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The Social Significance of the Shaman among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki

Abstract

Today, approximately 200 Reindeer-Evenki live in the Greater Khingan Range of north-east China (Manchuria). Their ancestors, who around the end of the 1820s migrated from Siberia, already were nominally Russian Orthodox Christians before their immigration. Nevertheless, up to this date shamans have been playing an important role in religion and particularly in society. The Chinese Reindeer-Evenki are pure animists and believe that each thing has its soul. In their understanding, various spirits populate the whole universe. The shamans act as mediators between the world of humans and that of the spirits, and serve the members of their group as helpers in hunting, as healers and protectors, as keepers of tradition, and as guides for the departed on their journey to the land of the dead. They are a safety valve in every imaginable situation of mental stress, and are consulted even today in difficult and extraordinary situations, although they show signs of deterioration and suffer persecution. This study uses many examples in order to detail the very important social impact of the shaman on the society of the Reindeer-Evenki living in the Chinese taiga. The difficult, and for the candidate also dangerous process, of becoming a shaman among the Reindeer-Evenki of the Great Amur Bend, as well as the shaman's costume symbolizing a deer, is described briefly.

Keywords: Evenki—Greater Khingan Range—shamans—tutelary spirits—shamanic costume and tools—shamanic initiation

AROUND THE END OF THE 1820s, a small group of Evenki migrated with their reindeer into the mountain taiga of the Great Amur Bend in northeastern China. The area was rich in game at the time, and there was sufficient moss for the reindeer. Necessary bartering was done with the Cossacks of the border areas on the left banks of the Amur and the Argun rivers.

At present the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki are an extremely small ethnic group numbering approximately only two hundred people. They speak a North-Tungusic dialect. Their future as a cultural entity is very much endangered.

When they set foot on Chinese territory they nominally belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church, but to this day they remain *de facto* faithful to their animistic worldview in which the shaman¹ plays a most important role as mediator between human society and the world of spirits. Since the Evenki shaman was a being of two worlds—of this world and the other-world—he had great significance for the community. As the only such person in his community he was able to visit the otherworld already during his lifetime. For his birth on earth his mother was responsible, for his second, spiritual, birth it was the spirits. These powers called him and gave him the strength to conduct a new life as a shaman who could see behind the veil of life and enter into contact with beings of the otherworld and with spirits. Because of his ability he could act for the benefit of his community. According to the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki, the universe was filled with spirits who lived in such places as the sky, the sun, the moon and stars, in the clouds and the wind, on tree and mountain tops, on rocks and in the taiga, in the earth, and even in animals and plants. All events in nature, any success or failure in human activities, illness, death, and so forth were all attributed to the spirits.

The Reindeer-Evenki of China lived in clans. The clan (*kāla*) was the most important social unit. It was formed by a closely linked group of relatives of the male line, conscious of a common descent and under the influence

of common clan spirits (*seva*) (ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 160). The interest of the shamans in their clans did not end with death; they remained attached to their communities but they also helped people who were strangers to their clans.

For some years after their arrival on Chinese soil each clan of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki still had its own shaman (see KAJGORODOV 1968, 129, 130). The decline of the original clan organization, however, finally made it impossible for each clan to have its own shaman, and after the mid 1930s only one shamaness survived in the whole group—Olga Dmitrievna Kudrina. She was the only woman professional in the community who helped in the hunt, accompanied the souls of the deceased, cured the sick, and was knowledgeable about spirits and religion.

Because the belief in the malevolent influences of various spirits was so deeply rooted in the psyche of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki, positive thinking seemed to be impossible after the loss of a shaman, and misfortunes piled up in every area of everyday life. The hunts were without success, the reindeer did not prosper, and violence broke out.

S. M. ŠIROKOGOROV describes the extreme situation that arose in an Evenki clan after the death of its shaman:

When, after the death of a shaman, the spirits of a group become loose, terrible and inexplicable illnesses occur in the group.... Adults fall into a nervous state, commit acts of inexplicable brutality, even crimes; a state of general excitement spreads, accompanied by an inclination to attacks of hysteria. Death as a consequence of this morbid state and other misfortunes of many kinds increase. The group's normal life stops; sometimes the group may be in danger of ruin. Such a state may continue for several years. (1935b, 79–80)

This observation by the Russian researcher and traveler was confirmed in the case of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki after the demise of the shamaness Olga Dmitrievna Kudrina in the fall of 1944. Deprived of its security valve, the group was now left without protection against the spirits and experienced a catastrophic period without a shaman. The spiritual safeguards the deceased shaman had erected while alive broke down; abnormal states of mind became frequent; illness, accidents, suicides, and other misfortunes increased; between the clans cruel excesses and some terrible murders prompted by desires for blood revenge occurred.

At that time the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki were organized into three groups, depending on the place of their trading connections with the outside world. The Moche group in the north traded mainly with partners from

Moche, a location on the Amur; the trade of the Cigan group (*cigan'cen*) was mainly carried out with the populace of a place on the Argun called Cigan; the Three-River group (Gunacen) secured its supply of necessary goods from trading partners among Russian emigrants in the so-called Three-River area.²

After a young Evenki of the Moche group killed a Japanese in 1944, the approximately fifty members of this group all migrated back into the Soviet Union across the Amur, because they feared repressive measures would be taken by the Japanese occupiers.

In 1945, while their areas were still under Japanese occupation, blood feuds erupted between members of the Cigan group that had remained in northeast China and members of the Three-River group, and continued until after 1949. Families from both groups were afraid to lead their nomadic life in common in case they met each other (KAJGORODOV 1968, 126, 129, 130; n.d., pp. 11, 32, 35–38, 107, 109, 190, 453, 646, 658, 694–95, 838, 884).

The deplorable events of this period can be traced for the most part, I think, to the lack of a shaman. When I asked Kajgorodov about this he expressed a similar thought in a letter: “Those researchers who write that at the death of a shaman the spirits become liberated and empowered to cause great misfortune, are correct. This can easily be seen in the case of the Three-River Evenki. Among their clans murder followed murder. The Russian trading partners (*andaki*) of the Evenki requested the Russian military administration (at the time of the Russian occupation of Manchuria from 1945 to 1948) to prohibit these terrible rituals; however, as a result of the great distances in the taiga, this could not be realized. No doubt, the Evenki believed that malevolent spirits had been released, because after the death of Olga Dmitrievna I heard them talk of her plans to invite a shaman of the Orocon³ so that he might contain the spirits and protect the Evenki against them. As far as I can remember, this plan was not carried out, though.”

The reason for this might have been that, originally, when there still were clan shamans, people avoided calling upon “clan-outsider” shamans because of the belief that such shamans could not help anyway—they knew only “alien” spirits. But there had always been cases in which a clan could not avoid calling in an outsider, e.g., when, after the death of a clan shaman, there was no appropriate person to inherit the spirits. In such a situation the clan’s spirits had to be gathered and, if possible, put out of reach by an outside shaman. Still, to engage a shaman outside of one’s clan or group was always a last resort.

Consequently, the presence of a shaman and his functioning appear to have been absolute necessities for the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki. His partic-

ipation in regulating spirit activities was often requested. By checking the spirits he could prevent their undesirable actions and thereby provide the people with the peace it needed to lead a successful economic and social life (cf. ŠIROKOGOROV 1935b, 87–88).

ŠIROKOGOROV (1935b, 88) trenchantly remarks about this phenomenon: “In view of the present-day intellectual level of the Tungus populations the lack of shamans would threaten them with the severest consequences.”

The critical situation of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki community changed only with the appearance of a new shaman. The installation of a suitable candidate was, therefore, in the existential interest of the whole group, and everyone was eager to find such a person as soon as possible.

The process of becoming a shaman was a complex affair among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki and attracted the keen interest of the social group. A detailed description of how a person of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki becomes a master of the spirits, a shaman, is beyond the purpose of this article and will therefore be dealt with on another occasion.

In this context an observation by ŠIROKOGOROV (1935b, 79, 80) is of interest. He notes that the relatives in the descending line of a defunct shaman are particularly prone to fall victim to mysterious illnesses, especially younger people of both sexes. Those afflicted in this way became depressed, distracted, and unresponsive; they were unable to work, slept for long periods, often talked during sleep, jumped up from their beds, and ran into the taiga in order to avoid contact with other humans. They often remained in solitude for a long time; refusing to eat, they lost weight. Attacks of hysteria accompanied by convulsions, insensibility, fear of brightness, and so forth were sometimes the typical symptoms of such illness. In most cases the situation of the afflicted deteriorated greatly until without any witness or assistant, a spirit took lodging in a shaman candidate deep in the taiga. When this happened the person fell into a state of ecstasy and lost consciousness, and the spirit finally came to dwell in him or her. After some time the candidate would return home, but sometimes he perished in the forest if he was not found by people who could bring him back to a camp.

After the spirits had taken possession of a shaman candidate for the first time, he was left undisturbed for a while. He would then return to a more balanced state and sometimes would try to shamanize. During this period the members of his community would give him special care and observe him because they knew that the spirits of the deceased shaman were the reasons for his sickness and abnormal behavior. This phase during which the candidate was afflicted by the “shamanic sickness” constituted something of a trial period.

Then, as a general rule, one evening or night a severe attack would

occur, and while it lasted the candidate would shiver like a shaman, jump around, and gnash his teeth. After that he would begin shamanizing. Each shaman of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki was invariably "sick," i.e., possessed by some spirits, before he began his activity. It would be quite correct to call "shamanic sickness" the symptoms of a sickness that pointed to the ability to become a shaman, typically meaning the more severe cases of a disturbed psychomental state. Such "sickness" was generally the basic condition for his later functioning as a shaman. The special conditions of his sickness induced the candidate to act as a shaman. As long as he resisted the "call," his state of health would deteriorate. Acceptance of his duty as shaman was a prerequisite for him to experience the necessary relief and relaxation and undergo a process of recovery. If the candidate originated from a family that had earlier produced shamans, nothing would interfere with his acknowledgment as an accomplished shaman.

Next to the idea of a shaman's call by the spirits, the concept that the ability to become a shaman could be inherited was to some degree important among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki. Most frequently a shaman's powers were transmitted in a direct line of male filiation from grandfather to grandson, but sometimes also from grandmother to granddaughter. The reason why sons and daughters were skipped over might have something to do with the double weight his spiritual duty put on the shaman, because he had to exercise that duty in addition to his daily breadwinner activities, such as hunting and reindeer husbandry. However, the qualification to be a shaman could also be acquired through another kinship lineage, e.g., from an uncle or an aunt, in some cases even from a brother or a sister. The "caller" need not always be an ancestor. Consequently, there was no fixed order of succession, and the transmission of a shaman's duty could not be restricted to certain degrees of kinship. In order to be genuine, shamanhood required personal aptitude as an absolute criterion. Nevertheless, among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki a strong linkage of shamanic aptitude to family and clan was evident.

In addition, ŠIROKOGOROV (1935a, 382) learned that a new shaman who was to "gather" the liberated spirits of the deceased shaman could not appear later than nine years after the death of the former shaman, because otherwise many people would have to suffer from the spirits.

According to LINDGREN, the shaman Olga Dmitrievna Kudrina experienced her calling in 1923 at the river Niznaya Ulugica, where in a dream she received her predecessor's tutelary spirit, who then transmitted to her the aptitude to be a shaman (1936, 128).

In a letter addressed to me, Kajgorodov wrote the following about Olga Dmitrievna Kudrina becoming a shamaness: "Before she became a

shamaness she often meditated and avoided human company. The decisive moment came after she had spent two weeks in the deep forest, where she lived without fire and food while conversing with the spirits. When she returned to the tent she was already a shamaness” (KAJGORODOV n.d., 130, 693, 797, 883).

Olga’s grandmother (*ewe*; died about 1914) had also been a shamaness. Furthermore, her uncle Vasilij Jakovlevic Kudrin (died about 1920) and her cousin Innokentij Ivanovic Kudrin were both shamans (LINDGREN 1936, 123–28); the latter, however, had only minor spiritual power and lacked the charismatic qualities of Olga.

When the clan system was still intact among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki and each clan had its own shaman, the chosen neophyte underwent formation at the hands of an experienced shaman of another clan. From him the neophyte learned the technique of ecstasy and the ability to make his spirits subservient and pliable to his needs, and the conducting of the *kam-lan’e* (shamanic seance) for diverse purposes. He became knowledgeable concerning the various symptoms of illnesses and the methods required to cure them, and he learned the topography of the world above and beneath and the roads leading thereto.

When Olga Dmitrievna Kudrina became a shamaness there was no shaman of her nationality left who could transmit to her the necessary esoteric knowledge. Therefore, she approached a master shaman of the Kumarcen living on the river Kumara⁴ who was known as a mighty shaman (LINDGREN 1935, 222; 1936, 129, 130; KAJGORODOV n.d., p. 32); for the reasons mentioned earlier, the Reindeer-Evenki community always showed a keen interest in having a shaman among them who was strong in power and rich in knowledge.

For his practice the shaman needed a special outfit consisting of a costume, a headdress (*derboŋi*),⁵ and a drum with drumstick. These requisites were of great significance for the shamanism of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki.

The costume represented a mental microcosm and was both symbol and seat of the shaman’s spirits. When he donned it, the shaman crossed the borderline between profane space and spirit world. Since this meant the beginning of his separation from this world, he donned the costume only immediately before the start of the seance. For outsiders it was generally dangerous to touch the costume, and even a shamaness would not touch the localizations of spirits attached to it during menstruation (cf. ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 302).

Among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki the costume symbolized a red deer (*kumaŋa*; *Cervus elaphus xantropygus* Milne-Edwards) whose natural as

well as supernatural qualities would be transmitted to the shaman.⁶

It was the duty of the clan or of the social group to make the new shaman's paraphernalia. Every member made an effort to participate in the process because by doing so each person participated directly in the shaman becoming that person's future protector.

The parts of the costume made of leather or cloth were sewn by women, if possible by those who were already beyond the climacteric. If no such women were in the community, others could do it as well, but then the finished costume would have to be purified by the smoke from certain plants.

Wooden parts were made by able carvers, and metallic parts by blacksmiths. The blacksmiths of the Reindeer-Evenki were famous for their prowess. Small bells used on sledges, as well as metal hooks and eyes, were acquired from Russian *andaki* by barter at trading meets (*bogzory*) (cf. LINDGREN 1935, 227; 1936, 218, 223; KAJGORODOV 1968, 126; n.d., 90, 130, 131, 159).⁷

Drum and drumstick were the most important elements of the shaman's outfit. Without them a seance would have been impossible among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki, since they helped the shaman to fall into trance. There was a mystic relationship between the drum produced by the whole social group and the shaman. To procure the materials and to make the drum was the special privilege of the clan or the group's men. It was a task of utmost importance because whether its later use was effective or not decided not only the personal success of the shaman but also the life and well-being of each clan or group member. It can therefore easily be understood that in the making of such an important instrument, whose efficacy involved reaching heaven and the realm of the dead, each step of the process was solemnly executed following the instructions of the shaman, who, for his part, received his instructions from the spirit that initiated him. Therefore, from the beginning there existed an intimate threefold relationship between community, shaman, and drum. The tree whose wood was used for the frame, and the animal that survived and sounded in the membrane, did not merely provide the material of the drum; rather, they were received as sacrificial and spiritual beings whose existence had not been ended by the cutting of the tree or the killing of the animal. When the dull sound of the drum carried the Evenki shaman away with it, the drum became his mount to the otherworld, his magic elk or magic deer, depending on what animal had provided the drum's membrane according to the will of the spirits. The drumstick was the whip. This idea could be found in all of Siberia. In order to function satisfactorily as the mount of the shaman, the membrane needed to come from an animal that was suited to the task by its age and physical constitution. The Chinese Reindeer-Evenki preferred the hide of a two-

year-old Isjubr deer or of an elk because it would give a better sound than the thicker hide of an older animal. The hunter whose task it was to hunt the animal was chosen by the shaman and had to dedicate himself with all his energy to the important task.

The experience of the call and the making of the paraphernalia were then followed by the initiation of the candidate. This, too, was related to dreams and visions and meant the climax and the end of a long-lasting and painful period of preparation.

The soul of the candidate traveled into the otherworld. There it was killed and cut into pieces by the spirits. In the process the young shaman experienced his being made into a skeleton. The spirits consumed his flesh and afterwards reassembled his bones. He was revived and finally returned with the capacity to act as a fully established shaman for the benefit of his community.⁸ Now he was in a position to leave this world, if need be, and to converse with beings in the otherworld.

In most cases psychic or psychosomatic illnesses prompted the initiatory experience. Long meditation in the solitude of the deep forests, combined with the avoidance of food, produced the same result. Shamanic initiation always occurred as self-initiation, as a purely individual experience of the candidate. It achieved his being separated from the life he had conducted till that point and his changing into a new form of existence, one characterized by temporary sojourns in an otherworldly realm not accessible to ordinary human beings of his group. After his return from his initiatory travel he was not the same person he was before: he had died and had come to life again.

The visible proof of a person's becoming a shaman among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki was that the shaman, under the guidance of his spiritual master, performed during three summers a *qamlan'e* at which he called the spirits at the meeting of several clans. After the shaman had come to know all the spirits called by his master, had successfully passed trials and sometimes painful tests, and had become familiar with the essential practices, a last and solemn ceremony took place as a kind of "ordination" conducted by the master. In this manner the new shaman demonstrated to all members of his community that the spirits had called him. This conclusion of his "formation" was at the same time a social highlight imbued with an especially solemn and cultic character by the sacrifice of a reindeer or an elk.⁹ With this ceremony the complete acknowledgment of the shaman by his group was achieved. From this time on he conducted all spiritual activities independently and on his own (cf. QIU 1962, 98).

At the outset of his career the young shaman of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki had to master five or six spirits; at its end he was expected to master all of them, either directly or with the help of other spirits. The more powerful

a shaman was, the more spirits were subservient to him. These spirits did not have the quality of tutelary spirits, for the shaman was their master. But he was obliged to look after them with sacrifices and treat them well. The shaman was therefore the more active partner in his relationship with his tutelary spirits; he secured the help of his spirits, but they did not necessarily protect him (ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 351, 357; SCHULZ-WEIDNER 1947, 52, 53).¹⁰

The ties of the Reindeer-Evenki shaman with his community are made particularly clear in the range of his tasks. He always swung into action when the normal life of a group member or of the whole community was being disturbed or was falling into disorder as a result of the interference of spiritual powers. In addition to this, he was the most important keeper of the people's traditions. If we should compare him with professions of our time, he would be physician, priest, historian, diviner, poet, storyteller, and dancer. Besides fulfilling these roles, he had to earn his living as hunter, the same as all the other members of the group. This means that he needed to command mental and physical strength and capacities to a much higher degree than the others in his clan.

The opinion of some earlier researchers that shamans are epileptics or psychopaths appears to be mistaken, I believe, because epilepsy causes unusual mental lethargy, forgetfulness, and a narrowing of the range of vision. Besides, an epileptic is never able to consciously control an attack. For such reasons the assertion that the shaman's states of trance are nothing but epileptic attacks is not acceptable. The shaman has to have a remarkably quick mind, and in any case has to possess a larger measure of mental ability than his fellow clan members. To carry out his duty was dangerous for the shaman as well as a strain on his strength. To deal with the spirits, to call them forth and install them by one's own intention in one's body was a task that demanded and consumed an unusual amount of strength. A communication from KAJGORODOV (n.d., p. 130) has to be understood in this sense. He says that among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki only the most courageous and the strongest was allowed to become a shaman. Between him and his fellow clansmen a difference in degree existed that was responsible for his "being unusual" and "abnormal."

The most important social duties of the Reindeer-Evenki shaman were:

Conducting the religious sacrificial ceremonies on the occasion of seasonal and social celebrations (e.g., annual celebrations, weddings, memorials for deceased persons, etc.)

Offering sacrifices and influencing otherworldly powers in order to ward off misfortune and catastrophes.

Supplicating the spirits (masters of animals) responsible for success in the hunt.

Divination and prediction of the future.

Curing of sickness.

Guiding the souls of the deceased into the realm of the dead.

In the old times ritual fighting among shamans was part of a shaman's duties in a wider sense. The rival shamans changed themselves into animals, i.e., into the animal-shaped bearers of their souls such as bear, elk, reindeer, and so forth. The fight of shamans was a fight to death and was intended to help one's own community. The Chinese Reindeer-Evenki of today still pass on stories of fights between their earlier shamans and those of the Kumarcen on the rivers Kumara and Panga.

While shamanizing would bring the shaman himself relief and would sometimes rid him of certain physical diseases, his activities also meant a psychic and physical cure for the society he lived in.

As already mentioned, the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki were convinced that most psychomental disturbances were caused by the influence of spirits. These spirits could use the human body as their dwelling and settle themselves in it. When that happened the person was "possessed" by the spirits. In most such cases the "spirit" was the characteristic expression of a pathological state. Various degrees of a sickness corresponded with various spirits. The Chinese Reindeer-Evenki saw it as a necessary evil that spirit forces affected human beings in this manner, but they were not prepared to simply give in to them. Every method was tried, therefore, to dispel the spirits. First every individual attempted to ward off the spirits. But there existed many more spirits of a special kind, those expressing certain psychomental phenomena and illnesses, against whom the powers of an individual were insufficient and only a shaman could provide help. At this stage the afflicted approached the shaman, whose duty was to assist the members of his group in such cases. Confidence in the power of a shaman was so strong among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki that the simple existence of a shaman or even just the choice of a candidate was enough to achieve a psychological effect. As soon as a shaman was present, the spirits were no longer free to act at will, they now had to reckon with the possibility of being overcome and chased out by a shaman of great power and knowledge. As a result, they preferred to retreat from their human victims, and as a consequence, cases of sickness decreased. This unconscious process can probably be interpreted to be, among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki, an adaptation to an individual's personal disposition and the result of long experience.

The community's feelings of confidence and trust obliged the shaman. He could not avoid his duty. Once he received the calling he had to be ready to help, day and night, without considering his own interests and without sparing his strength. He often had to abandon his personal affairs in order to travel hundreds of kilometers through the taiga in order to visit a patient. Such activity could be very strenuous and might eventually lead to the shaman's total exhaustion. If he did not impose certain restrictions on himself he might even become the victim of his own psychological excesses and of his own "spirits." This could even lead to his losing his ability to shamanize and only a more powerful shaman could cure him. He might also die or be killed by "his spirits."

Most prominent among the tasks of a shaman was the treatment of patients. A seance with the shaman falling into a state of trance constituted the climax of this process. If the sickness was grave and the patient close to death, the shaman attempted by this method to overtake the soul on its way to the realm of the dead and bring it back.

As a matter of course, the shaman knew how to apply medicinal herbs and plants. Amongst his technical methods of curing we might also reckon the monotonous music of the drum and the shaman's singing, because they helped to increase his hypnotic influence on the patient.

When all the attempts of the shaman failed and the spirits proved to be stronger than him, the patient would die according to the will of the spirits. When that happened it became the task of the shaman to guide the soul of the deceased into the land of the souls (*buno*; see ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 141), because only he knew the road to that land. Quite often the shaman had first to search for the soul that was wandering aimlessly somewhere in the universe. It was, so to say, the last act of charity the shaman could perform on behalf of a deceased member of his clan or group. By doing this he proved to the survivors that the soul need not aimlessly wander about and fall prey to some evil spirits, but rather that it could reach its final destination as the result of the safe guidance of a powerful shaman. Such assurance went a long way in supporting the people when they thought about their own deaths. The sacrificial reindeer killed during the *kamlan'e* for the dead became the mount (i.e., the soul of the reindeer) of the deceased on his trip to the land of the dead. Part of the victim's meat was, together with alcohol, consumed by those present, the shaman included. For the shaman alcohol meant a stimulus to trance and an increase of his powers when dealing with the spirits. Those human beings whose souls had to remain on earth and who could not reach the land of the dead because of some adverse circumstance, such as the lack of a shaman, were most unfortunate. To guide the soul to the land of the dead was therefore one of the most important func-

tions of the shaman, one in which he had to muster all his ability. At a later *ḡamlan'e* held in honor of the deceased during the summer meeting season of the clans, the deceased could transmit his advice and wishes to his survivors through the mouth of the shaman.¹¹

In terms of frequency, however, the treatment of minor illnesses and the performance of various sacrifices, divination, and so forth, took the main stage in the daily life of the shaman. For example, at a wedding a seance was held to divine the future of the young couple, or at the beginning of the main hunting season the shaman would ask for game (KAJGORODOV n.d., 188).¹²

The *ḡamlan'e*¹³ was the personal experience of the shaman, but at the same time it was a group event of utmost significance for the group's social organization. A seance called for a number of preparations, such as the construction of a platform for the sacrifice (*delḡen*), the killing of the sacrificial animal¹⁴ and the cooking of its meat, the readying of the paraphernalia, and so forth. The shaman's costume was suspended in the tent and in front of it the drum was fastened. These preparations were executed by particularly experienced and worthy men in the shaman's following. The character of the *ḡamlan'e* as an event of the community was expressed by inviting guests from another hunting camp to the event whenever other families were camped nearby.

With the preparations finished, the seance could begin. Whether it would take place in a tent or under the open sky depended on the number of participants, since even the largest tent made of birch tree bark could not accommodate much more than ten persons (see ŠIROKOGOROV 1929, 255).

Most often a *ḡamlan'e* began at night under a full moon. The darkness helped to increase the shaman's capacity for concentration and to heighten the feeling of mysterious expectation among the onlookers.

As if they acted on a secret command, all participants in the spiritual performance appeared in order to be present when the male assistants (*ḡār'i*, according to ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 329) would solemnly clothe the shaman. Participation in the *ḡamlan'e* by the audience meant that they joined as a choir in the singing of the shaman's songs (*ḡar* or *ḡara*, according to ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 329). They joined both the songs sung in a lower voice and those sung in a louder voice and with a faster rhythm. Also, the shouts of the shaman that marked the end of a motif were repeated in similar form by some of the men, in general the shaman's assistants. By increasing the speed of the singing and drumming the shaman put himself in a trance. When he fell into trance and was lying on the floor the support of his assistants was very important. Lasting for several hours, the *ḡamlan'e* was a preeminent community experience and reinforced the relationship of confidence

between the shaman and the group he had to protect.

KAJGORODOV's description of a seance the shamaness Olga Dmitrievna Kudrina held under the open sky in the summer of 1940 on the occasion of a Reindeer-Evenki wedding demonstrates with equal clarity the event's quality as a community event. He writes (1970, 158):

...the guests let the reindeer roam freely and gathered with a serious expression on their faces around the fire. The reason for the change in mood was evident; it was because the shamaness was preparing herself for the *kamlan'e*. She donned her somber shaman's costume and reached for the drum.... All Evenki, guests as well as hosts, became seated on the floor, forming a wide circle, and waited in silence for the ceremony to begin.

With a sudden move of hand the shamaness pushed a strand of her hair over her face and looked into the surrounding audience with a disturbed glance. Then she suddenly hit her head with the drum which she held fast in her right hand. The echo of the drum's sound, resembling the distant howling of a band of hungry wolves, made a frightening impression on me.

For a moment she rolled her eyes and stood motionless. Then she danced slowly, as if it was beyond her strength, once around the fire. Suddenly she jumped from her left foot on to the right, with each passing minute her movements grew increasingly fast and abrupt.... Pulling the drum away from her head the old woman beat it abruptly, and at that point, something indescribable happened. Now she hopped on the spot, now she moved in a strange dance around the fire, all the time frantically beating the drum. With wild guttural sounds she called the spirits.... When they saw this, many Evenki, too, reached a state of ecstasy. They all jumped up from their places and roared wildly along with the shamaness, rolling their red eyes. One of them, I suspect it was Usatkan, began first to roar, then to lament, and his brother Fedor uttered sounds resembling a hysteric laughter.... Gradually the movements of the old woman grew weaker, one could observe how her strength deserted her. Her voice became raucous, and pearls of sweat covered her face. Slowly she circled the fire one last time, strangely raised her arms as if she intended to cling to something in the air and fell to the ground with a heavy groan. With a dull sound the drum rolled to the floor.

The Evenki jumped up from their seats and surrounded the woman lying on the floor.... Her face was wet and of a gray color like the earth; from time to time her whole body twitched and only with difficulty she

moved her swollen tongue. The Evenki listened intensively and tried not to miss a single one of her words....

At certain times (e.g., during menstruation and after giving birth) the magic powers of a female shaman were diminished. During such times she could fulfill her social functions only partially because she might not be able to help while that period lasted. For that reason great shamanesses of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki were mostly without children. The shamaness Olga Dmitrievna Kudrina, too, had no children of her own.

The shaman of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki did not receive remuneration for his performances and activities, except for small gifts of alcohol and food. The shaman's task required an entirely altruistic behavior and did not generate any material advantage.

To conclude, we can sum up the findings of this article as follows. Since, according to the mind of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki, the most variegated spiritual beings affect human life by their mysterious power, and since an ordinary human being was not in a position to influence them, the shaman was entrusted with an important social role as an esoteric specialist dealing with spirits. Being the protector and healer of a clan or a group, he fulfilled important tasks and functions for the community. When a clan or group lacked a shaman, the spirits grew dissatisfied and sent sickness and other misfortune. Only if somebody could be found who was prepared and suitable to accept the heavy task of a shaman would the group return to a normal state. For such reasons, the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki always tried to have a shaman among them, and each member of a clan or a group had a personal interest in finding or choosing a suitable candidate. Once such a person was found, the men and women of the community participated enthusiastically and with great interest in the preparation of the shaman's outfit in order to share in the process of making that person become a future guardian. They accompanied the candidate on his difficult road to become a shaman. The shamanic seance as an experience of the community had an equally high value. It can be said beyond doubt that the shaman and the group that he was to protect shared common interests. The activities of the shaman, and the psychological influence that those activities had, were absolutely necessary for the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki to eliminate social tensions and to restore harmony after the community had been disturbed. Since the shaman had been born into the same culture and environment as the other members of his group, what distinguished the shaman and constituted his being "unusual," were certain extraordinary capacities, qualities, and abilities

Because he served as a mediator between human beings and spirits, he

enjoyed social recognition. His social standing among his people or clan was generally high, while the amount of prestige enjoyed by him depended upon his ability. If he fulfilled his task with a sense of responsibility he could enjoy the confidence of his companions and their grateful recognition.

As the shaman lived in constant danger because of his dealings with demons and spirits and because during seances he fought with these powers before everybody's eyes, he was naturally regarded with feelings of reserve and terror. People knew of the shaman's power and were happy and grateful if he used it for the benefit of the community, but one could never be quite sure if he might not abuse this power some day. Dealings of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki with their shaman were usually characterized by politeness and friendliness, but also by reverence and respect, accompanied by a certain amount of fear.

Despite having power in spiritual matters, the shaman never officially was head of the clan or a political leader of his people. His special psychomental state would not allow it. Because of the importance the activities of shamans commanded in the life of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki, the shaman was intimately linked to his community and fulfilled an important function within it. He had to be a capable and inspired person. Belief in the power of the shaman had a suggestive effect on the members of the community.

In the fall of 1993 I had a chance to make an excursion into the northern Greater Khingan Range and visit the Reindeer-Evenki who still live there today.¹⁵ There, in the autumn larch forests, I encountered the more than eighty-year-old shamaness Njura Kaltakun in a hunting camp of five tents of the taiga nomads. Her famous predecessor, Olga Dmitrievna Kudrina, in 1944 died, and she has been active among her people since the 1950s.

Njura had taken over the spirits of her predecessor. She is now, as Olga had been until her death, the only genuine shamaness among the Reindeer-Evenki of northeast China. The Isjubr deer antlers with six branches made of metal that adorned her shaman's crown indicated that she was considered by her people to be a strong and great shaman. The old shamaness was present in this *urilen* (Evenki for nomadic economic community) in the upper region of the Albazicha river system because she was out searching for a hunter who two weeks earlier had vanished in the taiga without leaving a trace. He was sent out by his community to scout for a new place to camp. Her presence ensured that the missing hunter's family would not be seized by despair and hysteria, which would then spread like wildfire throughout the whole *urilen*.

My personal observations confirmed, therefore, research findings con-

cerning the social position and semantics of the shaman in the society of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki even at the present time. There is, therefore, nothing that has to be added to or changed in the conclusions reached earlier. What follows is, accordingly, an additional corroboration of the insights gained earlier through study of the available literature and correspondence with specialist scholars.

Njura, who was born around 1912, told me that she experienced her calling when she was only sixteen years old. After that the spirits made her become a shamaness. At that time she became, as Olga before her, the disciple of a powerful shaman of the neighboring Kumarcen in order to acquire the esoteric tools necessary for her difficult task among her people. This famous shaman of the Kumarcen, by the name Mentjihan, lived on the upper reaches of the Kumara river in friendly relations with the Reindeer-Evenki. Still, relations between the shamans of the Reindeer-Evenki and the Kumarcen were not always harmonious. Njura recounted the tradition according to which the shamans of both people fought against each other with the help of their spirits, and that such fights between shamans often ended in the death of one of them. The contesting parties changed themselves into their alter ego under an animal shape and/or let their theriomorphic assistant spirits fight each other. Once, Njura had attended a *ḡamlan'e* together with Olga in the vicinity of Mt Okoldoi (Along Shan). During the extremely antireligious Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China Njura was forbidden to shamanize any longer. Her entire shaman outfit was confiscated and transferred to the Museum in Harbin. The ultraleftists, in their at times criminal zeal and one-sided bias, did not even notice that their action deprived the whole ethnic group of its safety valve. However, the shamanism of the Reindeer-Evenki continued to exist in secret and, after Liberation, under the new policies of Nationalities Njura received new shamanic paraphernalia. The shaman's new costume and the drum were made, as usual, by some specialists in the group (Vladimir Kaltakun, Maria Sologon, Pelageja Kaltakun). On the basis of my observations, I assume that when the shamans of the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki can still fulfill their functions without restriction, there are fewer cases of spirit-caused sickness than in times when there is no shaman. The latest resurgence of shamanism after a period of persecution definitely proves, I think, the necessity and the desirability of shamans in the future as well. But, for how long? Together with the Reindeer-Evenki the shamans are dying out. Their drumming, their roaring, their singing will soon fall silent in the remote larch forests of the Greater Khingan Range. Here, in Northeast China's most distant corner, they have their last refuge and, perhaps, their *Urheimat*.

NOTES

Dedication: In grateful memory of my friend Anatolij Makarovič Kajgorodov (1927–1998), the outstanding expert on the Reindeer-Evenki of the Chinese taiga.

1. The Chinese Reindeer-Evenki use the term *s'aman*. A female shaman is often called *odoyan* (see ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 269, 270).

2. For more on the structure and historical development of Evenki trading see HEYNE 1992.

3. Orocon are a horse-breeding Tungusic neighboring group on the river Gan.

4. In modern China Kumarcen, or Manegren, are combined with the horse-breeding Orocon and Birarcen in the Oroqen Nationality.

5. On top of the headdress were antlers of the red deer made out of iron with from four to six prongs attached to them. The more powerful the shaman, the more prongs on the antlers (ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 291).

6. The theriomorphic costumes of shamans are the largest and most important group of costumes among all Eurasian peoples. Besides costumes resembling birds or deer, costumes symbolizing bears were also common, and in rare cases other animals (e.g., dragonflies among the Ket) or imaginary beings were represented.

7. For more on the barter method of the Russian-Evenki see HEYNE 1992.

8. According to FINDEISEN (1957, 51), the so-called shamanic sickness is a mystic self-sacrifice for fellow clan members. He writes: "The essence of all these truly terrible processes... is that the shaman can cure only those sicknesses that are caused by spirits that have received their part of his body at the time of the terrible cutting up of his body."

9. As a consequence of the relatively small number of reindeer among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki, they had imposed some restrictions on themselves. Therefore, a reindeer was killed only when there was a great need for meat. The killing of a reindeer could further be justified by reason of some acceptable social function, such as a wedding or the sending off of a reindeer's soul as the mount for the soul of a deceased (ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 92).

10. The Chinese Reindeer-Evenki used the term *ojan* for the state of "mastering the spirits" (ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 271).

11. The Chinese Reindeer-Evenki believed that another relative (member of the clan) would die if they did not succeed in answering the needs and wishes of the dead. Special attention was given to the treatment of the soul (ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 215).

12. FINDEISEN (1957, 137) reports: "Among the Tungus, too, the shaman becomes active at the beginning of the hunt. Further, if for some supernatural reason the hunting luck had disappeared, his help is asked for. In order to support the hunt the shamans of hunting peoples perform rites in which they implore the spirits for their assistance. For example, in the thinking of the Yukagir the spirits first have to catch the 'shadows' of those animals that later will be really caught by the hunters. Among the Tungus the shaman has to perform ritually those actions that are necessary to catch the game." Here we meet with concepts and rituals of hunting magic.

13. Among the Chinese Reindeer-Evenki the term for "shamanize" is *sama* (+ suffix) or *n'imya* (ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 269, 297, 309).

14. When a reindeer was killed for a shamanic sacrifice certain specific rules had to be observed. It was important that during the spiritual method of killing the animal no blood was spilled. The animal was forced to the ground and its chest opened by a cut with a sharp hunting knife. The person killing the animal swiftly inserted his hand into the opening and compressed the aorta so that the animal died instantly (ŠIROKOGOROV 1935a, 92).

15. The text of the present article was originally written in 1993 to be included in a vol-

ume on shamanism that was to accompany an exhibit in Cologne. The exhibit did not materialize. Instead, I was given the chance to visit the Reindeer-Evenki in the Greater Khingan Range in the fall of 1993 through the kind offices of Dr. Ingo Nentwig (Leipzig) and the intervention of Professor Wu Bingan of Liaoning University in Shenyang (China).

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