound knowledge of prehistoric archeology and comparative ethnology, Leroi-Gourhan

developed a prescient critique of the slow processes of separation that “led to the denial of any connection between the human and the rest of the living world” (1993: 402). From the Paleolithic age to that of modern industrial societies, as the study of paleoanthropology continues to confirm, humans have been continually finding ways to externalize the essential functions of their relationship with the world: they externalized part of the digestive process when they started cooking their food; with the creation of machines, they externalized the tools and gestures through which the human body ensured its connection to material existence; and they externalized the mnemonic faculty with books and electronic systems.² They have even externalized the imaginative function, entrusting it to visual image technologies and a small elite of image creators. As Leroi-Gourhan predicted fifty years ago with astonishing foresight, the accelerated pace of globalization and the emergence of the Internet have amplified the processes of separation he described to a vertiginous degree. From a global perspective, humanity has never before achieved so great a capacity for mental and material production; but on the level of the individual, this capacity seems to correlate with a contraction of the field of expression on which the human skill for motor and imaginative creation operates. The trajectory Leroi-Gourhan paints may be just as easily extended to the political sphere if we consider the externalization of individuals’ sovereign power over their own relationship with the surrounding world, which is highly protected in societies that strongly value autonomy, but is entrusted to hereditary or elected representatives in modern hierarchical societies.³ Leroi-Gourhan’s vision of the world is thus founded on a profound critique of modernity that may seem lacking in optimism, but it would be a mistake not to take it seriously when we consider that he also predicted the global ecological crisis that has become the greatest threat of our time.

A particularly original aspect of Leroi-Gourhan’s thinking is his attention to the role visual images have played in two indissociable historical processes: the hierarchization of social relationships and the

2. For Jean-Jacques Hublin, the externalization of the digestive function and technical actions is followed by social and cognitive forms of externalization (Hublin 2017).

3. On ancient European and indigenous American democracies, see Testart 2012. On the evolution of the meaning of the term democracy since Antiquity and its movement toward a delegative system, see Dupuis-Déri 2013.

dissolution of the connection between humans and their environment. Modern technologies, he tells us, provide humans with “the reflection of a world that has expanded to the proportions of the universe but has become a world of images” (Leroi-Gourhan 1993). The manner in which we are integrated into our environment, a fundamental fact of all forms of life, is increasingly experienced by proxy, through the spectacle of technologically produced images. The condition of modernity thus seems to continually sever humans from their creative and imaginative potential, delegating it to an ever-smaller elite.

The shamanic itinerary pursued in this book allows us to shine a spotlight on several aspects of these problems. The short imaginative experiment run in the opening pages—a stroll through a mental park, followed by an unpleasant, albeit imagined injection—showed that mental travel and emotional immersion are abilities everyone has, and that the dichotomy between the real and the imaginary is ultimately of little help in accounting for them. Our autonomic nervous system can be affected by mental images as though they were sensory perceptions, and this is an indispensable disposition when it comes to making plans, sharing them with others, or being emotionally moved when hearing about someone else’s experiences. We have also shown that the ability to immerse oneself in imagined environments probably played a fundamental role in the evolution of the extraordinary hunting skills of humans, that strange, empathic predator. The imagination is something like a supplementary sense that enables us to put ourselves in the place of animals and perceive different kinds of intentionality in the world around us. Many societies around the world cultivate these skills, often using dreams as a privileged means of gaining insight into the subjectivities of nonhuman beings. Of course, the exploratory imagination is not entirely absent from modern societies—we too have our dreams and mental journeys—but these practices rarely take on much social or cultural value. Public cultural policies do not contain dreaming programs, but instead promote things like literature and cinema, which are based on the guided imagination. The mental life of moderns—the historical foundation of which lies in the gradual severing of human connections with animals, plants, and gods—leaves little room for the *exploratory imagination of different worlds*, the only real outlet for which is projection into the future, in the utopian mode. The exploratory imagination of worlds is thus transplanted from the spatial dimension to the temporal one. There is a direct relationship between the way a society deals with its members’ dreams and daydreams, and the way it relates to the nonhuman cohabitants of its territories. This

is what makes (or at least should make) ecologies of the imagination a field of the utmost importance for contemporary anthropology.

The shamanic exploration of worlds intensifies and methodically cultivates the disposition for projecting ourselves into nonhuman subjectivities that we inherited from our Paleolithic past as hunters. In all of the boreal shamanic traditions, animals assume the power to speak and enter into communication with humans, while the latter break away from their familiar moorings to embrace distant perspectives. The astonishing experience of perceiving the earth and the human species from the point of view of ducks, cranes, and clouds, from high up in the celestial world, is common to a vast array of shamanic traditions, from the psychotropic mushroom-inspired visions of Chukchi hunters to the versified chants of Yakut and Ket shamans. Shamanism is thus a technique through which humans experience seeing themselves and their world from the outside, from the point of view of other lives and other worlds.

Chukchi, Koryak, and Khant shamans may sometimes use hallucinogenic mushrooms, but it has never been essential to their practice: they can go on mental journeys with or without them. For shamans, the neuropharmacological effects of the mushroom may enhance the ritual experience, but they are never its primary purpose. For their part, the hierarchical shamans of the Altaic populations never use mushrooms. The shamanic arts cannot therefore be reduced to hallucinations or “altered states of consciousness” as they so often have been. They in fact mobilize a continuum of non-sensory perceptions—dreaming, daydreaming, and mental travel, for example—that are among the most common and quotidian elements of our mental lives. Shamanism is not an “archaic technique of ecstasy,” as Mircea Eliade has it, but an innovative reflexive art of mental travel. It is in this sense that we are all potential shamans. To free the shamanic arts from this pathological image means finding a way to avoid neutralizing their subversive potential as a truly human form of communication with the world, on a par with those forms that are more familiar to us and which we tend to take to be the only legitimate ones.

Nor would it be correct to reduce the shamanic art of mental travel to a body of cultural beliefs about or representations of the world, as symbolic interpretations tend to suggest—another way of neutralizing the significance of these traditions. Proponents of the altered-states-of-consciousness and symbolic approaches are ultimately driven by the same conception of the imagination as a reservoir of mental representations, whether these representations are seen as deviant or conventional. Both schools conceive of the imagination solely in its contemplative mode,

even though it is clear that in shamanic experience the imagination plays a fundamentally agentive role. Thanks to the findings of neuroscientific research, we now know that imagination engages the same motor functions that humans use to act in the world and thus cannot be said to consist of mental representations alone. Taking these new models into account, I have approached shamanism as a set of techniques and devices that allow for the sharing and transmission of the imaginative experiences through which humans establish relationships with the invisible in a way that explicitly engages their motor function, proprioception, and power to act.

If the imagination is a central component of the relationship between humans and the living world, the manners in which it is used and distributed in a social context are critical issues. In several Siberian societies, the position of shaman is the only notable status recognized by the group, the only manifestation of the social division of labor beyond the basic division of tasks according to sex and age. The Paleo-Asiatic peoples of the northeast generally have no notion of a “chief”; they recognize only “strong” individuals whose influence, always strictly limited, is bound up with their generosity and their success in hunting and warfare. These figures have no means of depriving others of their autonomy or their freedom to determine their own fate, nor do they have any authority to speak on behalf of others. As Jochelson writes of the Koryak, “Neither in traditions nor in other tales do we find any trace of the representative principle before the advent of the Russians” ([1905–1908] 2016: 788). It was for this reason that, when Russian settlers sought to establish the status of tax-collecting officials among populations that they saw as anarchic, they introduced a Yakut term: *toion*, or “lord.”⁴ In these same northeastern regions, the figure of the blacksmith—who enjoyed considerable social status in other parts of northern Asia—either does not exist (in which case the metallurgy of these societies was limited to hammering metals received from the outside world), or only appeared under Russian colonial influence (Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 611–14; 1926: 424). Shamans, on the other hand, are known all over Siberia, meaning that the only universally recognized kind of specialization is the mastery of the invisible. Shamanic traditions display the first forms of differentiation between categories of people. The social division of labor thus

4. On the Chukchi, see Bogoras 1904–1909. On the Yukaghir, see Jochelson 1926. On the Itelmen, see Bat’ianova and Turaev 2010: 179. On the Koryak, see Jochelson [1905–1908] 2016: 763.

begins with a division of imaginative labor. We saw in chapter 11 how, among the Yukaghir of the tundra, this specialization took a hierarchical form as they began to adopt images and accessories from Altaic groups, a process parallel to that which occurred among the Nivkh. It is thus clear from our journey across Siberia that the origin of inequality should not be sought exclusively in a society's economic realities, but also in the historical transformations of its ecologies of imagination.

For Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Amerindian shamanism could be defined as the authorization of certain individuals to cross the corporeal barriers between species, adopt an exospecific subjective perspective, and administer the relations between those species and humans" (2015: 60). Shamans thus take on the role of "cosmopolitical diplomats" on behalf of ordinary people (2015: 151). This description is accurate enough, but only in contexts tending toward hierarchization. It is important not to forget that the ability to mentally explore nonhuman worlds, inherited from our history as a hunting species, is common to all humans. Recognized specialists and "diplomats" may have established monopolies on imaginative and oneiric exploration in many parts of the world, but *not everywhere*. Certain Amazonian groups, such as the Parakanã, reject the shamanic institution outright and allow anyone who can dream to devote their sleeping life to the exploration of otherness and a multitude of different points of view on the world: "In the dream world," Carlo Fausto relates, "universal communication is constituted between humans, animals, artifacts, and natural objects" ([2001] 2012: 189). We know that with the dark-tent ritual and their own various dream practices, a great many communities in Siberia and North America recognize and cultivate the basic ability of hunters to visualize the inner worlds of animals in a way that is comparable to that of the Parakanã. Hunters like these have no real need for plenipotentiary embassies and administrators when it comes to immersing themselves, body and mind, in their surrounding environment. The idea then, postulated by some perspectivist mythologies, that subjectivity is confined within the opaque barriers of the body, is one way of shoring up the prerogatives of those shamans whose own authority is founded on their status as exceptional beings. Understanding how hierarchical diplomacy engenders a kind of confiscation of the right to explore different worlds is a major issue for anthropology.

Our comparative work on the diverse ritual practices of Siberia has brought to light a vast contrast between two sets of shamanic traditions: a heterarchical regime of imagination and a hierarchical regime of imagination. Through modes of transmission that privilege generative patterns,

the former regime favors individual experiences of direct dyadic relationships with the nonhuman members of the nurturing environment. In these cases, the shaman is seen as a simple translator who facilitates dyadic relationships between humans and nonhumans, rather than as a diplomat whose interventions are indispensable to these relationships. The methods that these traditions—represented by the Paleo-Asiatic populations on the Pacific coast of Siberia, as well as the Ob-Ugrian groups in the region's western reaches—employ to stimulate the production of invisible imagery include sensory deprivation under the dark tent, the consumption of psychotropic mushrooms (*Amanita muscaria*), and dreaming. Shamans in this regime are distinguished by a remarkable degree of individuality that enables them to transgress categorical boundaries—particularly those pertaining to sex for the northeastern groups—though without this difference being innate or definitive. Their status as experts in certain kinds of ritual practice is contingent and reversible. Because all humans are understood to be at least potentially open to the invisible, their exceptional status is a matter of degree and not kind.

In the hierarchical traditions that spread throughout Siberia under the influence of the expanding Altaic populations, the shaman is seen as an indispensable mediator in the relations between humans and nonhumans. Their practices thus transmit a rigid triadic model based on a kind of complementarity between open people (the specialists) and the general mass of closed people. In this regime, shamans are inheritors of an essence that is simultaneously singular and collective, just as the complex voice of their chants is simultaneously their own and that of an ancestor. The innate porosity of the shamanic body means that it is open to both centripetal visits from spirits and the centrifugal movement of the shaman's soul, which can project itself outward and off into the invisible. The shaman's intimacy with the invisible is thus rooted in the singularity of his or her own body, which is intrinsically different from that of ordinary persons. The latter delegate to the shaman some of the fundamental aspects of their relationship with the nonhuman entities that populate their environment and provide them with sustenance. The shaman takes on these responsibilities during regular domestic or community rituals. The dependence of the ordinary members of the community on the shaman is matched by a reciprocal reliance on the part of the specialist, since the shaman can begin his activities only once the community has provided him with the insignia associated with his special status: the drum and costume. The prototypical action of the hierarchical ritual is the live journey, in which the officiant gives a legible form, in

the immediate space of the ritual stage, to the negotiations carried out in virtual space on behalf of the spectators, perhaps to retrieve the soul of a sick person, or to secure success in hunting, fertility, or good fortune. In this regime, the imagination in its agentive and exploratory modes is most often reserved for the shaman, though even for them the proliferation of cognitive technologies means that the exploratory dimension tends to give way to a guided modality.

The deep-seated homogeneity of these techniques across all of the hierarchical traditions has been clear throughout our trans-Siberian survey, revealing a cultural and spiritual unity that spans a vast geographical area, as can be seen on few other parts of the planet. Certain features, though not entirely ubiquitous, recur with such precision across different hierarchical societies that they can be read as clues to vast exchanges that took place on a continental scale. Take for example the X-ray-like image of the thorax, complete with a representation of the specialist's ribs, that can be seen on shamanic aprons from Manchuria all the way to the Arctic, by way of Lake Baikal. Similarly, the eyes depicted on shamanic headdresses as a sign of exceptional visionary ability can be found all along the Yenisei River, from the Darhad of Mongolia to the Samoyedic peoples of the Arctic, and then south among the Udeghe of the lower Amur. Another technique, in which shamans set out on their mental navigations on a raft made of carved fish figures, can be found in the Arctic, on the Yenisei, in Transbaikalia, and again in the lower Amur region. In the same territories, shamans carry out their celestial ascents by means of a pole or tree trunk, which is often taken as an image of the roads that ritual specialists follow through the invisible world. The model of the road-song is a fundamental hierarchical tool for ordering the succession of mental images of the journey and subjecting them to a shared geography. But none of these techniques are a given or necessary part of what shamans do: Chukchi shamans prefer to steer clear of the beaten track and travel across skies and seas with no need for an image of a network of conventional roads.

Another revealing technique used in hierarchical traditions to keep the imagination in check is the straps with which non-shamanic spectators literally hold their shaman "by the reins," preventing the officiant from immersing himself in a lying journey, with all that this implies for the unbridled use of the exploratory imagination. This procedure is well known along the Yenisei, Lena, and lower Amur rivers. Though it is typically presented as a kind of "support" used to prevent the shaman from "falling" into the abysses of the invisible, this device is in fact a means

of retaining some control over the shaman's imaginative activity and a deliberate form of prohibition on the lying journey, which the Altaics would have encountered among the many heterarchical populations whose territories they invaded.

Hierarchical shamans thus have to be wary of too fully abandoning themselves to their own mental imagery and instead coordinate it with their visual perceptions. To this end they benefit from an ingenious device that has been diffused along these same three axes—the Yenisei, Lena, and Amur rivers: this is the fringe that hangs from the ritual head-dress over the shaman's eyes and allows the officiant to filter and blur the visual pathway. Spanning a distance of from three to five thousand kilometers, these three rivers seem to have provided a set of remarkably efficient channels for the spread of various hierarchical technologies (see figure 11, page 103).

It is important to understand that heterarchical systems are not primitive forms stuck on a lower rung of an evolutionary ladder, one on which the hierarchical traditions represent an inevitable, higher stage. Heterarchical societies instituted a series of deliberate checks on the specialization of the shaman's skills and powers—by forbidding his participation in bear festivals, for example, as is the case with the Ugrians of western Siberia and the Nivkh on the Pacific coast. These restrictions are a form of conscious, but not always effective, resistance to the temptations of the hierarchical models observed in neighboring populations.

So, what motivates and sets in motion the expansion of hierarchy and the accompanying proliferation of visual images in shamanic practices? Why do some groups resist hierarchy, while others enthusiastically embrace it? Are we right, for example, to presume that there exists some kind of affinity between economic accumulation and an externalized symbolic one? As we have seen, neither pastoralism, wealth, nor clan organization, which other researchers have proposed as the cause and origin of hierarchy, are necessarily associated with it. The reindeer-herding Chukchi, who are powerful pastoralists, are marked by vast inequalities in wealth; and Nivkh social life is organized entirely in relation to exogamous patrilineal clans: yet neither of these groups has developed hierarchical shamanic traditions. Conversely, there are egalitarian hunter-gatherers, such as the Evenki and the Ket, whose shamanic practices are thoroughly hierarchical. Nor does it seem that food storage—the importance of which for the stratification of hunter-gatherer societies was long ago demonstrated by Testart (1982)—is a decisive criterion in relation to shamanic traditions: among the sedentary hunter-fishers of the Pacific, some like

the Itelmen and the Nivkh have heterarchical traditions, while others, like the Ulch, have powerful hierarchical shamans.

Regimes of imagination cannot, in other words, be reduced to pale reflections of economic and social infrastructures. These mental configurations cut across the boundaries of any recent classification of social types. We thus need to look beyond techno-economic criteria and consider explanations on the cognitive level. Could these contrasts, then, be correlated with the major modes of identification and ontologies? Unlike earlier models, the system elaborated by Philippe Descola does not subordinate the superstructural to the infrastructural, but instead shows how different ontologies can help or hinder the adoption of various techno-economic practices. Certainly the flexible nature and reversibility of categorical positions in heterarchical traditions have a logical affinity with the reciprocity of perspectives and relations that Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro place at the heart of animist ontology (Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998). And for its part, the world of hierarchical shamanism that we have identified in northern Asia has much in common with what Descola describes as an analogical ontology: a way of thinking that elaborates correspondences between different entities and states of being characterized by singularity and dispersion. A being like the bear, though heralded as the master of the forest by hunters, finds itself reduced to a lowly servant of the lower world in shamanic cosmograms—a singular unit integrated into a hierarchical order of compartmentalized levels. When it comes to shamanic practices, many hierarchical ritual techniques are based on recurring analogies between the human body, the domestic space, and the cosmos. Humans themselves are divided into two rigidly essentialized categories—open people and closed people—though without constituting an integrated totality such as we see in the Indian caste system. The iconographic mechanisms that Descola identifies as typical of analogical thought (Descola 2010: 165–82) can be clearly recognized in the abundant visual imagery of hierarchical shamanism: the correspondences between the macrocosm and the microcosm, the vast networks of heterogeneous elements, the embedding of a single motif on several different scales—all of these can be identified in the costumes and rituals that turn the domestic space and the shaman's body into a model of the world, and in the paintings on shamanic drums, which depict their own compositional models in a *mise en abyme*. Behind these effects, we have been able to trace the principles of projection and coordination that regulate the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the immediate and the virtual.

But it is more in the images that it produces than in the implementation of a relational schema of “protective domination,” as Descola proposes, that we can recognize analogical thought in northern Asia. None of the Siberian societies we have considered exhibits anything like a homogeneous relational schema that would govern the entirety of the relationships comprising it—both those between humans and those humans have with animals and other nonhuman entities. The wealthy Chukchi watch over and protect their reindeer, but the authority the rich have over the poor is limited and circumstantial, countered by a fundamental principle of individual autonomy, according to which each individual should ultimately have as much responsibility as possible over his own relationship with the world and his survival in it. It is this principle that gives their ritual tradition, in which everyone is a quasi-shaman, its heterarchical twist. Conversely, the Tozhu Tuvans do very little to watch over or protect their reindeer, yet their shamanism is resolutely hierarchical. There is therefore no correlation between the treatment of animals and the regime of imagination, and no indication that the latter must derive from the former.

The decisive criterion for the emergence of hierarchy seems instead to be the possibility of integrating domination and inequality into an all-encompassing system, one in which dependencies and substitutions are not accidents, but necessities. One of the necessary conditions for hierarchy—though certainly not the only one—is a principle of substitution capable of inhibiting the principle of autonomy. The unexpected correlation we uncovered between types of shamanism and forms of marriage prestation provides proof of this. Among populations with a hierarchical ritual tradition, the dominant form of matrimonial prestation is the payment of a bridewealth, whereby the elders of the groom allow him to marry by offering goods to the father of his prospective bride. Conversely, those societies of eastern Siberia, whose shamanic traditions are heterarchically oriented, favor other forms of marriage, primarily involving the suitor obtaining the right to marry by the sweat of his brow, going to work for his father-in-law. The similarity and structural homology between the investiture of a hierarchical shaman and recognition of a marriage via the exchange of material property is clear: in both cases, a network of people come together to gather food and prestige goods in order to throw a large collective feast in honor of one of their own. In both cases, individuals are substituted for others in the management of the collective’s relationships with outsiders, and gifts are used to secure rights over an individual. Just as a suitor’s elders can step in on his behalf

to negotiate the payment of a bridewealth, the hierarchical shaman, who sometimes assumes the role of fiancé or matchmaker on behalf of the community, becomes the delegated representative of humans in their negotiations with nonhumans.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu underlined the strange state of affairs by which, in Western societies, the elected representative to whom an assembly delegates its power to represent itself ends up embodying the collective and can therefore legitimately impose their own will and exercise their own power over those they represent: “the fact of speaking for, in favor of, or in the name of someone implies the propensity to speak in the place of that person” (Bourdieu 1985: 60). In this sense, as Bourdieu writes, “[the] work of delegation [...] becomes the principle of political alienation” (1985: 57). In a certain way, by taking on functions that ordinary people assume for themselves in heterarchical contexts, hierarchical shamans have at least in part come to stand in for ordinary people in their dialogue with the world. However, Siberian societies have managed to protect themselves from the excesses of usurpation, so common throughout Western history, with a number of techniques designed to keep hierarchical shamans from gaining political or economic power, something these ritual specialists have rarely been able to do. The group’s reliance on the shaman is counterbalanced by a reciprocal form of dependence, thanks to which the community is able to exercise a constant control over its delegate’s actions in nonhuman worlds. Take for example, the “reins” and sparks with which audience members prevent hierarchical shamans from immersing themselves too deeply in their own intimate mental images. It is undoubtedly because of this demand for control that the silence and opacity of the lying journey fails to satisfy the audience’s expectations, and that the ritual devices of hierarchical traditions tend toward a certain degree of transparency, giving a visual form to the shaman’s invisible wonderings. Visibility is thus a kind of compensation for delegation, and this is perhaps one reason for the profusion of visual images that characterizes hierarchical traditions.

The difference between the role of material images in hierarchical and heterarchical systems is striking. While heterarchical practices make little, if any, use of images as a means of accessing the invisible—instead favoring obscurity and various dream practices—the spectacular ceremonies put on in hierarchal traditions are rife with them. These images do not, however, constitute an invasive iconography standing in for all imaginative work. In part destroyed when a shaman dies, these images lead an intermittent existence between singular material incarnations

and their persistence in dreams and memory. Their purpose is not to give visual form to everything, nor to take the place of non-sensory perceptions, but to guide and frame them through their fragmentary and suggestive (as opposed to descriptive) character. They are often what Carlo Severi calls “chimeras,” images which, by means of a few salient features, convey by projection an implicit space. In such images, “the invisible takes precedence over the visible and seems to provide its context” (2017: 233). For Severi, the salient features of these images often act as cues for memorization and the preservation of knowledge in certain oral traditions. Such is the case with the images used in the hierarchical traditions of northern Asia, which help to fix cosmologies and mental itineraries. Though this iconography does not reduce the invisible to the visible, in comparison with the obscurity of the dark tent, it helps encode a stable transmission of virtual worlds by partially sealing them in matter.

Indeed, the mental universes of the hierarchical traditions of Central Siberia are much more stable than those of the heterarchical populations to the east and west. The chants of hierarchical shamans combine moments of individual inspiration with faithful reproductions of the words and voice of a shamanic ancestor. The verses are structured in parallel with a network of routes that traverse a common invisible geography, which is sometimes shared by individual shamans down to the smallest detail. While heterarchical traditions favor generative patterns that stimulate the creative renewal of indeterminate individual experiences, hierarchical traditions tend to reserve these modalities for specialists and more commonly rely on fixed canonical models. In hierarchical practices, the invisible thus seems to cool down, its eddies slowing, as though it were mired in the visible.

Techniques for stabilizing and transmitting knowledge in oral traditions, be they pictographs or prophetic writing systems, have in recent years been the subject of much analysis and theorization by anthropologists (Severi 2015; Déléage 2013). And yet the very need to stabilize content remains in and of itself mysterious. Some societies are keen to accumulate knowledge and images, and to ensure that they are passed on unchanged from one individual to the next, either by rote memorization or by committing them to different material supports meant to preserve them for eternity. But this is by no means a universal desire: other societies prefer transmission in the form of individualized experiences, particularly in dreams and visions. Their point of view is captured well in the formula: “To explain too much is to steal a person’s opportunity to learn” (Buckley 1979: 31, cited in Smith 1998: 421).

I argue that, in those societies that have embarked on the process, the stabilization of images is correlated with a less egalitarian regime of imagination. In the passage from heterarchy to hierarchy, the use of the imagination as a mode of knowing the world tends to become increasingly externalized in the form of material images. In parallel, the autonomy of each individual's relationship with his or her vital environment also tends to become externalized as it is delegated to an authorized specialist. This double externalization exhibits the ambiguities of other externalization techniques analyzed by Leroi-Gourhan. It is a form of liberation in that it relieves each individual of a burden and, through the specialization of these practices, enables the development of great virtuoso traditions, in the verbal arts as well as iconography. The question is, at what price? It subjects individuals to relations of dependence framed by networks of control and regulation, and impoverishes their relationship with the world by severing it from its invisible dimensions and taking away some of their responsibility for it. We know just how far these forms of detachment from the world can go once they have been set in motion; from the itinerary we have followed, we have seen that it is possible to discern some of the emergent forms of this process of detachment in the shamanic traditions of the forests of Siberia, and thus perhaps to acquire a better grasp of its unfolding.

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