Anatole Lewitzky

MYTHS AND RITES OF SHAMANISM[1]

What is shamanism? What is the social nature of this institution which at times seems so clearly to be situated on the fringe of society that one is tempted to call it anti-social? There is indeed no lack of definitions, but where religion is concerned definitions are never satisfactory, for the limits of various phenomena are too uncertain and shadings between them too subtle. The social position of the shaman is so variable that it seems hardly possible even to state the question precisely. On the other hand, we find in mythology and ritual numerous elements indicating the place held by the shaman in collective, and especially in more general, representations of divinities. An attempt to establish, as evidenced in mythology, the position of the shaman in relation to the divinities will lead us to indications as to his social nature, that is, to society's conception of the shaman.

The term "shamanism" seems unquestionably to represent a definite reality. Among the Turko-mongol, Finno-ugrian, Tunguso-manchu, and Paleo-arctic peoples of Asia, as well as among Tibetans and North American Indians, are found magico-religious practices with numerous characteristics in common: the drum, spread from the Laplanders to the Greenland Eskimos; the ecstatic dances; the clearly pathological nature of the shaman's personality; finally, the idea of a deeply intimate contact with the

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spirit world, the notion of levitation, and more generally a means of penetration into other worlds.

But along with these common marks, what a variety of particular forms, of superimposed or substituted elements! The study of shamanism can scarcely be undertaken apart from the historical and archeological study of central and northern Asia; exclusively ethnographic methods are not sufficient. We are dealing with peoples belonging to several linguistic families, spread over enormous spaces; peoples who in the course of their history have been shaken by innumerable migratory movements which founded empires or were incorporated into existing ones. Finally came Buddhism, Islam, Christianity. At the moment there is great confusion and it seems, perhaps, that the ancient beliefs are not completely annihilated.

What is a shaman? From whom does he derive his power? What is his role?

One does not become a shaman without having certain clearly defined psychological predispositions, interpreted as a vocation or even as a direct call from the spirits. These conditions occasionally exist from childhood or, among adults, following some upset of nervous equilibrium by illness or accident. If, as a general rule, every magician is to some degree nervously upset, shamanism is characterized by rites the performance of which in itself requires a morbid condition of the nervous system. Without exception, authors bear this out; Radloff notes that among the Altai Tatars novice shamans are subject to epileptic fits, hysteria, or other symptoms of nervous disorder. Hangaloff points out that among the Buriats those who are to become shamans have a peculiar neuro-psychic constitution, clearly different from that of the normal man. He cites also the case of three celebrated shamans of the Galagansk district who, during an attack of dementia, had to be put to death. Bogoras declares that the idea of his vocation occasionally reaches such a degree of intensity that the future shaman contracts nervous illness just at the point of his "revelation."

A shaman is the chosen one of the spirits. The latter come for him, offer their friendship, their support, even their service. A shaman must have a "strong" soul; being singled out by the spirits is a proof of exceptional power. A knowledge of several myths relating to shamanism suffices to make clear that the shaman is always seen as a being capable of competing with the spirits as well as possessing all their specific qualities. The shaman of mythology is more than an intermediary between men and spirits, he is himself a spirit—he has his own independence and power. Far from being

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their servant, he is served by numerous secondary spirits whom he strictly controls. Here are several myths suggestive of this aspect of shamanism:

Yakuts—Myth of the First Shaman

. . . his name was An-Argyl-Oyun.

He was powerful and performed great miracles: he would revive the dead, restore vision to the blind. The report of such miracles reached Ai-Toyen (God), who sent word to the shaman to ask in the name of what god he worked these miracles and whether he believed in Him. An-Argyl-Oyun (the grave, the important shaman) answered three times that he did not believe in God and that the miracles were performed by his own power.

Ai-Toyen, angered, ordered that the Shaman be burned.

But since the body of Oyun was formed of a mass of reptiles, a frog escaped the flames and went to live on a high mountain.

From this frog are descended the powerful demons who still provide the Yakuts with shamans.

The First Buriat Shaman
(Version reported by Chachkov)

Hara-Gyrgen, most illustrious of shamans, had unlimited power—to recall the dead to life, to make rich the poor, everything was within his reach. This great power disturbed the god (that is, the most popular of the gods of heaven, Esege-Malan), who feared an eventual revolt of the shaman. So he decided to test Hara-Gyrgen, and called to himself the soul of a rich young girl. The latter fell gravely ill and her father invited the shaman to cure her. The shaman concentrated all his force, sat upon his drum and flew into the canopy of heaven, then to the underground world, in a thorough search for the lost soul.

Suddenly he spied her on the god's table, locked in a bottle which the god held closed with his finger. The clever shaman transformed himself into a yellow spider and stung the god in the cheek. The latter let go the bottle and touched his cheek. The shaman took advantage of this opportunity to take the soul from the bottle and give it back to the dying girl. But the god would not pardon this insolence and took measures to limit the shaman's power.

The second version is more complete:

The first Buriat shaman was Boholi-Hara; his power was supernatural. . . . Boholi-Hara had a written book which he had received from Esege-Malan-Tengeri. There lived on the earth at that time a very rich man who had no children. He asked the shaman Boholi-Hara to aid him in his difficulty, by asking the god to send him a son; then Boholi-Hara came to the house of this rich man and began to shamanize, but he did not address to gods or genies his request for a son for the childless man; he himself created a son, in the following way: he made the bones of

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stone, the flesh of clay, the blood of river water; a soul was still needed, but this didn't trouble Boholi-Hara at all: he gathered seventy different flowers and from them made the soul of the boy. After a time, a son was born to the rich man, and reached the age of three years.

One day heaven (Esege-Mamo) ordered three winged couriers to inspect the earth. The three winged couriers surveyed the whole earth and found all in order except for the fact that to a childless man had been born a son of exceptional beauty created by some mysterious means; the winged couriers brought this news to Esege-Malan. Then Esege-Malan learned that this boy had been created by the shaman Boholi-Hara without the intervention of the gods, a forbidden act, for no one but the gods had the right to create men; therefore Esege-Malan sent the three winged couriers to bring back the soul of this boy.

As in the previously cited version, the god shut up the soul in a bottle and the shaman succeeded in freeing it. The text continues:

Boholi-Hara went back to earth and put the soul back in the boy's body; he then exclaimed: "There is no one else on earth capable, as I am, of creating a man and of taking a soul away from Esege-Malan." Upon hearing this, the enraged Esege-Malan sent for the shaman, who went up to heaven. Esege-Malan picked up the shaman's book, tore it and threw the pieces from him. Then he said to Boholi-Hara: "How dare you, a layman, create a man without the gods, who alone are qualified for the task; how dare you cause me pain and take away the soul of a sick person?" Finally he broke the drum in two parts, diminishing the power of the shaman.

At this moment the nine sons of heaven entered and said to Esege-Malan: "We have need of him, for every day we send nine arrows to the earth, and he sends them back to heaven." Esege-Malan condemns the shaman Boholi-Hara to ride upon a black rock until either he or the rock wears out. If Boholi-Hara wears out before the rock, then he will exist no longer and all shamans will henceforth be wicked. If, on the other hand, Boholi-Hara does not wear out, and the rock does, then he is to reappear upon the earth in full possession of his powers.

The myth ends with a theme of considerable importance. The shaman, it is said, passes the test, thanks to the support lent him by a god who is one of the protective gods of the forge: "Boholi-Hara put on boots of ever-lasting iron which he received from the god of heaven Zan-Sagan and this is why now Boholi-Hara rides the rock and the rock wears down and is already half used up."

This myth is quite impressive. I should hesitate, however, to present it as a definition of shamanism. The titanic element appears exaggerated, especially when the myth is compared to tales of other Asiatic shamanist peoples. Buriat mythology is highly evolved, with a notion of God which

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is uncommon in the shamanistic world. It seems to have been developed by numerous successive generations of shamans, organized into a true clergy—a savant mythology based on a systematized cosmogony.

There are, however, two facts in this myth on which I should like to dwell: the shooting back of arrows to heaven, and the presence of the god of the forge. The nine sons of heaven send nine arrows to the earth every day and the shaman sends them back. A rite in which arrows are aimed into the sky at certain fixed times is widespread throughout most of Asia. What is an arrow if not a vehicle or, more generally, a means of communicating with distant spheres? Among the Buriats, a man killed by lightning is treated as a shaman; he is buried with the funeral rites used for the burial of a shaman: those officiating take nine arrows and, along the way, shoot one into the sky, returning, as they say, the arrow which has killed the man; on the way back from the burial they shoot the eight remaining arrows, no doubt destined for the other eight gods of heaven. Thus, relations between heaven and earth are regularly assured, there is a continual interchange of various sorts, a sort of reciprocity.

These relations are judged indispensable by the gods themselves to the point where they intervene in favor of a disgraced shaman. This notion of indispensable relations between different worlds, so characteristic of shamanic mythologies generally, remains in full force in Buriat rites and beliefs. To assume this fundamental function of his state, the shaman must undergo an apprenticeship in the celestial spheres.

Sternberg reports a particularly interesting bit of information: "A Buriat shaman," he says, "generally is descended from some great shaman become a spirit, who chooses the most capable among his posterity; he takes their souls to heaven, in order to teach them the shaman's art and to familiarize them with conditions in the vast celestial empire, its practices and rules. On the way to heaven the souls of the young shamans visit the god of the middle world: Tehasar Mankal, the yellow goat, god of the dance, of fertility and riches, who lives with the nine daughters of Solboni, the dawn god . . . there, the soul of the young shaman spends time in amorous play with the divine daughters, etc. . . ." Let us ignore for the moment the question of the shaman's intimacies with spirits of the opposite sex. What is important to remember here is the idea that the true initiation takes place in heaven. The rite makes this point in the clearest possible terms:

The ceremony is directed by an old shaman, assisted by nine young men, called in the rite the shaman-father and his nine sons, these last symbolizing the nine sons

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of heaven. Nine wooden bowls and nine stones are prepared; from the cemetery-grove of the village are brought a certain number of birches and one pine. The largest birch, torn up by the roots, is permanently planted in one corner of the future shaman's dwelling; the top, passed through the opening above the hearth, extends above the roof. This birch symbolizes the god of the door, who opens to the shaman the way to heaven and to the other gods. . . . Before the postulant's house are planted a fixed number of birches, first one plus nine principal trees, then three groups of three (these are dry trees), finally nine others to which the sacrificial rams, etc., are attached. . . . A system of red and blue cords connects the large interior birch with those outside. These cords symbolize the way—literally, the *bridge*—which the shaman must cross in order to reach the gods. Once all has been installed, the shamans gather in the novice's dwelling and begin to shamanize, that is to sing and dance, invoking especially the ninety-first male and ninety-first female shamans. At the proper moment, they form a procession which moves toward the sacrificial animals, immolated after a rather complex purification process. At this point the candidate advances to the first of the nine birches, climbs to the top, and invokes first the master of shamans, then his dead shaman-relatives. He descends head downward. Then he climbs each of the eight remaining trees in turn, describing nine spiral turns in each climb and invoking the proper spirits from the top.

It is clear that the climbing of the nine birches permits the beginner to reach the nine heavens and thus to obtain, by direct contact with the nine *tengheri*, the powers necessary to the performance of his functions. The birch permanently placed in his dwelling permits him to reach his patron at any time or, generally, to visit the spheres inhabited by the spirits.

In life then the shaman appears as a being obedient to the gods, and the rites represent him as one receiving his powers from the gods of heaven. In quasi-official mythology, shamanism is represented as an institution created by the nine gods of heaven, favorable to human beings, with a view toward helping them. In Yakut shamanism, which is also highly organized but which has better preserved a number of archaic elements, we find this moving oath pronounced during the initiation rite: "I promise to be the protector of the unfortunate, the father of the poor, the mother of orphans." Here the initiation, more summary than that of the Buriats, proceeds as follows: the future shaman, wearing the ritual costume, drum and sticks in hand, is led by his initiator to a mountain or into a distant field. Nine young maidens are placed at his right, and nine young men at his left. The old shaman stands behind him and pronounces the words of the oath, repeated by the candidate. The latter also promises to consecrate his life to the genie who has chosen him and to obey his orders. Then the master reveals the dwelling place of this spirit, who thus becomes the tute-

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lary genie of the new shaman; he also learns the procedure needed to master this protective spirit. In reality the shaman has several tutelary genies, as each man possesses several souls distinguished by specific characteristics. There is one, however, which may be considered as the principal: *ijä-kyl*, the animal-mother, a true personal totem on whom depends his life and death. The shaman sees this genie but three times during his lifetime. The animal-mother dies before the shaman, but the latter cannot then survive for long. This totem always resides in the same place; it is extremely vulnerable, for it can die of mere fright. Along with this totem, the Yakut shaman possesses another, an active tutelary genie, on whom he especially depends for his strength. These genies are called "shamans" and constitute, as it were, counterparts in the beyond of shamans living on earth. Their struggles have a direct result on the life of earthly shamans. It is however doubtful that dualism may be considered as characteristic of shamanist mythologies. Some elements tend to prove that this distinction is of recent origin. In fact, the idea of primitive indifferentiation is found even among the Yakuts. Witness, for example, the myth of the initiation carried out in heaven. There is in the Yakut pantheon an important divinity whose name, translated literally, means "the sun—insatiable glutton," and who is one of the sons of the great god of heaven. The chief attribute of this god is a large iron rod. At the time of initiation, the head of the shaman-candidate, severed from the body, is impaled on the end of this rod. The god lifts the rod so that the head is shown to the entire world. Meanwhile the body of the candidate is cut into bits which are thrown down to feed secondary spirits; these, by absorbing the flesh of the new shaman, become his natural servants.

This representation of servant-genies of the shaman appears even more clearly in Tungus shamanism, which is certainly much more archaic than that of the true Turko-mongol peoples.

Among most of the Tunguses the initiation ceremony is entirely lacking. The man who feels disposed to become a shaman has no need of investiture. His dignity is directly conferred by spirits, and initiation is their exclusive business. It is for them to judge whether the aspirant is sufficiently prepared for the exercise of his functions. To be recognized as a shaman, a Tungus need merely offer his proofs. Remarkably enough, the ritual of initiation is lacking even among those Tunguses who possess a hierarchy of shamanic grades, like certain Amurian groups. Among the Goldi, the future shaman himself chooses the moment of his consecration, obeying, as he believes, the will of his genie. When he considers himself

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sufficiently prepared, he invites his nearby relatives, as well as all his neighbors. Behind his house, he plants under a large tree nine little stakes sketchily carved to represent divinities friendly to his clan. After sunset, he begins to chant in honor of his tutelary genie. Then, leaving the house, he dances toward the prepared place and executes nine chants interspersed with dances. When this long exhibition is over, he seizes the sacrificial animal which someone hands him—a little pig, a rooster, or a wild duck—drains its blood, sprinkles the idols with blood, and drinks some himself. He then dismembers the beast, cutting off the head, extracting the liver, the heart, and the lungs, which are reserved for the spirits. Everyone returns to the house, the new shaman dances in, crouches, and chants a recital of his conversion. The ceremony ends with a banquet.

This ceremony is sufficient for the recognition of a first-grade shaman, whose principal function is to combat evil spirits, especially those responsible for illness. The second and third grades have the right to officiate at funerals, to take possession of the dead person's soul and lead it into the next world. These grades are also self-conferred. When invited by a spirit, the candidate prepares the required vestments and ritual objects. Then, accompanied by two or three assistants, he proceeds ceremoniously through the villages inhabited by members of his clan, without revealing the purpose of his trip. Upon reaching the limits of his clan's territory, he puts on the distinctive signs of his new dignity and returns, announcing to everyone the grace which has touched him, and inviting his relatives to the great consecration sacrifice. On the night before the ceremony, after sunset, nine persons lead the assembled crowd in a dance. The dancers wear little bells around their waists and beat drums. The dance lasts until the entrance of the shaman himself. The latter begins by telling, in chant, of his life, his struggles, his hesitations; he invokes his protective spirits, suddenly begins to speak in their name, dances. This session is divided into nine periods. When the ninth chant is over, the eldest member of the group pours a glass of brandy which he offers on his knees to the shaman with the words: "Be our shaman, help us." The sacrifice takes place the next day. The shaman is busy from early morning, he begs his genies not to abandon him, never to refuse him their help, and, finally, to accept the sacrifice. When all these preparations are over, the shaman, followed by all the guests, goes to the place designated for the ceremony. Before the figurines nine pigs are lined up, their feet bound. At a sign from the shaman, his aides leap upon the animals, bleed them, and gather the blood in wooden bowls which they offer to their master. The latter, in a state of

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extreme agitation, howling and shaking, drinks the blood greedily. Suddenly he becomes ecstatic, utters hysterical cries, jumps and dances, violently shaking all the pendants and bells of his ritual costume. Occasionally his nervous tension reaches such a degree that the ecstatic shaman falls unconscious.

While the shaman is recovering, the meat of the sacrificed animals is cooked for the meal which is to follow. The banquet ordinarily lasts until late at night. The shaman, after swallowing the first glass of brandy, drinks no more and eats very moderately. Etiquette requires that he serve his guests himself, and soon he is the only one who is not intoxicated.

The genie of whom the shaman is the chosen one will serve during the entire length of his ministry as executive agent in the invisible worlds. The Amurian Tunguses call this genie *ajami*, the friend. It is this genie among his spiritual supporters upon whom the shaman can count in every circumstance, whose fidelity is not based on self-interest, and who lends his support through pure affection, even love. It is chiefly through this genie that the Tungus shaman recruits his other invisible helpers. He generally has the services of several categories, of unequal powers. Some he employs as fighters in his mythical struggles against his antagonists in the world beyond. Others act as scouts or information agents. Still others are couriers or porters. It is not merely by the attractive force of his strong personality that the shaman keeps this large group under his command. Some he acquires through prayer and persuasion, while less important ones simply find it advantageous to be regularly nourished with the blood and viscera of sacrificed animals. But the most insignificant genies are often recruited by force. Shirokogoroff cites among the Tunguses of Transbaikalia the institution of a veritable clientele of assorted genies around a shaman, who takes pains to prevent them from doing harm. The death of such a shaman provokes frightful calamities engineered by the liberated genies, who fall upon men with tortures, epidemics, and especially with nervous disorders.

The notion of one or more great gods, and of the omnipotence of heaven, hardly exists beyond the limits of the Turko-mongol world. Even among the Yakuts, whose shamans are initiated in heaven, there are personal totems whose importance is not to be underestimated. These totems live in some deserted spot, under a rock for example, but never in heaven. And there are in Kakut shamanism—as in Tungus shamanism—numerous zoomorphic genies, zoomorphic in origin at least, whose function is often to aid the shaman in transporting himself to other worlds generally, not merely to the celestial world. There is besides heaven the lower world,

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underground, but there are also the invisible spaces of the inhabited world. This fact is important, for a large part of the zoomorphic elements of mythology imply the existence on earth of invisible regions. It is even generally admitted that totemism may never have existed in the north of Asia. The problem is too complex for discussion here; one fact seems certain: that most of the peoples with whom we are concerned, Buriats, Yakuts, Altai Turks, Samoyeds, Ostiaks, and others, have since earliest antiquity had a most significant notion of their relationship with the animal world. Animals are represented as organized in clans—each species forming a particular clan governed by a master. This master resides in some invisible spot out of the reach of simple mortals. The animal clans have their duties toward men, just as the clans of men have their duties in regard to the animals. An animal is to be killed in a certain way, otherwise the master of his clan will supply no more game, or seek other ways to avenge the clan. The animal clans are on an equal footing with the human, and are seen as allies of the latter, with all the consequences implicit in this position. Thus, according to the myth, certain species of animals furnish males to the human clan. The vendetta exists equally on both sides. The Tchuktchi avoid killing a wolf, persuaded that other wolves would come for vengeance. The Oroches are afraid to hurt a squirrel. The Tunguses of the Yenisei never kill mosquitoes.

If on the other hand a bear, for example, kills a man, the Oroches immediately organize a hunt, capture a bear, kill it, eat its heart, and throw out the rest of the meat; they save the skin, which with the head of the beast serves as a shroud for the dead man. Among the Voguls the nearest relative was required to seek revenge by killing a bear. The Goldis have the same custom in regard to the tiger; they kill him and bury him with this little speech: "Now we are even, you have killed one of ours, we have killed one of yours. Now let us live in peace. Don't come to disturb us again, or we will kill you."

This somewhat social conception of the universe appears very clearly among most of the more or less archaic peoples of the region under discussion. It is probable that the custom of having tame animals, widespread throughout central and northern Asia, is linked to these ancient ideas. These mythical conceptions of the animal kingdom gave rise to a multitude of spirits of closely related origin. According to Zelenin these spirits seem to have preserved for a very long time their clan character, and sometimes even show a relationship to the maternal clan. This fact is reported by such reliable scholars as Castren and Radloff. In any case, the cult of these spirits

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seems in all cases founded on the contractual principle. Here are some examples: Among the Altai Turks, the genie is dismissed for not performing his obligations, as when a patient in his care dies; his effigy is taken into the forest and hung to a branch; then a triple offering of brandy is made, the image is asked not to become angry, saluted, and left alone. In particularly serious cases, the genie may be judged and condemned; his effigy is then beaten, stamped upon, and burned to the accompaniment of the crowd's invective.

Kracheninuikoff describes the burning of fifty-five fetishes in Kamchatka. The Voguls, before going hunting, used to make agreements with their genies on the division of the catch, adding, "but in case of bad luck you shall have nothing." They also sometimes replaced certain fetishes by others. The Ostiaks in the early eighteenth century, when the fishing catch was small, reproached the father of fish, insulted him, upset his effigy, dragged it through the mud, stamped on it, spat on it, and submitted it to generally offensive treatment as long as the fishing didn't improve.

The Samoyeds had the habit of thrashing the figurines of their divinities. When they created new fetishes, they first put them through a test, placing them, for example, next to a trap and adopting them only if game was then caught. The Tunguses, during the hunt, used to throw the figurine of the hunters' genie into the air; if it landed face down, a bad sign, they would beat it.

We have just seen that even rather important divinities such as the father of fish among the Ostiaks did not escape harsh treatment. Perhaps only the figures of the chiefs of the most important animal species, considered as masters of nature, responsible for the ordering of life and the dispensing of riches, were treated with more respect.

But what has shamanism to do with all this? It would seem that men dealt directly with their divinities, and what divinities! Here we are far removed from the gods of heaven in the Buriat pantheon, and we know too that religious ceremonies of certain clans were accomplished by the entire population presided over by the eldest man, aided by other old men. Unless age put him in the first rank, the shaman took part as a mere member of the clan.

Thus shamanism seems to be more recent than all these zoomorphic pantheons. It adopted into its system especially the institution of anarchic spirits, of whom it became the master. The shaman became the priest of society, in the full meaning of the term, only among certain Turkomongols. But society accepted him and adjusted to his presence.

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The beginnings of shamanism must have coincided with the first use of metals. Among the Buriats, the condemned shaman is helped by the god of the forge and puts on iron boots. Among the Yakuts the god puts the new shaman's head on a pike of iron. And here is information from a Yakut: "The blacksmith and the shaman are birds of a feather . . . they are on the same level . . . blacksmiths can also heal the sick, give advice, predict the future . . . the blacksmith's function is hereditary and the ninth generation of blacksmiths acquire exceptional magical qualities which enable them to forge the iron pieces of the shamanic costume. Spirits generally fear the clanging of iron and the noise of the bellows. . . ." Besides this, every shaman's costume is covered with all sorts of iron pendants.

A completely analogous conception exists among the Altai Turks. There, the shaman most often has to deal with the god Erlik. According to the myth, this god lives in an iron tent or, and this no doubt means the same thing, in a grotto hollowed out in the depths of a mountain of iron. On his way there the shaman chants: "Let us cross courageously the sky which strikes the iron forest."

This association of shaman and blacksmith, or generally of shaman and iron, is attested to in almost all the north of Asia. Among the eastern Tunguses shamans were blacksmiths.

There is finally a bird whose importance in all that part of Asia even as far as China must not be misunderstood: the owl or grand duke. He is the blacksmith's bird, and also that of the shaman. He symbolizes underground fire. He hunts out evil spirits and devours them. This is why stuffed owls are often hung over cradles and in doorways. His power is considerable, so the shaman is often decorated with owl feathers.

A shaman, then, seems to be above all a magician, but a magician performing a function conferred by society, so that he is also a sort of priest. He combats the gods only in defense of men. However, he is not alone in this attitude toward the divinities. The group as a whole, in case of need, challenges the invisible powers, opposes their intervention. There is, between the attitude of a shaman and that of a layman, no real difference of nature, but merely one of degree.

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