

Weighing 20 kilos or more, the coats of Siberian shamans are dramatic symbols of sacred power

In this abridged extract from her 1914 book 'Shamanism in Siberia' Maria Czaplicka, describes their construction and symbolism

Coat of Power



Above: Yakut shaman in full ritual costume
Early C20th

Below: shaman's set of miniature iron tools,
Mongolia
C20th



In everyday life the shaman is not distinguishable from other people except by an occasionally haughty manner; but when he is engaged in communicating with spirits, he has to make use of a special dress and special instruments.

Authors of the eighteenth century, paid great attention to the shaman's accessories - though they have probably only been attracted by their picturesque side - yet their descriptions are very valuable.

The writer Shashkoff enumerates the following items as being indispensable to the shaman's dress all over Siberia: the coat, the mask, the cap, and the copper or iron plate on the breast.

Each tribe has, moreover, some particular object which plays the chief part in the shamanistic ceremony; among the Gilyak and the Olchi it is the shaman's girdle which is of the greatest significance; among the Buryat, the horse-staves.

The coat possesses an impersonal power of itself. By assuming this coat the shaman receives supernatural power, which allows him to go to the upper and under-worlds to meet spirits and deal with them. It is called the 'shaman's horse' among the Yakut. The coat as a whole is a protector of the shaman, and each symbolic object on the coat is also his protector.

Earlier writers thought that the shamanic costumes used throughout Siberia had a threefold significance: 1: the shaman wishes to make a profound impression on the eyes of the people by the eccentricity of his costume. 2: the ringing of the bells

and the noise of the drum impress their sense of hearing. 3: symbolic meaning is attached to these accessories and adornments, a meaning known only to believers, especially to the shamans.

But this interpretation does not bring out the whole importance of the relationship of these objects to the spiritual world. They are of great importance, for the spirits will not hear the voice of the shaman unless the right dress and implements are used, and the drum beaten; they are sacred because of their contact with a supernatural and often dangerous power.

Being sacred, these accessories must not be used by anyone but a shaman. It is only a good shaman, a real one, who can possess the full shaman's dress.

THE SHAMAN BLACKSMITH

Among the Siberians it is usually the shaman himself who makes all accessories, and that only when the spirits give their permission.

Among the Yakut, even the blacksmith who undertakes the ornamentation of the costume, must have inherited the right. If the blacksmith who makes a shamanistic ornament has not a sufficient number of ancestors, if he is not surrounded on all sides by the noise of hammering and the glow of fire, then birds with crooked claws and beaks will tear his heart in pieces. For this reason the blacksmith's vocation comes next in importance to the shaman's.

In modern times it is practically impossible among the Yakut for the shaman's coat to be made, since there is now no class of hereditary blacksmiths.

In his description of the Tungus shaman's garment, the writer Gmelin relates how the shaman whom he saw 'had no cap because the old one was burnt and the spirits would not grant him a new one.'

Among the Yakut even those who, like the blacksmith, help in the adornment of the shaman's garment, occupy a half-magical position, being credited with 'peculiar fingers'.

The hereditary blacksmiths have tools with souls (*ichchylakh*), which can give out sounds of their own accord. The blacksmiths are those who approach most nearly to the shaman in their office, and are, in a

way, related to them; 'the blacksmith and the shaman are of one nest', says a proverb of the Kolyma district, 'the smith is the elder brother of the shaman' is another saying.

Blacksmiths can sometimes cure, give advice, and foretell the future, but their knowledge is simply a matter of cleverness and does not possess magical value. The profession of blacksmith is mostly hereditary. In the ninth generation the blacksmith first acquires certain supernatural qualities, and the longer his line of descent, the greater his qualities.

The spirits are generally afraid of the iron, and of the noise made by the smith's bellows. In the district of Kolyma, the shaman would not shamanise until the Russian writer Sieroszewski had removed his case of metal instruments, and even then the shaman attributed his bad luck to them.

YAKUT SHAMAN COATS

The shaman's coat, consists chiefly of a coat of cowhide, so short in front that it does not reach the knees, but touches the ground at the back. The coat is plain in front, and fastens on the breast with leather straps, and under the chin with a buckle in the form of a colt's tongue (*kulun tyl kurduk*).

On the front of the coat are sewn figures of animals, birds, fishes; various disks; images of the sun, moon, and stars; and also some iron representations of the human skeleton and bowels.

A good shaman's dress requires about 35 to 40 pounds (15 to 18kg) of iron.

The edges and the surface of this coat are ornamented at the back with different objects, each having its own name, place, and meaning.

Sieroszewski gives us an account of some of the coat ornamentation, which he heard from an old Yakut. The Sun (*kungeta*), a round, smooth, shining disk, the

size of a small saucer, hanging between the shoulders, on a short strap of leather which passes through the hole in the middle of the disk. The Hole in the Ice Sun (*oibon-kunga*), a disk of the same shape and size as the first, but with a larger hole in the middle. It hangs above or below the first plate on a long leather strap. Rolls of tin (*kondei kyhan*) about the size of a thumb, but longer, banging at the back on the metal rings or loops. Copper bells without tongues (*hobo*), suspended below the collar; like a crow's egg in size and shape, and having on the upper part a drawing of a fish's head. They are tied to the leather straps or to the metal loops.

POWER OF THE AMAGYAT

In his list, Sieroszewski describes the the *amagyat*, a copper plate as long as the first finger and half as wide as the palm of the hand. It is covered either with a drawing of a man, with feet, hands, head, nose, mouth, eyes, and ears, or with an engraving in relief, having a man's figure in the middle. It represents both the shaman's ancestor and his protector.

Only a blacksmith who has nine generations behind him can, without danger to himself from the spirits, make an *amagyat*.

The absence of an *amagyat* in a shaman's equipment differentiates the less important shamans from those who possess one. The power of those in possession of the *amagyat* varies according to the strength of the spirit living within the *amagyat*.

Describing a shaman in action, Sieroszewski says that the shaman implored the assistance of his *amagyat* and of other protecting spirits; and it is

only when the *amagyat* descends upon the shaman that he begins his frenzied dances.

The *amagyat* is the sign of the shaman's vocation, which is always given by the old shaman to the new. The Yakut shaman is taught by an older shaman, who initiates him by suspending round his neck the *amagyat*. This symbol is taken away from the shaman who no longer wishes to shamanise.

An old blind Yakut, however, told Sieroszewski how he gave up his shaman's vocation, thinking it a sin, and although a powerful shaman removed the *amagyat* from him, nevertheless the spirits made him blind.

In the Mongolian language *amagaldzi* signifies the figure of the protective spirit of the house, family, and goods, made of tin. This word is derived from the word *amagan* - grandmother.

The human body cannot endure



Above: Soyote shaman's costume from the area by Lake Baikal Mid C19th

Top inset: shaman's miniature iron axe C20th Mongolia



Left: Yakut shaman's ritual costume showing large amount of ironwork Mid C19th

*The coat as a whole
is a protector of
the shaman, and each
symbolic object on
the coat is also
his protector*



the continuous presence of a power equal to the great gods; hence the *amagyat* resides not within, but close beside the shaman (in the home made for it by the blacksmith), and comes to the shaman's assistance whenever he needs him.

The great shamans at death take their *amagyat* spirit with them, and thus change into heavenly beings, most of whom are ex-shamans; if the *amagyat* does not depart in this way, then sooner or later it will show itself on the earth. After the shaman's death the spirit of a remaining *amagyat* seeks to re-embody itself in some one belonging to the same clan.

COATS OF THE ALTAI SHAMANS

Amongst the natives of Altai, the shaman's coat is made of goat or reindeer hide. All the outer side is covered with pendants of varying length in serpent form, and have pieces of many-coloured stuff stitched on to it. The pendants, which terminate in serpents' heads, hang freely. Bundles of reindeer leather straps are also attached here and there. The term *manyak*, is applied by the natives of Altai to the small pendants as well as to the coat as a whole.

There can further be found on the coat various symbolic figures and jingling pendants, such as iron triangles, a small bow and arrow to frighten hostile spirits.

On the back and sometimes on the front of the coat there are sewed two copper disks. One *kam* (shaman) had four empty tobacco-bags hanging on his coat with imaginary tobacco inside, which he

*Left: Evenk or Yakut shaman
in full ritual costume*

*Right: Shaman's iron jingle
cones. Mongolia C20th*

*Below: miniature iron
bow and arrow
Mongolia
C20th*



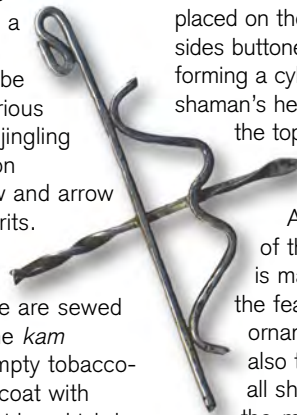
offers to the spirits whilst he is wandering in their country.

The collar is trimmed with owl feathers. One *kam* had seven little dolls on his collar, which, the C19th century explorer Grigory Potanin was told, were heavenly maidens.

A few bells are sewed on here and there; the more prosperous shamans have as many as nine. The ringing of the bells is the voice of the seven maidens whose symbols are sewed to the collar calling to the spirits to descend to them.

The cap of the Altaian shaman is formed of a square piece of the hide of a reindeer calf. On one side there are two buttons and on the other two loops. On the top, bunches of feathers are sewn, and from the lower edge hangs a fringe made of string and shell-fish. This is placed on the head with the two sides buttoned to the back, thus forming a cylindrical cap on the shaman's head. If the hide is hard, the top of the cap with its feathers sticks up like a coronet.

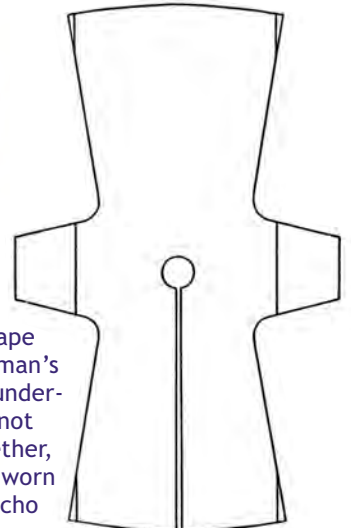
Among some shamans of the Teleut tribe, the cap is made of brown owl skin; the feathers remain as ornaments, and sometimes also the bird's head. It is not all shamans who can wear the *manyak* and the owlskin



*Left
& right:
front and
back illustration
of a shaman's
costume from
the area by Lake
Baikal. The
cloth is cut from
one length and
lined with
reindeer skin*



*Right:
template
showing the
cut-out shape
of the shaman's
coat. The under-
arms are not
joined together,
the coat is worn
like a poncho*



cap. The spirits generally announce to the chosen man when he may wear them.

The Buryat shaman's costume was first described by the C18th German explorer Peter Pallas. 'It belonged to a female shaman, who was accompanied by her husband and two other Buryat, each of them holding a magical drum.

She herself held in her hand two sticks, ornamented at the top end with a carving of a horse's head surrounded by small bells. From the back of the shoulders reaching to the ground hung about thirty snakes, made of white and black skin, in such a way that the snakes seem to be composed of white and black rings. One of the snakes was divided into three at the end, and was accounted indispensable to each Buryat female shaman. The cap was covered with an iron casque having horns with three branches, projecting on both sides like those of a deer.'

In their exhaustive 1893 work 'Materials for the Study of Shamanism in Siberia' N.N. Agapitoff and N.M. Khangaloff describe the old shaman costume among the Buryat - a costume of a kind which, however, is very rarely to be met with at present. According to them, the coat, the cap, and the horse-staves are the chief appertenances of a shaman.

The coat is of material, its shape does not differ from that of the ordinary coat. The front of the coat is covered with metal figures of horses, fishes, birds. The back is covered with twisted iron representing snakes, together with a whole row of little bells and tambourine bells.

On the chest above the thin plates used to hang little shining copper disks, and on the sleeves, were also hung thin iron plates, in imitation of the bones of the shoulder and forearm.

The cap, which is peaked, is made of lynx skin, with a bunch of ribbons on the top.

On the shaman's boots there were formerly sewed iron plates, but these are no longer in use.

The Olkhon Buryat shamans have one other property, called a *shire*. It is a box three and a half feet long and one foot deep, standing on four legs, each two feet high. On the box are hung ribbons, bells, strips of skin, and on one of the long sides different figures are

carved or painted in red. Usually on the right side is represented the sun, and on the left, the moon. The sun is depicted as a wheel, and in the middle of the moon there is a human figure holding a tree in one hand.

In the middle of the long side there are three images of secondary gods, one woman and two men, in whose honour wine is sprinkled several times a year. There are also war implements - bow and quiver and sword, and under each human figure there is a horse. The *shire* is used to hold horse-staves, drums, and other ritual implements.

The shaman acquires the right of carrying the *shire* after their fifth consecration¹. With every new consecration up to the ninth, the height and other dimensions of the *shire* increase.

Nil, the C19 archbishop of Yaroslavl, mentions two things more: *abagaldey*, a monstrous mask of skin, wood, and metal, painted, and ornamented with a great beard; and *toli*, a metal looking-glass with representations of twelve animals on it; this is hung round the neck and worn on the breast; sometimes it is sewed on the shaman's coat.

Occasionally the Buryat shaman has also a whip with bells, but generally all these implements tend to disappear in modern times.

NOTES: 1: There are nine levels of Buryat shaman consecration, shamans pass through a ceremony every seven years to reach the next level, at each level they are allowed to own and wear specific objects. For a full account of such a ceremony read the book 'Shanar: dedication ritual of a Buryat shaman'. Parabola Books.

This article was extracted and adapted from the book 'Shamanism in Siberia' M.A. Czaplicka, first published in 1914. See a review of the reprinted edition of the book in this issue of Sacred Hoop.

Maria Antonina Czaplicka (1886-1921) was a Polish born cultural anthropologist who is best known for her work on Siberian shamanism. She was based in London, and travelled to Siberia, doing extensive fieldwork there in an era where women were not generally engaged in either scientific research or exploration.

Living to only 35 years of age, she was also a skilled early photographer and took many images on her travels in Siberia. Some of these can be found here:<http://bit.ly/cPYORU>

More information about her life can be found at: <http://bit.ly/9S9J7I>



Above: Altai shaman in costume with a splendid shaman's drum. Late C19th



Left: bronze shaman's 'tiger' bells on an iron ring. Late C19th Southern Siberia



Buryat shaman's orgay - set of iron reindeer antlers. Late C19th

Below: a modern Buryat shaman drums while wearing a set of iron horns

