COATS OF MANY SPIRITS

NICHOLAS BREEZE WOOD

'Suddenly he rises and begins to dance and spin. Whirling, the metal ornaments and mirrors clash and sing. On and on he dances until all at once the assistant offers him a cup of water..... and takes up the coat, pulls it gently from him, pulls the drum from his trembling fingers into her own. She leaps up and begins to dance and the coat is singing with her, and the shaman slumps to the floor by her feet. Now the assistant pulls off the coat and she almost throws it to the anthropologist..... Now the coat is pulled in turn from the anthropologist and they call for a 'local', and a young woman rises, puts on the coat, drums and dances. At last the drumming falters to a close. The assistant and the anthropologist whisper more with the slumped shaman. The young anthropologist takes up the coat, heavy with ribbons and fur and ornaments, heavy with power. He drags the coat over us. The ornaments, the fur are waterfalls of power. I sit and the power is poured over me. I am blessed'.

Karen Kelly. (Extract from an account of a shaman's ceremony she took part in at Cambridge University in 1997, which appeared in Sacred Hoop Issue 18).

The costumes worn by shamans in Northern Europe and Siberia, from Finland to the North of China and Kamchatka are seen as essential parts of their shamanic tradition. Made from combinations of fur and fine silks, and hung with bells, bronze mirrors, strips of cloth, metal fetishes of animals and other spirits, shells, glass beads and other items they are both deeply symbolic of the shaman's universe. The coat may be extremely heavy, with up to 45lb (100 kilos) of iron amulets tied onto it. The coats also act as containers for the power that the shaman will draw upon in magical work.

By wearing a costume, a shaman not only is reminded of his magical universe, but is helped to enter and become part of it.

A full costume is generally made up of three distinct parts, the coat, the mask or head covering, and the boots.

THE MASK AND CAP

One part of the costume which has been adopted, at least in a simplified form, in the West, is the shaman's mask. This, at its most basic, can be a bandanna wrapped over the eyes to shield them from the light of Ordinary Reality. Other traditional headgear is more complex, involving leather or cloth caps, with fringes that fall down over the eyes. Sometimes these have small mirrors attached to them to reflect the gaze of hostile spirits.

Some shamans also wear metal crowns on which are fixed large iron antlers and multicolored silk scarves. The scarves represent the rainbow up which the shaman travels to the Upper World. The antlers are also said to represent the roots of the World Tree that connects the three layers of Creation.

SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

The shaman's coat is perhaps the most dramatic part of their costume. Generally made from animal hide, very often with the fur still attached, it often displays a skeleton design, for it is very common in shamanic initiations for the spirits to dismember the shaman and then put him or her back together again. This design not only symbolises the shaman's own recreated skeleton, but also sometimes represents a half-human, half-animal skeleton, symbolising the half-human, half-animal nature of the shaman. Bird symbolism is a frequent feature of the design, and the silk or leather streamers that generally hang down from the coat are often seen as wings or feathers with which the shamans flies.

MIRRORS, PROTECTION AND SEXUALITY

In Tuva the word for a shaman's coat (*kujak*) is also the word for armour; part of its role is to protect the shaman from hostile spirits while he shamanises. The coat is generally hung with large numbers of bells, which are also often hung on their drums, as well as metal and wooden fetishes of animals and ancestors whose protection is being sought.

Large Chinese bronze mirrors (*toli*) may form a part of this protection, and it is not uncommon to see a shaman's coat hung with these, some of which are up to 2,000 years old, being traded for considerable distances across Southern Siberia. They are hung on the coat both to deflect the attack of hostile spirits, and also to act as a container, or home, for the shaman's own helper spirits.

Sometimes the clothes of the shaman are deliberately made in the style of those worn by the opposite sex, and male shamans might wear iron discs on the front of their coats to represent women's breasts. This is part of the worldwide tradition of transexual and transvestite shamans.

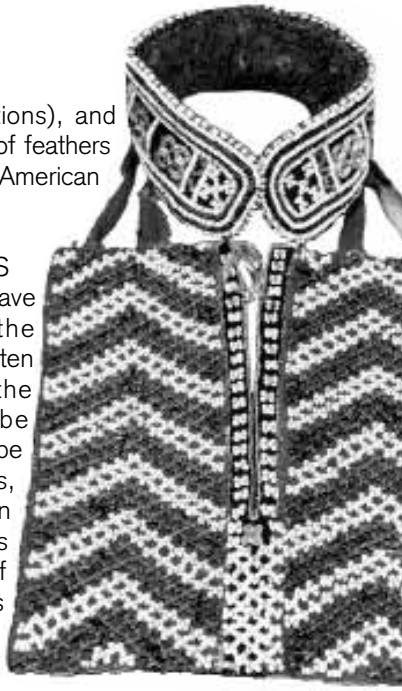
The reason for the reversal of sexuality is complex. Sometimes it is seen as a response to the sex of the shaman's helper spirits, sometimes as a response to the nature of the tribe's creator god - if the creator god is androgynous then the shaman needs to display some of the traits of the opposite sex.

It may also be a vestige of the idea that the first (and most powerful) shamans were women, and the male shamans are seeking to identify with them.

BIRD AND ANIMAL SYMBOLS

Small fetishes of animals and birds are worn to represent helper spirits, and parts of the animal itself may also be used. For instance, a 'Bear Shaman' may have a dried bear paw tied to their coat, or a small mask representing the bear's face made out of rawhide or metal.

A deerskin coat may be worn when the shaman flies (rides on the back of a spirit reindeer) to the Upper World, or he may sit on a cushion of deerskin to represent that he is riding this magical being. Often eagle feathers will be worn to symbolise power (a custom most noted of course in Native American shamanic traditions), and some shamans wear a headdress of feathers that resemble the famous Native American eagle feather bonnets.



STAMPING WITH IRON BOOTS

Some shamanic traditions also have specific types of boots that the shamans must wear. These are often similar to regular items from the culture, but may have to be decorated with specific colours, be made out of specific animal skins, or have other magical items sewn into them. Some shaman's boots have to have soles made of iron, which the shaman uses to drive away hostile spirits by stamping his feet while wearing them.

These ritual clothes, from such highly artistic and spiritually creative cultures, are a fabulous wealth of sacred art that today's Western shamanic practitioners can learn a great deal from.

PHOTOS

Page 14: (*top*) Buryat shaman's metal bear mask fetish; (*centre*) Evenki shaman's coat, complete with bells and Chinese mirrors; (*bottom*) front and back views of an antique Chinese bronze mirror, the sort typically used for shamans costumes.

Page 15: (*top right*) a Mansi tribe beaded collar and breastplate, the design on the breastplate represents the shaman's ribcage; (*centre*) a coat belonging to a female shaman of the Tolfalar people, made from reindeer skin and embroidered with deer hair; (*bottom left*) Evenki shaman's crown with iron deer antlers with cloth streamers; (*bottom right*) shaman with his drum. He is wearing a traditional mask with fringing that hangs down in front of his eyes.