

SHAMANHOOD IN CENTRAL ASIA

It is a well-known fact that the first religious leaders of the Turkish world were the shamans (qam or kham in different Turkic dialects). Their distinct religious function was described in more or less detail in the early historical sources which mentioned the Turks, the Uighurs and the Kirghiz (6th to 11th centuries). Besides the Byzantine historiographies, one can also find data on shamanic seances, divination, trance, rainmaking, sacrificial rituals (e.g. horse sacrifice) and the worship of mountains and trees in the works of Biruni, Avicenna, Gardizi, Idrisi, Kashgari, Juwayni, Rashid ad-Din Tabib and others. All the main shamanic functions are closely related to the religious and ethical ideas of the Central Asian Turkish peoples among whom shamanhood is still alive (and recently even revitalised). Another circle of source material which contains ethical patterns of political leadership is the heroic epic poetry of the Turkish peoples of Central Asia. The hero of epic poetry has clear shamanic features, therefore his behaviour, heroic deeds and ethical standards could serve as models for the common people - this is how the basic elements of the old traditions became transmitted and rescued from oblivion. Shamans were indeed the keepers of the Turkic spiritual heritage.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is well known that the shaman was the most important religious leader in the world of the ancient Turkic peoples. In recent times a tendency has begun to appear in research into comparative religion and the ethnology of religion which favours the precise and meticulous description of local religious phenomena over hollow theoretical models. This means that instead of the word "shamanism" which has come to be over-generalised they are beginning to use the term shamanhood (Pentikainen et al. eds. 2001). It is in this sense that we have chosen to use this term in order to denote the various shamans who play such a vital role among the Turkic

peoples of Central Asia. Another reason for using this term is that shamans as “religious specialists” are most similar to priests (Witzen, 1672), indeed, the most ancient historical sources likened them to the priesthood.

If we wish to look at these old sources one by one, we need not tread an unbroken path, as we can rely on the work of scholars like Jean-Paul Roux (1984), Denis Sinor (d., 1990) (incidentally, a Hungarian) and an excellent summary by Julian Baldick (2000).

The first reference is traditionally made to Byzantine sources which mention the old empire of the Turks of Inner Asia (552-744) as a scene for the activities of shamans. “Byzantine sources say that the Turks had priests who foretold the future and these priests intervened when a Byzantine envoy came to visit a Turk ruler. They made the envoy and his attendants pass between two fires, in order to purify them” (Baldick 2000:39, and Roux 1984:66-67). Perhaps it is worth mentioning at this point that the author of this paper has had a personal experience of this purifying rite in 1996 when Buryat shamans requested him to step over a small fire before approaching the scene of a sacrificial rite.

Chinese sources mention the use of rain-making stones by Uyghurs (in 756) which is typically associated with shamanic activity: “evidently the stones had passed from the proscribed shamans to the ruler himself (Baldick 2000:43, cf. also Molnar 1994). It is also customary to refer to Chinese sources, according to which, “the Kirgiz had shamans in the ninth century. These shamans seem to have their activities reflected in the inscriptions: a dead man is presented as rejoining his family through a shamanic summoning of his spirit” (Baldick 2000:45). The epitaph suggested that the deceased was a shaman who had travelled in the three levels of the universe, a typical model of the shamanic worldview” (see Hoppal 1995).

Ibu Sina (Avicenna), the great philosopher, poet, astronomer and doctor lived in the 11th century near Bukhara. He gives us the first known account of a shamanic seance, observed by him among a tribe of Turkoman. ‘When they go to consult the shaman to get a prophecy from him he starts running very fast in all directions, gasping until he goes into a trance (Baldick 2000:49 and 176, see note 26).

The Turkic word for “shaman” (*qam*) appeared for the first time in the famous Turkic-Arabic dictionary composed in the 1070s by Kashgari. In his Compendium of the Turkic Dialects (*Diwan lughat al-Turk*) the term *qam* occurs at least four times, and he explains it as “diviner” (see

Roux 1984:68 and 95), other also argue that there is no evidence that the *qam* was a shaman in those ancient times (Dankoff 1975:77).

The Iranian historian Juwayni (1226-1283) wrote that in the old religion of the Uyghurs the *qams* played a significant role (Juwayni 1958: vol. 1.: 55-57). Another famous Iranian Rashid al-Din Tabib (cca 1247-1318) also gave a vivid account of the appearance of a Turkic Muslim mystic who dressed like a shaman and wore a felt hat with two horns and little bells, who would beat a drum and play other instruments producing a horrible noise (Roux 1984:70-71, quoted by Baldick 2000:56).

All of these above mentioned features and activities are highly typical and characteristic of shamans (*qams*) of Central Asia, even in the present day. Let us enumerate the basic functions of the shamans in order to achieve a better understanding of their social roles and the leading role they play in their own societies.

THE FUNCTIONS OF SHAMANS

The proliferation of publications about shamanism shows that the growth of academic interest is entirely in accordance with the fact that a cultural phenomenon which was thought to have disappeared, or was forbidden, because it was judged politically dangerous, is today taking on a new lease of life. It is important to establish this, as it has become clear at the end of the 20th century that, from time to time, certain cultural phenomena can be born again or can be revived. An indication of this renewal is that the signs of shamanism which are considered the most general, find a mode of existence in the context of modern life. These are the following:

1. A healing function
2. The shaman ceremony as one-man/woman theatre
3. The shaman as poet and minstrel
4. The shaman's ritual roles or functions in the community
5. The acceptance of the role of political leader

These social spheres of action can all be found in the classic descriptions which are the products of Russian ethnographic literature. It is not surprising therefore, that at the end of the century, all over Eurasia, in the shamanism of the region, there are examples almost everywhere of modern versions of these functions. Let us take them in turn. As far as the healing function is concerned, it is not just a question of the survival of a local system of beliefs but quite simply of a basic need which forces the simple people of remote regions, who have no medical care, to use the

services of shamans who are reviving ancient folk medicine. It is important to note that, going by my experience (and this is not mentioned in earlier literature on the subject), the shamans do not *heal* so much as *prevent* the complaints from occurring. During ceremonies, they cleanse patients, who are losing their mental or physical balance, of negative influences; put more simply, the shaman works on re-establishing harmony.

They do this by making predictions for the future, by throwing light on possible causes, or by simple cleansing ceremonies, for instance by burning incense or the use of a «magic» laying on of hands (as we managed to capture on film in Tuva in 1997).

Personal impressions of the shamans taking on of ritual roles tell us that, as individuals responsible for organising ceremonies, they create a kind of therapeutic atmosphere for the participants, as we experienced in Tuva and Bakha (former Yakutia), or as we saw during the filming of ceremonial animal sacrifices among the Buryat. The shamans, as leaders of the ceremony, were not just the performers of the ceremony but were teachers at the same time. They taught some of the participants (anyone interested, but particularly young people) how to behave appropriately in such an honoured, or what might best be described as a «sacred», situation. Closely linked to this social role is the fact that the shamans must perform long texts: they sing them, recite them, and in many cases improvise them on the spot. This means that the shaman, though he is familiar with the traditional melodies and rhythms, must still create the poetic text which is necessary for him to summon the spirits. The use of poetic text on such a festive occasion not only lifts the atmosphere of the ritual above the everyday, but also allows the audience to participate in a kind of artistic experience. Another important circumstance is worth mentioning here, namely that, especially among the people of the ex-Soviet Union, the shaman texts are even today performed in languages which the minorities concerned had all but forgotten under pressure from the authorities. In other words, the shaman is also the guardian of linguistic and of poetic traditions.

The preservation of these texts also means the survival of ancient linguistic rhythms, which partly help improvisation and partly preserve on a phonetic level the mythological information which allows the texts to be re-created from time to time. According to the theory of mytho-poetic texts, the names of gods and the naming of local spirits, mountains, rivers or guardian spirits of rocks can be considered as micro-texts

containing concentrated information, from which collective memory and the shamans' individual creative skills can reconstruct the shamanic world view. This world view contains ethical judgements, provides models for standards of behaviour and thus makes orientation in the world easier for the individual. Among the rules on ethics, one of the most important is the unconditional respect for nature and the environment, the maintenance of the rule that we do not destroy the immediate environment unnecessarily. That is to say, that we must retain the state of balance which we inherited from our forefathers, because this is the only way we can ensure for the next generation a valuable life and a source of living in their native land.

Lastly, the acceptance of political roles. This social function is mentioned in early specialist literature as even existing in the Mongolian empire of the great khans, which was an extremely hierarchical society. The role of the *beki* was known to include the function of direct participant in political decision-making alongside the Khan and the generals. The shaman had a distinguished role because it was he who knew the various techniques of foretelling the future and was able to give advance information regarding the right moment for various military undertakings. This was particularly important at a time when armies were equipped with bows and arrows, since the weather (dry or wet conditions) could influence their success a great deal. It is interesting that the shamans who suddenly appeared at the end of the 20th century as if out of nowhere, are not just acting as healers in their narrow rooms in urban blocks. They do not only organise communal animal sacrifices somewhere in the Altay mountain or even in the inner city of Seoul, but also take on the political role of poet and appear in public to defend the interests of their homeland or their community. This acceptance of a political role is particularly important when the minority ethnic groups have almost no educated representatives, so that the political representation of the minority in parliaments and city forums falls to the educated few, to literati or writers with experience in public speaking. It is no accident therefore, that the Tuvan poet writer, Mongush Kenin-Lopsan is one of those who deliberately state that they come from a shamanic family, even though a few decades ago this was not something people readily talked about. Another person who has learned such strength of character from her shaman ancestors, is the young Nenets woman who performs songs learned from her grandmother, rewrites her words and perhaps will one day herself be a poet. But, as she said, despite her college education, she would like to go

back and live among her own people. She is not the only one. We found other examples among the younger generation of researchers who are beginning to study manifestations of shamanism, precisely because, as the only educated members of their nation, they feel it is their duty, arising from a sense of mission, to become acquainted with the traditions and to be the among those who are passing them on (Hoppal 2000).

One of the shaman's social roles, customarily overlooked, is that of conducting rites of initiation which were among the shamanic duties. Young shamans-to-be must go through an entire range of ceremonies in order to become a shaman. Someone must teach them the prayers for calling up the helping spirits, the benedictions, the ritual gestures, the proper rhythm of beating the drum, the steps of the dance, the diagnostic skills to be used in healing, the technique of divination and numerous other details. All this was part of the rite of initiation. In this sense it was also highly similar to the process of initiation used for priests and monks, to that of religious leaders.

The process of teaching and initiation described above is also an introduction into the value system of the shamanic culture. The value system in turn is based on the ancient world view of the shamanic peoples. It has repeatedly been pointed out that this is none other than the animistic natural philosophy of shamanistic peoples (Hoppal 1997).

CONCLUSIONS

Shamanistic peoples, notably the Turkic groups of the Altay region, still hold the belief that all things in their environment have a spirit master or a spirit lord. All parts of the natural world, hills and rivers, lakes and forests are entities with their own soul. It is compulsory to respect these and wrong to disturb their peace. If you must take something away from nature, you must do it with all proper humility, gratitude and a return gift. This view is based on the ideal of retaining balances instead of practising exploitation. The return gift may be symbolic or it may be a genuine sacrifice, for example an animal sacrifice, or it can be an oral expression of gratitude, a prayer or an *algis* (benediction). The essential mission of shamans has been in ancient times, and is even today, at places where shamanism has been revitalised, to teach people the rules of proper behaviour and to set an example in this respect (see Hoppal 1996).

The cultural life of Turkic people, however, contained a very efficient tool to assist the shamans in this effort of transmitting the tradition, and

that was their Turkic heroic epic poetry. To sing heroic epics was one of the responsibilities of the shaman among some peoples of Central Asia. It is known that the same word was used for shaman healer and singer (*bakhshi*) for example by the Uzbeks (Centlivres, P. - Centlivres-Demont, M. - Slobin, M., 1988).

The epic songs of Central Asian peoples are full of shamanistic elements and mythical motives which used to dmm the norms of proper social behaviour into the listeners. "The *Oghuz-name* (composed around 1300 in East Turkistan), *Kitab-i Dede Korkut* (put together in the early fourteenth century) and later the folklore oral versions of Koroglu, the Kirghiz! oral epic of Kokotoy and the Manas epic, the Alpamys and others, clearly reflect in many episodes that the main hero's original function was comparable to that of the shaman's." (Baldick 2000:74).

In other words, the shaman-hero was a model who set an example for the younger generations of heroic attitude, of loyalty to the community, of courage in battle, of helping relations and the poor, and of faithfulness. Briefly, the hero had shamanic characteristics or, the other way round, he could advance to the role of a hero, of a charismatic leader precisely because he was a shaman. (It is interesting to note that in Hungarian folklore and national literature there is also an epic figure like that, *Toldi*.)

I should like to propose a hypothesis here - it is my opinion, that the respect that Turkic peoples show for tradition is related to the unbelievable popularity of epic songs. Even today there are *manaschi* and *kaichi* born - people who carry on the tradition of song. In other words, these songs have retained the reverence for the ancestors and an appreciation for the historical tradition. The Turkic soul used to be characterised by a kind of "antiquarianism", a respect for the past which also appeared in the fact that they made the effort to note down their own folklore and retain it as a value (Baldick 2000:49).

Thus my opinion is that the transmission of the inner values of shamanism shaped the respect for the past which plays such a decisive role in the culture of the Turkic peoples. This is a shared tradition which can serve as a solid base for the development and regeneration of the Turkic world in the coming centuries.

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