

MIRCEA  
ELIADE

A HISTORY  
OF RELIGIOUS  
IDEAS

Volume

3

From  
Muhammad  
to the  
Age of Reforms

Translated by Alf Hiltebeitel and  
Diane Apostolos-Cappadona

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A HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS IDEAS

**Translated from the French by**

**Alf Hiltebeitel and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona**

MIRCEA

ELIADE

A HISTORY

# RELIGIOUS

**History of**

Religion

of

Man

From Muhammad to the

Age of Reforms

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*For Christinel*

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# Preface

The delay with which this third volume appears is due to reasons of health: as time goes by my vision continues to dwindle, and because of a stubborn arthritis, I write with difficulty. This obliges me to complete the last part of *A History of Religious Ideas* with the collaboration of several of my colleagues, selected from among my former students.

As the reader will not fail to notice, I have modified the plan announced in the Preface of volume 2. I have continued the history of the Christian churches as far as the Enlightenment, and I have transferred the chapters on the expansion of Hinduism, medieval China, and Japanese religions to the final volume. I have devoted four chapters to the history of the beliefs, ideas, and religious institutions of Europe between the fourth and seventeenth centuries. But I have concentrated less on the familiar creations of Occidental thought (e.g., Scholasticism, Reformation) than on certain phenomena which have largely passed into silence or been minimized in the manuals: heterodoxies, heresies, mythologies, and popular practices such as sorcery, alchemy, and esotericism. Interpreted in their proper spiritual horizon, these religious creations have their own special interest and occasionally their grandeur. In any case, they have become integrated into the religious history and culture of Europe.

An important section of the final volume of *A History of Religious Ideas* will be a presentation of the archaic and traditional religions of America, Africa, and Oceania. In fact, in the final chapter, I will undertake to analyze the religious creativity of modern societies.

I wish to thank Professor Charles Adams, who had the kindness to read chapters 33 and 35, and who communicated to me a number of precise observations. It is I, however, who am responsible for the interpretation of Shi'ism and Muslim mysticism, an interpretation grounded in the hermeneutic of my lamented late friend, Henry Corbin. I would like to acknowledge my colleague and friend, Professor Andre Lacocque, for the care with which he read and corrected the entire text of this present volume, and my publisher and friend, Jean-Luc Pidoux-Payot, for his patience and for the interest with which he has followed the elaboration of this work.

The presence, affection, and devotion of my wife have helped me to triumph over the fatigue and the discouragements provoked by my sufferings and infirmities. It is indeed thanks to her that this volume has been achieved.

# The Religions of Ancient Eurasia: Turko-Mongols, Finno-Ugrians, Balto- Slavs

## 31

### 241. Hunters, nomads, warriors

The terrible invasions of the Turko-Mongols—from the Huns in the fourth century to the time of Tamburlaine in the fourteenth—were inspired by the mythic model of the primitive hunter of Eurasia: the carnivore pursuing his game on the steppes. In the suddenness and rapidity of their movements, their massacres of entire populations, and their annihilation of the external signs of sedentary cultures (towns and villages), the horsemen of the Huns, Avars, Turks, and Mongols were like packs of wolves hunting the cervidae on the steppes or attacking the herds of nomad shepherds. Certainly, the strategic importance and political consequences of this behavior were well known by their military chiefs. But the mystical prestige of the exemplary hunter, the carnivore, played a considerable role. A number of Altaic tribes claimed a supernatural wolf as their ancestor (cf. §10).

The flashing apparition of the “Empires of the Steppes” and their more or less ephemeral character still fascinate historians. In effect, the Huns in 374 crushed the Ostrogoths on the Dniester, provoking the precipitous migration of a series of other Germanic tribes, and then, leaving the Hungarian plains, ravaged several provinces of the Roman Empire. Attila succeeded in overwhelming a large part of central Europe, but shortly after his death (453), the Huns, divided and bewildered, disappeared from history. Similarly, the enormous Mongol Empire created by Genghis Khan in twenty years (1206-1227) and expanded by his successors (to Eastern Europe after 1241; to Persia, Iraq, and Anatolia after 1258; and to China in 1279) declined after the failure to conquer Japan (1281). The Turk Tamburlaine (1360-1404),

who considered himself Genghis Khan’s successor, was the last great conqueror inspired by the model of the carnivores.

We must insist that these various “barbarians” surging from the Central Asian steppes were not unaware of certain cultural and religious creations of civilized peoples. Moreover, as we will see in a moment, their ancestors, prehistoric horsemen and nomadic shepherds, had likewise benefited from the discoveries made in the

diverse regions of southern Asia.

The populations speaking Altaic languages occupied a vast territory: Siberia, the Volga region, central Asia, north and northwest China, Mongolia, and Turkey. Three principal branches are distinguished: (1) common Turkish (Uigur, Chagatai); (2) Mongol (Kalmyk, Mongol, Buryat); and (3) Manchu-Tungus.<sup>1</sup> The primitive habitat of these Altaic peoples had in all likelihood been the steppes around the Altai and Ch'ing-hai mountains, between Tibet and China, extending to the north, as far as the Siberian taiga. These diverse Altaic groups, as well as the Finno-Ugrian populations, practiced hunting and fishing in the northern regions, nomadic shepherding in central Asia, and, in a very modest way, farming in the southern zone.

From prehistory, northern Eurasia had been influenced by cultures, skills, and religious ideas coming from the south. The breeding of reindeer in the Siberian regions had been inspired by the domestication of the horse, most probably effected on the steppes. The centers of prehistoric commerce (for example, the Island of the deer on Lake Onega) and metallurgy (Perm) had played an important role in the elaboration of Siberian cultures. Furthermore, central and northern Asia had gradually received religious ideas of Mesopotamian, Iranian, Chinese, Indian, Tibetan (Lamaism), Christian (Nestorianism), and Manichaeian origin, to which it is necessary to add the influences of Islam and, more recently, of Russian Orthodox Christianity.

One must add, however, that these influences were not always successful in modifying the original religious structures. Certain beliefs and customs specific to the Paleolithic hunters still survive in northern Eurasia. In a number of cases, one recognizes these archaic myths and religious conceptions in Lamaist, Muslim, and Christian disguises.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, despite the diverse syncretisms, one can distinguish certain characteristic conceptions: the belief in a celestial god, sovereign of mankind; a specific type of cosmogony; mystical solidarity with animals; shamanism. Nevertheless, the great interest in the religions of central and northern Asia resides chiefly in the syncretistic structure of their creations.

## 242. Tangri, the “Celestial God”

Of all the gods of the Altaic peoples, the most important and best known is indeed Tangri (Tengri among the Mongols and Kalmyks, Tengeri among the Buryats, Tangere among the Tatars of the Volga, and Tingir among the Beltirs). The vocable *tangri*, meaning “god” and “sky,” belongs to the vocabulary of the Turks and the Mongols. Existing “from the prehistory of Asia, it has had a singular fortune. Its field of influence in time, in space, and across civilizations is immense; one knows of it over two millennia; it is or has been employed across all of Asia, from the borders of China to the south of Russia, from Kamchatka to the Sea of Marmara; it has served the Altaic ‘peasants’ by designating their gods and being their supreme God, and has been conserved in all the great universal religions which the Turks and the Mongols have embraced in the course of their history (Christianity, Manichaeism, Islam,

etc.).<sup>3</sup> The word *tangari* is used to express the divine. As applied to the great celestial god, it is attested among the Hsiung-nu in the second century B.C. The texts present him as “grand” (*usd*), “white and heavenly” (*kok*), “eternal” (*mongka*), and endowed with “strength” (*ktic*).<sup>4</sup> In one of the Paleo-Turkic inscriptions of Orkhon (seventh to eighth centuries), it is written: “When the blue sky on high, and the somber earth below were made, between the two were made the sons of men (=humankind).”<sup>5</sup> One can interpret the separation of the Sky and the Earth as a cosmogonic act. But as to a cosmogony proper, having Tangri as its author, there are only allusions. The Tatars of the Altai and the Yakuts, however, refer to their God as a “creator.” And, according to the Buryats, the gods (*tengri*) created man and the latter lived happily up to the moment when the evil spirits spread sickness and death upon the earth.<sup>6</sup>

In such manner the cosmic order, and thus the organization of the world and society, and the destiny of mankind, depend upon Tangri. Accordingly, every sovereign must receive his investiture from heaven. One reads in the inscription of Orkhon: “Tangri who had elevated my father to Kaghan . . . Tangri who gave the empire, this Tangri has established me as Kaghan.”<sup>7</sup> In effect, the Kaghan is the “Son of Heaven” according to the Chinese model (cf. §128). The sovereign is the envoy or representative of the Celestial God. The cult of Tangri is maintained in all its strength and integrity by the sovereign. “When anarchy reigns, when the tribes are scattered, when there is no longer an Empire (as in our times), Tangri, formerly so significant, tends to become a *deus otiosus*, to leave his place to secondary celestial divinities or to break apart into pieces (the multiplication of Tan-gris). . . . When there is no longer a sovereign, the celestial God is slowly forgotten, the popular cult is strengthened and tends to become primary.”<sup>8</sup> (The Mongols knew 99 Tengris, most of them having their own names and precise functions.) The transformation of a celestial god and sovereign into a *deus otiosus* is a universally attested phenomenon. In the case of Tangri, his multiplication or his substitution by other divinities appears to have followed the breakup of the empire.

But a similar process is verified in innumerable historical contexts (cf. *Patterns*, §§14ff.)

Tangri did not have temples, and it is unlikely that he was represented in the form of a statue. In his celebrated discussion with the Imam of Boukhara, Genghis Khan said to him: “The entire universe is the house of God, to what advantage is it to designate a particular place (for example, Mecca) in order to go there?” As everywhere else, the celestial god of the Altai is omniscient. In taking an oath, the Mongols would say, “May Heaven know it!” The military chiefs climbed mountain tops (images of the Center of the World) to pray to God, or, before their campaigns, they lived apart in their tents (occasionally for three days, as Genghis Khan did), while the troops invoked Heaven. Tangri manifested his discontent by cosmic signs: comets, famines, and floods. One would address him in prayers (for example, among the Mongols, the Beltirs, etc.) and one would sacrifice horses, cattle, and sheep to him. Sacrifice to celestial gods is universally attested, especially in cases of calamity or natural

catastrophe. But, in central and northern Asia, as elsewhere, the multiplication of Tangri is followed by their assimilation to other gods (of the thunderstorm, cosmic fertility, etc.). Thus in Altaic, Bai Ulgan (the “Most Grand”) is replaced by Tengere Kaira Kan (“the compassionate Heavenly Lord”), and it is to the latter that one performs the horse sacrifice (see below, §§248ff.).<sup>9</sup> Remoteness and passivity characterize other celestial gods. Thus Buga (“Heaven,” “World”) of the Tungus receives no cult; he is omniscient, but does not interfere in human affairs or punish evildoers. Uriin Ai Toy on of the Yakuts inhabits the seventh heaven, governs all, but does only good (which is to say he doesn’t bring punishment).<sup>10</sup>

## 243. The structure of the world

The cosmology and cosmogony of the Altaic peoples are of great interest. For one thing, they conserve archaic elements found in a number of traditional cultures. In addition, the forms by which they have been transmitted indicate a long syncretistic process of assimilation and reinterpretation of certain ideas received from other peoples. What is more: the cosmology does not always seem to account for the most widespread Asian cosmogonic myth. To be sure, we must take into account the heterogeneity of the evidence at our disposal: the cosmogonic myth has circulated above all in popular cultural contexts— an important point whose significance will soon be underscored.

In Asia, as in many other parts of the world, the structure of the universe is understood on the whole as having three tiers—Heaven, Earth, Hell—interconnected by a central axis. This axis passes through an “opening,” a “hole,” by which the gods descend to the Earth and the dead into the subterranean regions. It is through this opening that the soul of the shaman is able to fly away or descend during his celestial or infernal journeys. The three worlds—which are inhabited by gods, men, and the Sovereign of Hell with the dead—are thus imagined as three superimposed planes.<sup>11</sup>

A number of Altaic peoples have imagined that heaven is like a tent; the Milky Way is the “seam”; the stars, the “holes” for the light. From time to time, the gods open the tent to look out on the earth, thus causing meteors. Heaven is also conceived as a cover or lid which happens not to have been perfectly fitted to the edges of the earth; thus the great winds penetrate through the openings. And it is through this reduced space that heroes and other privileged beings are able to slip through and reach Heaven. In the middle of Heaven shines the pole-star, which supports the celestial tent like a post. It is called “the Golden Pillar” (by the Mongols, Buryats, etc.), “the Iron Pillar” (by the Siberian Tatars, etc.), “the Solar Pillar” (by the Teleuts, etc.).<sup>12</sup>

As one would expect, this cosmology has found a model in the microcosm of the human world. The world axis is represented in a concrete fashion, whether by the pillars which support human habitations, or in the form of single, isolated posts, called “Pillars of the World.”

When the form of the habitation is modified (from the hut with a conical roof one passes to the yurt), the pillar's mythico-religious function devolves upon the high opening for the removal of the smoke. This aperture corresponds to the similar orifice of the "House of Heaven," assimilated to the "hole" which the polestar makes in the canopy of heaven. This symbolism is extremely widespread.<sup>13</sup> The underlying idea is the belief in the possibility of direct communication with Heaven. On the macrocosmic level, this communication is represented by an axis (pillar, mountain, tree, etc.). On the microcosmic plane, it is signified by the central pillar of the dwelling-place or the highest opening of the tent. One may thus say that *every human habitation is projected as a "Center of the World,"* that every altar, tent, or home makes possible a rupture of levels and consequently communication with the gods, and even (in the case of the shamans) the ascent to Heaven.

As we have remarked several times before, the most widespread mythical images of the "Center of the World" (traceable even in prehistory; cf. §7) are the Cosmic Mountain and the World Tree. These images are encountered also among the Altaic populations and throughout Asia. The Tatars of the Altai imagined Bai Ulgan in the middle of Heaven, seated on the Golden Mountain. The Abakan Tatars called it "Iron Mountain." The fact that the Mongols, Buryats, and Kalmyks knew it under the name of Sumbur, Sumur, or Sumer, which clearly betrays an Indian influence (= Meru, the mythical mountain), does not necessarily imply that they were ever ignorant of this archaic and universal symbol.<sup>14</sup> As for the World Tree, it is attested to everywhere in Asia and plays an important role in shamanism. Cosmologically, the World Tree rises from the center of the earth, from the point of the earth's "navel," and its highest branches touch the palace of Bai Ulgan. The Tree unites the three cosmic regions, for its roots are sunk into the inmost depths of the earth. According to the Mongols and Buryats, the gods (Tengeri) feed off the fruits of the Tree. Other Altaic peoples believe that the souls of infants, before birth, repose like little birds on the branches of the Cosmic Tree, and that it is there that the shamans go to look for them.<sup>15</sup> The shaman is supposed to fashion his drum from the wood of the World Tree. Replicas of this tree are found before and inside his yurt, and he also draws it on his drum. What is more, as we will see (§245), when the Altaic shaman climbs the ritual birch, he effectively climbs the Cosmic Tree.

## 244. The vicissitudes of creation

The cosmogonic myth best known among the peoples of central and northern Asia is almost universally dispersed, although in quite different forms. Its archaism (cf. §7), its considerable diffusion—outside of central and northern Asia, it is attested in Aryan and pre-Aryan India, in Southeast Asia, and in North America—and the multiple modifications that it has undergone in the course of the centuries are features of this myth that present the historian of religions with one of his most stimulating problems. In order to place the specific characters of these central Asian versions (and those of eastern Europe, §250) in relief, let us first present what appear to be the myth's earliest forms. The landscape is always the same: the Great Waters before the Creation.

The scenario permits these variations: (1) God, in the form of an animal, himself plunges to the bottom of the abyss to bring up a little mud in order to fashion the Earth; (2) he dispatches an amphibious animal (an aquatic bird); or (3) he gets a creature (sometimes an omithomorph) to dive, whose existence he was unaware of till that time and who, in what follows, turns out to be his adversary. The first version is found in Hinduism (a great god—Prajapati, Brahma, Visnu—transformed into a boar descends to the bottom of the Waters and lifts up the Earth; cf. vol. 1, p. 441). The second is extremely widespread (pre-Aryan India, Assam, North America, etc.). Let us note that in this version the animal divers and the Creator are in no way opposed to each other. It is only in Asia and eastern Europe that the cosmogonic dive takes on “dualistic” overtones.

Among the different Turkish peoples one sometimes comes across

the fusion of these last two versions. A Buryat myth presents Sombol-Burkan resting upon the primordial Ocean. Seeing an aquatic bird, he asks it to dive into the depths. With the mud carried back by the bird, he creates the Earth. According to other variations, Burkan then fashions man, always with the mud.<sup>16</sup> In a myth of the Lebed Tatars, a white swan dives on the command of God and brings back to him a bit of earth in its beak. God forms the Earth, flat and smooth. It is only afterwards that the Devil arrives, to make the marsh.<sup>17</sup> According to the Tatars of the Altai, in the beginning, when only the Waters existed, God and “man” swam together in the form of black geese. God sent “man” to find the mud. But the latter kept a bit in his mouth, and when the Earth began to grow larger, the mud began to inflate. He was obliged to spit it out, in this manner giving birth to the marsh. God said to him: “You have sinned, and your subjects will be evil. My subjects will be pious; they will see the Sun, the light, and I will be called Kurbystan (= Ohrmazd). You, you will be Erlik.”<sup>18</sup> The syncretism with Iranian ideas is evident. But the scenario of the cosmic dive is almost entirely preserved. The identity between “man” and the Sovereign of Hell, Erlik Khan, is explained by the fact that the First Man, the mythic Ancestor, was also the first to die (a mytheme found in many traditions).

Among the Mongols, the variants are even more complex. Ocirvani (= Vajrapani) and Tsagan-Sukurty descend from Heaven onto the primordial sea. Ocirvani asks his companion to dive and bring him some mud. After having spread out this mud on a tortoise, they both fall asleep. Then comes the Devil, Sulmus, who endeavors to drown them, but as much as he rolls them over, the Earth expands. According to a second variant, Ocurman, who lives in Heaven, wishes to create the Earth and seeks a companion. He finds one in Tsangan-Sukurty, and sends him to find the clay in his name. But Tsangan-Sukurty becomes

boastful: “Without me, you would not have been able to obtain the clay!” he cries. Then the clay slips out from between his fingers. Diving again, he takes the mud this second time in the name Ocurman. After the Creation Sulmus comes by and demands a part of the Earth, exactly as much of it as he can touch with the tip of his staff. Sulmus hits the sun with his staff, and the serpents appear.<sup>19</sup> The myth unifies or

juxtaposes two different dualistic motifs: (1) the identification of the adversary-rival with the protagonist of the dive; and (2) the Evil One who arrives from some unknown place when the Earth has already been created, and demands a part of it or seeks to destroy it.

The cosmogonic dive is also found among the Finno-Ugrians, the western Slavs, and in eastern Europe. We will soon return to the “dualistic hardening” of the myth, and examine the hypotheses advanced as to its origin (§250). For the moment, let us insist that it is from the third variant—in which the Creator gets an anthropomorphic auxiliary to undertake the dive—that the dramatic and, ultimately, the “dualistic” possibilities of the myth are developed. The vicissitudes of the dive and the cosmogonic work which follows it are invoked henceforth to explain the imperfections of Creation: advent of Death, the appearances of mountains and marshes, as well as the “birth” of the Devil and the existence of Evil. As it is no longer the *Creator himself* who plunges in order to procure the substance of the Earth, but one of his auxiliaries or servitors who carries out the task, it becomes possible to introduce into the myth, thanks precisely to this episode, an element of insubordination, of antagonism or opposition. The “dualistic” interpretation of the Creation has been made possible by the progressive transformation of the theriomorphic auxiliary of God into his “servitor,” his “companion,” and finally his Adversary.<sup>20</sup> We will have further occasion to appreciate the importance of this dualistic interpretation in “popular” theodicies (§251).

The myths about the creation of man also set in relief the baneful role of the Adversary. As in many mythologies, God forms man from clay and breathes a soul into him. But in central and northern Asia, the scenario includes a dramatic episode: after having fashioned the bodies of the first men, God leaves a dog to protect them and climbs to Heaven in order to seek souls for them. During his absence Erlik comes along and, promising the dog (still naked at this moment) a fleece if it allows him to approach, stains the bodies with his saliva. The Buryats believe that without the stain of Cholm (the Adversary), humans would never have known of sickness and death. According to another group of Altaic variants, it was Erlik, profiting from the absence of God and enticing the dog, who animated the bodies himself.<sup>21</sup> In this latter case, it is a question of a desperate effort not only to absolve God of the existence of illnesses and human mortality, but also of the wickedness of the human soul.

## **245. The shaman and shamanic initiation**

A celestial sovereign god who becomes a *deus otiosus* or is indefinitely multiplied (Tangri and the 99 Tengri); a creator god, but one whose works (the world and man) are bungled by the shrewd intervention of a satanic adversary; the precariousness of the human soul; illness and death provoked by demons and evil spirits; a tripartite universe—Heaven, Earth, and Hell—which implies a mythic geography that can be quite complex (the numerous celestial and infernal levels demand the knowledge of

the paths which lead to heaven or into the netherworld)—it suffices to have recalled these essential elements in order to appreciate the considerable role of the shaman in the religions of central and northern Asia. In effect, the shaman is at one and the same time theologian and demonologist, specialist in ecstasy and medicineman, auxiliary of the hunt, protector of the community and the animal herds, psychopomp and, in certain societies, poet and man of erudition.

The term “shamanism” is used to designate an archaic (seemingly attested since the Paleolithic) and universally dispersed (though rather exceptional in Africa) religious phenomenon. But shamanism, in the strict sense of the term, prevails especially in central and northern Asia and in the Arctic regions. It is repeatedly in Asia that shamanism has endured influences of the greatest number (Irano-Mesopotamian, Buddhist, Lamaist), without losing its proper structure.

The multiple powers of the shaman are the result of his initiatory experiences. It is thanks to the ordeals of his initiation that the future shaman measures the precariousness of the human soul and learns the means to defend it. Likewise, he knows by experience the sufferings provoked by different maladies and is able to identify their causes. He undergoes a ritual death, descends to Hell, and, sometimes, ascends to Heaven. In short, all the powers of the shaman depend on his experiences and his knowledge of the “spiritual” order. He succeeds in familiarizing himself with all the “spirits”: the souls of the living and the dead, the gods and the demons, the innumerable figures—invisible to the rest of mankind—who inhabit the three cosmic regions.

One becomes a shaman by one of three means: (1) by a spontaneous vocation (a “calling” or an “election”); (2) by the hereditary transmission of the shamanic profession; or (3) by a personal decision or, more rarely, by the desire of the clan. But whatever has been the method of selection, a shaman is recognized as such only after he has received a double instruction: (1) of an ecstatic order (dreams, visions, trances, etc.), and (2) of a traditional order (shamanic techniques, names and functions of spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc.). This double instruction, which is presided over by the spirits and the old master shamans, constitutes the initiation. This might be done publicly, but the absence of such a ceremony does not imply by any means the absence of an initiation. The latter may very well be effected in a dream or in an ecstatic experience of the neophyte.

The syndrome of the mystical vocation is recognized easily. The future shaman singles himself out by strange behavior. He becomes a dreamer, seeks solitude, loves to saunter in the woods or in deserted places, has visions, sings during his sleep. Sometimes this period of incubation is characterized by rather grave symptoms. Among the Yakuts, the young man may become mad and fall unconscious easily, take shelter in the forest, feed on the bark of trees, throw himself into the water and fire, and hurt himself with knives.<sup>22</sup> Even when it is a matter of hereditary shamanism, the election of the future shaman is preceded by a change of behavior. The souls of the ancestor-shamans choose a young man of the family; he becomes absentminded

and dreamy, is seized by a need for solitude, has prophetic visions, undergoes fits which leave him unconscious. During that time, according to the Buryats, the soul is carried away by the spirit. Received in the palace of the gods, it is instructed by the ancestor-shamans in the secrets of the profession, the forms and names of the gods, the names and cult of the spirits, and so on. It is only after this first initiation that the soul reintegrates with the body.<sup>23</sup>

Quite often the mystical vocation implies a profound crisis, which plays the role of an initiation. Now every initiation, of whatever order, includes a period of segregation and a certain number of tests and tortures. The illness unleashed upon the future shaman by the anguished feeling that he has been “chosen” takes on, by its very nature, the value of an “initiatory illness.” The precariousness and solitude that are part of every illness become aggravated, in this precise case, by the symbolism of mystical death. For in taking upon oneself this supernatural “election,” one feels that one has been abandoned by the divine or demonic powers and left to an imminent death. The “madness” of future shamans, their “psychic chaos,” signifies that the profane man is about to “dissolve” himself and that a new personality is at the point of being born.

In many cases, the syndrome of “sickness” follows very closely the classic ritual of initiation. The sufferings of the “elect” bear a point by point resemblance with initiatory tortures. Just as, in rites of puberty, the novice is killed by demon-“masters of initiation,” so the future shaman sees himself cut up and morselled out by the “demons of the illness.” In his sickness, he experiences his ritual death in the form of a descent into Hell. He witnesses, in his dream, his own dismemberment. He sees the demons cut off his head and scratch out his eyes. According to the Yakuts, the spirits carry the future shaman to Hell and imprison him there for three years in a house. It is there that he undergoes his initiation: the spirits cut off his head, which they put aside (because the novice must look on with his own eyes as he is torn apart), and they cut him into little pieces, which they then distribute to the spirits of diverse illnesses. It is only by experiencing this condition that the future shaman will obtain the power of healing. His bones are then covered over again with new flesh, and in certain cases he is also supplied with new blood. Other shamans tell that during their initiatory illness, the ancestral shamans pierce them with arrows, cut their flesh, and pull out their bones in order to clean them; or else they open up their stomach, eat their flesh and drink their blood; or cook their body and forge on their head with the use of an anvil. During this time, they lie unconscious, nearly inanimate, for three to nine days in the yurt or a solitary place. Some seem even to have stopped breathing and have nearly been buried. Finally, they are resuscitated, but with an entirely renewed body, and with the gift of the shaman.<sup>24</sup>

Generally, when the neophyte lies unconscious in the yurt, the family appeals to a shaman, and it is the latter, much later, who will have the role of instructor. In other cases, after his “initiatory dismemberment,” the novice goes out in search of a master, in order to learn the secrets of the profession. The instruction is of an esoteric nature, and it is sometimes received in a state of ecstasy. In other words, the master shaman

instructs his disciple in the same manner that the demons and the spirits would. Among the Yakuts, the master takes the soul of the novice with him on a long ecstatic journey. He begins by climbing a mountain. From the top, the master shaman shows the novice the fork in the path from which other trails lead towards the crests. That is where the various maladies that torment men reside. The master then leads his disciple into a dwelling. There, they put on shamanic costumes and shamanize together. The master reveals to him how to recognize and to heal the ills which attack the diverse parts of the body. Finally, he leads his disciples to the higher world, to the residence of the celestial spirits. The new shaman has at his command henceforth a “consecrated body” and he is able to practice his craft.<sup>25</sup>

One also finds public initiatory ceremonies, especially among the Buryats, the Goldi, the Altai, the Tungus, and the Manchus. Among the most interesting are those of the Buryats. The principal rite calls for an ascent. In the yurt one fixes a solid birch, the roots set in the hearth and the top emerging from the smoke-hole. This birch is named “the guardian of the door,” for it opens for the shaman his passage to Heaven. The apprentice climbs up to the top of the birch and, going out by the smoke-hole, cries out with strength to invoke the aid of the gods. Then, all those in attendance are directed in procession toward a site set off from the village, where a great number of birches have been planted the previous evening for the ceremony. Near one birch, a goat is sacrificed and the apprentice, naked from the waist up, is anointed with blood on the head, eyes, and ears, while other shamans play the drum. The master-shaman then climbs up a birch and makes nine incisions at the top. The apprentice, followed by the other shamans, climbs up in turn. As they mount, they all fall—or feign to fall—into ecstasy. According to one informed source, the candidate must climb nine birches which, like the nine notches, symbolize the nine heavens.<sup>26</sup>

What must be kept in mind about this initiatory rite is that the apprentice shaman is supposed to go to Heaven in order to be consecrated. As we will see, ascent by means of a tree or post also constitutes the essential rite in the seances of Altaic shamans. The birch or the post is comparable to the Tree or the Pillar which stands at the Center of the World and connects the three cosmic zones. In sum, the shamanic tree has all the prestige of the Cosmic Tree.

## **246. Shamanic myths and rituals**

The myths of the origin of shamans set two highly significant themes in relief: (1) the “First Shaman” was created by God (or by the celestial gods); (2) but on account of his maliciousness, the gods severely limited his powers. According to the Buryats, the Tengris decided to give a shaman to mankind so that he could struggle against sickness and death, which had been introduced by evil spirits. They dispatched the Eagle. The latter saw a woman asleep and had intercourse with her.

The woman gave birth to a son who became the “First Shaman.” The Yakuts share the same belief. But the Eagle also bears the name of Supreme Being, Ai (the “Creator”)