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The Shamanism Magazine

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



Above: an Evenki drum and beater. The handle is a 'moving' iron handle, fixed to the drum frame with iron chains. Early C20th

Below: a Buryat shaman plays his drum, cloth snakes on his coat swinging wildly

Soul DRUM

Nicholas Breeze Wood explores the shamanic frame drums of Siberia

When we think of a shaman, we probably also think of a drum, because *shaman* and *drum* go together like *bread* and *butter*.

No-one knows the historic origin of drums, but they certainly have been in use by people for tens of thousands of years. Indeed if you tap a dry, animal skin which

has been stretched on a frame as part of its preparation, it sounds like a drum, and these probably were the first drums ever made.

The word *shaman* comes from Siberia, and it is in this vast geographical region where shamanism proper is to be found. Some anthropologists do not

consider it is to be found anywhere else on earth and do not label Native American or any other form of spiritual practice as shamanism.

The shamans of Central Asia and Siberia are unique in their use of the drum for the classic 'shamanic journey'.

A frame drum is made by stretching skin over a frame of wood, which is generally made from a long plank of thin wood bent into a rough circle - the two ends of the plank being joined together in some way (often traditionally by rawhide lacing) to keep the circle closed and firmly fixed.

The shamanic drums of Siberia and Asia are made like this and, on first glance, look similar to many Native American frame drums. On closer examination however, major differences will be obvious.

All shamans' drums from Siberia and Central Asia are single-skinned, having a skin on one side of the frame only, the back of the drum being left open so the wooden frame can be seen. I am not including Southern Asian shamans' drums in this article, as the two-sided drums used by Nepalese and some Tibetan shamans are not really in the same tradition of shamanic drum making.

FIXING ON THE DRUMSKIN

The most noticeable difference between Native American and Siberian drums is the way the skin is attached to the frame.

Native American drums very often have holes in the edge of the drumskin, through which rawhide lacing is stretched, criss-crossing the back of the drum to bind the skin on very tightly. This criss-crossing is also often bound together to form a cross at the back of the drum; the cross forms a convenient way to hold the drum while it is being played.

With Siberian drums however, there are no rawhide laces holding the skin in place on the frame. Instead, the skin is actually stitched to the frame by means of sinew or cord.

First, a series of holes is made through the frame, and then the edge of the skin is folded over the frame and tucked inside the drum. The cord is then passed through the skin from the outside of the drum, through the frame, and through the skin that is folded back inside the frame. It then



passes along the skin inside the frame to the next hole, and out again to the outside of the drum once more (see illustration).

Tension is put into the skin at this stage by pulling it taut before each stitch is made.

This is a very time-consuming way of making a drum, and it takes perhaps four or five times longer to make one using this process than it would using a Native American rawhide lacing style of construction.

THE DRUM HANDLE

Because there is no rawhide lacing stretching across the back of a Siberian drum, there is no place to hold it, and this is the other big difference between Native American and Siberian drums - the handle.

Handles of Siberian shamanic drums fall into two main types, 'static' and 'moving'. They can also be divided up into those made of wood or bone, and those made of iron or other metal.

In a 'static'-handled drum the handle is rigidly fixed to the frame and does not move. A 'moving' handle is tied loosely to the frame and moves about as the drum is played. Drums with 'moving' handles are generally played with the face of the drum pointing towards the ground - the drum actually being suspended on the handle.

Static, wooden-handled drums have a vertical bar of wood running across the frame from top to bottom. More rarely they have an additional cross bar going from side to side, and where this bar does appear, it is normally much thinner and there only to tie cloth streamers, bells or other ritual objects to the drum.

Drums with moving wooden or bone handles have a strip of wood or bone suspended in the centre of the frame by four iron chains, ropes, or cords.

Metal handles can again be 'static' or 'moving' types, and range from quite simple to very complex in their construction. The simplest is a 'moving' metal handle where a bar or cross or circle of metal (generally iron), is attached to the frame by chains.

Static metal drum handles may vary from simple rigid bars fixed across the frame, to whole inner frameworks of metal, attached to the outer wooden frame.

Many cultural groups name the handle of a drum after an animal. In Mongolia it is called a *bar* or *el-bar* (tiger), in the Altai Mountains they are called *mar* (snow leopard), and Buryat shamans call them *baran-geresum* (bear).

On some drums from Southern Siberia (including Mongolia, Tuva, the Altai mountains and Buryatia) the handle sometimes takes the form of a stylised bow and arrow. The vertical handle represents the arrow, and a thinner curved strip of wood attached at the top of the vertical handle, represents the curve of the bow itself.

The symbolism is that the drum is like a bow, which

shoots the shaman on his journey, and he holds on to the arrow (the drum handle) as he flies.

Another meaning is that the drum acts as a bow and arrow ready to shoot hostile spirits the shaman meets while on his journey. Some Southern Siberian drums have a wire of iron stretching horizontally across the inside of the drum, which they call a *kyrish* (bow string). This is often hung with short lengths of twisted iron rod, which are the shaman's arrows, ready to be used when needed.

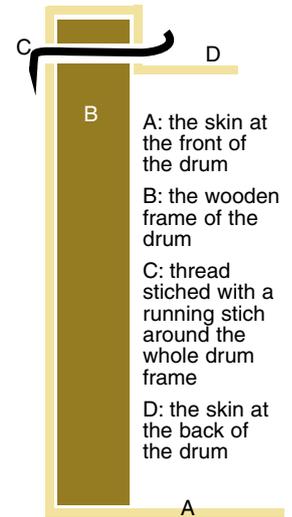
Actual bows are also used in some Southern Siberian shamanic rituals, the shaman journeying on the sound of a bow string being twanged. They are also used as a method of dreaming where the shaman will gaze past a vibrating bow string at a fire to enable him to 'see' the spirits of things. The connection between bows and arrows and drums is therefore quite complex.

Another tradition from this part of the world is that the vertical bar the shaman holds represents a spirit, and these types of drum handles often have legs at the bottom of the handle and a face made from carved wood or metal at the top. The spirit is often the shaman's main helper spirit, or the spirit of an ancestor who helps the shaman, or sometimes the spirit of the drum itself called 'the master of the drum.'

DRUM DECORATION

Siberian shamans' drums are often very ornate, their symbolism being a mix of cultural tradition and the shaman's personal vision.

They may be left unpainted, or painted with designs symbolising the cosmology of the shaman's universe, or images of



SIBERIAN DRUM CROSS SECTION

- A: the skin at the front of the drum
- B: the wooden frame of the drum
- C: thread stitched with a running stitch around the whole drum frame
- D: the skin at the back of the drum

Evenki drum paddle late C19th

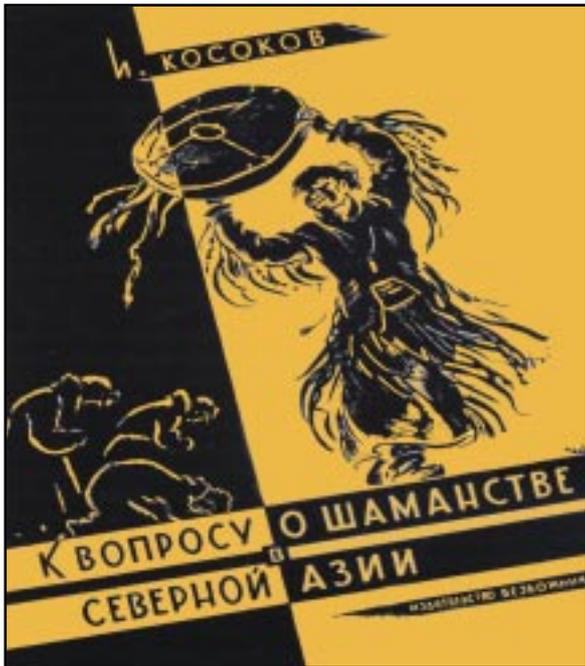


Below: typical rawhide lacing found on a Native American-style frame drum



Buryat shaman's drum, with fixed handle made of copper in the form of an *ongon* representing the master spirit of the drum.





Above: a Soviet anti-shamanic propagandist leaflet, warning people of the evils of giving power to the local shaman. C1920's

Below: an Evenki shaman in full costume



inner ledge to the skin at the back of the drum. Glass beads are sometimes stitched to this ledge as decoration, but then again drums may be left completely undecorated.



Altai shaman's drum with a 'static' wooden handle in the form of an ongon of the master of the drum late C19th

MAKING AND EMPOWERING

With such a vast geographic area as Siberia, there is no one tradition for the making and empowering of drums, as it varies from tribe to tribe.

Some shamans make their own drums, some employ semi-professional drum makers and some shamans' drums are made by the whole community the shaman serves.

Generally the frame is made of birch, or larch, or spruce, and the skin is deer (often reindeer) or horse. Many shamanic groups do not have a word for drum as such, but refer to them by the name of the animal used to skin it - adding the word 'sacred' before it, so a shaman may think of his drum as a 'sacred deer' or 'sacred horse'.

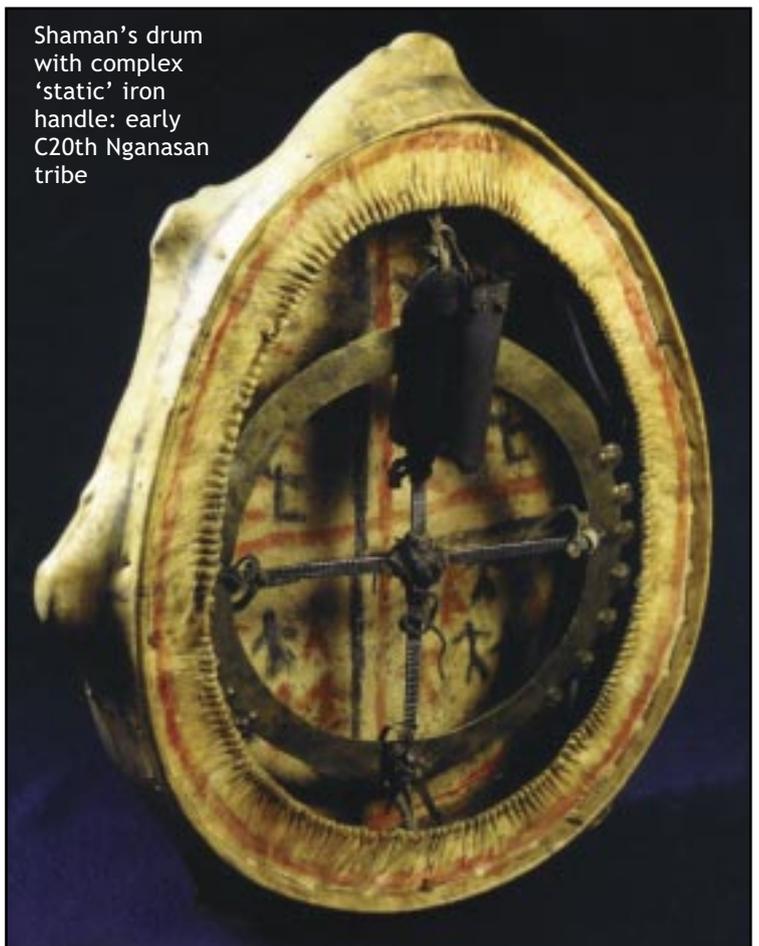
Often there are special ceremonies to be enacted during the making of the drum, sometimes with prohibitions as to who can touch, or even see, the materials. But sometimes the expectation is that as many

members of the shaman's community will touch it, and even play on the completed drum, as part of connecting it to the people.

Generally metal and other ritual decorative items used in the construction will come from older drums, or other shamanic tools. These are considered to be 'ancestral items', having gained power during their life and previous use. When a new item is needed the assistance of a shaman-blacksmith will be called on, who will make the new object using appropriate ceremony and with great regard for the spirits. In Siberia blacksmiths are considered a type of shaman in their own right.

Part of the distinctive shape of many Siberian drums are the bumps which stick out from the side of the drum. These are often called 'resonators', and they are small sticks of wood or small animal bones, or other items. They are fixed to the frame by either nailing them on, or by binding

Shaman's drum with complex 'static' iron handle: early C20th Nganasan tribe



them on with leather thong or lengths of sinew. They make small air pockets when the drum-skin is put over them, and are said to make the drum sing better and louder - although I have not noticed any difference personally. These 'bumps' also represent sacred mountains or other aspects of the particular shamanic folklore of a culture, and different cultural groups will use different numbers of them.

Drums vary in diameter from quite small, perhaps 45cm to 50cm wide, to large drums of over 100cm across. The depth of the frame can also vary from between about 8cm to 25cm. A large drum with a deep frame, hung with a lot of ironwork, is a very heavy drum - far heavier than those we may be used to playing in the West.

Siberian shamans employ a special type of drumstick called a 'drum paddle.' These are flat, often slightly curved, wooden shapes, covered in fur on one side - ranging from reindeer to goat to bear or other animals, depending on cultural tradition - and often hung with bells, or metal rings on the other. The drum is struck with the fur-covered side of the paddle, and the bells or rings act as a rattle, jingling as the drum is hit. Siberian shamans do not use rattles, unlike Native American medicine people, and the drum paddle



is the closest Siberian shamanism gets to these mainstays of Western neo-shamanic practice.

The drumstick is a very important tool in its own right. Many shamans will use a drumstick a long time before they get a drum, employing it as a rattle, and healing with it by using it as a sort of whip or knife, to drive out, or cut away illness from a patient. They also use them as a method of divining, by throwing them up in the air and noting how they land.

EMPOWERMENT

Once a drum is made and decorated it may, according to the culture, be empowered. Some tribal groups do not empower drums, as they say that because the drum and the drumstick are made from living wood (these groups never use dead wood), it is alive and therefore needs no empowering.

Other groups will empower them by specific ceremonies, seeing this as essential for the safety of the shaman, as the shaman might get lost during a journey if they do not use an empowered drum, or the drum may break during use, trapping the

shaman's soul in the spirit worlds. Often empowerments are held by older, more experienced shamans who are assisting in the training of the younger ones.

Some of these empowerment ceremonies take several days to accomplish and are very complex, involving specific shamanic journeys to spirit helpers, offerings to the animal whose skin was used, and the tree the frame and beater was made from. At its simplest, an offering of vodka or other liquid such as milk, would be made to the spirits, and the drum would probably also be 'fed' with it.

A Siberian shaman's drum is not a musical instrument, it is a complex model of the shamanic universe, a tool kit of weapons, and ropes to tie up hostile spirits. It may also be employed in other ways during the shaman's spirit travelling, for on a shamanic journey a shaman may well use his drum as a boat and his drum beater as a paddle, if he comes to a body of water he has to cross in the spirit worlds.

A drum will contain, in a very physical sense, the shaman's spirit helpers, who will each have *ongons* or spirit houses to live in within the frame. It will probably also have a place - a passenger seat so to speak - for any lost soul parts that have been retrieved on the shamanic journey, the shaman putting them into the drum for safe keeping until they can be returned to their rightful owner.

The drum is, in essence, the sacred place that lies at the very heart of Siberian shamanism, connecting the shaman to the other worlds of the spirits.

Nicholas Breeze Wood is the editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine. He is a shamanic practitioner and has been a maker of shamanic drums and other ritual objects for over 20 years. He has made a lifelong study of the tools of shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism, and never gets tired of going on and on about them.

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Left: Evenki drum with a 'loose' iron handle and bead work around the edge of the skin. Late C19th

Above: shaman and his drum. Early C20th

Bottom - left: Tofalar tribal drum from South-western Siberia. Late C19th

Below: a shaman from Southern Siberia. The drum has a curved bow-shaped piece of wood just above the shaman's hand, forming a symbolic bow and arrow inside the drum

