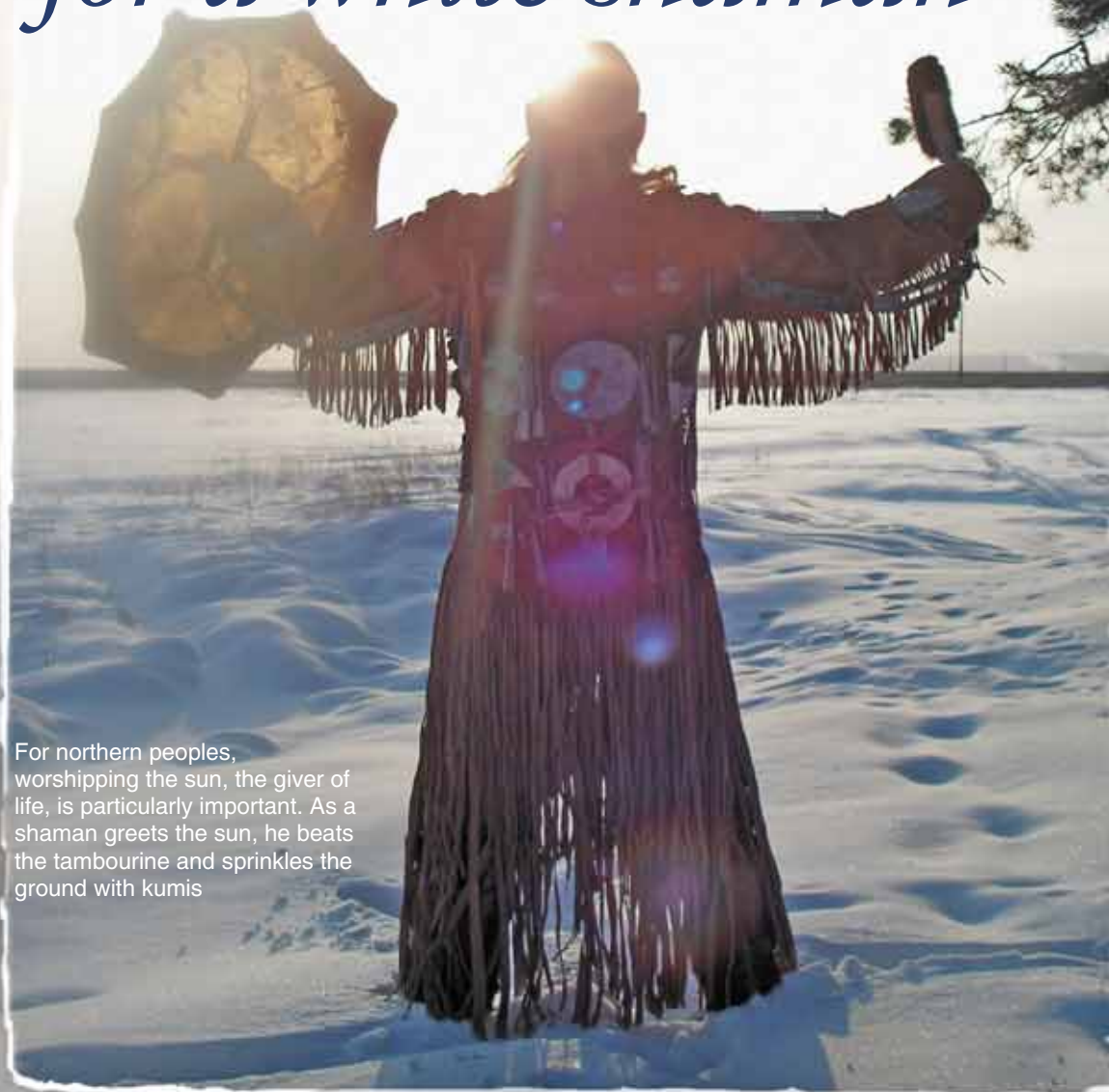


Churima for a white shaman

YU.A. SLEPTSOV



For northern peoples, worshipping the sun, the giver of life, is particularly important. As a shaman greets the sun, he beats the tambourine and sprinkles the ground with kumis

The shaman's path does not come to an end when he passes away. The Evenks believe that after the death he goes to meet celestial residents – the light gods of aiyy. To ensure the meeting takes place, shaman's relatives offer the gods deer, equip sledges, and erect a churima – the quarters of the deceased in the world of the dead

Key words: burial, the Evenks, shamans, ceremony, sacrificial deer



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The spirits of mountain passes are especially worshipped by Northern nationalities. At the Bakyrkychan (the Evenk for "slippery") pass you can see offerings left by hunters and deer breeders: ammunition, the skull of a sacrificial deer, and the skeleton of a deer sledge resembling a wooden idol. The legend goes that at this pass an Evenk girl, who competed for her needlework skills against the Sun itself, lost her load. As a punishment for this behavior, she was turned to stone. The locality at the foot of the Chersky pass is called *Diol asatkan* (literally, a "petrified girl"); there is a large stone there to which she turned, according to the legend. This place is especially worshipped by the Evenks. You cannot speak loudly, hit a stone against a stone, sew, or make anything here





Far-away northern districts of Yakutia are a unique region in terms of ethnography as the rituals and traditions that have died out in the central part of the republic have preserved here. One of such “archaic islands” is the settlement of Buor-Sysy of the Moma ulus, Yakutia

The Evenks is a low-number indigenous nationality of the North. They mostly live in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Khabarovsk Krai, and in the Magadan and Kamchatka Oblasts. There are 19 242 of them, according to the most recent population count.

The Evenk language belongs to the Tungus-Manchu group of the Altai language family. In 1931, a Latin-based writing system was developed, and in 1936, a writing system based on the Russian alphabet. In the 1990s, the policy of the language and traditional culture revival was actively pursued.

The archaic name of the Evenks is the Tungus. Tungus tribes spread from the Cis-Baikal and Trans-Baikal areas all over East Siberia beginning with the 1st millennium A.D. As they settled, they assimilated a number of Yukagirs, and subsequently were themselves absorbed by the Yakuts.

Since meeting the Russians in the 17th c., the Evenks have been strongly influenced by them. The Evenks were among the most Christianized peoples of the North thanks to the active missionary policy conducted by the Orthodox Church. At the same time, they preserved traditional rituals and beliefs: hunting and fishing cults, worshipping the spirits-masters of nature, and shamanism.

The Evenks’ main traditional occupations are nomadic deer-breeding, hunting, and fishing.

From: (PEOPLES of RUSSIA project, www.narodru.ru)

In the traditional Evenk culture, burial rituals take a central place. Worshipping the dead and communicating with their souls derives from the far-away past.

The Evenks used to have two ways of burial: in the air and in the ground. The former meant that a dead body was placed on a labaz, a special platform mounted on poles. Bodies buried in the ground were put in boxes made out of cut wood. The air burial was considered more honorable; it was intended for shamans and clan elders.

In the process of Christianization, the former way gradually disappeared and the latter was critically altered. Burials turned into inhumations, i.e. putting a body in the ground, and followed the Orthodox ritual: the grave was arranged along the west-east line and a cross was erected. Nevertheless, some elements of the indigenous ritual remained.

One of them is a churima – a pyramid-shaped funeral structure of three or four poles. Resembling the skeleton of a chum, it symbolizes the dwelling





Brothers Nikolai Sleptsov and Dmitry Sleptsov, sons of the “white” shaman Gavrila Petrovich Sleptsov

of the deceased in the world of the dead.

In the old days, churimas were common for all Evenk groups regardless of the place of their residence; now you can only see it them far-away corners of the republic, where ancient tradition has remained intact.

The vision of a “white” shaman

An example of a combination of the Christian and Evenk funeral tradition can be G.P. Sleptsov’s burial in the settlement of Buor-Sysy, Moma ulus, Yakutia. According to many residents of the settlement, he was a “white,” i.e. a healing, shaman.

They say that before dying Gavrila Petrovich told to his daughter that he saw two people leading sacrificial deer. He decided to play a practical joke on them and then reward them for the trouble. Knowing that it was her brother Nikolai and a friend of his who went to the cattle camp

to fetch the deer, she decided to write down her father’s words in a notebook.

It came to light later that as the two friends were returning home, their snowmobiles suddenly died out though they were new and had worked faultlessly up to that moment. The friends struggled with them a few hours trying to start them but to no avail. Having decided to go on foot, Nikolai made a last attempt to start the snowmobile – and, all of a sudden, it worked as though it had never broken. Delighted, they carried on.

Soon they came across two elks – as though on purpose, the elks walked right to the middle of the road and stopped dead. Thinking that this was the prey sent by the shaman, they killed them both. As Nikolai said later, never in his life had he had such an easy hunt. He believed that his father gave them meat so that they could treat their relatives and all the people who would come to his funeral.

The churima at the grave of the “white” shaman G. P. Sleptsov – a traditional ritual structure symbolizing the quarters of the deceased in the world of the dead.

The photo at the bottom – the scaffold to the west of the grave, where the sacrificial deer lie and the sledge with the dead man’s belongings is put.

The settlement of Buor-Sysy, Moma ulus, Yakutia

A cross under the churima

In accordance with the Christian ritual, an eight-pointed cross, with an upper cross-bar and a sidewise foot, was put at the foot of buried G.P. Sleptsov. Inside the fence, a churima – the traditional ritual structure – was erected, twice as high as the cross.

The funeral marker is made of poles. On top of it is a small structure of three logs, resembling an ancient on-the-ground burial.

To the west of the grave is a scaffold made out of larch poles, on which sacrificial deer lie. They are arranged in a prescribed order: the first is man-chik, a deer that breaks the way in the deep snow for the deer following it; next is the riding deer uchakh, with its saddle and rein; the last is the deer that carries the dead man’s luggage to the underworld.

The luggage is put on another platform built to the north of the sacrificial scaffold. There, too, there are deer and the sledge of the deceased with all his things and everything a deer herder needs for travelling.





Remains of the sacrificial deer, the saddle and the belongings of a deceased Evenk at the cemetery of the settlement of Khonuu, Moma ulus, Yakutia

A solar disk and a wooden doll emeget, attributes of a shaman's costume. The sun lit the shaman woman's way during her trip across the gloomy Lower World, and the doll served to communicate with the spirits and other inhabitants of the netherworld. *The Museum of Local Lore, settlement of Khonuu, Moma ulus, Yakutia*

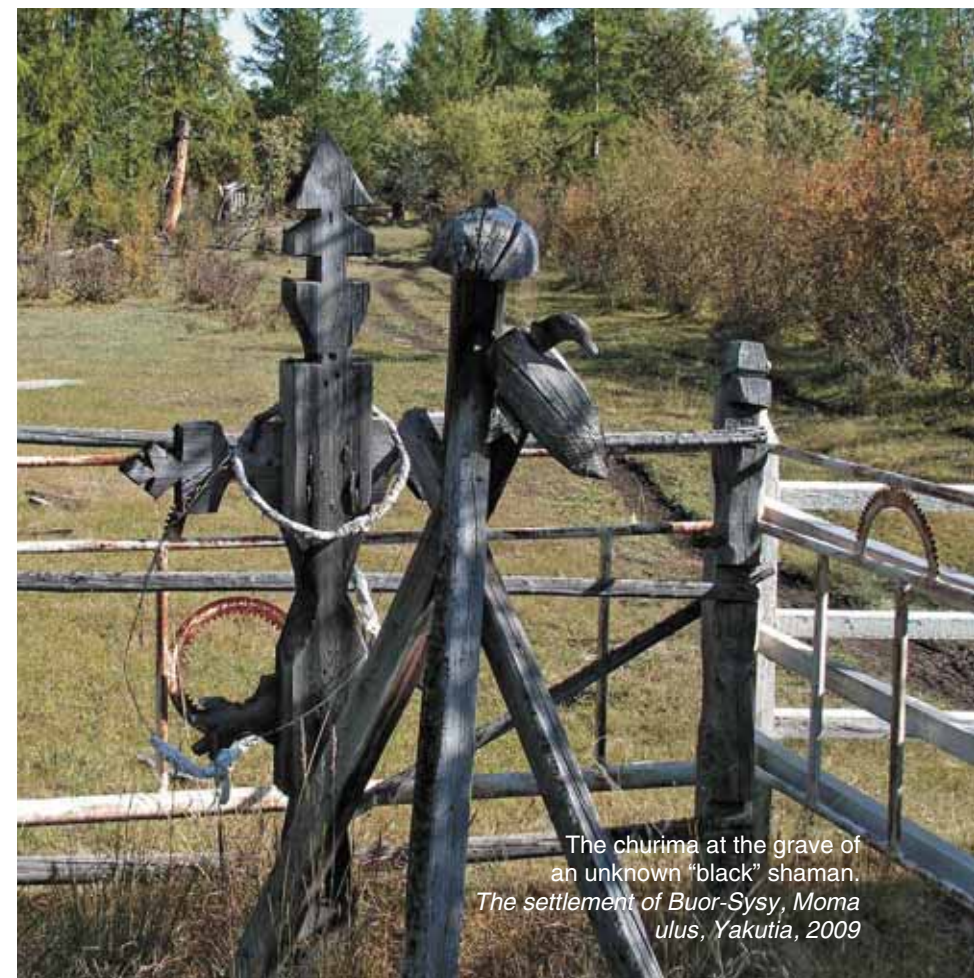


As a rule, the Evenks burn the clothes and personal belongings of the dead since they believe that no trace of him should be left after the funeral. At this burial, however, the shaman's belongings are intact. This can be a specific feature of the Moma funeral ritual.

According to local residents, the shaman's tambourine and the mallet are kept far away, in the mountains of Chersky ridge, in one of the barns that belonged to Sleptsov. One cannot touch, let alone use them.

Birds' warning

The churima at Sleptsov's grave is not the only one in the locality. To the north of the settlement is another similar structure, erected at the grave of an unknown "black" shaman. According to Gavril Petrovich, this man was a bloodthirsty shaman, and Sleptsov even prohibited children to come close to his grave.



The churima at the grave of an unknown "black" shaman. The settlement of Buor-Sysy, Moma ulus, Yakutia, 2009



Inside the fence is an orthodox cross, this time six-pointed, with upper and lower cross-bars. The points of the cross are decorated with carvings.

The churima at this grave is as high as the cross. Attached to the ends of its poles are wooden figurines of birds, looking like duck calls local residents use in the spring to lure migrating birds. Gavril Petrovich used to say that these birds serve as a warning that it is a prohibited area with no entry.



The sacred tree with ribbon offerings.
In the vicinity of the settlement of
Khonuu, Moma ulus, Yakutia

In April 2006, the first congress of Evenks living in Russia was held. Its goal was to unite the representatives of this low-number nationality living in various regions of Yakutia, Chukotka, Kamchatka, in the Magadan Oblast and Khabarovsk Krai. The mission of the congress was to develop measures that would assist in preserving cultural traditions and rituals of the Evenks, as well as in protecting their rights and interests. A deer-herder by birth, representative of the Moma Evenks Ye.I. Sleptsov asks the spirits of the earth to bless the congress

The funeral rituals of the Moma ulus accord Christian regulations and Evenks' traditional beliefs; a cross and a churima get along inside the same fence. Symbols of different religions, they convey the same belief – the belief in eternal life.

After the funeral, the Evenks do not wear mourning or yield to long-lasting sorrow over the dead. And this attitude to death largely contributes to the survival of this small nomadic nationality in the harsh conditions of the Far North.



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