Shamanism and Occultism: the Question of Correlation

Scientific literature associates the concept of occultism with a wide range of adjoining concepts that aspire to the mastery of secret knowledge, both individually and in aggregate with the others. These concepts include mysticism, spiritism, astrology, and alchemy, which are sometimes given the collective label the occult sciences. At some point in the history of human civilization, all of them together, and each one by itself, enjoyed the status of scientific knowledge and were studied as such in secular educational institutions. Religion on the other hand, while itself using occult methods which were, in varying degrees, present in all Eastern and Western religious systems, officially condemned occult practices and punished severely those suspected of using them, often to the extent of capital punishment. Examples include the witch hunts, and the stakes of the Inquisition.

However, while there exists a large body of literature on occultism and its relation to various religions that recognize mystical experience, few have directed their attention to the search for its possible roots in Shamanism, which can rightfully be called if not a world religion, then at least the first supranational religion to emerge, although different peoples know it under different names. The term Shamanism in scientific literature emerged much later than the phenomenon it describes. To date, no one single definition of the nature of shamanism has yet been agreed upon. Some researchers perceive it as a religion, others as a worldview, still others as a practice. This does not change the essence of the matter from the point of view of the subject under study.

The definitions of occultism that can be found in philosophical, psychological or religious encyclopedias, as well as in specialized literature, stipulate its main features as the following: the possession of higher psychic or spiritual abilities; the possession of secret knowledge available only to the initiated; the ability to establish contact with the netherworld and the ability to receive from the dwellers of this world answers to questions posed by the living; the ability to use these answers in order to predict the future and influence its course. For the researcher into shamanic cultures in any part of the world these indicators
represent the standard qualities that characterize the ordinary shaman and without which he cannot be considered a shaman. There are still other highly important qualities the shaman possesses: the ability to heal a fairly large number of diseases and afflictions, including mental conditions, to induce mass hypnosis in the participants in the rituals he is carrying out and the ability (if we may use contemporary language) to “scan” the brain and psyche of his client and to re-create his “portrait” in the past (including his past life), present and future. And finally, the ease with which the shaman crosses the border between the worlds of the living and the dead, continuously receiving information from his deceased ancestors (who often double up as his spirits and helpers) about what might happen, what must be avoided and, most importantly, how to escape seemingly unavoidable misfortune and even death. I am not convinced that the carriers of occult knowledge today really can do all these things. But then it is possible that in the early days of occultism they could.

Research on Shamanism

The literature on the nature of the shamanic gift and Shamanism as a phenomenon of human culture comprises more than a thousand titles, as people started writing about it in the 17th century. There is no need to expound on the basics of Shamanism here, since almost every serious encyclopaedia and reference work on the religions of the world contains relevant articles.1 Towards the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century, the research on regional forms of Shamanism, as well as on theoretical aspects, has reached such dimensions that we can state the following: one can find books on Shamanism of the indigenous populations of practically all countries of Asia, America, Africa, Australia and even Europe. We can talk about Shamanism studies as an independent discipline that emerged at the intersection of several subjects, including religious studies, philosophy, psychology, history and medicine. There are centers for the study of Shamanism in Europe, Asia and the USA. I want to mention several authors whose works are key to the study of this cultural-historical phenomenon: Mircea Eliade,2 Åke Hultkrantz,3 Vilmos Diószegi,4

Anna-Leena Siikala, Anna-Leena Siikala/Mihály Hoppal, Mihály Hoppal, Roberta Hamayon, Piers Vitebsky, Caroline Humphrey/Urgunge Onon, Marjorie Balzer, and Eva Fridman, among others. Each of these authors has several books and dozens of articles to his or her name. Moreover, they have organized international conferences on Shamanism and edited the collected volumes that were published after these conferences.

Since this article is based on Russian materials on Shamanism, some of the scholars who were the founders of Shamanism studies as an academic discipline in Russia should be introduced, namely Sergei Shirokogorov, Vladimir Bogoraz, Lev Shternberg, Nadezhda Dyrenkova, Andrei Anokhin, and

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4 Vilmos Diószegi, Shamanism. Selected Writing of V. Diószegi, ed. by Mihály Hoppal, Bibliotheca Shamanistica, vol. 6 (Budapest, 1998).
9 Piers Vitebsky, Dialogues with the Dead (Cambridge University Press, 1993).
12 Eva Fridman Neumann, Sacred Geography: Shamanism among the Buddhist Peoples of Russia, Bibliotheca Shamanistica, vol. 12 (Budapest, 2004).
15 Lev Shternberg, Pervobytinaia religiia v svete ètnografii (Leningrad 1936).
Gavriil Ksenofontov. The latter fell victim to political repression in 1938 and his work began to appear in print only in 1992. These authors produced the first, rather divergent, definitions of Shamanism. They were not theorists confined to their offices, but experienced field researchers who knew the languages of the indigenous peoples and collected their material from various peoples (Tungus, Chukchi, Giliaki, Altai, Yakut) even before the Russian Revolution in 1917. As a result their work reflects the classical period of Shamanism before it came under the tremendous pressure of Soviet government ideology.

The new generation of Shamanism scholars who replaced them – Leonid Potapov, Andrei Popov, Sevian Vainshtein, Taras Mikhailov, Dashinima Dugarov, Vladislav Kulemzin, Anatolii Mazin, Vladimir Basilov and many others, worked under the conditions dictated by the mass atheization of the population and repressions of priests and ordinary believers. As a result, much of what they wrote was their own reconstruction of how they thought things had looked or should have looked during the time of classical Shamanism.

In the 1980s and 1990s those who were interested were inundated with material on Shamanism and on what some people decided to consider Shamanism, from news items to art works whose hero was a shaman, and from websites and blogs to documentary films shot in different regions of Russia by amateurs, as well as professionals. Two scholars, both of them members of the staff at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, stood out among this flood that called all kinds of things “Shamanism.” Their works became pillars of support and lode stars for all admirers of the shaman genre in science and in life. These scholars are Vladimir Basilov

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20 Andrei Popov, Kamlaniiia shamanov byvshego Viliuiskogo okruga (teksty) (Novosibirsk, 2006).
21 Sevian Vainshtein, Tuvintsy-todzhintsy. Istoriko-ëtnograficheskie ochernki (Moscow, 1961); idem, Mir kochevnikov Tsentra Azii (Moscow, 1991).
22 Taras Mikhailov, Iz istorii buriatskogo shamanizma (s drevnikh vremen do XVIII v.) (Novosibirsk, 1980); idem, Buriatskii shamanizm:istoriia, struktura i sotsial’nye funktsii (Novosibirsk, 1987).
23 Dashinima Dugarov, Istoricheskie korni belogo shamanstva na materiale obriadovogo fol’klora buriat (Moscow, 1991).
25 Anatoli Mazin, Traditsionnye verovaniia i obriady évenkov-orokhonov (konets XIX-nachalo XX vv.) (Novosibirsk, 1984).
26 Vladimir Basilov, Izbranniki dukhov (Moscow, 1984), 208p.; idem, Shamanstvo u narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana (Moscow, 1992).
and Valentina Kharitonova. Each of them is the author of dozens of articles on the topics and can be called the leaders of the two main currents in contemporary Russian Shamanism studies.

Vladimir Basilov, who died in tragic circumstances in 1998, defended the classics of the genre and unceasingly wrote about what ought to be considered Shamanism, not distinguishing between the two Russian terms shamanstvo and Shamanism, and defining which religious ideas and practices could be considered shamanist. Valentina Kharitonova, on the other hand, is monitoring the largest possible number of groups in different regions and across different professional strata of society who hold that they represent classical Shamanism and frequently take offence when considered neo-shamans, pseudo-shamans, or not associated with the phenomenon at all. Kharitonova’s main focus is on the medical aspect of this research.

Shamanism in the Soviet Era

During Soviet times it could be dangerous to write something positive about any religion at all. The only writings on religion to be approved and published were those that took a harshly critical stance. The ideological construct of the USSR considered religion in all its forms, from early forms of belief to world religions, as “vestiges,” sometimes even specifying which social order had left the vestiges behind, e.g. feudalism, capitalism or the early class society. Shamanism was allocated a place at the very bottom of this scale, as a vestige of the early class society, and sometimes of feudalism, too, although the people of Siberia has failed to experience any feudalism, passing from the early class society directly to Soviet socialism. On the other hand, writings on the Shamanism of peoples in faraway countries, such as the Malay and Indonesians, received every possible encouragement. These works made it possible to talk of Shamanism as a cultural phenomenon, and their print runs quickly sold out.

It would be incorrect to claim that there was no research on Shamanism in Soviet Russia whatsoever, of course there were scholars working on the topic; however, these works focused on Shamanism in the past. They included two

28 Ibid., 7–9.
29 Her book, Kharitonova 2005, and many articles, are dedicated to this topic.
30 Elena Revunenkova, Narody Malaizii i Zapadnoi Indonezii (nekotorye aspekty dukhovnoi kul'tury) (Moscow, 1980).
books by Taras Mikhailov, one of the leading specialists on the Shamanism of the Buriats. Mikhailov himself descended from one of the shamanic clans of the Buriats of Irkutsk and knew many of the things he described in his monographs from the tales of his ancestors and those shamans who practiced in secret, as well as drawing heavily on the material on Shamanism already published in the three-volume work of the first Buriat ethnographer, Matvei Khangalov (d. 1918).

In order to protect himself against the wrath of the Party leaders, he called his book *From the History of Buriat Shamanism (from antiquity to the 19th century)* (*Iz istorii buriatskogo shamanizma (s drevneishikh vremen do XVIII v.)*). His books were detailed and profound studies, but when the very same leaders ordered that Shamanism must be strongly condemned, he wrote brochures such as *Buriat Shamanism and its vestiges (Buriatskoe shamanstvo i ego perezhitki)*. This approach corresponded to the demands of the times in which he lived and made clear that somehow Shamanism no longer existed, that all that remained were its vestiges.

The beginning of the revival of religion during Perestroika, and especially afterwards, failed to stimulate the writing of either general works or regionally focused research about the fate of Shamanism during the Soviet era. Everyone immediately began to write about the process of revival, which is entirely understandable: the revival happened live, right before the eyes of the researchers, and changed itself in every concrete segment of time. As such it was much more interesting than the past. The persecution of Shamanism and the repressions against shamans were merely mentioned in the context of other negative phenomena of the Soviet era. But while Russian scholars talked about this subject in passing, merely stating a fact, European and American researchers

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who chanced to be in Russia at this time and even carried out field research, were attracted by the matter.35

And yet, every researcher into Shamanism in either its classical or contemporary forms had firsthand experience of interaction with shamans in the Soviet Union. I am no exception. I would not call this interaction very successful, since it carried the imprint of the time when it took place. But it allows me to make a certain number of generalizations.

In 1959, when I was a student of the Faculty of Ethnography of Moscow State University, I went to Buriatia for the first time and began the research in which I am engaged to the present day. As the object of my research I chose the Tunka region where, as I knew, Shamanism had become entwined with Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity. I knew that there were several shamans in the region and carefully looked for opportunities to meet them. Sometimes I was successful, but more often than not the shamans tried to avoid these meetings. I understood their reasons. In the young girl (i.e. me) who had come from faraway Moscow they saw not a researcher, but a threat to their existence, even more so since they were forced to carry out their shamanic activities in secret.

By this time the Soviet government had been fighting them for around forty years. The shamans had been among the first to experience this government’s iron hand. When the repressions began against those who did not correspond to the new ideological standards and were not convinced of the imminent advent of the bright communist future, the shamans were among the first to suffer. Those who managed to avoid exile and forced labor camps remained in their native villages, but were now living under the vigilant eyes of the local powers. Their vocation and activities had been banned. Reluctance, and sometimes fear of putting themselves at risk, and even more so those who were seeking their help and advice, meant that the entire repertoire of shamanic rituals was moved from daytime, which had been the norm, into the night, which was considered a violation of the rules – the shamanic spirits were more responsive to the shaman’s appeal for help when it was light and disliked acting in the dark. Moreover, when a ritual was carried out at night, a guard consisting of young people was positioned at some distance from the scene, whose task was to warn the shaman of the approach of unwanted guests with the help

of pre-agreed signs (whistling, the cry of a bird or animal). It is possible that this practice was not followed everywhere, but the late Dar’ia Tankhaeva, who lived in the village of Kyren and spent her youth in the Tory steppe, told me that between the age of 15-17 she was often told to stand guard while her uncle carried out shamanic rituals. She now found it funny to remember, but at the time was terribly afraid.

Thus in the Soviet era the shamanic tradition was preserved in secret. The shamans rarely made their activities public and their clients also kept silent for fear of both the authorities and researchers who were studying the local religious situation. They were even afraid of people who were inappropriately curious. This led to the impression that the Soviet powers had been successful, or nearly successful, in uprooting Shamanism and that Shamanism had practically self-liquidated by the 1960s. Fortunately it was not so. The shamanic tradition survived the Soviet government, and during the boom revival of traditional cultures and religions that began in Russia towards the end of the 1980s it quickly gathered strength.\textsuperscript{36}

The Renaissance of Shamanism and its Manifestations

The post-Soviet period and space presented to the scholarly community and the whole world a huge boom in the most divergent religions – from world religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and their national forms) to narrowly local pagan cults, some even unknown to those outside a certain village or region. Shamanism occupies a place in between these two extremes.

The revival of Shamanism gave rise to a huge wave of scholarly research into this process that was accompanied by publications in the media that lacked any scholarship and thoroughly confused the picture of what was happening. An analysis of the publications of the last 25 years (the sample begins in 1985, the year Perestroika began) allowed scholars to conclude that the processes that were going on in the shamanic world were not homogenous.\textsuperscript{37} The concept of the \textit{revival of Shamanism} included a number of phenomena that were independent of each other and united under the label \textit{Shamanism}.


solely because it is widely known and understood by many of those who are interested in various forms of esotericism.

And in fact, traditional shamanic cult sites (holy mountains, mountain passes, groves, ancestral graves et al) that had been destroyed or consigned to oblivion during Soviet times were reinstated and shamans began to perform the necessary rituals, but at the same time we also saw the formation of associations and unions of shamans within ethnically more or less homogenous regions.

The emergence of shamanic associations, which Valentina Kharitonova, who specialized in Shamanism of the post-Soviet period, wittily referred to as a “party-trade union form of socialist vestige”\(^\text{38}\) —this was a clear deviation from the classic Shamanism of former times, which valued individuality rather than collective approaches in these matters.

Shamanism, emerging from the underground to which it had been confined from the 1920s–1980s, appeared in the most divergent spheres. Shamans began to not just perform rituals, which had always been part of their function, but to make public appearances in the mass media and propagate the shamanic worldview, to feature frequently in documentaries, to leave their native villages to travel to the large Russian cities and subsequently abroad, to Europe, America and Asia. There they began to do something of which the classic shamanic tradition categorically disapproves, namely carry out shamanic acts or heal people on alien territory, far away from their own helper spirits (which are often the spirits of their ancestors) who had remained behind. Often they simply demonstrate their extrasensory abilities without any particular reason and ask for payment.

In the context of the newly emerged associations and unions the shamans began to engage in publishing and education, which no longer bears any relation to Shamanism as a form of religious activity. Instead, it was related to Shamanism as a form of knowledge—whether religious, worldview-related, practical or natural depends on how one looks at Shamanism—but knowledge for certain.

To this category belong the maps of the sacred sites of Buriatia, re-published several times, and the now annually appearing calendars that indicate the dates for performing shamanic rituals in honor of the spirits of one’s ancestors in the places where they need to be honored.\(^\text{39}\) It is clear that the traditional shamans could not have coped with these undertakings. But the new generation of sha-

\(^{38}\) Idem, 156.

\(^{39}\) *Sviashchennye gory Baikal’skogo regiona. Kalendar’ tradtsionnykh obriadov.* (no place given, 2005); *Traditsionnye shamanskie obriady* (Religioznyi kalendar’) (Ulan-Ude, 2001).
mans, who were in demand in the new Russian reality, coped well. And now we have finally arrived at the topic mentioned in the title of this paper: Shamanism and the intelligentsia in Russia in the post-Perestroika period.

I want to mention straight away that my analysis is mostly based on the material from Buriatia that I know well, because I am a specialist in this area, travel there every year to go on expeditions and try to keep up with events taking place there. The generation of shamans that has appeared in Buriatia over the last two decades can be called the shamanic intelligentsia, which of course does not apply to each and every individual shaman. Realizing the somewhat conditional character of this concept I want to explain what I mean. First and foremost, this is a young generation of shamans, not in terms of age (many of them are well over forty and some are much older) but in terms of the relative recency of their vocation to perform shamanic tasks. It seems that Perestroika, and in particular the years after it, had a profound influence on the shamanic spirits too, giving them an incentive to extend the “call” to Shamanism to representatives of a new, young generation who harbor contemporary ideas. Typically, these people hold a degree from a secular higher education institute and have experience in working in different secular establishments, such as higher education institutes, schools, libraries or public administration, which can be easily combined with the performance of shamanic duties. It turned out that it is perfectly possible to pursue a secular career and belong to the regional intelligentsia while also being a shaman, without experiencing any ideological or practical discomfort.

A particular interesting example of this kind of synthesis we find in the biography of Iurii Kharaev (d. 1996). He was a distinguished cultural figure in the Republic of Buriatia and worked for almost twenty-five years as the director of the Republic’s national library. At the same time he was a well-known shaman whose clientele included not only his kinsmen, but also members of the government apparatus of the Republic of Buriatia and the Republic’s higher technical and cultural intelligentsia. His former clients and “colleagues” in the shamanic trade remember him with great warmth and respect. There is no doubt that he was one of the most outstanding representatives of the Buriat intelligentsia in general and a just as outstanding representative of the shamanic intelligentsia in particular. After his death Pravda Buriatii, the main print organ of the Buriat government, published an obituary that listed all his secular achievements and appointments and ranked his activity as a shaman alongside them. The obituary was signed by the republic’s highest-ranking officials. This was the first time the achievements of a member of the intelligentsia as a shaman were publicly acknowledged.
Another example of this combination is Nadezhda Stepanova, a graduate of the library section of the Institute of Culture in Ulan Ude (today the East Siberian State Academy of Culture and Art). For a few years she taught “The Principles of Shamanic Practice” at the department of Ethnology and Folklore at this Academy. Since 1993 she has been the president of the Shamans’ Association of Buriatia, and since 2001 also the president of the Shamans’ Association of Central Asia. She has visited Italy, France, Brazil, the USA and other countries and there shared her own experience with members of the public who are interested in esoterism in its various forms. The Italian documentary filmmaker Constanzo Aleone has shot a documentary on Stepanova, and a book has been published in Italy with her stories about herself, how she became a shaman, how she became aware of her shamanic gift and tried to ignore it, what miseries befell her family as a result and how she had to become a shaman after all. Today she is the best-known representative of the Buriat shamanic circles in the international arena.

And another example from the same sphere. In the Soviet period, Eshinkhorlo Tsybikzhapova was a teacher and lecturer at the regional centre for public education and later a member of staff member at the Buriat Institute for the Enhancement of the Qualifications of Staff in Education. Since the early 1990s she has been practising as a shaman who is known for her special healing gift—she can heal with the help of sound, song, tunes to the words of nonexistent but nevertheless phonetically recognizable languages with which she, like a painter with his brush, “paints” a picture of her client, in the course of which she discovers the diseases that have befallen him or her and heals them through her song. After leaving Buriatia, where there are many shamans fighting for space in a relatively small republic, for Novosibirsk oblast’, where there are practically no shamans at all, she began giving courses on the perfection of the psychological and physical nature of the human being. Most of her clients are young and middle-aged women who are, for various reasons, experiencing a high degree of stress. She helps them rediscover their faith in their own strength and potential and find inner harmony.

At some point she understood that her psychological knowledge was insufficient and graduated from Novosibirsk University’s correspondence course program. Now she is herself teaching psychology at Buriatia State University, but has not given up her shamanic practice. Yet she no longer calls herself a shaman, believing that she has outgrown this label and requesting to be called a psychologist or even psychotherapist instead.40 To her patients it does not

40 N. Zhukovskaia, “Buriatskie shamanki na mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii (tunkinskii opyt, iul’
matter what she calls herself, what matters is that she has preserved her healing gift, which is shamanic in its essence, and that she uses it for the good of others.

Stepanova and Tsybikzhapova are urban shamans. Caroline Humphrey has produced an interesting description of their shamanic biographies and their trajectory from being ordinary members of the secular urban intelligentsia to becoming shamans. Humphrey recorded detailed and rather open stories about their shamanic experience from both women.41

In 1993 the Society of Buriat Shamans was founded, at first under the name Khese khengereg (literally Clanging Tambourine), subsequently renamed Bee murgel (literally Shamanic faith). This society, a fundamentally new phenomenon, unites the old and new generations of professional shamans and was brought into being by the characteristic features of social and public life in Russia in general and in Buriatia in particular. The Society is registered with the Ministry of Justice of the Buriat Republic and has the same status as more than hundred other denominational organizations in the republic, such as Buddhist monasteries (datsany), Orthodox churches, Old Believers’ (the so called “smeiiskie” ) communities, new religious centers (the Bahai, the Hare Krishnas, Protestant missions that emerged in the mid-20th century et al). According to the Ministry of Justice, there were 228 religious communities registered in the Buriat Republic at the end of 2009. Among them are three shamanic ones—Bee murgel (Shamanic faith), Lusad (Water Spirits) and Tëngëri (The Heavenly World). The two latest ones emerged fairly recently and unite shamans who stem from Irkutsk oblast’ and the Aginsk steppe but who are living in the Buriatia Republic. Yet another shamanic organisation was founded in 2009—Khukhé Munké Tëngëri (Eternal Blue Sky).

Why do shamans choose to form organizations? New times dictate new rules. There are several reasons for the legalization of shamans. The law “On religious activity on the territory of the Republic of Buriatia”, which names Shamanism as one of four traditional religions in Buriatia, protects the sacred cult sites and allows the performance of certain rituals at these sites, but also demands that the shamans register their cult sites as special protected objects. This is required to avoid conflict with the representatives of other denominations who claim the same sacred site, or any agricultural organizations that might decide to use the site and damage it. One shaman on his or her own


would hardly be able to gain justice; this can only be achieved by an organized community of shamans.

The shamans’ organizations have yet another objective, and that is to block the way of pseudo-shamans, of whom there have been quite a few recently. According to the shaman Dugar D. Ochirov in an interview with Mihály Hoppal, the president of the International Society for the Study of Shamanism, “our shamanic society was created to stop charlatans from performing rituals; and whoever considers himself a shaman must demonstrate his abilities and perform rituals—this is one of the preconditions of admission to the Society of Shamans.”

The Society is also active in other fields. We can list a number of “events” (if this word can be applied at all to shamanic practice and cultural tradition) the society either organized or that took place with its knowledge and the participation of its members. They include a series of *tailgan* (ancestral sacrifices) in honor of the “Thirteen lords and masters” — personages from the shamanic pantheon of the Baikal Buriats. These lords are considered the ancestors and forefathers of various ethnic subdivisions on which the prosperity of the entire Buriat people depends, according to the shamans. In our age this idea is more than timely. It testifies to the fact that the shamans are concerned about the fate of the people as a whole and are trying to exert beneficial influence with the help of traditional methods.

The planned *tailgan* were held for the first time in July and August 1993: the first was held in honour of the lord of the island of Ol’khon—Oikhoni buural-babay; the second was in honour of the lord of the mountain Baragkhan in Barguzin; the third in honour of the forefather of the Bulagaty Bukha-noion, who was also the patron and defender of all Burias; the fourth in honour of Burin-khan, the spirit of the mountain of Munku-Sardyk, the highest point of the range of the Eastern Saian Mountains etc.

In the last years, *Tailgan* in honour of the patron spirits of local mountains, wells and passes have been held entirely officially, and the participants have included not only representatives of the *Society of Shamans*, but also of the authorities (in some cases even the heads of the regional administration). The heads of the regions thus publicly display their loyalty to the traditional religious culture of the population, which is particularly important during election campaigns. In 2002 a *Tailgan* was held on the occasion of the 840th anniversary
of the birth of Genghis Khan, perceived by the population of Central Asia, especially in Mongolia and Buriatia not, as in Russian historical science, as a conqueror, oppressor and destroyer but, conversely, as the great creator of the Mongol empire, god-patron of all Mongol peoples and Man No 1 of the second millennium. The participants comprised shamans not just from Buriatia, but from Mongolia as well, alongside representatives of various ethnic groups and, naturally, representatives of the authorities on republican level.

The next area in which we see an interpenetration of the spheres of shamans and intellectuals is scientific conferences, either on Shamanism or more broadly, on the cultural history of the peoples of Central Asia and Southern Siberia, who are sometimes compared to the indigenous cultures of North America. The participation of shamans in scientific conferences is one of the most interesting phenomena of the post-Soviet stage in the development of Shamanism. I would define it as the fusion of Shamanism with Shamanology (Shamanism studies), that is, the fusion of a cultural phenomenon and the scientific study of it. In it, two streams converge. The first stream features shamans who are striving towards science, while the second consists of scholars of Shamanism who desire to be initiated into Shamanism. The latter are most often scholars of Shamanism from regions where Shamanism is part of the national tradition and/or scholars who have shamans among their ancestors and who think that their knowledge of Shamanism gives them a right to be initiated into Shamanism.

At first the shamans strictly opposed these ambitions. However, the devaluation of various kinds of values in societies that have lost their moral criteria, to which Russia unfortunately now belongs, took its toll here, too. I am aware of several cases in which scholars of Shamanism, or even of subjects other than Shamanism, received the desired initiation. Also known is the sum they paid for this—$300 US. The fact that this sum is the same in all cases tells us that yet another unwritten rule of shamanic ethics has been violated, which stipulates that the shaman does not name a sum, but waits until the person who has ordered the ritual pays of their own accord the sum they can afford or consider appropriate.

But let us return to the subject of scientific conferences that are attended by shamans. The first such conference took place in August 1992 in Yakutsk and was called “Shamanism: Genesis, Reconstruction, Traditions.” After this first attempt such conferences became a regular feature and were held every two or three years in Buriatia, Tuva, Khakassia and even in Moscow. The last of them, defined as the International Interdisciplinary Symposium “Psychophysiology and Social Adaptation among (Neo) Shamans in Past and Present,” took place
on 2-8 August 2010 in the town of Arshan in the Tunka region of Buriatia. It had a rather varied programme and demonstrated that the field of questions under debate had become much wider since the first conference in Yakutsk. At the conference in Arshan scholar-theoreticians and shaman-practitioners jointly discussed the following issues: 1) The psychophysiology and social adaptation of (neo) shamans; 2) The changed state of consciousness in the practice of (neo) shamans and storytellers and issues of creative self-expression; 3) (Neo) shamans in the human world and the spirit world; the phenomenon of personality; 4) The shaman and the pagan priest: limitations and specifics of practice, their role and place in the social medium. The programme of the symposium included a Tailgan at the foot of the sacred mountain which is considered the residence of Bukha-noion, the personage from the shamanic pantheon that is respected by all Buriats. The Tailgan attracted more than one hundred participants who had travelled from all over the Baikal region. The Tailgan was led by shamans who were members of the religious organization Tėngėri and who had attended the symposium, giving papers and speeches. There were also showings of films on Shamanism and shamans that had been shot by scholars in many different countries.

While in Yakutsk I focused on the question of what attracts shamans to scientific conferences where scholars, using their professional language, give papers that are hardly accessible to anyone outside the scholarly community. However, it has turned out that the language of scholars is very accessible to contemporary shamans, most of whom hold higher degrees, but they do not agree with the things scholars write about Shamanism and shamans, considering the research on themselves to be “incorrect” and think that they are better equipped to talk about themselves at scholarly conferences. This is not surprising, given that the shamans have inside knowledge of their art and profession, while the task of the researcher is by definition external. This is the reason why I find the desire of shamans to fuse their gift with the ability to explain it well so interesting. It means that a new source for the study of Shamanism is emerging. What is even more important, it concerns contemporary Shamanism, giving us the opportunity to contrast the contemporary situation within and around Shamanism with the one that has been studied by subsequent generations of scholars from the mid-19th century onwards.

There is already some experience in this field. One example are the books of the shaman and healer Nadezhda Angaraeva, who recently also rejected the title of “shaman” and now considers herself a priestess of the Tėngrian cult.43

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43 Nadezhda Angareva, Vremia ognia (Ulan-Ude, 1996); eadem, Vetochka verby s bubentsami
Another example is the Sacrament and Practice of Shamanism (Tainstvo i praktika shamanizma) by Boris Bazarov, a shaman from Barguzin. Yet more examples are the shaman Nadezhda Stepanova’s book of short stories about herself, edited and translated by the Italian journalist D’Arista, and Eshin-Khorlo Tsybikzhapova’s books that are not even about Shamanism, but about the heroic epos Geser in the light of philosophy and cosmic harmony. These works prepare the ground for considerations about the nature and depth of shamanic sacraments, with the authors prepared to facilitate the grasp of these sacraments in every possible way, although they also warn of the danger secret knowledge presents to the uninitiated and the overly curious. Working in direct contact with them, I received several warnings that I was approaching a dangerous border which I, as an uninitiated person, was not meant to cross. As a scholar I was upset by this, but as a human being I was very grateful for the warning.

There is yet another field of activity in which shamans, scholars and professional ecologists put up a united front, and that is the preservation of the environment and landscape features (mountains, lakes, rivers, forests etc) and of cultural objects, created by human hands throughout history (archaeological monuments dating from different epochs, cult buildings etc). In Siberia, this field of activity has been very important during the last three decades because of the unchecked actions of oil and gas companies who are exploiting oil and gas reserves and building pipelines in areas which are protected as natural and cultural sites by a number of federal laws (“On the guaranteed rights of indigenous small peoples”, adopted in 1999; “On the preservation of the environment”, adopted in 2002; “On the animal world, adopted in 1998; “On the objects of cultural heritage (monuments of history and culture) of the peoples of the Russian Federation”, adopted in 2002). All these laws are being deliberately ignored and constantly violated with the connivance of the central and local authorities, who are receiving sizeable amounts of money from the abovementioned companies for not meddling in their affairs.

The ones who struggle for the “small fatherland”, for the preservation of hunting grounds and pasture, are the local population together with ecologists.
from NGOs; often they also attract the local shamans to their cause. The most potent means of protest the shamans have at their disposal is to perform traditional rites at these sacred sites, addressing the local spirits and asking them to protect the sacred sites of the ethnic territories.

Unfortunately this does not always help. The best-known case where it did is the confrontation in 2002 between the Tunka National Park and the international oil company YUKOS, where the involvement of shamans (supported, by the way, by other economic and political measures) helped avert the destruction of more than twenty sacred sites and four villages in the Tory steppe with their epibiotic vegetation. This topic has been covered in scientific literature.47

However, science is not the only way of putting one’s knowledge into practice that attracts the shamans. They also take an interest in the theatre, as the shamanic and the theatrical performances are related and thus the theatre also represents a world that allows the shaman to display his or her talent. I am only giving one example here.

In May-June 2001, the Second World Theatre Olympics took place in Moscow. Apart from theatre companies from different countries, and above all from Russia, there were also shamans from Buriatia, Tuva, Khakassia and Moscow (!?). The shamans from Buriatia were represented by Bair Ts. Rinchinov (accompanied by three of his helpers), a representative of the Aginsk Buriat, who is considered a very strong shaman in his region. In the context of the shamanic master-class that took place at the Olympics, he performed a nightly shamanic ritual which, although it took place on the stage of the new building of the Theatre School for Dramatic Art (director Anatolii Vasil’ev), made a very strong impression on those present.

Shamans of the type described above are often referred to as neo-shamans or urban shamans, which is not quite the same.48 However, the name is not the most important element. It has fallen to these people to re-establish and develop an important cultural, psychological, moral and medicinal tradition which is a constituent element of the people’s mentality and was interrupted for seven decades during the Soviet era.

Everything cited above refers to the representatives of the intellectual stratum who became aware of their shamanic gift and were initiated as shamans in

the post-Soviet era, having either come from a position in the state apparatus or pursued a free profession. However, there was also the educated rural or urban intelligentsia, the members of which considered themselves far removed from the traditional views of their ancestors and did not believe in any spirits or their ability to influence peoples’ lives. One example I encountered during my expeditions in the 1990s demonstrates the degree to which this applied. During these years a woman called Vera Khromtsova worked as a schoolteacher of biology and chemistry in the village of Tory in the Tunka region of Buriatia. Her father was Buriat, her mother Russian, she considered herself Russian. When I asked her about her religion she answered “atheist”; she did not believe in any gods, whether Christian or Buddhist, and even less so in shamanic spirits. Priests she contemptuously referred to as frauds and swindlers, no matter of which religion. In her lessons and excursions she acquainted her pupils with the nature of their native region and taught them how to observe it. All her actions were evidence of a practical mindset devoid of any tendency towards exalted views.

Once we met in the street of the village and began a conversation on some topic. We were interrupted by her neighbour who walked past and asked:
— Vera, why did you pull the sacks out from the cellar yesterday?
The conversation carried on:
— Well, Badma came—Vera began, but her neighbour interrupted her.
— Which Badma?
— Badma Tsyrenova.
— But she died two years ago.
— That’s what I’m saying. Badma came and said “Take the sacks out from the cellar.”
— And you didn’t ask her why?
— I didn’t have time, she left immediately.

Three days later the upper end of the Tunka valley saw very strong rainfalls, which led to the groundwater rising and flooding all cellars, destroying the food reserves that many people kept there. Those who had been “visited by Badma” and “warned” to take out the food reserves (sacks of potatoes, carrots, cabbages, turnips, jars of jam and pickles—all that which can be destroyed by water in the cellar) did not suffer damage from the elements.

The following moments render this everyday episode from the Buriat village interesting. No one was surprised to see the recently (or not so recently?) deceased Badma in the flesh, not even the atheist schoolteacher. Many families have their own “Badma”, as a rule a deceased relative whose appearance usually warns them of some impending misfortune. However, in order for this to hap-
pen one condition must be fulfilled—the graves and souls of the deceased ancestors must not be neglected and forgotten by their descendants. Only when this memory is present and regular sacrifices of food and drink are made to the souls of the ancestors, when they are remembered and called to the ancestral sacrificial offerings (tailgan) can a thread emerge that links descendants and ancestors and enables the latter to assist their living kinfolk.

Shamanic Practice in Moscow

However, matters were not limited to the regions only. In the years following Perestroika the intelligentsia in the capitals, too, caught the Shamanism bug. This bug has even been given the scientific name “experiential Shamanism”, from the English term “experience”. Its initiator is Alina Slobodova, a professional psychologist, graduate of Moscow State University and student of Michael Harner, an American scholar of Shamanism who set up the Center for the Development of Shamanic Practice in California and subsequently branches of the Center in many countries. Using his methods, Slobodova in the early 1990s founded a school seminar in Moscow which she called Moscow Shamanic Center.

By the end of the 20th century she had hundreds of followers who honestly thought that what they were doing in this school was real Shamanism. Michael Harner believed that everyone can become a shaman if he receives the appropriate training according to a certain methodology and masters a certain amount of practice. The firm belief that this is possible and that it is not necessary to have a long line of ancestors who were shamans (and how could a Muscovite have one, whose ancestors always lived in central Russia and had no relation to the shamanistic world), have made this center extremely popular. Alina Slobodova herself maintains that her students and the students of her students who have graduated from the Center and its branches number one thousand.49 It is likely that by 2011 they have become much more numerous. The circle of followers of experiential Shamanism includes members of the intelligentsia working in different professions, representatives of small and medium-sized business, women who do not work (the wives of wealthy men who need not worry about money and how to feed their families).

What is it that attracts members of the creative intelligentsia and businesspeople to shamanistic centres and unions? There are several reasons, although in some cases a single reason is probably sufficient, while in others all the reasons were at work. First of all, many associate the interest in non-traditional forms of medical practice first and foremost with Shamanism. Secondly, there is the search for ways to counteract stress, which affects so many people in our day. Thirdly, there are various forms of the search for oneself, one’s roots, one’s talents and ways of realizing these talents. Fourthly, the activity of shamans, which was banned for many decades, like all banned things attracted the interest of many of those who came in contact with it or at least heard about it. As soon as the bans were lifted, Shamanism became some kind of fashion, and initiation into this world, often accidental and without understanding of the inherent dangers, was seen as a token of belonging to an elite, a prestigious token that offered an “immersion” into this virtual world.

There are possibly other reasons too, but the four I listed above explain the overwhelming majority of cases of immersion into Shamanism by members of the intelligentsia.

One has to add that the founder of the Moscow Shaman Center, Alina Slobodova, does not insist on being called a shaman, or on calling her activity Shamanism. It was the press who christened her a shaman. She refers to herself as a psychologist and psychotherapist who is using shamanic practices. And now, having founded several schools in different Russian towns that are headed by her disciples she considers that she has outgrown all this, that she is going further while maintaining shamanic spiritual practices (contact with spirits, immersion in trance, “flights” through different worlds, reception of energy from a helper animal) and holding training events, but already at a different level. At the same time she admits that the interest in these practices is falling, although those who mastered them with the aim of health improvement and self-perfection would most probably not abandon them.