A distinctive feature of a Siberian shaman's ritual costume is the face mask they often wear, with its fringe, or 'eye curtain' that hangs down over the face. These face masks are common across all of Siberia in one form or another, and they are an important part of most shamans' costumes.

In the West, in shamanic workshops and classes over recent decades a tradition has evolved of wearing bandanas, which serve the purpose of shielding the eyes from the distraction of intruding light. I have no doubt that for many people these bandanas have developed into a part of their 'ritual kit.' Yet bandanas may lack the depth of ritual significance of a the traditional shaman's face mask.

Shaman's Face Masks of Siberia
Nicholas Breeze Wood

Face masks vary greatly across Mongolia and Siberia. Some have thick curtains of plaited cords hanging down, some have strips of leather, and some - like Evenk shaman's ch'ikta masks - have only symbolic cords which do not obstruct the vision at all. In the case of the ch'ikta, only seven small strings of beads are used.

Mongolian masks, which are generally called orgoi, often resemble Native American plains Indian feather headdresses, but with a crown of large vulture feathers rather than the eagle feathers used by the Native Americans. Other Siberian tribal groups also use feathers, often those of the loon, or other water birds such as geese.

Mongolian orgoi masks also have faces embroidered onto them representing the spirit eyes and mouth of the shaman. These have two main purposes: they provide eyes for the shaman whilst in the spirit worlds; also they are there to scare away unwelcome hostile spirits.

Buryat shamans from Northern Mongolia and over the border into Russia, have a face mask that also has eyes. This mask is called a maykhabsha, and it is worn by both white and black shamans. The colour of a black shaman's maykhabsha is black, whereas that of a white shaman is blue, because of the white shaman's association with the upperworld.

Buryat maykhabsha do not have feathers on them, instead they have either three or five long multicoloured streamers that hang down from the back. These streamers are generally fixed to the actual cap by means of fancy buttons. They are made up of five colours of brocade, which represent the five elemental colours of Tibetan Buddhism; yellow - earth; red - fire; blue - water; green - air; and white - space.

These streamers are decorated with bells and small pearls, and are a fairly recent development, in use for only the last 100-150 years or so, coming into the country during a period of Buddhist revival.

The cap of a maykhabsha has a top circle, generally of brocade, which is there to protect the shaman's crown during spirit flight. Sometimes they also have a second circle of brocade inside. Normally, a coloured tassel hangs from the very top, and sometimes a blue khadag scarf is also fixed here.

Michael Harner, in his article in this issue of Sacred Hoop, shares his theory that the movement of the fringes help shamans go into a
The most elaborate form of shamanic head gear are the metal horns or antlers that some shamans wear. These are mostly to be found amidst the Buryat and Evenk tribal groups wear them as well. These horns, known by the Buryat people as orgay, often denote the number of initiations a shaman has gone through - the more experienced the shaman, the greater number of prongs on the horns - although this is not always the case. Normally these antlers do not have a fringe of their own, but are worn over a fringed cap or other headdress; sometimes however, as in the Evenk examples in this article, they have their own set of fringes.

**MAKING YOUR OWN MASK**

Making your own fringed mask can be an excellent way to deepen your shamanic practice. Not only will it give you a bit of ritual ‘kit’ that will be a positive support to your practice - by reminding you every time you put it on that you are preparing to do shamanic work - but it will also enable you to develop your own cosmological symbolism, which is important in developing a deeper way of working with the spirit world.

I advise you to journey to your spirits about this, to talk to them about the design and the colours you should use, and any objects that should be sewn or tied onto your mask. This is not about ‘dressing up’, as making it with a deep connection to your spirits is essential if it is to be powerful and honest. If you want to dress up buy a pirate hat!

In the very simplest form of fringed mask the fringes hang from a strip of material, which can be tied around the head, so that the fringes dangle over the eyes. There is an example of just such an old Mongolian mask at the top of the page.

This was the first type of mask I made, over twenty years ago now, and I still have it and use it. I started with a strip of black wool cloth, to which I stitched a simple, cut, buckskin leather fringe, which I painted red. On either end of the wool cloth strip I attached cloth ties to fix behind my head; then I finished it by stitching some red Tibetan silk brocade over the top of the buckskin fringe to hide it, allowing just the fringes to dangle out below. I also added some antique glass beads, conch shells and an old, tiny Mongolian shaman’s mirror.

This mask was not at all difficult to make, and only took me a few hours. I consider it ‘informal wear’ in the spirit world, and as it is small and easily portable in a pocket I often take it with me when I go to shamanic gatherings etc.

For more formal wear I’m lucky enough to own a Buryat shaman’s full maykhabsha, complete with five brocade tails. These coloured tails are not always worn, as they signify that a shaman has come to a deep knowledge of the nature of the elements in the Mongolian equivalent of the medicine wheel teachings. After 30 years of working with the medicine wheel teachings I learned from native American teachers, I respectfully...
trust I am qualified enough when I wear it. This *maykhabsha* came to me some years ago from a contact in Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia. When it arrived it had a strong, rancid smell of the butter used in Mongolian everyday rural life, and I had to hang it up for some time in fresh air before I could stand to wear it.

The cap part of my *maykhabsha* was too small for me, and so I made a larger one, and attached the brocade tails to it. I’m not very experienced in working with fabric, I like leather more as it stays where you put it and does what its told. Fabric has far too much a mind of its own for my liking! Because of this I had to keep it simple, and so had to really think hard about how to do it. Eventually I hit upon the idea of using a ready-formed, simple cotton baseball cap. I chose one that was not adjustable as I didn’t want it to have a plastic adjuster and a gap in the back.

Of course I needed to cut off the front, flat, sunshade part of the baseball cap before I could started to make the mask. The fringe itself was the next problem, but I discovered a ready-made fringing material designed for shawls, available in craftsshops - or in my case ‘by the yard’ on eBay. This fringing is made up of little thread fringes, fixed to a woven strip. Each strand was too lightweight to be a fringe on the finished *maykhabsha*, as the one on the original - too small for me - cap, had quite thick fringes. So I plaited each group of three thin strands together to make a thicker fringe.

Plaiting each group of three thin strands to make one thicker fringe, over the metre length of the ready-made shawl fringe, took me about five or six hours over all, done over a period of a few days. So if you can’t plait when you start you will have plenty of practice as you go on with your *maykhabsha* making.

I then folded it in half, (I found that one metre of the shawl fringing was about the right length) and then in half again, to make the total fringe width a quarter of a metre. This made the fringe four layers thick, which gave about the same thickness of fringe as the original *maykhabsha* cap had.

I wanted to line the inside, to hide the inner of the original baseball cap, so I turned the cap inside out, copied the shapes of the sections that made it up, and cut some thin cotton material, which I stitched onto the cap. Once this was done I turned the cap right side out again, and now it had a fairly neat inner lining.

I long ago realised that, whereas I try to make my shamanic ‘kit’ out of natural materials such as cotton and silk, Mongolian shamans don’t have such fussiness, and use all sorts of man-made materials in their costumes and objects. This was born out when I examined the

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**Above:** plaiting the fringe: holding it under foot makes it easier to hold  
**Left:** the raw fringe before plaiting  
**Below:** the completed plaited fringe and the unworked cap
maykhabsha’s original cap, as it too appeared to be made out of a baseball type piece of headgear. I stitched the fringe inside the front of the baseball cap, and then folded a length of red brocade over the bottom edge of the cap to act as a finishing decoration.

The final task was to cut a circle of brocade for the top, hem it, and then stitch it on, over the cap - like an extra skull cap. I also cut a smaller, similar brocade circle for the inside of the cap. Out from the top brocade circle, I attached some black cords to make a topknot tassel, as is traditional.

When the whole thing was completed (see picture on opposite page), I stitched and embroidered some eyes on the front of the maykhabsha, and added five fancy buttons on the back to attach the five brocade tails to. These buttons should always be the best you can get, and I hunted online to get some with the knot of eternity symbol, a design used in both Tibetan Buddhism and Mongolian shamanism.

I use my maykhabsha for ‘big’ shamanic work, as it is formal wear. I also sing to its spirit on a regular basis - as I do for all my pieces of shamanic ‘kit’; honouring ritual costumes, drums and other items by making offerings and performing thanksgiving songs is a very traditional part of shamanism.

Having special pieces of clothing to wear for shamanic work each time is a very good way to get deeper into your practice. Such clothing reminds us that we are stepping away from everyday reality, and the traditional shamanic view is that they help us by giving power, act as armour and are powerful helper spirits in their own right.

You do not need to be a dressmaker or tailor to make a simple flat strip mask, or even convert a ready-made baseball cap. If you fancy making your own maykhabsha, get a cap larger than your size, as when you put an inner lining in it and attach the fringes, it will make it smaller, and after all your hard work you don’t want to find it doesn’t fit you. If you are skilled enough to make the streamers for the back, go for it, but if you are not, just the cap will make an excellent shamanic face mask.

If you mess up in your craftwork so what - it won’t have cost you much money and it’s all good learning - you will do it better next time. The only real shame is if you don’t have the bottle to try it at all - all traditional shamans are artists and craftpeople... so what are you waiting for... practice makes perfect!

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