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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)

# the Shaman transformed

Transgenderism in  
Siberian Shamanism



Nicholas Breeze Wood

Above: carved marine ivory statue of a shaman drumming. Koryak people

Opposite page - top: costume of a woman shaman in elaborate X-ray style. Tofala people

Bottom - left and centre: Costumes of a male shaman. Both costumes show the metal breast discs. Yakut people

Right: close up of a male shaman's costume showing the metal breast discs. Yakut people

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## ALL IN A NAME

An important pointer to the original shamans being women comes from the names the different Siberian peoples have for a shaman.

Shaman is a Western corruption of *samaan* or *s'amanthe*, a word from the Siberian Evenki (previously known as the Tungus people), which gradually got brought into the Russian language by early explorers of Siberia. The word gradually got established as a general term for a Siberian tribal spiritual healer in Russia, and then migrated to the rest of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries via anthropologists. The word *shamanka*, meaning a woman shaman, was never used by Siberian people - the ending *ka* is a Russian way of giving a word a female form.

Across the vastness of Siberia, different peoples had different names for both male and female shamans. The Yakut call male shamans *khamma* or *ayun*, the Mongols and Buryats *buge* or *bo*, the Evenki *samman* and *khamman*, the Tartars and Altaians use *kam* and *gam*, the shamans of Kyrgyzstan use *baksy*, and the Samoyed use *tadibey*.

But a woman shaman has a different name, and this name is basically the same over a wide geographical area. Among the Mongols, Buryats, Yakuts, Altaians, Turgout, and Kyrgys the word for a woman shaman is *udagan* (or variations such as *utagan*, *ubakan*, *utygan* or *utugun*). This word probably originates from the Mongolian word *Etugen* which is the name of the ancient hearth-goddess.

Because *udagan* is so universal, language experts understand it to be a very old word, older than the words for male shaman, which seems to show that female shamans have been around a lot longer than male ones have.

There is other evidence that supports the idea of women being the first shamans. When we look at the roles of traditional Siberian shamans, both male and female, we can see how their modes of dress, habits, and privileges compare with those of their non-shaman same-sex peers. For instance, if a male shaman is

Many anthropologists have come to the conclusion that within the shamanism of Siberia, women were the first shamans.

The C18th Russian explorer Stepan Krasheninnikoff writes that the shamanistic gift among the people of Kamchatka is almost exclusive to women. "Woman is by nature a shaman," declared a Chukchi shaman to the anthropologist and writer Waldemar Bogoras, "She does not need to be specially prepared for

allowed to dress, or do activities that normally men are prohibited from doing, but which women are expected to do.

### CROSSING THE GENDER DIVIDE

As the first shamans may well have been women, it is interesting to see how many Siberian male shamans - to some degree or another - are 'transformed' to become women. Women shamans do 'transform' to become men, but this is generally less common.

This transformation occurs all over Siberia, but it is much more dramatic in the Northern parts.

In the south of Siberia, transgenderism is mostly centred around the costume and ritual apparel of the shaman. Writing about Yakut shamans in his book 'The Evolution of the Black Faith,' Russian anthropologist V. F. Troshchanski points out that traditionally 'male Yakut shamans have two iron circles representing breasts on their coat, that they part their hair in the middle - as traditionally woman would do, that they braid their hair like a woman does and let it fall loose during their ceremonies.'

He also notes that 'neither a woman nor a shaman lies on the right side of the yurt' and adds that 'It is only on very important occasions that the shaman wears his own garment; on lesser

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occasions he wears a girl's jacket made of foal's hide.' Despite these somewhat superficial aspects of trans-genderism, male shamans generally stay within their cultural same gender roles.

### WORKING WITH THE SPIRITS

This appropriation of certain female roles has sometimes been interpreted by anthropologists as a sort of cunning plan by male shamans who are eager to take power from women and muscle in on their social territories. But from a shamanic point of view it is much more to do with the balancing of energy within the shaman. Vladimir Kondakov, a Yakut shaman, described how shamans have to balance their male and female energy in order to work powerfully.







Above: woman's decorative chest panel. Evenki people

Right: shaman's ritual breast plate. Yakut people

Below: shaman's costume showing the ritual breast plate. Evenki people



Many Siberian male shamans have female spirit helpers, and as it is customary in Siberian shamanism to have spirit helpers take over a shaman, a spirit's female qualities (or possibly male spirit helper qualities in the case of women) will come forward, making the shaman appear to act in a transgender manner.

This work with opposite gender spirit helpers is seen as useful in the healing work shamans do, as it helps balance out the energies in the person being healed. Sometimes a shaman will tell his or her patient that they too must adopt the manner, clothes or life style of the opposite sex if they are to get well again.

The opposite gender spirits often demand that shamans dress in the clothes of the opposite sex. This may need to be only when they perform shamanic work, or all of the time, depending on the instruction of the spirit.

This more overt form of transgenderism occurs more in the north of Siberia up by the Arctic Ocean. One Northern Siberian Chukchi shaman recounts how when he was young, and before becoming a shaman, he was afflicted with a strange illness which caused him to sleep day after day, almost without interruption.

Eventually a spirit appeared to him in his sleep and ordered him to put on a woman's dress, after which he got better and became a shaman.

This shaman had a wife and four children and was described as having 'cheeks covered with a stubby black beard so there could be no misunderstanding about the sex to which he really belonged.'

## BECOMING A SOFT-MAN

At times the shamanic use of balanced sexual power means that male shamans are said to actually turn physically into females (and vice versa), rather than just wearing opposite sex clothes or adopting hair styles. This gender change may be just for particular shamanic ceremonies or it may be permanent.

At the turn of the C20th, the Russian ethnographer Waldemar Bogoras studied the Chukchi people and wrote a book about them. He describes how many male shamans become *yirka-laul* (soft-men) or *ne' uchica* (like a woman) and women shamans become *qa' chikicheca* (like a man). He tells us that such transformations were always on a spirit's orders and were greatly feared by the young shamans who wished to remain their biological gender.

Bogoras explained the various degrees and stages of transformation amongst the Chukchi shamans he met, beginning with male shamans echoing women only in the manner of braiding and arranging their hair.

The next stage is when a man 'throws away the rifle and the lance, the lasso of the reindeer herdsman, and the harpoon of the seal-hunter, and takes to the needle and the skin-scraper.'

He explains that shamans learn the use of these quickly because the spirits help them all the time, 'even to the point where the shaman's mode of speech changes from male to female, and his body alters in its faculties and forces, thus does he lose masculine strength, fleetness of foot and endurance in wrestling, and acquires instead the helplessness of the woman... He has accompanying psychological changes, as he loses his brute courage and fighting spirit, and becomes shy of strangers, even fond of small talk and of nursing small children; with this the soft-man begins to feel like a woman.'

Bogoras goes on to report that; 'A true soft-man enters into sexual competition with women for young men, and succeeds easily with the

aid of his spirits. He chooses a lover and takes a husband, and a marriage is performed with the usual rites, and I must say that it forms a quite solid union which often lasts till the death of one of the parties.'

Soft men are said sometimes to acquire the sex organs of a woman, although others are said to have mistresses and to produce children with them. The greatest male shamans who become soft-men are said to even be able to give birth to children, and there are reports of giving birth being held in public to prove they are now truly women.

In addition to perhaps marrying in ordinary life, each soft-man has a special protector spirit who plays the part of a spirit-husband. Sometimes a male shaman who has not transformed to a soft-man has a spirit-wife too, in addition to his own physical wife.

Bogoras never met a woman transformed into a man, but he heard of several cases. One transformed female shaman was a widow, who had children of her own. Following the command of the spirits, she cut her hair, took on the dress of a man, adopted masculine pronunciation, and even learned in a very short time to handle the spear and to shoot with a rifle. Eventually she wanted to marry, and easily found a young girl who consented to become her wife.

But it seems that the spirits could sometimes be negotiated with, one Koryak shaman wore women's clothes for two years on the orders of his spirits; but after that time, as he had not been able to completely transform into a soft-man, he implored his spirits to permit him to resume wearing regular men's clothes. The spirits granted his request, but on the condition that he put on women's clothes during ceremonies.

Despite being shamans, soft-men would sometimes suffer a loss of status, and be treated badly as the tribes treated the rest of the women.

## MEN, WOMEN AND SHAMANS

This transgenderism in Siberian shamans has been noted for a very long time. The Roman historian Herodotus describes the *enarees*, the transgender male-to-female shamans of the ancient Scythians of the Central Asian steppes. He described how they would go so far as to mutilate their



genitalia and afterwards take on female roles. They were said to be the most powerful shamans of their people. The Roman poet Ovid claimed that some Scythian female shamans knew how to extract what he called 'female poison,' which was distilled from the urine of a mare in heat. This poison was used to dose men in order to turn them into women. Today a pregnant mare's urine is the main source of premarin, the most widely used estrogen drug for gender reassignment.

It seems that shamanic transgenderism is extremely ancient, and it can perhaps be said that in traditional Siberian culture there are three sexes - women, men and shamans, as the shaman does not truly belong to either gender.

A shaman may be transgender, androgynous, homosexual or heterosexual, or sexless, but whatever they are, they form a special category of people, having special social roles comprising of both male and female characteristics. The same may be said of their ritual clothes, which combine features peculiar to the dress of both sexes.

Whether the transgenderism displayed by some Siberian shamans is inherent in their personality and physiology is

debated by anthropologists, especially as many shamans appear to be comfortable in their biological gender and sexuality before they receive their calling, and then are often most reluctant to make the change, especially if the change involves becoming a soft-man.

From this it would appear that it is the intervention of the spirits which causes such dramatic changes, although an inherent transgenderism in the shaman-to-be which 'comes out' during their initiation cannot be ruled out.

It is important not to think that Siberian shamans come from some

sort of enlightened liberal society. If a non-shaman decided to change their gender they stood a great chance of social stigma and would probably be shunned. But when a shaman changes, it is seen as a sacred thing, a spirit power gifted to them to help them be more powerful as a servant of the people.

*One Chukchi shaman recounts how when he was young before becoming a shaman, he was afflicted with a strange illness. Eventually a spirit appeared to him and ordered him to put on a woman's dress, after which he got better and became a shaman*

*Chukchi soft-man shaman*



*Above: cap of a transgender 'transformed' shaman. Yukaghir people*



*Chukchi shaman perform a prosperity ceremony*