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Shamanism as a Worldview Basis of Ethnocultural Traditions of the Peoples of the Sayan-Altai in Present-Day Society

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Shamanism of the Sayan-Altai represents a form of religious beliefs characterized by a special ecstatic communication of the shaman with the supernatural world. The shamanism therewith plays an integrating role in traditional culture.

The soul-concept is an important constituent of the entire complex of shamanism because it is the soul that is the central subject to which the entire shamanizing act is aimed at.

Keywords: shamanism, traditional beliefs of the peoples of the Sayan-Altai, religious world view, concepts about soul, ethno-confessional traditions.

Shamanism of the Sayan-Altai represents a form of religious beliefs characterized by a special ecstatic communication of the shaman with the supernatural world. Shamanism itself originated at a certain stage of the development of animistic beliefs: (more in detail, see (Abaev, 2001; Vainshtein, 1961, 1964; Kenin-Lopsan, 1978, 2002; Revunenkovna at al., 2000 and others)). In essence, shamanism represents an archaic form of the religion of the peoples of Central and East Asia, afterwards preserved mainly amongst Tungusic and Paleo-Asiatic peoples of Siberia and the Far East. The word «shaman» thence was spread only among some Tungusic tribes who lived mainly in the basin of Amur River and began to advance to the Trans-Baikal region and further westward in the early sixteenth century. There are various versions regarding the origin of the

term «shaman». From the very beginning of the appearance of shamanism there stood out a circle of persons who in their qualities and functions occupied a special place in a group of people: the elders of the clan, tribal chiefs, military leaders, medicine-men, etc. Among them there were people with a specific mental organization – obsessed shamans who were believed to be able to establish contact with spirits and to satisfy other necessities of the clan members. The term «shaman» comes from the Tungusic languages and in Tungus it means «an obsessed person» (from Tungusic «saman»). Shamanism is based on the belief in the necessity of special intermediaries between a human group and spirits, who (i.e. the intermediaries) are supposedly elected and taught by the spirits themselves. The obligation of these intermediaries-shamans is to serve spirits and

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with their help to protect their tribesmen from troubles (Basilov, 1984). In L.V. Angyzhakova's opinion, the availability of three main indicators of shamanism – the system of beliefs, developed ritual, and the institute of cultic servants – makes it possible to say that shamanism is a religion in which the main function is to establish contacts between a social group and the supernatural world in order to solve various problems (Anzhiganova, 2002).

The archeological findings show that as far back as ancient times the peoples of the Sayan-Altai had a developed religious worldview containing layers of ecosophic and cosmogonic concepts reflected in beliefs, rituals, and cultic symbols. Ethnocultural traditions of the peoples of this region formed in the result of a tight interaction of natural landscape, autochthonic beliefs and, later, a powerful influence of Buddhism.

Undoubtedly, it is the economic development of society that is a dominant factor in the interrelationship of Man and Nature. Ecological concepts of the peoples of the Sayan-Altai were reflected in the traditional system of autochthonic beliefs and cults (the cults of the Sky and the Earth, cult of the mountains, cult of «the masters of places», etc.). That is why we can say that in this region there formed a special type of attitude of Man to his natural environment, i.e. a peculiar ecological culture. Its characteristic features were preconditioned by the peculiarities of historical development of this region, its natural and geographic conditions, ethnic forms of nomadic pastoralism, traditional land-utilization, etc. and were formed on the basis of ethnic, confessional and socio-cultural traditions of the peoples who at different stages of their historical development made their own contribution in the formation of Central-Asian civilization (the Turks, Mongols, Buryats, Altaians, Khakassians, Tuvans, etc). This type of attitude of humans to nature did not involve something universal and predetermined

once and for all, but, most likely, quite the reverse – it varied in each ethnic territory and in each specific case it functioned as a specific set of concrete standards, ideals and stereotypes of ecological thinking and behavior regulating the interaction of Man with Nature (Abaev, 2005).

It is a 'civilizational' approach which suggests a complex analysis comprising the study of ethnographic, ethno-confessional and geopolitical characteristics that makes it possible to consider how the processes of the development of traditional beliefs of the peoples of the Sayan-Altai happened, how they contributed to the development of spiritual culture and what their diversity and specific character consisted of.

Thus, it is animal husbandry that was the main economy amongst the peoples of the Sayan-Altai, farming, while also ancient, existed, but often as a subsidiary economic activity.

The main dwelling of steppe nomads was the felt yurt, while reindeer herders lived in conical tepees made of poles covered with animal skins or larch or, most often, specially worked birch bark. We can say, in this case, that the spatial decision of the dwelling was of great importance for traditional culture of the peoples of the Sayan-Altai. M. Eliade wrote: «the dwelling is always sanctified by virtue of the fact that it represents *imago mundi* (Latin – «picture or image of the world) and the world is a divine creation» (Eliade, 1994, p. 40). Therefore, the space of the yurt included certain sacral symbols: the division of the yurt into two halves, concentration of all the objects around fireplace (a symbolic center of the dwelling), the hole in the top of the yurt for smoke, etc.

The life-style of the nomadic pastoralists, preconditioned by geographical conditions, without question had an influence on the religious beliefs formed in the Sayan-Altai. The investigations on the culture of primitive society testify that the initial form of man's social

perception was clannish and tribal, i.e. when the individual realized that he was an integral part not only of his clan but also of the surrounding powers of nature and animals. Moreover, the practical-spiritual understanding of the world by humans was carried out through its dualization into this world and the other world (this duality, however, was conflict-free, i.e. harmonious in spirit) (More in detail about the issues of traditional world view of the people of the Sayan-Altai, see (Abaeva and Zhukovskaya, 2004; Anzhiganova, 2002; E.G. Devlet and M.A. Devlet, 2005; Revunenikova et al., 2000; Sagalaev and Oktyabrskaya, 1990; Verbitsky, 1893)).

Shamanism, performing a mediating function in the interaction of society and nature, plays an integral role in traditional culture. That is why shamanism «can be compared with a multivalued operational system (OS) which serves to operate the resources of a computer and is the basis for its operability... It is shamanism (or shaman's world perception) that acts as such an OS. This world perception is believed to be based upon the system of binary contradistinctions and it is not so much the result of the work of consciousness as a set of rules for its work. This archaic (but not outdated even today) OS codes and decodes incoming information, selects, stores and processes it properly» (Sagalaev, 1998, p. 143).

Since shamanism does not belong to the earliest forms of traditional beliefs, the formation of shamanic rites occurred when humans already had a well shaped idea of the supernatural. L. Ya. Shternberg, a well-known ethnographer and investigator of primitive religions, basing himself upon the knowledge of factual material connected with the tribes in various parts of the world, noted: «the foundation for any religious system is the common idea – the idea of the dependence of the existence of human beings on the supreme creatures who either help or harm and destroy humans (Shternberg, 1963, p. 3). On

the other hand, there exist «remedies» against hypostatic forces and there appears a possibility to «control» these forces through a dialogue with them. This is the reason why the shaman is not an accidental figure in the history of the culture of humankind. This is a man who charged himself with the fulfillment of the functions determined by the cultural norms of his nation (Basilov, 1984). It is interesting to note that the functions of one or another shaman depended on his abilities: the more he knew, the wider his functions were and the more influence he had. Moreover, the opinion, widespread in Russian literature, that shamans, as other servants of a cult, were rich and well-to-do members of the clan is false. It is false because although the shamans were paid for shamanizing acts, at the same time, they bore expenses when they were invited to shamanize in a different place. Furthermore, it was a token payment and the shaman was not allowed to ask for more as it could do harm to the shaman himself: he could lose his power or have problems in his everyday life.

The soul-concept is an important constituent of the entire complex of shamanism because it is the soul that is the central subject to which the entire shamanizing act is aimed at (the treatment of a sick person, 'conversation with a dead person', etc.).

The worldview premise for participation of a shaman in the treatment of sick people was the idea about the multiplicity of man's 'souls'. Each of them could leave the man's body. V. P. D'iakonova remarked: «The Tuvans who practiced shamanism believed that when a man was alive he had a vital force or energy which allowed him to be an alive being. In literature such a force is called 'soul' and there are usually two terms for it: *tyn* literally 'respiration' and *sagysh* – 'mind' or 'thought' (D'iakonova, 1975, p. 45). Yu. L. Aranchyn notes that at the moment of conception *tyn* and *sagysh* move from the man into the fetus.

The woman therewith gives only room for the baby (Aranchyn, 1982). The Tuvans, furthermore, believed in the existence of *syunezin* which leaves the person after his death (D'iakonova, 1975). Thus, D'iakonova defined *syunezin* as «non-material substance of any human being which symbolizes the life» (D'iakonova, 1981, p. 163). Moreover, according to the lamaist rituals during the funerals a lama would read a prayer in which he requested the soul (*syunezin*) of the dead person to be born again in the form of a child (Potapov, 1969).

It is the respiration related to the throat and the nose that is one of the most important vital processes after birth among the Altaians as well. The Altaians told about death in the following way: «his respiration has discontinued or 'his soul' or 'respiration' has gone out». They believed with good reason that the vital force left the person with his last breath and movement» (Goncharova, 1999, p. 88).

According to M. B. Kenin-Lopsan, a man has two souls: the main soul and the grey one. When a man dies he loses his main soul while his grey soul remains in the yurt. The parents of the dead person invite a shaman on the forty-ninth day after the death so that he will drive out the grey soul. When people are alive, their souls can stay in different places. Kenin-Lopsan explains the notions *tyn*, *sagysh* and *syunezin* in the following way: the term *sagysh* is meant to designate the inner psychological state of the person, *tyn* can be defined as a vital respiration and *syunezin* is the man's soul itself (Kenin-Lopsan, 1993).

If for whatever reason the soul leaves a person even for a moment, his life is in danger. The most powerful shaman would be invited and asked to use all his power to call back the soul that has left the living person. The lost soul often came back to the person in the form of a hair. If the shaman did not succeed in calling the

lost soul back, the sick person could die. After the return of the soul, the sick person recovered quickly.

The main form of shaman's relations with spirits in the form of various prayers, offerings or battle is called *kamlanie*, from the Turkic word *kam* (cf. Tuvan *kham*) – shaman.

Kamlanie as the main kind of shaman's activities had various forms. There was no special school for shamans. As a rule, a young shaman learned how to shamanize from an experienced shaman and often participated in shamanizing acts. The ritual practice was strictly regulated: each action was made and each word was said in order not to destroy the harmony of the world on the one hand, and to preserve the harmony of the man in this world on the other. R. Walsh wrote: «in the world ruled by mysterious and unpredictable forces, it is the shaman who holds up hope that these forces can be understood and changed, or even controlled; the humans do not have to be helpless and perplexed victims of a cold and unfriendly Universe; any illness can be cured, conflicts can be settled, guilt can be attenuated, the gods can be propitiated, the evil can be fought, and even death can be deprived of the awe it inspires» (Walsh, 1996, p. 192).

Funeral cults occupy an important place in the shamanic ritual system. The funeral rite per se involves actions connected with the belief in the passage of human beings into the other world and with necessity to protect the spirit of the dead person from being attacked by evil spirits during such a passage (More in detail about funeral rite, see (Archimayeva, 2002; D'iakonova, 1975; Potapov, 1969)). The shaman therewith becomes the main actor: he determines the day of the funerals, tells how to remove the body of the deceased and carry it to the burial place, performs the ritual of purification, and 'talks to the deceased'.

The central point in the cultic activities of a shaman is the faith in his role of a chosen person able to communicate with other worlds. «Only an imaginative person inclined to mysticism can become a real devoted shaman. His inherent observance and ability to understand the real meaning of some supernatural forces and natural phenomena gives him possibility to operate the mind and imagination of the primitive man... He is constantly in search of something, he is always sick for something. He is not satisfied with the surrounding life and his thought whirls away beyond the clouds to the blue heights in the kingdom of his Gods. During a shamanizing act he becomes ecstatic and becomes convicted that at this moment his spiritual essence reaches the deities, goes down to Hell, or flies to the Heavens to meet God-deities. He believes that he is a visionary and transmits his belief to all the people present at the shamanizing act who are usually ready for this by an extraordinary atmosphere in which the shaman circumposes himself» (Grumm-Grzhimailo, 1926, p. 141). In essence, *kamlanie* of a shaman represents a one-actor theater in which the spectators' attention and success depends on the artistry and talent of the shaman. When shamanizing the shaman represents a multi-valued symbol. He is the central figure who connects the three spheres of the universe together. He is not only a mediator between the world but also a doctor and even a politician because he can actively interfere with the decision of important matters of his clan.

It is important to note that the symbols of shamanic *kamlanie* strictly corresponded to previously established world view. In spite of all the whimsicality of shamanic rituals, they were in line with existing traditions. In this connection V.N. Basilov rightly remarked: «The world view of a shaman is the world view of his people» (Basilov, 1984, p. 64). It may be the reason why

later when Buddhism began spreading among the peoples of the Sayan-Altai, shamanism was neither ousted nor absorbed by this new religion. Playing a considerable role in people's everyday life, the shamanic world view allowed man to realize his own spiritual needs. Shamanism performed important social functions. Shamans became important figures in the most dramatic time in a clan's life – before hunting, during epidemics, etc.

Such an ethno-confessional integrity was not destroyed with the coming of Buddhism, which assimilated traditional rituals, transformed them and, in doing so, preserved its structural continuity and initial cultic semantics. This happened, in particular, because from early times in the beliefs of the Tuvans, Altaians, Buryats and other peoples there developed the idea of an Absolute which became expressed in the cult of «eternal blue Sky (tengri). The Buryats perceive it as «the beginning of all the living» (Zhambalova, 1999), the Tuvans – as Kurbustu (The Supreme God). The idea of non-personified all-powerful Heavenly God as the center of an absolute mind (wisdom), force, power and mercy (goodness) simultaneously preserved etymological links with of the word «god» (tengri) with archaic concepts about totem zoogenic deities and their meditative functions. Thus, the known Ancient Turkic descriptions of the Supreme God Tengri-Khan (Khan-Tengri) emphasize his ambivalence and polyvalence, pointing to the functions of an universal mediator and trace his image at once as a dragon-like being and as a subhuman who has a head of a mountain goat but with bull's horns and a wolf's neck or a bear but with a fish tail and the like (Abaev, 2004).

The spread of Buddhism throughout the Sayan-Altai resulted in the origin of syncretism on the basis of the relationship with traditional beliefs of the peoples of the Sayan-Altai.

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Шаманизм как мировоззренческая основа этнокультурных традиций народов Саяно-Алтая в современном обществе

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Шаманизм Саяно-Алтая представляет собой одну из форм религиозных верований, характерной особенностью которой и является своеобразное экстатическое общение шамана со сверхъестественным миром. При этом шаманизм играет интегрирующую роль в традиционной культуре.

Важной составляющей всего комплекса шаманизма являются представления о душе, поскольку именно она выступает центральным субъектом, на который направлен весь ритуал камлания шамана.

Ключевые слова: шаманизм, традиционные верования народов Саяно-Алтая, религиозное мировоззрение, представления о душе, этноконфессиональные традиции.
