

# Stakes of the Game: Life and Death in Siberian Shamanism

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Most of the images evoked by the term shamanism are derived from the soul's field of experience. These images run the gamut of possibilities, from a disconcerting exoticism to the most intimate familiarity. Sometimes the shaman's role is limited to that of pathetic hero, struggling in solitude against hostile nature; sometimes he becomes the rudimentary model of the mystic or even of the psychiatrist of contemporary societies. These images, however, without being completely false, wrongly reduce the shamanic phenomenon to the shaman's personality and limit his field of action to the individual psyche. This limitation hardly does justice to the realities of shamanistic societies. What is missing in the shaman-centered view is the collective's slumbering velleity of itself entering into shamanic experience. Each cure becomes an occasion for collective renewal and joy. The shaman's activities in séance, it is believed, are an expression of the direct contact he has established with the spirits and of his power over them; his duties are the realization of a ritual act carried out at the behest of the community.

Viewed from inside the ritual, the terminology of shamanic activity is indifferent to the spiritual quality of things. One notion, however, does recur in all shamanistic societies: the idea of "play" or "game" [*jeu*]. Beyond the fact that the idea of "game" is the most widespread indigenous idea associated with shamanic activity, it is also a particularly apt manner in which to characterize the shamanic view of the world. We will use the example of Siberian cultures to investigate this view and will attempt to illustrate the role played by the idea of "game," presented as the mainspring of human actions on the world: in the shamanistic view, life is seen as the fruit of an exchange between humans and the world, and the game itself is the art of exchange.

Dispersed deep in the forests of Siberia live small ethnic groups

who survive as hunters; shamanism is their claim to glory. This is not simply because the word *saman*<sup>1</sup> comes from one of the groups, the Tongus, but because shamanism – as much in the Siberia of yore as in the Siberia of *perestroika* – remains at the heart of their way of living and thinking. Not, of course, in the same way: While under the Czars, Orthodox proselytes forbade both rituals and ritual objects, the Soviet regime went after the shamans first, then after their believers, and finally after their beliefs. In this way two separate dogmas superimposed themselves over the shamanic view of the world. Yet their absolutist principles of Good and Evil did not prevail over the implicit relativism of the shamanistic view: the sense of exchange and alternation. Both the forces of nature and the souls of the dead continue to count for more in these societies than a set of distant ideals.

Traditionally, the shaman is seen as an emanation of his community; he cannot officiate without the community's participation, since he acts in its name. Equally, the accessories indispensable to his ritual activity depend on the community's accord. For the shaman, curing an illness is only one among many disorders that he treats: finding a lost knife, mediating a marital dispute, appeasing the vagrant soul of a dead person bent on revenge. Moreover, he is as capable of causing these disorders as he is of remedying them: he is as much feared as he is deemed necessary. Above all, these activities are viewed as secondary functions – secondary to the extent that all restoration implies an underlying order. Therefore the tasks he performs as a specialist in curing disorder are not the primary basis of the shaman's social standing (these cures, by the way, are the sole activities for which he is paid). They are secondary, in any event, in relation to the only shamanic duty that is the object of a regular ritual affecting the entire community: that of "obtaining luck" for the season and year ahead. Usually this means luck at the hunt, when hunting is the principal means of subsistence; outside the hunt, it means luck in other, aleatory spheres of life that are of vital interest to the community: that there be neither epidemic nor natural disasters, neither penury nor fruitlessness. Participating in this ritual is obligatory for all. This does not mean that it will bring luck without fail, but rather that, without the ritual, bad luck is certain.

1. The word is first mentioned by the Russian Archpriest Avvakum who, exiled to Siberia at the end of the seventeenth century, immediately recognized a potential religious rival in this individual whose behavior was so strange.

In the Siberia of today, when people celebrate the coming of summer with the round dance – hand in hand, feet tapping and singing in chorus – while several steps away young men wrestle, forehead to forehead, it is done with the feeling of carrying out the essential intent of the ritual, that is to say exorcising misfortune for the coming months. Atheistic propaganda, which has not succeeded in forbidding these “games” (this is what they’re called throughout Siberia), has nevertheless tried to neutralize their spiritual force. The authorities have entirely stripped them of the ritual element that surrounded the shaman’s activities (as well as of the shaman himself) and integrated them into nonreligious festivals. Refrains devoted to the glory, defense, and prosperity of the Soviet Union have been injected into the songs that accompany the games; simultaneously, theater, circus, and sports have been developed to replace the sense of entertainment and amusement that shamanic practices are known to have produced. However, the people who “play” these games today assert that it is possible to have shamanism without a shaman. By maintaining a harmonious relationship with surrounding nature, they hope to express the depth of their culture and demonstrate their loyalty to their people.

To bring to light what links these “games” to shamanism, it will first be necessary to recall the system constituted by the traditional structure of these societies. The methodical ritual that frames the games is a crystallization – as will be seen below – of the interdependence of the diverse facets and functions of shamanism. Also, in the study of the games, echoes of other rituals that take place around the world – carnivals, games, sports, etc. – will be felt. In the same way that the study of the various treatments for mental illnesses has linked shamanism with psychiatry, a study of these games can serve to help make shamanism less strange to us, and its primitive aspects more natural.

#### **Reciprocal Exchange with the Nurturing Supernatural World**

The shamanistic world view of the Siberian hunter is based on the belief that the natural beings (game, fish) on which human beings depend for nourishment are themselves animated by spirits. Spirits are to animals as the souls of humans are to their bodies. Like the soul, the animal’s spirit animates the body and infuses it with life force. Thus it is necessary to act upon the spirits to gain control over the animals (that is, to act upon the supernatural world that

controls the natural). To obtain luck at the hunt or promises of game, the shaman must be able to remove some of the life force from the animals, which allows the taking of their meat. To do this, the shaman masterminds a "capture" parallel to that of the hunter and of equal importance: the vital force is as indispensable to the soul of a man as meat is to his body; it is a bit of "luck" in that it prefigures the real capture by the hunter.

However, this double taking cannot be done without impunity because – with spirits as with people – taking is only possible within the framework of an exchange and with something given back in return; otherwise it is theft, subject to reprisal. Thus for the hunter there is an exchange between the world of humans on one side and of animals and spirits on the other. This exchange is expressed in the following manner: just as humans live off the vital force and meat of animals, the spirits of animals consume the flesh and vital force of humans. The fact that humans lose their vitality over the course of years and eventually die is thus part of the natural order of things. Sickness and death are not only a form of payment to the spirits for the food that is given, but also the condition for the reappearance of food for the benefit of future generations.<sup>2</sup> In short, the life of both worlds depends on a perpetual and mutually consummated exchange. The two worlds are simultaneously partner and prey to each other.

The shaman's function is to manage the entire exchange. It is his job to establish the rules, to guarantee their correct course (taking and then making payment), and to assure the permanence of the partners between whom the exchange takes place. It is a function that corresponds, both symbolically and on the level of the community, to a reality that falls on each of its members: exchanging with one another and reproducing oneself. This is why the function can be realized on different levels in different societies, both complementary and supplementary: it can be affixed to the community itself (as in today's Siberia, if only partially) or to the shaman (as in traditional Siberian society); or it can even (as in more populated, dense and complicated societies in other parts of the world) be divided among various specialties.

2. This explains the custom, still practiced in these societies, of voluntary death. A good death for a hunter is to disappear alone into the forest never to return, once his grandchildren have reached the age where they can hunt for themselves; no one will set out to search for him. In the same way the victim of drowning will not be fished from the water, as his death is thought to be caused by the impatient hunger of the spirit who provides fish.

**Ambivalence, Alternation and Equivalence:  
How the Game is Played**

The reciprocal exchange between the worlds causes a general ambivalence. The hunter knows that the spirits who, in the form of prey, give life, must also one day take it back. They are neither good nor bad by nature, but must be good and bad in turn so that the human race can perpetuate itself over the course of generations. Thus the supernatural world created by them is not transcendent. Rather, they are humanity's partner and on equal footing with it. The supernatural world is respected, but neither worshipped nor implored.

The shaman, too, is ambivalent since, after the initial taking of vital animal force, he must guarantee compensation, in the form of human vital force; if he does not, he cannot draw on it again. Although he assures the life of the entire human community, he does so at the cost of the lives of some<sup>3</sup> of its members. This is why he is believed to be as capable of harming as of helping. His harmfulness (like his benevolence) is unstable, but necessary. It is also controlled. The shaman's mandate – which consists of being entrusted with the ritual of obtaining luck – is limited to a single year or even to the current season. If the spoils are mediocre, he is replaced for the next season; and the shaman who costs the community too many human lives can himself be put to death.

As a general rule the shaman, within the framework of the ritual, uses himself as an example of the necessity of giving: at the end of each séance he feigns his own death. Ashen-colored, he collapses, inert and silent, stretched out on a rug representing the nether world; there the spirits will devour him at their leisure, as if he were a prey offered up to their voracity. This moment, which concludes his "voyage" into the supernatural, has been dubbed by some authors as a catatonic trance. It is an obligatory episode of the ritual, embodying the circuit of exchange in its totality; without it the debt would remain unpaid, a menace to the community. This act of offering himself as a victim also seems to be useful to the shaman's reputation, since he is often suspected of making the others pay too much. Indeed it is believed that in this offering of himself as prey he is truly risking his life. The fact that he takes this risk boosts the confidence of his audience; although anguished, it is their duty now to help him come around, to help him rise and

3. The so-called sorcery of the shaman is a result of this necessity.

rediscover his voice and vigor. He must then recount to them the vicissitudes of his voyage and announce the amount of promised prey as well as the losses to be incurred in return.<sup>4</sup>

There can thus be no substitute<sup>5</sup> for the human compensation required by the supernatural partner, whose demand of loyalty is absolute. However, the principle of exchange by itself does not exclude the possibility of seeking an advantage in the way the exchange is put into practice. Indeed the manner in which the exchange is conceived is based on the rhythm of life and death; and this rhythm implies a lag time between giving and taking. Reserving, in the circuit of exchange, a margin of time that can be put to use is equivalent, in regard to the duty of loyalty, to reserving a place for a certain amount of ruse. The art of the exchange is to take as much as possible as soon as possible, and to return as little as possible at the last possible moment. It is up to each of the partners to do his best at playing the alternate roles of hunter and prey.<sup>6</sup> The good shaman is the one who brings good luck and postpones bad luck, the final expression of which is death. This image evokes certain ideas that are popular, here and there throughout the world, concerning luck: one must know how to earn luck and how to seize it, because luck constantly threatens to turn and must always, sooner or later, be paid back; therefore one must know how to play the game well.

The perpetuation of the exchange necessitates action upon the partners, both human and animal; upon the living for whom they procreate, and upon the dead so that their souls will be recycled normally, ensuring rebirth through their descendants. The foundation of this reproduction is the reutilization of the souls of its members – whether it be at the heart of a group or race – over the course of generations. These are regular tasks, legitimated by the entire community during a grand collective ritual, over which the leading

4. At that time the shaman is also requested to predict who is going to die, and when. As a divinatory accessory he uses an arrow, which he shoots. He bases his prophecy on an interpretation of its trajectory.

5. Among the neighboring Altaic communities – a pastoral people – the animal sacrifice offered by the farmer to the spirits of his ancestors is indeed a substitute; precisely for this reason, the relation with the supernatural is no longer one of reciprocal exchange.

6. The image of shamanism as both dangerous and heroic stems from this: it is both art and exploit. The necessity of utilizing both seduction and ruse, while remaining within the limits of the rules of exchange, accounts for the personalization of the practice and the importance of individual charisma, as well as of the rivalry among shamans; it is also the basis of shamanism's inability to create a doctrine or a priesthood and makes it vulnerable to organized religions.

shaman traditionally presides. This ritual often entails other, supplementary tasks for him and for other shamans, and may call for additional, exceptional rituals. For example, a cure might have to be found for a dangerous, wandering soul with no descendants; frustrated because unable to be reborn, such a soul seeks revenge against the living, either by capturing another soul or by taking its place – nervous and mental illnesses are supposed to be caused in this way.<sup>7</sup> A shaman might have to cure cases of melancholy or anorexia, sterility or asocial behavior, disinterest in life or procreation. He may even be called upon to help in a difficult delivery of a baby or to keep watch over the infancy of a child.

In brief, anything that hinders reproduction hinders the correct functioning of the exchange with the nourishing supernatural world; and shamanic activity itself in part depends on this exchange. This is what connects the cure to the shaman's other activities.

### **The Ritual Renewal of Life**

"Renewal of life" is the name most commonly given to the periodic collective ritual mentioned above, in the course of which, according to tradition, the shaman obtains luck for the hunting season. This ritual reaffirms in totality the exchange between humanity and the nourishing supernatural world. It also reaffirms the institution that governs this exchange: an alliance whose concrete expression is the symbolic marriage between the shaman and the daughter of the spirit that gives the prey.

The shaman's right to intervene legitimately in the supernatural world is based on the fact that he travels there as a husband, not a plunderer. His supernatural wife has, it is said, "chosen" him for his masculine qualities.<sup>8</sup> She is believed to have appeared to him in

7. The shaman appeases the vengeful soul by means of a personalized service, which allows the living, perturbed person to be cured. The aim of this service is to restore to the soul without descendants a connection to his stock of souls; one of the procedures is to offer the dead person the chance to procreate in the beyond by means of ritual marriage between his effigy and the effigy of a dead, unmarried person of the opposite sex. In our time this practice has also been attested to in other parts of Asia, such as Korea and Taiwan.

8. It is a fact that the shaman of the hunt is always male, which brings up the question of female shamans. In the context of the hunt they are limited to the role of clairvoyants, analogous to the role of helper that women fulfill in the hunt in daily life. Her claim to authority is derived from the call of one of the dead spirits. According to popular belief, the love of animal spirits is harmful to a woman;

dream and demanded, upon penalty of death, that he marry her; she, in exchange, promises to make him a shaman and to help him in his tasks although she will punish or abandon him if he loses his virility. In the event of a bad year, this is the argument put forth by the community if it decides to take away his right to perform the ritual for the upcoming year, wishing instead to entrust the task to another shaman who is deemed more capable or luckier. Thus the marriage staged during the ritual does not imply the shaman's permanent investiture. It only assures, during the period in which the ritual is in effect, the help of his supernatural spouse and the community's granting him the use of the tools of his trade – the drum and other accessories.

In sealing the alliance with the supernatural, the ritual sets in motion the very exchange mechanism whose basis is the alliance and whose initial moment (whether it be an appeal for luck or promises of prey or of the vital force) is a taking, imagined as a hunt. The ritual is not limited to setting the exchange in motion: The circuit is carried to its conclusion in the person of the shaman, who is first its agent and then its victim. Through associated rites – the commemoration of the dead and integration of the young – he also assures its perpetuation.

In short, the ritual simultaneously demonstrates the legitimacy, purpose, and function of the shaman's role. It amalgamates the automatism of recurring rituals (assumed to work simply by the fact of their execution) and the contingency of exceptional rituals (assumed to depend, for their efficacy, on the quality of their execution). This amalgam explains why the expected result of the ritual is always formulated in negative terms: although the performance of the ritual does not guarantee its efficacy, non-execution

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responding to it will lead to her death. From an analytical point of view, the feminization of shamanic duties would be an inversion of the meaning of the alliance with the supernatural. This is because Siberian communities, being communities of hunters, conceive of their shamans as takers. Since women are viewed as objects of the matrimonial exchange, submissive to their taker, the communities refuse to define their shamans in feminine terms. In brief, the rejection of the feminization of the shaman is a means of rejecting a position of submission *vis-à-vis* the supernatural. This does not prevent the shaman, during the ritual, from completing both the circle of alliance and of exchange; first the taker, he ends as a passive object, offering both his vitality and his virility for consumption by the spirits: thus he in turn plays the role of hunter and prey, stallion and filly, so as to represent symbolically the totality of the relationship; this is the condition that makes possible, at the close of the ritual, its repetition; but its ideology demands that the interest be focused on the taking, and thus cannot give primacy to the object of the exchange.



will guarantee misfortune and the inability to overcome it. The ritual is totalizing not only in its form but also in its aims, since it assures the perpetuation of the community as such and of the environment on which it depends. The menace of misfortune in the case of non-execution is also total – misfortune in the form of penury, illness, and defeat at the hands of other communities.

### The “Games”:

#### Dancing and Wrestling for Life in the Face of Death

Among the various components of this type of ritual, there is one that is remarkably constant, whatever the name and form of the ritual, and whatever its evolution over time and its variations from one ethnic group to another. This ritual is uniformly associated with the name of “games.” These games, carried out by laymen, obey the same principles and utilize the same symbols as the ritual behavior of the shaman, although they are brought into play differently.

The shaman’s ritual behavior is determined both by the status he is believed to enjoy in the supernatural world, that is, husband; and by the character of the activity he is to carry out there, a hunter. Forced to adapt himself to the animal nature of his spouse (imagined in the form of a reindeer or elk, animals of prey par excellence), he assumes the role of the male of the same species. This is the basis for his animalized<sup>9</sup> behavior during the séance. Clothed in reindeer fur and with branches twined in his hair, he bellows and leaps like a male trying to chase away rivals so that he can couple with the female. His wildness culminates in an explo-

9. The perspective of supernatural love provides an explanation not only for the shaman’s wildness during the ritual, but for the totality of behaviors certain authors call the “illness of initiation” (flight into the forest, muteness, refusal to eat meat), which manifests itself in adolescence and starts the shaman upon his career: these behaviors are an expression – in the form of imitation of a wild animal – of the lover’s attempt to seduce. Since puberty gives everyone the right to love (on earth as well as in the supernatural world) and each member of the community has the right, for him or herself, to “shamanize” without ritual framework or societal control, the imitation of animal behavior approximates insanity. Conversely, to become a shaman, entrusted with duties of collective concern, it is obligatory to travel to and marry in the supernatural world, which alone permits the community’s harmony and can only be expressed in a ritual framework. The apparent madness sometimes manifested in the course of shamanic ritual is never confused with a pathological state. Indeed anyone who is considered ill is by definition disqualified from being a shaman, although at the same time he may be spurred to participate in shamanic rituals.

sion of "rage," his head thrown back. Thus, by his virility, he identifies himself with the animal and, like the animal, ends as prey, when he offers himself up as victim to the law of exchange. The people say that the good shaman is like a stallion; an ardent male, he is hostile to his rivals, difficult for the hunter to track down, and knows how to fight to the death in defense of the herd. In Siberian languages the terminology of shamanic action is tied to the sexual and martial power of the most celebrated species in this regard: horned, mammiferous ruminants and, among birds, gallinaceans. Most of the terminology derives from words indicating rutting activities: either the rut in total (Samoyed) or one of the aggressive behaviors associated with it: jumping and stamping (Yakout, Tongus) or shakes of the head and/or horns (Bouriat)<sup>10</sup> – most of these words can also mean, in a general sense, "to play." This terminology illustrates the double virility demanded of the shaman that assures the perpetuation and defense of his community.

As for the nonreligious games: they can be grouped into two categories, whose respective models are dancing and wrestling. The first type encompasses sexually suggestive and playful games. These are expressed for the most part in the form of dance. The principal steps are called "trotting," "stamping," or "leaping," just as the shaman's steps, in séance, imitate a deer in rut. The dances are marked by winglike arm movements, swaying of the hips, and leaps that imitate large birds in nuptial parade. Animal imitation is equally present in the songs that accompany or alternate with the dances; this is achieved through onomatopoeic sounds that evoke the mating calls of these species, or in the content of the songs themselves ("Let's trot the trot of an elk, let's trot the trot of the reindeer"). Most of these dances are organized in the form of rounds sung between men and women in which mocking couplets are exchanged. Also of this type are the many games played between two teams (for example, the ring game, in which a ring is passed from one team member to another; the object of the game is for the team with the ring to keep hidden the identity of its bearer, which the other team tries to guess; the teams are divided along

10. É. Lot-Falck, 1977. That's not all. At the beginning of the séance the shaman also assumes a secondary role that he amalgamates with his principal one: the role of auxiliary spirits. Like a hunter's brothers-in-law in daily life, these spirits are to help him at the hunt in the supernatural world: he mimics the properties of other species, such as the carrion birds that signal the prey, the raptors and carnivores who grab hold of it; he wears some of their attributes, including feathers, snout, teeth, etc.

the lines of matrimonial distribution). Finally, there is a whole gamut of informal behaviors: jokes, teasing, and bawdy challenges meant to provoke laughter and flirting. These exchanges take place between allied groups who indulge in "provocation" and "love-making" with equal vigor. For the adults simple goading, these exchanges can, for the young, turn into lovers' escapades.

These societies consider dancing obligatory during this type of ritual. And, according to tradition, it is the shaman's duty to ensure that each person acquits himself well. The shaman's first duty is to have each member of the community bang the drum. This banging begins at the same moment as the ritual "animation" of the drum (caused by the presence of the supernatural spouse<sup>11</sup>): it is imperative that the just-animated drum "not be allowed to rest" the entire night. Only after the laymen have banged on it can the shaman himself bang on it, and now it becomes his. By banging the drum he must prevent the dance rhythm from slackening. He will strike at lazy calves with his drumstick or rain down blows on a collapsed dancer to force him to rise. He knows that if he allows the festival to languish he will be judged a bad shaman. To our day, at nonreligious festivals where there is still traditional dancing (especially at weddings), each person is expected to urge on his neighbor to continue.

Everyone eats, and laughs a lot, too. But the feast is more than an alimentary necessity. First of all it is proof of the efficacy of the seasonal (or yearly) ritual. It is also the background that links the separate workday tasks into a common fare. Above all it is the locus for the redistribution of wealth between the living (each one giving according to his or her means), and of communion between the living and the dead. Duly "nourished" by the alimentary offerings laid out for their benefit, the souls of the dead can then proceed with the recycling necessary to guarantee their rebirth. These offerings, which are the active element of the commemoration of the dead, are today often its sole expression.

As to the laughter: it is more than merely the combined effect of the dances and the gay, voluptuous atmosphere. It is also a kind of obligatory ritual, although unconscious or unformulated as such. However, if the ritual fails, sadness and a lack of spirit are in part

11. The drum is indeed believed to serve as a symbol for the shaman's wife; this is illustrated by the frequent ritual activity of treating the drum as his wife. It can equally serve as a symbol of the shaman's "animal double," permitting him to play the role of husband in the supernatural world. The drum (always thought of with its drumstick) is in a certain sense the concretization of the shamanic couple.

blamed for the misfortune that follows. Laughter is proof that one is dancing well (and therefore that one has the abilities required for procreation); in this way, laughter is a sign of the efficacy to expect from the ritual.<sup>12</sup> In itself laughter carries a symbolic value, as Bakhtin has underlined in regard to the carnival festivals in medieval France. In Siberia, laughter is believed to have a positive effect in the exchange between worlds. The more one laughs, the more the negative side of the exchange is counterbalanced. Jokes, games and humorous stories accompany the commemoration of the dead (laughter also accompanies the shamanic cure), as if everything were arranged to start the exchange going again. It's also as if everything were arranged so as to allow for a direct experience of the series of ideas linked to the principles of the exchange (the relativity of the ideas of good and ill fortune, of wealth and poverty, of the alternation of the ideas of life and death, and the alternation of generations and seasons), and of the fact that each of us has the means of making this exchange less unfavorable to him or herself.

The second type of game has a competitive orientation. It is essentially a wrestling match among men, one on one, forehead to forehead, exactly as reindeer, bulls and cocks do it. The terminology of animal struggle, focused on the idea of goring the opponent, is also used. The confrontation itself is often preceded and followed by movements of the head and arms and legs, in imitation of such celebrated birds as eagles and falcons. The victors of the first round meet in the second round, and so on, the number of competitors diminishing with each match. To the ultimate victor goes the glory of the moment and fame with women. From childhood every young boy trains to wrestle, no matter how puny or doomed to lose his first-round match. Winning of course does matter – the idea of competition demands it – but it is not the primary objective. To shirk these annual encounters would be an admission of one's inability to become, once an adult, an independent man; in so doing, one would be excluded from the network of alliances woven into the social fabric. This perspective explains why – in training as in combat – the adversary must be neither a family member nor someone outside the ethnic group; rather he must be a

12. Animal spirits too are thought to laugh in prelude to lovemaking. The ability to cause them to laugh is the subject of many stories that hunters tell while on armed vigil – the stories must be odd and salacious to make the hunted species laugh and love.

potential ally, since wrestling prefigures the form of life of an autonomous member of society. This perspective also allows us to understand how wrestling can become a mark of one's belonging to the ethnic community, as well as an emblem of the feeling that accompanies it.

If these two types of games correspond to the two sides of shamanic virility – imitating the same animal species and using the same terminology – the games nonetheless present themselves as stylizations. The behavior of the shaman, on the other hand, seems to remain fluid. It is significant that while the songs and the choreography of the dances of the laymen can be written down and the wrestling moves catalogued, the jests and shouts of the shaman defy attempts at notation. The shaman acts as he pleases, on the inspiration of the moment. His behavior may very well be full of stereotyped elements, but it escapes regularity. It strives to be personalized, to adapt itself to the moment and refuses to be codified. The imitation of animal behavior is different in the two cases. The shaman is charged with coupling and battling with imaginary animals; the profane play at being animals with humans.

If the same principles are exemplified in the two cases, they are exemplified in a complementary, not an identical, sense. The shaman's acts cause a meeting between the two partners of the vital exchange. The games represent these worlds in parallel form, projecting to one the image of the other: The humans, by giving evidence of the same vitality in procreation and the same passion for self-defense as the animals they are imitating, oblige the animals – through human ritualization – to codify their patterns of procreation and aggression (in order, of course, to better suit the needs of human consumption). The games, therefore, do not embody the principle of exchange as such (this is the shaman's role), but embody it from the point of view of the perpetuation and interdependence of the partners, who are situated in a shared mirror. The nature of it as game preserves the margin for human action that characterizes the shamanic representation of the exchange. Respecting the rules of the game does not preclude playing the game well. And playing well augurs a better year ahead. Thus, in the games as in the shamanic ritual, a qualitative, aleatory stake is added to the automatic, regular one.

From the point of view of the partners of the perpetual exchange between the worlds, these "games" – which are only a part of the ritual of the renewal of life – have the same totalizing effect as the

ritual itself: they assure the totality of the exchange, even if they do not directly actualize it. They are as valid for the community as a whole as they are for each of its members individually. There is a double duty to participate in the ritual: both as an obligation to the community and as a personal necessity.

This type of totalizing finality accounts for the fate bestowed upon similar games, both in Siberian society and throughout the world. Generally speaking, these kinds of games have been ignored: given passing mention in descriptions as nothing more than an obligatory ritual, reduced in analysis to festival filler, or brushed aside by interpreters in favor of other ritual elements that, in both spatial and temporal comparison, have ultimately been shown to be of secondary importance. Ethnography was probably influenced by the general condemnation of these types of games by the Christian Church and other centralizing authorities, who branded them as obscene and savage. Was not the real aim of the churches to discredit the conception of a supernatural world in partnership and reciprocity with humanity – a conception antagonistic to their own, which was based on divine transcendence and implied human submissiveness? Attacked in Siberia as a pagan holiday by the Orthodox clergy, the games were later, by the Communist regime, treated as a relic of the past. And yet, although deprived of the shaman's presence and stripped of all religious content, the games have endured. Reduced in some cases to a youth festival, in others to a competitive sports event, the games have nevertheless successfully resisted all attempts to replace them. In fact among the majority of Siberian peoples the games have today become the basis of annual festivals that celebrate local, ethnic, or even national identity. In the neighboring republic of Mongolia, the national festival is called *Erijn gurvan naadam*, "The three manly days"; among the three games – wrestling, bow and arrow, and horse racing – the wrestling competition is by far the most prized.

One aspect of the games seems not unrelated to their perennial appeal, nor unrelated to those values and behavior that accompany their contemporary equivalents. We are speaking of the manner in which all the functions are linked, the way all the dimensions that are represented criss-cross in their execution; in this they show that they are bound by an inner necessity. Indeed in the games, as in shamanic practice – although proceeding from the opposite direction – a necessary tie binds, on the one hand, the perpetuation of

the exchange to the reproduction of its partners; and on the other, it ties the community to each of its members. This is why the rituals are as effective inside the community as they are beneficial to its identity in relation to the outside world. Perhaps it is by a similar logic that the modern Olympic Games are linked to those of ancient Greece; there, while ritualizing the rivalries between cities, the games were also believed to stimulate the fertility and prosperity of each city individually.

The very name "game" (an annoyance to every centralized society) is itself perhaps not without import in the history of the rituals that bear it. A great number of societies have occasion to use terms that correspond to our words "game" and "play"<sup>13</sup>; on the one hand the terms designate those regular, collective rituals (or parts of rituals) that aim – among other things – to stimulate fertility and prosperity; on the other, they are used in supplementary rituals for the commemoration of the dead or even employ components of shamanic activity. It is to these type of "games" that the *benandanti* of Friuli turn; in these games they indulge in leaps and jousts, and their objective is to foster the harvest (Ginzbourg, 1980). The "game" is also part of the terminology employed by Andean communities in their ritual seasonal "battles" (Molinié-Fioravanti 1988). "Playing" is the name of the action of shamanic spirits in Korea, and the central episode of the ritual cure is called making the spirits of the dead "play" (Kim, 1989). In all these terms there is a convergence of a constellation of ideas, covering both senses, pleasing and competitive, that have been brought to light in regard to the Siberian games.

Besides, the very term "game" is sufficient to qualify an act as ritual to the extent that it also conveys the idea of representation, that is, an action performed symbolically ("to play" is to act "as if"); it is therefore different than its real-world equivalent, although having, like it, a stake.<sup>14</sup> This may help explain how these profane games retain both their value as ritual and their symbolic

13. In this regard it bears mentioning that the English word "game" accommodates both the sense of "play" and "game" in the strict sense. In addition, there is the meaning of game as "prey," which coincides precisely with its shamanic use.

14. It is this symbolic perspective that allows us to set aside questions concerning the shaman's "normalcy" or "pathology" as well as the ultimate impact of psychotropic drugs on his behavior; whether the shaman is drugged or insane in no way alters the significance of his activity, which is an expression of a role defined by the symbolic system.

efficacy: to this day, during times of drought, the youth of the Mongolian steppe climb local hills to meet and wrestle in hopes of bringing rain.

More importantly, the very principle of the exchange, as it is understood in shamanism, is summarized in the idea of a "game" conceived abstractly. In it, to insure the correct functioning of the world, humans are assigned the role of partner – indeed decisive partner – of the symbolic powers underpinning it. By means of their margin for action in the realization of their reciprocal duty (their ability to make something of the situation), humans are made master of the game and can even be the winner. Perhaps this is what Siberian societies are alluding to when they draw a distinction between their own, shamanic societies, and God-based societies like the Russian. As opposed to the object of faith, the shamanic attitude consists in approaching the other as a partner whom one hopes to exchange with, negotiate with, even play with. Ever adaptable and ready, the shamanic attitude is also potentially subversive.

*Translated from the French by Thomas Epstein.*

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