

The Eight Elements of Shamanism and the Ewenks



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Analysis of Shamanistic Texts
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1 Introduction

When Hiroyuki Takei introduces the main character of his visual novel "Shaman King", he feels the need to define the profession of the character as follows: "*A Shaman is a person who binds this world with the next*" (1998: 23, see figure 3). Because this definition is not very exhaustive, the supporting character researches in an "encyclopedia", where a shaman is described as "someone who can put himself in a trance and communicate with gods, spirits, the souls of the dead and the like directly. By borrowing their powers, a shaman can perform such deeds as healing the sick and the injured, governing the people and conveying the words of the living to the dead. They have existed at the heart of human society from ancient times to the present." (1998: 24-25, figures 4 & 5).

While the above definition captures the most important features of a shaman and actually is virtually the same as the definition by Kortt (1991: 27), it lacks in the department of analytical sharpness: Even modern psychics or mentalists could be considered shamans with such a definition. In order to use the caption "shaman" for a distinct cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to limit the scope of the term. According to Vadja, there are eight elements through which the shamanism in Central and North Asia and the polar regions of Europe and America can be singled out (1964: 268-290). This means particularly that the religious specialists of the American indigenous people are not considered to be "shamans" in this context, which is contrary to Takei's take where those shamans and their beliefs are central to the story of the comic (see Takei 2000, 2001).

1.1. The Eight Elements of Shamanism

First, at the very root of shamanism is the **ritual ecstasy**, through which the shaman is able to separate his/her soul from the body and send it on a journey (Vadja 1964: 268-271).

Second, the shaman is aided by and/or has the ability to command **theriomorph spirits** (Vadja 1964: 271-274). Vadja observes that a shaman is associated with a specific group of such spirits who can take the form of different animals like bears, birds, wolves, deer or rabbits. He further states, that there are animal mothers, usually in the form of either reindeer or bulls which are "*soul-bearers*" of the shaman and who act as alternative form for the shaman.



Figure 2.

Shaman King
Takei 1998: 22



Figure 3.

Shaman King
Takei 1998: 23

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Third, the shaman is chosen and supported by **non-theriomorph guardian spirits** (Vadja 1964: 275-277).

According to Vadja, shamans are often chosen to become shamans by a guardian spirit who only rarely has the form of an animal. He describes that after being chosen, a shaman would get a sickness with the only remedy being the acceptance of their fate.

Fourth, when the chosen one finally complies with the spirits, he/she has to complete an **initiation**, culminating in a ritual Vadja sees as being centred around a mystic death and resurrection of the candidate (1964: 277-281). He asserts that the climax of the ritual is the ecstatic event during which the novice experiences his body being cut apart by the spirits who then tear the flesh from the bones and proceed to put purified flesh on the bones and resurrect the initiate afterwards.

Fifth, as the initiation ritual occurs in the netherworld, it is the first of possibly more **travels to the beyond**, another ability that distinguishes the shaman from ordinary people (Vadja 1964: 281-283).

Sixth, without a distinct **cosmology** differentiating between the earth and the other spheres, the shaman cannot distinguish himself through travelling to those places. Vadja explains that there are usually at least three spheres, earth, heaven and underworld (1964: 283-284). However, he states that it is also possible for the spheres to be divided into additional levels.

Seventh, the shamanistic complex is also marked by the occurrence of **shaman fights**, which Vadja describes as mandatory duels to death between two shamans, respectively their animal alter egos (1964: 284-286).

Eight, the practitioner is marked by the **shamanistic equipment**, which consists mainly of a headdress, a cloak and a drum (Vadja 1964: 287-290).

While it is interesting to see many of these elements incorporated in the modern shamanistic epic by Takei, which is based on the “*shaman fight*”, a tournament between shamans and even features an almost traditional journey to the king of the underworld (Takei 2005), this text is going to investigate the occurrence of those central elements in the transcripts of two actual shamanistic rituals from the Evenki people.



Figure 4.

Shaman King
Takei 1998: 20



Figure 5.

Shaman King
Takei 1998: 21

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2 Main Part

The two examples of shamanistic rituals were recorded from the Evenki people living in Russia. In a first step, the Evenks are going to be presented in some more detail, then the two sources are introduced and analysed.

2.1. The Evenks

According to the Russian Census of 2002, there are roughly 35'000 Evenks living in Russia (2002), a number which is consistent with the research of Sablin and Savelyeva who wrote that there were about 29'000 Evenks in Russia in 1979 (2011: 19).

Additionally, it should be noted that the Evenks raise reindeer, as this is going to play a role during the different rituals.

Below is a map, on which the living space of the Evenks is marked in a bright violet colour as shown below:

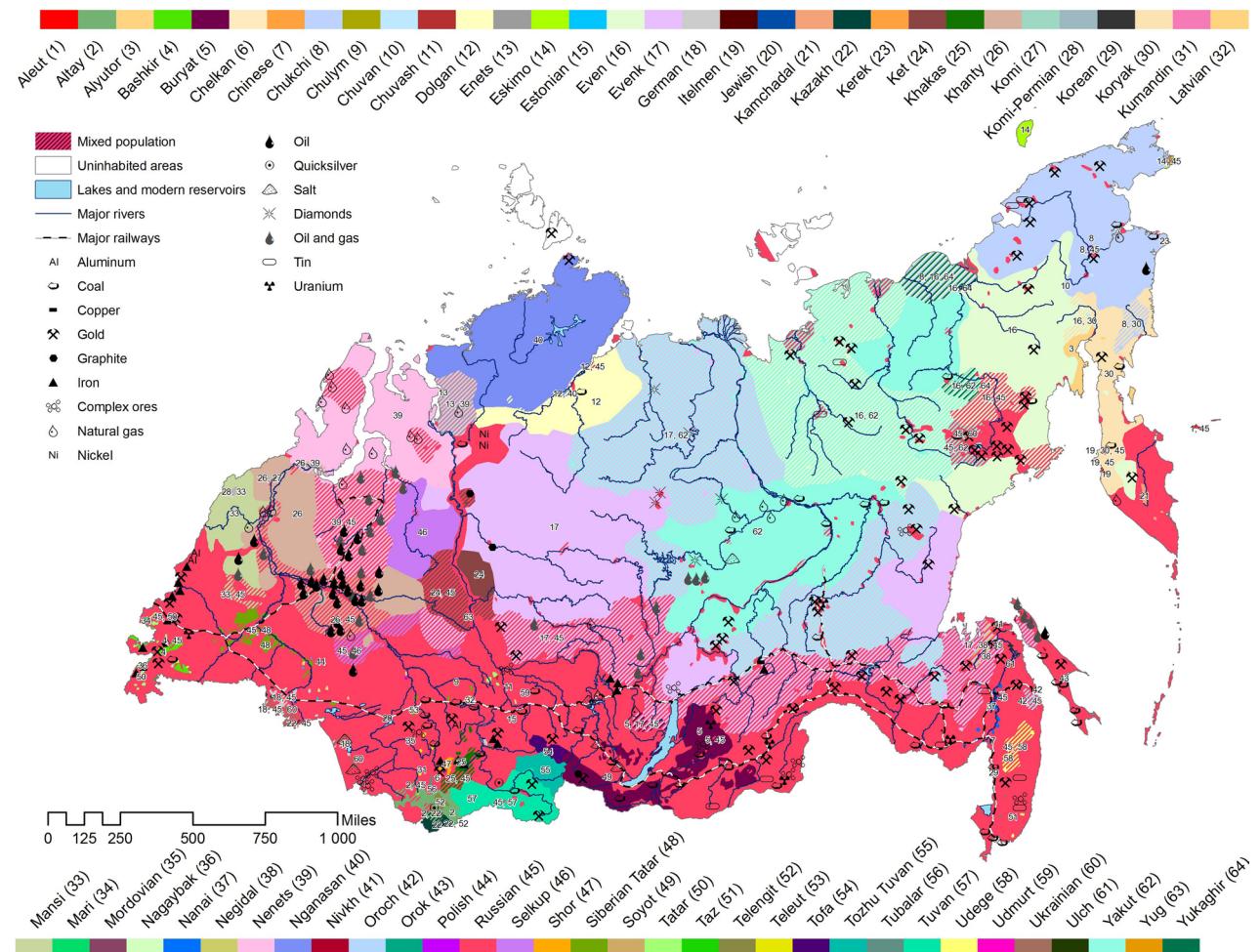


Figure 6.
Territory of the Evenks
Sablin and Savelyeva 2011: 23



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2.2. Linguistic Notes

Before it is possible to investigate the shamanistic rituals, it is important to mention some particularities of the language used by the shamans. As Wassiljewitsch notes, the rituals are performed in an ancient dialect, which is neither spoken nor completely understood by the modern Evenks (1963: 381). He also describes how the words are adapted with additional syllables in order to fit into the rhythm. All of this leads to the acknowledgment that any translation of those rituals requires further cognitive efforts before they can be understood and interpreted (1963: 382). Since Menges reports similar observations (1993: 129-134), it is not farfetched to posit that a thorough discussion is appropriate when presenting original texts. The general statements of Vadja about the common characteristics of shamanism provides the framework through which the two rituals can be understood.

2.3. The Arbâlden Summoning Ritual

The arbâlden summoning is a complete ritual recorded by Konstantin Mixajlovič Ryčkov in 1905/1909 (Menges 1993: 40-42). He translates the word arbâlden as “summoning”, but describes that the word is probably connected to arbâ-, which would be translated either as “denying a piece of flesh to the evil spirits” or “transferring the evil spirit of sickness from somebody into a sacrificial animal which is then released” (1993: 135). The second translation of arbâ is an accurate abstract for the ritual, which mainly details the healing of a sick person in 18 distinct “songs” (Menges 1993: 42). It is only known that the sick is a woman, there is no information recorded about her age or the sickness (1993: 42).

In the first and second song, the shaman describes his journey and how he meets different spirits, both good and evil (1993: 59-67).

In the third song, the shaman calls or summons some spirits (1993: 67-70), before he continues his journey in the following four songs (70-76).



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Here, the author of this text would like to use the opportunity to offer an approximation of the eight song from German into English (compare to Menges 1993: 77). The eight song is performed roughly in the middle of the ritual and its subject matter is the shaman who haggles with a spirit. It is a comparatively short song (14 verses), yet it is a good example for the broken form of the shamans exclamations during the whole ritual and it demonstrates the difficulties faced when working with original shamanistic texts.

Pshaw! [Expression of contempt]
I'll remember that!
Pshaw!
Members of the Clan, give!
I'll hurry up.
Hush!
Good one,
Hush!
I'll reach (them)
Add!
Increase!
Hurry!
Now?
Caw! [Imitation of a birds cry]
Caw!

The situation can be compared to listening to a telephone conversation, where only one person is heard. The shaman relates how he haggles with the spirit, but because the spirit has no presence in the world, one can only imagine how he reacts to the different actions of the shaman. This adds to the general linguistic problems, therefore the analysis at hand restricts itself to the more tangible elements of shamanism.

The ninth song is even shorter than the eight, only three verses long before the shaman smokes a pipe (1993:77). The first time the shaman enters full ecstasy is after the tenth song (1993: 78-79). The eleventh song accompanies the most important part of the ritual, where the sickness is transferred from the sick to the sacrifice (1993: 80-81).

During the songs twelve to sixteen, the shaman travels as a bird, before he returns to the earth during the last two songs (1993:82-94).



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2.4. The Ildramâčipkâ Ritual

The Ildramâčipkâ ritual was recorded by N.P. Nikulschin in 1940 and the title can be translated as "*Search for the Soul of the Sick*" (Wassiljewitsch 1940: 382). While it is shorter than the Arbâlden summoning, it has the advantage that the verses are generally complete sentences instead of just single words (Wassiljewitsch 1940:383-389). This makes the song more open to interpretation. Therefore, if the Arbâlden summoning is a good example of a whole ritual on one hand, the Ildramâčipkâ is a good illustration for the contents of one shamanistic song.

2.5. The Eight Elements of Shamanism Exemplified with the Evenks

With some select samples of the two above rituals, the following part of this text is dedicated to finding the eight characteristic elements of shamanism. However, as the sample rituals described above are specific rituals, not every element is going to be found directly in the sources. Especially the shamanistic duel and initiation are not mentioned, simply because one already has to be a shaman to perform the rituals and a duel would not be tied to the description of a specific ritual. To remedy the fact, that those elements are not found here, other sources are going to be used in those cases. This is not done with the intention of mixing different cultural settings together and stating that they are one and the same, but rather to show that they are important elements of the shamanistic complex, even if they are not explicitly mentioned in the used sample.

The **eight element**, the special gear, is best illustrated through the actions of the shaman after the summoning. Menges describes the scene as follows: The shaman drums, and then turns himself three times to the left, repeats that and then throws the drum away, removes his cloak before loosing consciousness (1993:94). This clearly shows that the special equipment, drum and cloak, play an important role for the ritual, because the shaman has to use it during the ceremony and discards them afterwards, all of which is consistent with the observations by Vadja.

The most impressive tale of a battle between shamans might be the battle of Činihua Hato against Meihua Hato in the legend of the Do Mergen, where the two shamans send their spirits to fight each other similar as two people today could battle with their "*Pokémon*", only with a deadly outcome (Bäcker 1985: 260-262). There is an example of a shamanistic battle in a story of the Chinese Evenks, unfortunately, it is not possible to go into further detail here because the story is only recorded in an unpublished manuscript. In any case, it can be said that it is true that duels are connected to the shamanistic tradition, the **seventh element** of shamanism.



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The **sixth element**, the shamanistic cosmology, is implied at several occasions. It already becomes apparent in the description of the composition of the ritual. The holy world tree who, according to Vadja, connects the realm of the earth to the other realms (1963: 283-284) is put in front of the tent and the sacrificial deer is bound to that tree (Menges 1993: 59). Additionally, when the ritual ends and the shaman returns to the earth, it is mentioned that the middle earth is the earth on which people can live (1993: 94).

In both rituals it is clear that the shaman travels in another world, especially during the Ildramâčipkâ it is explicitly described how the shaman travels along the shamanistic river and to various places in the underworld, indicating proof for the occurrence of the **fifth element** (Wassiljewitsch 1940: 387-388).

It is possible to witness the non-teriomorph guardian spirits, the **third element**, in various ways. For example, in the legend of the shaman Nišan, she meets the god Omosi-mama, who states that she herself appointed Nišan to become a shaman (Nowak-Durrant 1977: 77). There, Omosi-mama is described as an old woman. The legend of the shaman Nišan is a story which is also encountered with the Evenki people (Richtsfeld 1989: 120). Another sign is the "*dulbur*" the shaman uses during the rite. The "*dulbur*" is an artefact which is attached to the "*timko*", which is the tent pole opposite to the entrance (Menges 1993: 59, 138). As this is where the ancestors are supposed to reside, it can be assumed that the "*dulbur*" houses the shamans ancestral spirits, which support the shaman during the ritual (Menges 1993: 76, 85).

During the Ildramâčipkâ ceremony, the shaman uses the help of animals living in the water to travel and later sends his reindeer spirits into the underworld to retrieve the soul of the sick and at the same moment serving as a demonstration of the **second element** (Wassiljewitsch 1940: 385, 388).

As mentioned earlier, the shaman enters ecstasy, the **first element**, after the tenth song of the Arbâlden ritual, and he has to be held by two men during that time (Menges 1993: 80).



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3 Conclusion

With the examples outlined above, it should become clear that the eight elementary attributes of shamanism introduced by Vadja are probably pretty accurate. With a sample consisting of two shamanistic rituals, it is possible to find indications for most of the elements. With some further examination of related sources, it has been possible to observe all but the fourth element of shamanism, the initiation ritual. It has already been mentioned, that one would not expect the initiation ritual to be either part of a ritual concerned with the healing of a patient nor be mentioned.

Of course it is possible to make further observations about shamanism, one example would be the focus on the numbers three and seven (and multiplications thereof like nine), as those numbers are mentioned in almost every source used (Vadja 1964: 278, see also Menges 1993: 94, Wassiljewitsch 1940: 388, Bäcker 1985: 250, Nowak-Durrant 1977: 77).

Another example is how time passes differently during the ritual, as it suddenly becomes winter in the Arbâlden summoning and as morning and night are mentioned and several days pass in the Ildramâčipkâ ritual (Menges 1993: 67-70, Wassiljewitsch 1940: 387-389).

However, it is important to keep in mind that our main question was about identifying the defining elements of shamanism. Important numbers can be seen as a component of a cosmology surrounding shamanism, and would not be an immediate prerequisite.

In conclusion it can be argued that a thorough analysis of shamanistic sources evidently supports the eight defining elements of shamanism outlined by Vadja.



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