

Drumming, Imitating and Rattling;

*Accounting for 'Old Ways' of a Sakha 'shaman' of Siberia in a
Post-Shamanistic society*



“It is called ‘*aitchelaan*’, [a Sakha word for blessing of a journey].” Before traveling on any journey, a person may seek a blessing from an *algus*, a person who performs blessing rituals.

Through the vast Siberian land, a journey can be by foot, horse or reindeer or by car, and this ‘journey blessing’ is a way to strengthen the spirit and mind, and physically the body. When an *algus* performs an *aitchelaan*, the ritual comprises of ritual song or chant and burning of a tree-bark made special by ‘spirits’. In the high northern latitudes of the Siberian taiga (a dense coniferous forest), particular trees are marked by a distinct physical form, which is taken to be ‘from the spirits’. The tree chosen for rituals have tree-barks that are light in colour, lightweight and uniquely curved in shape. The *aitchelaan* blessing follows the ‘way of nature’ involving the land, the forest, the spirits. The blessing can take place anywhere.



Figure 1 Tree-bark with horsehair used in the *aitchelaan* blessing.

In an effort to understand roles of ‘shamanism’ in this contemporary world, I sat down with a family friend who is an *algus*. He is a Yakut/Sakha elder who speaks in Sakha from the Republic of Sakha, of the given name (either by Russian or Tungus), Yakutia, in Russia’s Far North, Siberia. In a position of elder in the community, the *algus* also educates the community on Sakha traditions, which entails preservation, protection and passing down of Sakha traditions. The rich cultural traditions that the Sakha people share are vocal or throat evocations of epic poems, music from the ancient *khomus* (vargan or mouth harp made of metal), and Sakha language. Belief in shamanism is also part of Sakha traditions. The Sakha word for ‘shaman’ is *ojun*. However, in post-Soviet lives, the ‘old ways’ of shamanism have been consigned to ethnography museums comprised of ethnographic materials of drums, costumes and photographs. As the photo shows, the *algus* is an older man who has lived through Soviet rule. He alluded to a poignant remark that ‘shamanism’ no longer exists and has died out. Piers Vitebsky¹ has noted that the peoples of Siberia may well be living in a ‘post-shamanistic society.’

When I sat down in the office of the *algus*, he began taking out eleven archived photos that were photographed before 1930s preserved by the *algus* himself. Although the *algus* is an elder of the Sakha community who attends to affairs of the community, the *algus* also preserves Sakha tradition by archiving ethnographic materials: drums, costumes and photographs of ‘shamans’ or *ojun*. On the wall were photographs of dead *ojun*.

1 (Vitebsky 1992) Piers Vitebsky’s ethnography is of the Even peoples of Siberia.



Figure 2 Archived photographs of dead *ojun* (shamans)



Figure 3 *Algus* interview April 2013



Figure 4 In post-shamanistic society, the *ojun* costumes hangs between two modern sport jackets



“You can still feel the energy from these photographs. His name was Nikolai. He was very powerful. In front of people, he would cut his head off and throw it away. The Russians did not kill him, he killed himself.”

Figure 5 Archived photo of powerful *ojun*.

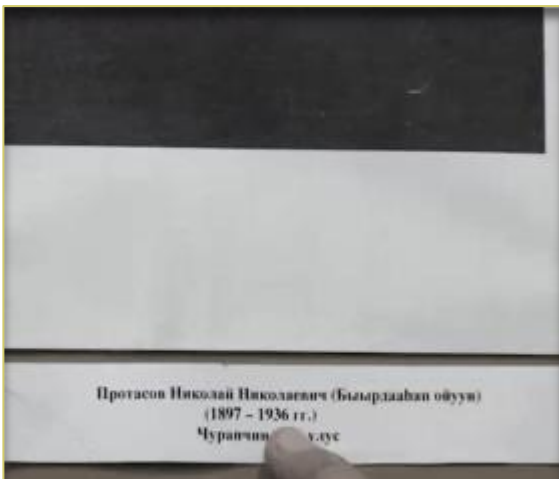
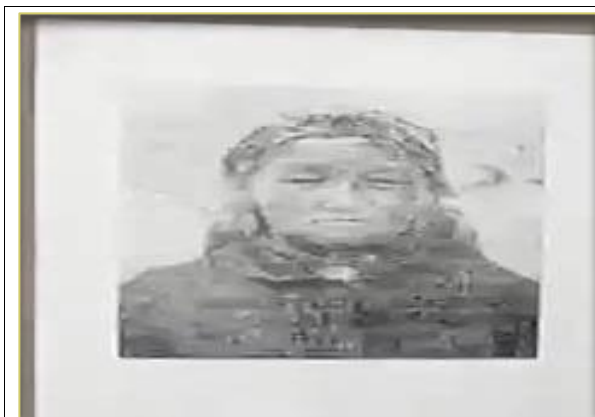


Figure 6 Nikolai, b. 1897 - d. 1936.

As noted by Vitebsky², from the 1930s, socialism had confronted ‘shamanism’ to the point of possible extinction (Vitebsky, 1992, p. 244). Vitebsky pointed out that although shamanism died out as an organized public practice, what came after were other types of ritual leaders, or other forms of divination (seeking knowledge of the other worlds). The *algus* is one such example of a ritual leader. This can also be seen that during the 1990s (post-Soviet rule), in the revival of old traditional ways, the attitude towards ‘shamanism’ was uncertain. Since, during the 1930s, the ‘special’ costume, paraphernalia, ceremony rituals, dance performances, numerous accounts of ‘inner’ knowledge, ‘shamanic’ practices, ‘shamanizing,’ have disappeared or cannot be proven or known by few with fragments of memories.

² (Vitebsky 1992), 244.



The algus looked down and stated, "All these ojun were imprisoned by the Russians, except one udahan (female shaman). She was Evenki and lived with them. I met sister Vera and she cured me. She was very powerful."

Figure 7 *udahan*, powerful female *ojun* living with the Evenki

The question whether 'shamanism' is still alive is hard to unravel. Yet, one attitude towards *ojun* is of prowess. The *algus* mimicked the powerful *ojun* Nikolai who cut off his head. With hand gestures, the *algus* moved one hand over his neck and the other over his head, in the gesture of slicing off the head. The head then was placed inside the pocket of the *algus*' black jacket. The *algus* also relayed that if someone has a 'special relation to spirits,' that person would not say so. That is to say, giving someone the label of *ojun* can mislead others. In the newly formed Republic of Sakha, people are distrustful of labels. This is especially true for giving someone the *ojun* label since a young novice usually will go through an initiation with an older *ojun* tutelary to become *ojun*. Moreover, *ojun* tutelary are hard to come by since during Soviet rule *ojun* were imprisoned, eventually died in prison, and/or were killed. There is of course the belief some *ojun* did escape the KGB during Soviet rule. Nowadays, the surviving relics of *ojun* costume and drum are relegated to museums and replicated in theatrical performances.

Nonetheless, for the *algus*, the *ojun* costume and drum survived an earlier time, especially specific to Sakha history (like all histories, Sakha history has different actors, e.g. the Sakha had *ojun* and the Even, *šaman*). Therefore, to put into perspective the potential for applying modern needs of 'healing technique' derived to some extent from 'old ways' of *ojun*, for instance 'therapeutic healing' or understanding cultural aspects in mental illness, from those who know of the 'old ways' (certain things can never be revived – a dead *ojun*); a good place to start is with the *algus*. In an effort to bring out the lived experiences of the *algus*, and the old ways of the Sakha *ojun*, and old ways in which the costume and drum were used as described in the interview from the *algus*, this essay draws on the method of visual imagery with photo images. This essay further adds to the visual methods of photos with regard to a post-shamanic world.

Important for this essay, the costume and the drum are highly functional in the 'act of shamanizing.' Thus, this essay focuses on the *affect* of the costume and drum of the Sakha *ojun* in the operation of 'shamanizing,' rather than the affect on the whole 'belief system' of 'shamanism.' The first section is about the use of visual methods; second section concerns Siberia and historical accounts of 'shamans'; third section is about the 'old ways' of *ojun* costume and drums which entails the interview. The photo images are placed throughout giving context to text. This essay acknowledges the complexities and problematic nature of interpreting the *ojun* costume to reveal the meaning of 'shamanism' as a whole system. Thus, it is important to note this is not an ethnographic study, but an essay in understanding the *descriptive* accounts of ethnographic materials in a contemporary context.

Using Visual Methods

Sakha costume and the Photocontext

In this essay, the photo context is highly appropriate to understand the photograph. Following Clem Adelman (1998, p. 148), the "context in the making" is just as important as the context in which photos are viewed, if

not more. Once again, it is important to note, this essay does not suggest *conceiving* of ‘shamanism’ as a belief system. Rather, the matter at hand is to give visual images to the *ojun* costume presently preserved today as it is described by the *algus*, hopefully to draw insights into what other archival accounts have described. A key component of ‘photocontext’ for Adelman (1998, p. 148) is for the photographer to “give a reflexive account” which recognizes how the image was “discovered.” This essay does this by writing in the context. With the silent position of ‘shamanism’ in post-Soviet times, the context of what is being described and accounted for in images – the costume and drum – is therefore significant and problematic. Brian Winston (1998, p. 64) attested to the “partiality” of image and in referring to Sekula, Winston stated: “photography offers at best partial evidence despite the richness of the data.” Siberian ‘shamanism’ and the Sakha *ojun* are steeped in rich data from a variety of sources compiled as “500 years of knowledge” (Narby & Huxley, 2001), “psychomental” eyewitness accounts (Shirokogoroff, 1935), “archaic techniques of ecstasy” (Eliade, 1964), constructed and imagined (Hutton, 2001), ethnographic collections (Diószegi & Hoppál, 1978), and “rite technique” (Siikala, 1978). Thus, ‘photocontext’ is to acknowledge the context in how the photos come to be part of this essay, which was informed by the *algus* and subsequently, ‘reflexivity’ drawn from the interview. This photo essay tries to show the relationship between photo images and the context of which the *algus* spoke, who himself is Sakha and describing the old ways of *ojun* costume and drum with specific Sakha characteristics. Therefore, this essay briefly sketches an outline of the old ways the Sakha *ojun* used the costume and drum that cannot be generalized for the other inhabitants of Russia’s Far North.

W.J.T. Mitchell (1994, p. 280) would have the relationship between photo and writing differentiate between the photo and writer (researcher), image and text, and what is viewed and what is read. Above all, the relationship between photo and writing is to articulate a ‘reflexivity’ in the photo essay itself (Adelman, 1998). In the following, the placement of the photo images supports the written accounts with the available body of information – the interview. From personal experiences, the *algus* attests to the tremendous energy of *ojun* and eyewitness accounts.

Sakha drum and sound context

This essay also concerns sounds. In writing about the senses and to understand meaning beyond the linguistic models of culture, David Howes (2005, p. 4) stresses the senses are to be understood as “cultural system” (referring to Clifford Geertz). Howes (2005, p. 5) and contributors emphasized the “context of communal sensory orders.” On the other hand, ‘culture’ as socially constructed (referring to Geertz) takes away the individual humanly lived experienced. Thus, to consider Siberian ‘shamanism’ and drumming thought of in a communal sense in a cultural system begins to quickly fall into oversimplification and generalization. The symbolism of the drumming highly varies from *ojun* to *ojun*. Carolyn Humphrey’s (Humphrey & Onon, 1996, p. 183) analysis of the Daur Mongols of (Chinese) Manchuria emphasized how the shamans were remembered as individuals. This essay however stresses the distinct sounds made by the *algus*, if only a glimpse. The distinct percussion of drumming and imitating sounds allow further insight into perhaps a ‘cultured’ form based on the text.

The drums compared to costumes were more commonly used by *ojun*, mainly because of its rhythmic capacity to induce altered states of consciousness (ASC). Anna-Leena Siikala’s (1978, p. 34) comprehensive study associates the neurophysiological process of ASC with “the subjective content of experiences that are influenced by the culturally dependent variables; e.g. beliefs, for instance how the shaman meets his/her spirit-helpers in a trance.” Drumming has the maximum exertion to effect the rhythmical stimulus in areas of the brain which respond to such auditory stimuli (Siikala, p. 45).

Siberia and Shamans

First known image of ‘shaman’

One of the first known images from 1692 is of a Siberian Tungus speaking ‘shaman,’ superficially described as “Priest of the Devil” comes from the Dutch traveller Nicholas Witsen (Hutton, 2001, p. 32). The ‘shaman’ is depicted with clawed feet, donning an antler head-dress and beating a drum. Witsen’s travel accounts are known to have popularized the term ‘shaman’ (Hutton, p. 32). Twenty years before, the word ‘shaman’ is first archived by Russian Priest exiled to Siberia in 1672, Aavukum Petrovich, who drew the conclusion that ‘shamans’ were devil worshippers defined against his own beliefs (Stone, 2003, pp. 20-23). In context, the image in Witsen’s book *Noord en Oost Tataryen* (1692) was a precursor to the 18C accounts, which by then ‘shamans’ were fakes and charlatans. Unsympathetic portrayals were taken up and recorded as written accounts and drawings by 18C European and Russian scientists to Siberia, that set ‘shamanism’ practices against ideas of modern western civilization (Hutton, pp. 29-55). To give definition to ‘shamanism’ is to recognize the social and cultural construct and by default, in the diverse use of the term, admittedly, there is no general agreed definition.

Exiled to Siberia, the Russian Ethnographer and linguist, Vladimir ILich Jochelson in 1908 (p. 58), described the mysterious sounds of drumming and vocals emanating from everywhere. Jochelson compared to other observers was one of the few ethnographers who did not ‘demonize’ ‘shamanism.’ In the following, Jochelson describes the sounds of drumming:

“Suddenly he commences to beat the drum softly and to sing a plaintive voice: then the beating of the drum grew stronger and stronger; and his song – in which could be heard sounds imitating the howling of the wolf, the groaning of the cargoose, and the voices of other animals, his guardian spirits – appeared to come sometimes from the corner nearest to my seat, then from the opposite end, then again from the middle of the house, and then it seemed to proceed from the ceiling. His drum also seemed to sound, now over my head, now at my feet, now behind, now in front of me. I could see nothing; [...] All of the sudden the sound of the drum and the singing ceased (Jochelson, 2001 [1908]).”



For the perfect shaman, a Sakha ojun “must be serious, possess tact, be able to convince his neighbors; above all, he must not be presumptuous, proud, ill-tempered. One must feel an inner force in him that does not offend yet is conscious of his power (Eliade, 1964, p. 29).”

Figure 8 The picture above portrays a possible image of a controlled state of *ojun*.

‘Cradle of Shamanism’

‘Shamanism’ has had a long relationship with scholars, which produced ethnographies that has been re-worked to find generalization; universals that apparently connected back to Siberia as some sort of ‘cradle of shamanism’ (Hutton, 2001); (Eliade, 1964); (Diószegi & Hoppál, 1978). There is however, and argued by Eliade (1964) comparative religious history) and Hutton (2001) constructions of Siberia) that Siberian ‘shamanism’ was regarded to have advantages in understanding a phenomenon of elements that exist independently elsewhere in the world. One account of ‘why we think we know about shamans’ is from Hutton (2001, p. 3) who put forth the idea that ‘shamanism’ and ‘Siberia’ are mental constructs of western imagination. From this perspective, this essay realizes the archival material is not without problems.

The Republic of Sakha and the Sakha peoples

An *algus* performs *aitchelaan*, ritual blessing, according to the natural movement of nature, the ‘ways of nature’, for instance when moving from summerhouse to the winter house, *aitchelaan* is for the journey within the natural land, the natural cycle of seasons and the immediate landscape, whether a horse-breeding camp or a village settlement. Making any journey through Siberia’s vastness, as the below map shows, requires knowing the ‘ways of nature’ for one to beware of the extreme climate and navigate the immense landscape. Further, the uniqueness of the Siberian landscape is not simply economic; the peoples of Russia’s Far North continue their survival allowing ideas of ‘personhood’ and revival of ethnic identity to flourish. Similar to other natives and indigenous peoples of the North (Vitebsky, 1992, pp. 243 for ‘Evenhood’ or personhood of the Even reindeer-herders), the Sakha have an intimate connection to the land. Sakha people pasture their cattle in the summer and horse breed, which connects them to the regional area (*ulus*) of Yakutsk. The accolade of the north, Sakha horses are sought after for their ability to withstand the extreme weather. A significant detail since the ‘Yakut’ (name given to the Sakha) are considered conquerors bringing their horses to Siberia from the south.



Figure 6 World Fact Book map of Russia

The Sakha people’s history is of migration to the Lena River valley before the Russians came to Siberia in search for fur in the 16C. Besides being identified as horse-breeders, a distinctive character of the Sakha is their Turkic language. From their Tungus-speaking neighbors, the Sakha were given the name ‘Yakut.’ To a great degree, they would rather identify as Sakha and after four centuries, the Republic of Sakha formed in the 1990s. Notwithstanding, the Sakha are considered native to the land (similar to the Buryats), unlike other inhabitants who the Russians have determined as ‘indigenous’ peoples, like the Tungus-speaking Eveny (or Even) and Evenki who were and some still are primarily reindeer-herders.

The Old Ways of Ojun in Costume and Drum

Although the natives and indigenous peoples of Russian’s Far North share similar beliefs of ‘shamanism,’ they also hold to diverse defining ‘techniques’ of shamanism. Vitebsky (1992, p. 244) makes a more interesting point in stating, “I also heard of expectations of the imminent reincarnation of deceased shamans, suggesting the persistence of ideas about cyclical time.” This suggests that there are certainly aspects of shamanism that has survived however problematic in the sense of oral tradition is not free of external forces such as forces from Russian Orthodox Christianity. That is to say, from a perspective of comparative religious histories, Eliade (1964, pp. 61, 208n) references a ‘shaman’ has been known to have a ‘spiritual role’ with rites of the dead and to possess an inner light similar to Christian mystics. According to Mihály Hoppál (1987, pp. 93-95), ‘shamanism’ can better be thought in terms of a ‘belief system’ that has a contemporary

character socially integrated in everyday beliefs. With regard to the views from Hoppál (1987, p. 95), ‘shamanism’ is a belief system comprised of: “1) knowledge of; 2) belief in the helping spirits, memory of ritual texts (songs, legends, myths, stories, epic poems), guidelines for performance (technique of ecstasy, rituals), shaman paraphernalia (costumes, mirror, drum sticks, horse hair, drums, bow from horse hair, hurmuz mouth-harp).”

When sitting down with the *algus*, the conversation started with the archived photos of dead *ojun*. Thirty minutes into the conversation, he stated: “now I want to talk about *ojun*.” By stating that he wanted to talk about *ojun*, stopping the previous conversation as if to change the tense into past tense and from then could we talk about *ojun*. This reflects on the reality that the *algus* believes Sakha peoples live in a post-shamanistic society. This is where the sound recording of the interview begins. The *algus* considered the discussion before which revolved around the land and honoring the land by making offerings to the fire or cigarettes in a space where one rests. When offerings are given, the spirits recognizes the full worth of the human and nature relationship. He continues stating: the young are in need of knowing more about nature and living in the land; the *yyasakh*, the summer festival is the most important event for the Sakha peoples; and teaching people of the old ways is his main purpose. The *algus* accepts the old ways of living with nature as an essential aspect of everyday. The everyday also means ‘way of nature,’ similar to how the *algus* performs *aitchalaan*, a journey blessing.

In the sound recording, the *algus* describes the metal pendants and what they represent in ideas and qualities. The photo images below ascribe to the sound descriptions. Regarding the characteristic of the costume, Hutton (2001, p. 80) mentioned that the Sakha costume was a recognizable trait for a Sakha *ojun*, yet not all *ojun* choose to have one. This would also mean ‘shaman’ costumes did not have to be worn to achieve ‘soul-flights,’ as commonly mistaken. If the *ojun* acquired one, it was handmade with metals ornaments, which had symbolisms of animals, body organs, and ‘spirit’ trappings specifically associated to that one *ojun*. The *algus* noted that the *ojun* drum was made from a special tree in the Siberian forest. The extreme climate in the summer allows rapid growth and intense heat, which may give the wood an unusual form, and was seen as a sign from the spirits. Since *ojun* costumes continue to be accounted for and were primarily preserved, this may suggest some have been replicated. Yet, there was once a time, when there was no confusion if this particular costume and drum belonged to that one *ojun*. Although Eliade contributed to the comparative history of religions in many ways, Eliade’s (1964, pp. 147-176) generally-sided accounts of diverse shaman’s costume and drum is rather presumptuous. Shaman paraphernalia (costumes, mirror, drum sticks, horse hair, drums, bow, hurmoz-mouth-harp) cannot be generalized.

As in the sound recording, when the *algus* begins to perform by drumming, he yawns, which means he is drawing in the helping-spirits (*amagyat*). He then imitates animal sounds. One distinct sound is of the raven. This relates to Hoppál’s inclusion of ‘shamanism’ in the ‘sphere’ of the everyday. By the ‘everyday,’ ‘shamanism’ was found to involve aspects of sleep (unconscious), initiation (tutulary), performance of dance, drumming, gestures in yawning that was symbolic of the taking the helping-spirits through the mouth, dreaming, altered states of consciousness (ASC), and so on. Below are images depicting dance performance with drumming and rattling of iron metals.

The sound recording highlights one element of how the shaman’s drum is the symbol of the ecstatic journey implying Eliade’s (1964, p. 173) portrayal of a “breakthrough in plane and hence a ‘Center of the World’” where the drumming reverberations, imitating of animals, and rattling to ‘shut them in’ can be transmitted. As Needham (1967, p. 613) would have us ask, how can we think of the connection between percussion and transition (613)?” It is important to note the sound section does not attempt to ethnographically describe the potential of sounds to formulate and analyze the ‘transition’ of territory, as Van Gennep showed by territorial passage, yet Needham states the general sounds of percussions to accompany a transition tended to be more unhelpful without the social context (Needham, 1967, p. 612). Rather, the sound section pays closer attention to the percussion of distinctive sounds. The sound recording tries to capture the distinctive sounds of the rattling, banging, drumming, yawning, and imitating of animals.

Interview: Ojun initiation, Costume, and Drumming

In the interview, the *algus* spoke of how *ojun* becomes *ojun*. The sound recording begins with the *algus* explain the initiation of the boy. The interview continues with the symbolism of the drums. As the finale, the *algus* performs on the drum wearing the Sakha *ojun* costume. To give context of the Sakha *ojun* in the old ways of performing, the following discusses the ‘act of shamanizing’ as it relates to *ojun* tutelary in initiation and spirit-helpers or personal guardians (*amagyat*). *Ojun* in the old ways were specialist in a manner through dance performance that captivated the community by highly being attuned to ‘mystic forces.’ In finding just the right rhythm, and through the right rhythm method, *ojun* moves out of the body or out of one world of appearances into another. The sound recording is not exaggerated. The importance of the *algus* performing suited the ‘everyday’ drumming rather than the theatrical. Keeping this in mind enables the listener better perceive the sound recording and also remember there are reasons to believe this in a post-shamanistic Siberia.

Considering the old ways of dance performances and how the costume, yet more so the drum was used, following the photo images, this essay examines the consequences of old ethnographic accounts. Since the Russian ethnography specifically accounted for a Sakha *ojun*, in *Shamanism in Siberia* (Diószegi & Hoppál, 1978), I refer to Žornickaja descriptions of dance performance. Žornickaja essentially describes the dance performance as spontaneous improvisation from the ethnographic accounts in the 1950s and 1960s (during a time of persecution). This Russian ethnographic source particularly mentioned the problematic accounts of informants that were mainly due to their old age and reliable memories. From this perspective, Žornickaja draws attention to the *un*-reliability in reviving and re-creating the old ways in post-Soviet Siberia. And, although polemic, Žornickaja gives a partial view of an old Sakha dance performance exemplifying costume and drum in which Žornickaja compares to what can be ‘collected’ in Soviet times. Thus, I later comment on the ‘act of shamanizing’ to give background on the **uses** of shaman costume and drum – community, duty, etc. The recorded interview gives an insight of the reasons why certain iron metals take a certain form on the costume and why the *ojun* beats the drum in the center, lowers his voice, positions downward with his feet and drums the lower half, and so on. Please take a moment and listen to the sound interview.

Ojun initiation



“During those days, the boy would have some wounds and have some nightmares. During these dreams, the bad spirits would come and take all his flesh out.” The boy would dream they ate it, everything, blood, and flesh and all muscles and everything was taken out. After that, they [bad spirits] would put in different things: different blood, different flesh, different muscles. From that day, he was a different person with different capacities.

Figure 9 *algus* speaking about illness as part of initiation

The *algus* places special importance on the ‘tutelary’ of the initiation for inner knowledge and the beginning process of the relationship between the *ojun* and spirit-helpers (*amagyat*). Written sources on shamanic initiation vary tremendously. Hutton’s perspective that the initiation can be thought of three successive effects relates to the interview. Hutton notes (2001, p. 75): “[The initiation] began with a general, culturally-induced (illness of the boy), condition: that a shaman was called upon to assist the ill person or condition. Once the other *ojun* heals the boy, according to Hutton, there are three successive sequences: 1) the call of the spirits; 2) the period of ‘training’ or gaining inner knowledge; 3) the process of acceptance. It is once again

noted, the circumstance surrounding the initiation varies across Siberia, and no such form can be treated as normative for the region. Hence the recording serves as an illustration.



“During three days and three nights, he had this nightmare of all this flesh eating. And after all this dreaming, the shaman comes. This shaman basically teaches this young shaman. And he gives all the knowledge he knows. Three days in the house and 28 days out in the woods. What the shaman teaches is an enormous amount of knowledge; about bad spirits, how many spirits are out there, every living thing has a bad spirit...,there is an enormous amount of information; how to go to the heavens, how to treat this and that how to treat this kind of situation, where to get help in how to, how to travel, how to do this, and there is enormous amount of knowledge. If we talk about it all, we would have to spend the whole night here.”

Figure 10 *algus* explaining initiation



*After the account of ojun initiation, the *algus* stands up, and walks to pick up the ojun costume, which hangs between two modern sport jackets.*

Costume

The *algus* begins to describe the *ojun* costume. The analysis of the costume tends to surround symbolism as a common framework. The *algus* noted the many symbolisms for the metal pendants. Please take a moment to listen to the interview detailing the symbols.



"This one is called mother spirit. Or mother animal. For shaman, it comes to his vision twice in life – when he becomes shaman and when shaman dies."



"These are woman's breast to ward off hostile spirits. Spirits do not like women."



"These are to scare away all those bad spirits."



Shaman would pierce [himself] with a knife [through the round metal piece]."



“All these metal helps him travel to the upper world [represents feathers on arm and back and winged arms for soul flight].”



“[Inside] These are for spirit-helpers.”

Costume and the Consequences

Although thoroughly fascinating, the *algus* refers to descriptions that can be found in ethnographic accounts from Eliade, Shirokogoroff, and Hutton. This introduces a complication. I would like to think the *algus* and by extension other Sakha peoples who also teach about the Sakha *ojun* history have lived experiences and can account for them, however, it is certainly possible that the descriptive symbolism accounted by the *algus* may have come from already produced ethnographic accounts. For instance, Hutton is not easily convinced of *ojun* evidence, accounts, histories and particularly Eliade's analysis. Hutton (2001, p. 156) makes a valid acknowledgement of the problems in post-Soviet Siberia with regard to revival, re-creation, and re-imagining in the reversal of ideas about 'shamanism.' Whether this revival takes place in the space of museums or 'heritage' conferences, knowledge of the old ways must come from somewhere, and this one consequence of *ojun* costume is the *re-creation* of such costume for performances, teaching, or even the museum.

Hence, it is *not* the case where 'shamanism,' like the costume, and the drums were the symbolism which discloses a microcosm of shaman beliefs. Eliade (1964, pp. 145 - 176) so eagerly generalized this viewpoint even though Eliade refers to S.V. Ivanov's comprehensive study of Siberian Shamans. The word itself shaman or *šaman* is a Tungusic word. Siikala (1978, pp. 14 citing Dioszegi, V., 1947) refers to the Tungus-Manchurian verb *ša* or *sa* could mean 'to know.' Much of the *taiga* and tundra of central and eastern Siberia, roamed by reindeer herders like the Even and Evenki peoples speak Tungus. The Sakha *ojun* distinctly differs from *šaman* in word and in origins. Yet, the accounts by the *algus* can be associated to both the Evenki and Sakha *ojun*. Again this is consequence of diluted known accounts, simplification, over-generalization, and sadly, loss of knowledge. In the very first photo image of *ojun* with drum, *ojun* wears an elaborate headdress, however headdress in the Sakha *ojun* are rarely mentioned. *Ojun* costume illustrates the consequences in the post-shamanistic society.

It is no surprise *ojun* costumes are problematic since costumes spawned numerous studies. Shirokogoroff's (1935, p. 288) extensive record of the Tungus costume considers details and would admit not one was absolutely like another observed of the southern Evenkis. Since the uses for costume (rattling of the ornaments) in dance performances helped in the improvisation, this also affected the 'shamanizing' to enter a state of ecstasy (Žornickaja, 1978, p. 305). Shirokogoroff (1935, p. 287) viewed that without the paraphernalia the effectiveness to produce "self-excitement, self-hypnosis, and hypnotic influence of the audience" would dramatically decrease. Both of these ethnographic accounts constitute another problem; the conclusion they arrive at become self-fastening to a particular group and leaves little room for diverse *ojun* practices.

Shirokogoroff (1935, p. 332) observed that the shamanizing was a form of hypnotherapy: illusions produced by the performer could succeed because the audience was to some degree in an altered state of consciousness themselves, yet so was the shaman performing. Shirokogoroff stated that a shaman's spirits were created in the mind as reality, which made the performance into a condition relating to faculties that are apparently unexplainable or in ones own mind or soul. Žornickaja (1978, p. 301) doubts the validity of the informants citing that they were "extremely old," accordingly, the notation points out her concerns. At a closer look, both seem to record, investigate, examine, question significant aspects that relate to the ethnographers themselves – not the Evenkis or Sakha peoples. This may be a product of their time noting that they were writing for a European and Russian audience.

Adding to another western account, Eliade's (1964, p. 6) set of defining characteristics were: besides the 'shamanic' special relations with the 'spirits,' ecstatic capacities of soul flight, and ascents to the sky, descents to the underworld, mastery over fire, and so on, Siberian (Eliade also includes central Asian) 'shamanism' validated specific techniques. The problem with this is that Eliade took the set and applied to whole regions, for instance to include of Central Asia, ignores the complexities of Siberian 'shamanism' which is widely diverse within each family of 'shamans.' Eliade (1964, pp. 146n, 147) would state that there is a certain sense that the costume is 'where spirits reside' referring to Shirokogoroff's study of the Tungus. Shirokogoroff (1935, p. 301) refers to the Tungus costume as "a dress with spirits" that compels the same respect for the 'spirits.' Although Hutton (2001, p. 81) finds Eliade's analysis of the symbolism of shaman costume and drum to be 'guesswork' at best, Eliade (1964, pp. 145-176) refers to the symbolism as a key component of how a shaman ascends and descends the other worlds (ecstatic journey) when indeed the Even and the Sakha are not from the say group and practices cannot offer any generalizations.

Drumming



*"In the forest, the
have a tree this
shape [of
drum]."*



“The metal represents the sun rays and the four directions. The drum also is made from cow horns and hide. Through the hole, shaman can see

The *algus* begins to drum.







The above pictures show the movement going down to the under world with drumming loud and downwards. Towards the end of the sound recording, the sound grows louder, and louder, ending with harsh beats to the underworld. The feet as well moves down and back to steadily move down and down, pounding the drum louder and louder. Even though this is just a brief recording, in the continuous drumming, one can get an idea that the *ojun* must find an appropriate rhythm method noted by Siikala.

Sakha *ojun* Dance as Performance: ‘act of shamanizing’

The document Žornickaja (1978, p. 299) first cites dates from 1768-69 that revealed an “interesting description of a shamanistic séance with dance as an inseparable part.” “And so shamanism is carried on by the *ojun*, that is a [Sakha] shaman, beating the drum and jumping about on his legs as much as he can and emitting unusual shouts; at the same time, jerking his head and calling on believers and worshippers, chasing demons and confusing the people [...] Another source from 1785 noted “he [shaman] having donned a robe of dressed hide with several iron rattles specially for shamanizing, and having tousled his hair, runs about the *yurta*, shaking his head, and delivering loud talks unintelligible to the Yakuts themselves [...] (Žornickaja, p. 299).” These 18C accounts from archives collected from Žornickaja were considered part of a time when *ojun* performance required their own sacred space and a community of audience. To understand *ojun* dance performances from archive sources dating back to the 18C, Žornickaja (pp. 299, 305) noted the close feature of dance with the “act of shamanizing.” From the comparison of the ethnographic accounts (observed in 1950, 51, 59, 60) with the archived material, the analysis concluded that the dance was a matter of entering trance and on the other hand, improvised with a ‘clear’ rhythm where an abrupt drumbeat corresponded to

high jumps. Interestingly, in recognizing spontaneous movements, Žornickaja does leave some room for individuality.

Žornickaja (1978) descriptions of dance performances were of banging metal pendants from the costume and each drumbeat accompanied with wild gesticulations. *Ojun* dance performance, although improvised, did “clearly” have a rhythm (Žornickaja, 1978). The emphasis on “clearly” extends to Siikala’s analysis on the effect on the nervous system. For Siikala (1978, p. 45) it is possible to prove experimentally that rhythmic drumming caused “a) change in the electric activity of the brain; b) unusual observations, as quoted by the test persons, and c) muscle jerks in some of the test persons.” What is rather interesting is that Žornickaja points of ‘spontaneity’ of dance in preparing the whole body and mind to enter a trance-like, whereas Siikala points to the *controlled* method for the shaman to find the right rhythm ‘method.’ Siikala’s study on drumming is a notable contribution. Siikala (p. 45) brings to light, referring to a study done by Neher, “it should be possible to transmit more energy to the brain with a drum than with a stimulus of higher frequency.” The sound recording is a practical exhibition that demonstrates the drum’s low frequency level.

Siikala goes as far as to suggest drums may well serve to be a central symbol in shamanism (p. 45). Shaman drums of Siberia play a vital role in shamanistic rituals (Potapov, 1978). However, shaman drums are not simply cultural relic. L.P. Potapov (1978, p. 169) argues that shaman drums of Siberia are powerful symbolic relics, precisely because they encapsulate a vital part of a larger understanding of the shamanic journey. For Potapov (1978, p. 177), drums provide resources for rich ethnographic history in their connection to “establishing the ancient genetic links between Altaians, Ugurs, Kirghizes, and Yakuts,” people who share regional links between North and Central Asian and also Siberia since the Sakha moved upward to settle around the Lean River. This becomes more fascinating knowing that *ojun* drums have a distinction in how the Sakha *ojun* journeys through the multi-tiered world – that is, through the ‘shaman’s horse’- the shamanic journey. Likewise, the symbol of horses is also known within Buryat circles. In giving detailed variations in symbolism known to vary from group to group depending on wood material, re-animating of animals, application of drawings, which constitute complex details, Potapov indicates that there was no common agreement of what such representation symbolized.

The *algus* stated: “The drum is the *ojun* horse.” For the Sakha, the combined imagery of horse and in this case of the sound recording, the raven (although the horse is also imitated, besides other animals), the soul takes flight. The costume depicts the animals with tipped feathers and wings, attached to the shoulders; *ojun* may fly to the sky. Thus, the Sakha relate to the horse in a far deeper relationship than mere riding or breeding. *Ojun*, during initiation may have visions of the horse, and through the drumbeats is guided by spirits. The drum in itself is culturally pattern made from cowhide stretched across a board and protruding horns, the metal hand distinguishing the four directions and the small opening to see illnesses. Like the horse itself, the drum comes to life capable of pulling up in air *ojun* with its pounding beat to nine heavens high. *Ojun* costume in the long tresses resembles the horse hair. This is one of cultural ‘form’ in which the Sakha pattern their ‘act of shamanizing.’

The significance in understanding the complex distinctions of ‘cultural’ form between the diverse peoples of the Far North is indeed to allow imagery of representation in how drums are used for what Eliade would call the ‘ecstatic journey.’ For instance, Eliade (1964, p. 172) noted of how the shaman of the Tungus of the Transbaikial uses his drum as a boat to cross the sea, thus indicating waters. When summoning up spirits, at the start of the ‘ecstatic journey’ there is an implied ‘breakthrough’ into another plane, and hence the ‘Center of the World’ (Eliade, 1964, p. 173). The drumbeats in the sound recording and images occupy the upper world, middle world and lower world. Thus, drums not only constitute the preparation into the ‘ecstatic journey,’ drumming is a receptacle that encourages for some kind of ‘breakthrough’ where a steed, like a Sakha horse carries them through.

Duly noted by Eliade (1964, p. 5), any ecstatic cannot be a shaman; the shaman is considered a shaman through “specializing in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave the body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld.” In this out-of-body-like experience, drumming and imitation in sounds

dominate the representation of this ecstatic journey into another worldly dimension. Nonetheless, Eliade (p. 180) also acknowledges the use of drums and other sounds are not confined to summoning of spirits or the ecstatic journey, but many shamans also drums and chant for their own pleasure and performance. However, Eliade (p. 180) stresses the implications of these actions remain the same; that is, ascending to the sky or descending to the underworld to visit the dead. In this respect, drums and sounds have an autonomy not strictly assigned to the symbolism or a role in the 'ecstatic journey.'

During the time of Žornickaja's efforts, there were ongoing radical transformations in people's lives under Soviet rule (shamans were prohibited to practice and imprisoned) and therefore, the information and informants were extremely old and could only produce fragmentary details. These accounts provide the dramatic and semi-public nature that 'shamanizing' is to call on the help of spirits for the community. The performance also is an indication into why an audience was needed. Siikala (1978, p. 15) characterizes reasons why the community calls upon shamans. One 'duty' is to solve serious situations that may cause problems back to a normal state, and this requires the summoning of spirits since the spirits are regarded as causing the crisis in the first place (Siikala, 1978, p. 15); (Hutton, 2001, p. 51). The 'act of shamanizing' necessitates a representative who can appease spirits and influence the world beyond, and that representative, the *ojun* must have an effective relation with the world of spirits. This bridging of worlds is essentially shamanizing. The *ojun* must first make contact with the spirits and this process is reciprocal where the spirits select their recruit (Siikala, 1978, p. 16). In the recording, the *algus* elaborates through the interview an initiation ceremony, which admitted a novice boy to the rank of *ojun*.

Ending: 500 years to re-shamanizing?

Intended in their compilation of "500 years on the path to knowledge," for Narby and Huxley (2001), the apparent complexity of 'shamanism' is constituted by an attempt to unravel the previous knowledge of shamanism since the 17C beginnings of Russian colonization to the end of the Soviet Union and to the contemporary aspects which include, as Vitebsky (1992, p. 244) stated, "an element of re-shamanizing." Although Narby and Huxley confine 'shamanism' to elements of 'mystery,' the above hoped to throw light on the problems and consequences of re-accounting aspects of something that cannot be defined. The imagery of the Sakha *ojun* through symbolism of costume and sound, and relating the interview with the *algus* to the archived material of Hoppál, Siikala, Žornickaja, Hutton and Eliade, although polemic, shows the consequences of a post-shamanistic society. The effort to bring out lived experiences of the *algus* rather seemed to hover over other ethnographic sources.

In post-Soviet or post-socialism, people of the Far North are still finding their way through the changes and paradoxes in a newer political terrain which has allowed nationalist movements for native and indigenous Siberians all vying for land rights, local autonomy, revival of their 'traditional culture' specifically native and indigenous languages. There is an upside; scholars have published studies relating to 'healing powers' of 'shamanism' such as Jean Achterberg (1985), Mihály Hoppál in Hungarian (1992), and Anna-Leena Siikala (1978) from a phenomenological approach touching on the neurophysiology and psychology of shamanism in Siberia, which may bring more sympathetic views towards medical anthropology.

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