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Flights of the Sacred

Symbolism and Theory in Siberian Shamanism

DURING THE SUMMER of 1994, in a small Sakha (Yakut) village in the Northern Sakha Republic (Yakutia), I visited the grave of a famous Sakha shaman and had what can be called an “altered states” experience. Since altered states—of consciousness, politics, and conditions of life—are quite common in the former Soviet Union in the nineties, let this story be an allegory for the disorientations and new connections that many are experiencing in these times.

The morning I walked out of the village to search for the shaman's grave was a gift of time, for I had just learned that the plane that would take me away would be a half day late. I had wanted to visit the grave of Tokoyeu *oiuun* (shaman), but several Sakha friends tried to dissuade me, saying, “It will be your responsibility, you can go there by yourself if you like.” They had shown me the appropriate path through a field, leading out from a rutted, muddy, Soviet-style road strewn with garbage. Visible in the distance was a hill-ock with a Russian Orthodox cross astride a long, low miniature house. The grave was separate, for the much revered and feared resting places of shamans are kept apart from others and usually hidden even deeper in the woods or taiga. When I reached the site, I passed its fenced grave in silence and tied a few horse hairs onto a nearby low bushlike tree, feeling somewhat silly, yet also sure that this was the proper behavior, as in sacred groves, to show respect. I turned back to look at the grave, and though I cannot say that a huge black raven literally flew out of it, I suddenly sensed his presence near the grave. The raven silently flew to a larch tree nearby and stared at me for long minutes that seemed to stop time. I remembered that one of the helper spirits of Tokoyeu was believed to be a raven (*suor*). And so I

looked at him calmly and said, in my mind, “If you are who I think you are, please help your grandson.”¹

Meeting Tokoyeu's grandson had been one of the most jolting and significant experiences of my field-work. He was a downcast and disheveled young man, with long straggly hair and a black leather jacket. When the Sakha friend with whom I was traveling went to ask if this grandson would be willing to talk to an American, he had responded somewhat sulkily, “I guess I will have to talk to her. I dreamed about her before she came. But I thought she was Russian.” Later, while the grandson, born in 1959, choked out his chilling life story, I turned off my tape recorder with tears streaming down my face. Tears were streaming down his, too. When he had been a teenager, he had had all the signs of a shamanic sickness—*attaten yald'ar*—a torturing and testing by the spirits. In another age, he would have accepted the spirit helpers of his grandfather and become a leader and spiritual healer of his people. Certainly his grandfather had been such a leader, before Soviet repression of shamans had made him an outcast.

In the Soviet period, “shamanic sickness” in a young man was taken to be an extreme mental illness, both politically and socially dangerous.² And indeed, the grandson admitted with a wry half-grin, it was probably a little scary for his fellow villagers when he rode a motorcycle around the graveyard and then came down a hill toward the village with no hands on the handlebars. He was twice taken to psychiatric prisons, where horrendously painful and debilitating drugs were administered within a system famous for its institutionalized sadism. Far from becoming a healer, the young man had become a mess, although he still showed signs of shamanic talents and had a loving family. Ironically, I was able to help him understand some of his options for potential curing in more “traditional” ways, since he felt isolated from knowledge of living Sakha shamans and from the activist cultural revitalization in republic cities and towns. I suggested that he might travel, de-

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spite long distances, to a young shaman of the Viliuisk region, one of whose helper spirits was a raven.

The raven figures in many shamanic narratives and seances throughout Siberia and in North America. In Sakha tradition, the raven is a spirit mediator par excellence but also a controversial bird, still believed by many today to appear as a harbinger of bad news, especially death. Shamans whose main spirit helpers are ravens are particularly powerful and revered, yet also feared and even pitied for the troubles this paradoxical spirit helper can bring.

This essay focuses on the significance of birds in shamanic cosmologies and in specific historic and current sociopolitical contexts. I feature Sakha ideologies, making comparisons among Siberian and other peoples, and exploring various theories about shamanism and the analysis of anthropology data more generally. Birds and other shamanic animals, as powerful tropes, are used here not to fly in the face of existing theories but as a way to work through them, to achieve complex, locally adapted matches among various theories and diverse data. Birds are the anthropological helper spirits of this essay, a mediating starting point for traveling into conceptual spaces that cannot and need not be homogenized.

Two key concepts suggested by comments of Sakha consultants, including shamans and curers, provide a framework for initial discussion: birds as helper spirit-mediators and birds as souls or soul manifestations. In discussing these concepts, I shuttle between ideas that are in the esoteric domain of shamans, passed on as special knowledge through generations, and ideas that are in the wider mainstream of belief for many Sakha. These domains overlap, especially since shamans shared and still share their knowledge with patients. Both domains are changing in ways that are not easily predictable. I am particularly interested in the eclectic shamanic worldviews expressed by non-shamans, which continue despite all the efforts to suppress shamanism on the part of Russian Orthodox missionaries and then of Soviets.

Birds and Beyond: Spirit Mediation and Soul Beliefs

Birds and other helper spirits were and are today summoned to solve personal or community problems through the seance, a poetic dance of symbolic codes, full of sound and fury, intensely involving, at once frightening and fascinating. The Sakha, the farthest north of Turkic language speakers, use several words and phrases for seance: *kuturar*, placing emphasis on shamanic chanting and songs, including calls of birds; *aptaktaakh*, referring to everything in the seance,

songs, dances, trancing, tricks, and miracles; and *kyryyr*, or travel to the edge.³

Some of the most compelling seance descriptions in all of Siberian ethnographic literature come from the turn-of-the-century Russian exile Ivan A. Khudiakov (1969:303–355), who recorded, in Sakha and Russian, dialogues between shamans and helper spirits. One such dialogue, between a Verkhoiansk shaman and an eagle spirit, involved the radical changing of the shaman's face and voice as he took on the persona of the spirit:

He stood, and bowing to all people present, said "Hello! Why have you called me here? Why have you bothered me? With what will you reward me? My steps are heavy, [though I trust] it is not for nothing that I have reached you. My sharp, fast eyes are piercing, my fiery tongue pours over and surrounds you all, my eagle talons capture and pin you, I will squeeze anyone who clutches my tail! Why have you asked me here? Tell me now, oh why?"

The shaman, feeding morsels of food to the spirit through the fire, drumming, shaking, and twirling in his iron-laden cloak, replied,

We have bothered you for a great reason. Please be kind. Please soften your skeptical heart, calm your boiling blood, look with pity. We disturb you for the sake of a sick one: cure our sick one here. And all that you demand, we will fulfill.⁴

In seances, including some that still occur, the sounds of animal and bird spirit helpers are not so much mimicked as embodied by the most effective shamans. Some of the iron ornaments of the Sakha, Even, Evenk, and Yukagir shaman's cloak symbolize bird feathers, certain bird bones (especially the humerus), and, often, full bird forms of various bird helper spirits. In certain seances, depending on their purpose and context, the shaman, instead of bringing spirits to the bedside of an ill patient, must travel to upper or lower worlds of the shamanic cosmos. Bird spirits are so salient that the Russian ethnographer Waldemar Jochelson suggested that the full shaman's cloak "represents a bird's skin, with the help of which the shaman is transformed into a bird . . . he is a bird-man . . . supposed to rise to the upper world by means of his coat" (1933:111) (see Figure 1).⁵

As birds help shamans ascend through difficult, multilayered cosmic terrain to capture lost souls or find spirits of sickness, they loan shamans their qualities—for example, the eagle's piercing eyesight and endurance. An illustration of the degree to which shamans were identified with their helper spirits is the nickname of one of the great deceased Sakha shamans of the Kolyma region, Kuba-oiuun (Swan-shaman). A current example is Kytalyk-oiuun (White Crane-shaman), whose name is significant because many still revere the

crane as a sacred, rare, and protected bird, associated with femininity, blessing, and seasonal balance (I. Gogolev 1987).

The identification of shamans with their helper spirits is confirmed in numerous stories of shamanic exploits. When the shaman Bahylai of the Srednaia Kolyma region was blamed for starting a forest fire soon after World War II, "the militia came searching for him, either to arrest or fine him. But he got away. He swam into the water and became a loon. As a loon, he was able to create a heavy, wet snow that stopped the fire." When he died, his family burned his mattress and clothes: "Out of this fire came a raven, which flew toward his home village."⁶

Parilop, a popular, wise, and kind shaman of the Srednaia Kolyma region, was said to be uncannily accurate at predictions and diagnoses of illnesses and troubles, although he supposedly stopped his curing seances after Soviet repression. He foresaw the burning of an electric power station a week before it occurred, but people did not take him seriously enough. Parilop had a woodgrouse as one of his helping spirits. "One day Parilop decided to visit his friend Kharkha in the village of Khatingnaakh. He came as a woodgrouse and sat right on Kharkha's roof. Kharkha came out of his house, saw the woodgrouse looking at him, and grabbed his gun, ready to shoot the bird, who got away." In a few days, Parilop arrived by plane. He "went to Kharkha's house, somewhat miffed but smiling, and said 'You nearly shot me the day before yesterday. Why did you try to do this?' "⁷

Tokoyeu, Parilop's contemporary, controlled the difficult and dangerous raven, whose uncanny abilities in identifying and transferring souls made them logical messengers and helpers. Tokoyeu was, by his own modest account, a shaman of merely middle-range power, capable of some curing, predictions, and finding of lost people and objects. As a young man, Tokoyeu had stopped at a hunter's rest spot near Siən Kiuol'. Suddenly, he fell into a kind of enchantment or trance:

I was surrounded by five human-looking spirits, who decided to test me at this place. What kind of seances could I do? What kind of spirits, *aiyy*—benevolent, *abaahy*—evil, would I control? What kind of attributes [e.g., dress, drum] would I have for my seances? Then they said, "You will be a medium-level oiun, a kind shaman. You will salve people's grief." At that moment I came to myself. I was on my back, with my hands to my aching head. I woke up, and from that time I started to do seances.⁸

Another shaman of Kolyma, reputed to have a raven and an eagle as his helper spirits, was Səməṇ Gul'aev, who died in 1965. Before he died, he searched desperately and fruitlessly for a successor. One promising candidate was a young man, Vasily A. Kudrin, who



Figure 1

Aleksandra Chirkova, wearing the cloak of her deceased father Konstantin oiun. Head doctor of the Abyi region of the Sakha Republic, she is a Soviet-medicine-trained surgeon also using traditional curing techniques in her medical practice. Photo by Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, 1993.

later regretted that he had rejected Gul'aev's overtures. Kudrin explained in 1994,

I was a Komsomol [young Communist League member] in the 1950s and was taking a sled with horses from Khatingnaakh village to Sredne Kolymsk. Suddenly I saw a raven swoop down and scare the horses. I calmed them down and went on. The next day, Gul'aev found me in the street and said, in the most fond, affectionate voice, "I've been looking for you and finally found you." I was petrified. He had seen me react with the horses when he was in the form of a raven, and wanted me to then become his apprentice. [Did you know who he was?] Yes, I knew who he was. Everyone knew who he was.

Kudrin's fears were derived from concern over Soviet repression of shamanic activity, but he had what was perhaps a greater terror of the spiritual trials required to become a shaman. Such birth-pain trials differed according to the type of shaman the neophyte was destined to be and the personalities of a given shaman and mentor. But in the ideology of generations of Sakha shamans, they involved a complex tempering of various kinds of souls. Through this tortuous process, lasting from one to nine years, shamans received multiple

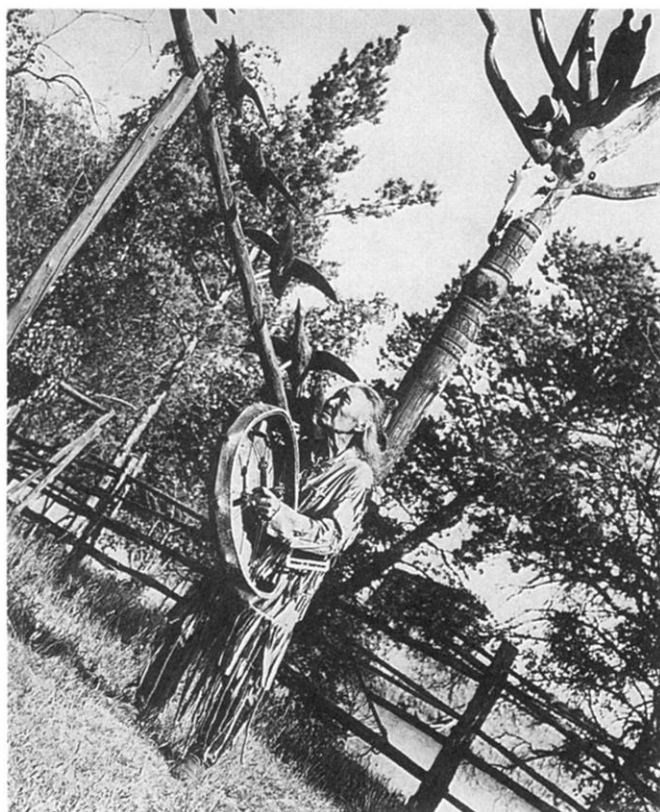


Figure 2

Iakim Izbekov, retired shaman's assistant and renowned choreographer, with wooden *əmægət* birds perched in a row on a pole slanted skyward at his homestead. Part-Sakha ethnographer Alexander A. Popov was told, "the first shaman cut, from pieces of willow, *ämäkät*, birds and animals, and made them whole, breathed life into them with his breath, after which they hid themselves. Since then have shamanic helper spirits existed" (1947:290).

helper spirits that could troubleshoot at a shaman's will. These mediating spirits ranged from the raven and eagle to such birds as the loon, hawk, crane, woodgrouse, swan, lark, cuckoo, and sandpiper, and included bears, wolves, foxes, bulls, and dogs. They were beasts of prey as well as more domesticated animals. They were rare, larger-than-life birds of great soaring power, as well as commonly seen birds of modest abilities and size. A great shaman could have as many as 47 helpers, but more typical numbers ranged from three to nine, and could change over a shaman's lifetime.

The Sakha ethnographer Nikolai A. Alekseev (1984:79–81) makes an important distinction between situational spirit helpers, who can be spirits of specific localities or specialized disease alleviation, and major tutelary spirits, who are more like alter egos or "doubles" of a shaman. The most important of helper "doubles" is the "mother-beast-spirit" (*iiə-kyyl*), sometimes also termed "primary-form-beast" (*kəp-kyyl*) (Ksenofontov 1992[1928]:69; Seroshevsky 1896:626). Such spir-

its are incorporated into cosmologies and iconographies that still have meaning. In the lexicon of folk medicine practitioners and believers, spirits in general are called *ichchi*, benevolent spirits are *aiyy*, and evil ones are *abaahy*. Shamanic tutelary spirits and the images they are housed in are both *əmægət*, mistakenly glossed in Christian-oriented ethnographies as "idols." Wooden *əmægət* usually take human or bird forms (see Figure 2).⁹

Sakha of diverse regions and backgrounds explain that they have three main souls: the *iiə-kut* or "mother soul," *buor-kut* or "earth-clay soul," and *salgyn-kut* or "air-breath soul." This concept of spirituality is crucial in philosophical teachings called *kut-siur* (soul-mind-life force) that are now taught in schools throughout the republic, stimulated by a group of Sakha intelligentsia who call themselves Kut-siur.¹⁰

In Sakha concepts prevalent among elders and members of Kut-siur, the key to Sakha fertility and the transfer of souls to human mothers is the sky goddess Aiyhyt. Various shamanic rituals of earlier times helped assuage problems of infertility or child deaths by convincing Aiyhyt to transfer souls from the sky (especially from the main sky god Aiy Toion) into a suffering woman. Shamans considered capable of leading such rituals were often, but not necessarily, women. In one case, a young woman asked the shaman Səməṇ Gul'aev for help because she had lost many children in childbirth or soon after. He prepared a small bird's nest that was placed on a sacred tree in the forest to attract the souls of a potential newborn. A child was born soon after and lived until adulthood.¹¹

For future shamans, including those with shamans in their family trees and those who are reincarnated shamans, the three souls have special fates (*d'yglha*) and require special training. Knowledge about this is esoteric and mystical and thus controversial, personal, and less susceptible than other soul beliefs to generalization. Yet a few patterns emerge. The earth-clay soul becomes a fish for its training, acquiring knowledge of water-based diseases and sickness caused by shamans. The air-breath soul, nestled in hollows or nests at ranked levels of a great larch tree, is fed raven or eagle eggs. Sons and daughters of one of the Sakha sky gods, Āry Darkhan, take the form of either the raven or the eagle and "teach the soul diverse shamanic tricks and cleverness" (Popov 1947:283). This soul could take the form of a cuckoo or sandpiper. If it has trouble, a nurturing double-headed eagle (*öksökiu*) dries its soul wings and fattens its body.¹²

A shaman's mother soul is spirited away to a land parallel to earth in the middle world, where it becomes the *iiə-kyyl* (mother beast). It lives physically separate from the shaman, who sees it and/or takes its form—some say three times in a life, others once a year, others

when it is critically needed. Yet its fate is intricately tied to the shaman's, for when it dies the shaman dies, and when the shaman fights with other shamans it can be in the form of the mother beast.

Stories of shamans fighting in the form of their mother beast are still popular and believed by some. The Viliuisk shaman Nikon is said to have vanquished a blacksmith who was a Komsomol member by taking this form and killing the blacksmith's wife. Some tales have ramifications of ethnic competition. The Kolyma shaman Parilop, allegedly sickened by a local Evenk shaman, took revenge in the form of a wolf and gorged himself on a herd of the Evenk shaman's reindeer. A village on the Abyi riverbank was founded only after the site had been made safe by a Sakha "white shaman" (*aiyy-oiuun*) who vanquished, in a mother-beast fight, a "black shaman" (*khara-oiuun*) who may have been a local Evenk.¹³

Typical shamanic mother beasts of the central and northern Sakha are the eagle, raven, crane, bull, elk, deer, and bear. Stronger shamans have a bear or an eagle, and weaker ones a wolf or dog.¹⁴ One of the Sakha curers with whom I have worked considers herself "especially close to the eagle." Her patients confirm they have seen an eagle during her seances, but I have not managed this.

In 1991, the main yearly Sakha festival (*yhyakh*), which celebrates fertility, fermented mare's milk (*kymys*), the advent of summer, and (on this occasion) the legalization of the festival as a state holiday, was declared in honor of the eagle. Special carved wooden posts called *sərgə*, topped by eagle images, were raised at several festival sites in the republic (Balzer 1993a). In 1995, I attended the raising of an enormous eagle post placed on a peak at the homestead site of one of the earliest known Sakha ancestors, Tygyn-Darkhan, said to be a warrior shaman. The ceremony, organized by members of Kut-siur, included prayers to Tygyn (see Figure 3).

The sacredness of the eagle is reflected in beliefs about serious supernatural punishments for the hunting of eagles, said to be children of the sky god Khotoi-aiyy. While the eagle's origins may be forgotten by some today, reticence to hunt eagles remains. A foolish Sakha eagle hunter could go crazy, acquiring the sounds of an eagle and ultimately writhing in death. (This might not happen to a Russian, however.) Poetic epithets for the eagle, used in shamanic seances, in prayers, and in sacred epics (*olonkho*), include "talons sounding like metal, screaming [into the] stone sky, with all seeing eyes, encircling shoulders, sharp tail, metal paws, dappled wing-feathers, encircling-wide wings, huge circular eyes, hooked-nose eagle-master."¹⁵

The famed interpreter of shamanism Mircea Eliade, relying especially on legends collected by the

Sakha ethnographer Gavril V. Ksenofontov (1992[1928]), attempted to squeeze various Sakha (Yakut) ideas of souls, shamanic initiation, and torture by spirits into his comparative framework. In Eliade's summary, a bird-of-prey mother, with her iron beak, hooked claws, and long tail, transports the shaman to the underworld to be torn apart by spirits of disease and then reborn. Alternatively, training takes place in a giant pine "world tree" of the sky, where the bird-of-prey mother, with the "head of an eagle and iron feathers," hatches "great, middling, and lesser shamans" by sitting on eggs containing their souls for "respectively three years, two years and one year" (Eliade 1964[1951]:36–38).

The beauty of the Ksenofontov collection is its rich diversity and historic specificity. Some narrators discuss the mother beast as a large bird with ironlike claws seen at birth and death by all shamans, while others insist only great shamans have mother beasts (Ksenofontov 1992[1928]:50, 55–56). Eliade's bird-of-prey mother is overgeneralized and simplified even as Yakut, much less for all of northern Asia, although certain Sakha concepts of the mother beast do resemble those of their Tungusic neighbors, the Even and Evenk.¹⁶ The Ksenofontov accounts reveal the significance and range

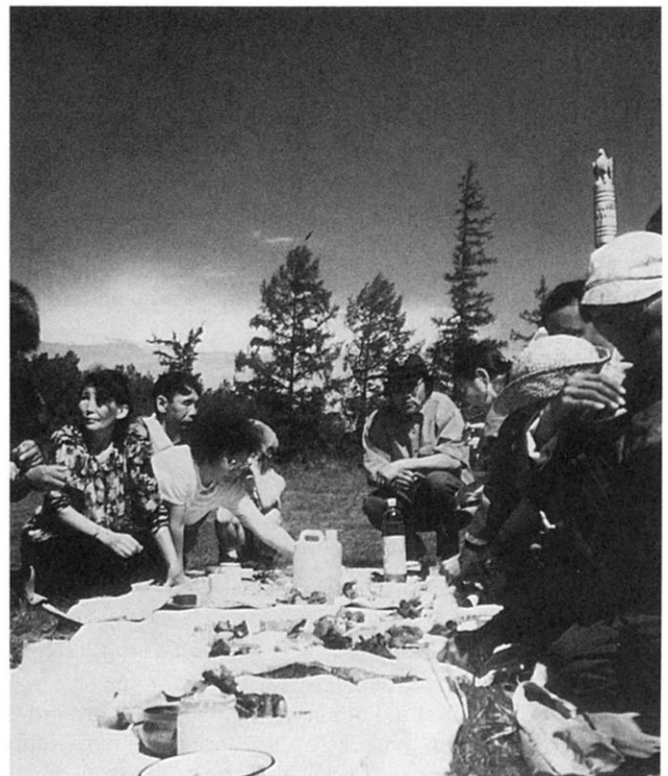


Figure 3

Feasting with *kymys* and horse meat kebabs, after the ceremonial placement of an eagle *sərgə* at the homestead site of Tygyn-Darkhan, one of the first known Sakha ancestors. Photo by Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, 1995.

of bird-shaman tropes. The shaman Səməñchik, for example, "during his shamanic torture, somehow rose to the sky, and there, sitting in the heights of a great tree, was made to call like a cuckoo—ku, ku." Platon Pavlov, from a family of Tiit-Aryy island shamans, explained that "the old people say that the shaman, or rather, his soul, endures torture in the lower country, at the hands of nine clans of evil spirits. When they have done enough they ask, 'Has not a flying bird yet appeared, have wings not yet sprouted, has fluffy bird fuzz not yet covered the body?'"¹⁷

A comparable narrative of shamanic sickness (ət-tənii) and "emergence as a curer" comes from Aida, a young woman of Belaia Gora in 1993: "I had trouble sleeping and felt sick . . . but then I slept fitfully and thought I had woken. I felt I had guests. I saw my mother coming out of the grave, and [deceased shaman] Konstantin oiun." Konstantin introduced Aida to a spirit helper, who said, " 'You will be curing people, but you must not be greedy.' 'How could I cure people,' I ask, 'when I don't know how?'" Aleksandra Chirkova, Konstantin's daughter and head doctor of the Abyi region, then invited Aida to a seance in the local hospital, during which Aida could not stop dancing:

People were even a little scared of me . . . but I went home in a mood to cure. . . . I started singing in the old Sakha song style [not known before]. . . . I wanted to be a bird, a lark, and sang of this, and of flying. It was wonderful. . . . Once I saw a road, long and hard. On one side was Konstantin oiun, with a drum, and a bear, dancing. On the other was my mother, in traditional Sakha dress. I went home on this road to get a bird I had there, a lark. I clasped it to my breast to give to Aleksandra. Then I said to all the animals, to Grandfather, to the bear, to my mother, "Stay, stay behind." . . . I see so much now. Who has darkness, who has energy, light. I always have the urge to fly.

This lovely, lively young mother is part of a folk medicine team, helping Aleksandra Chirkova, a Moscow-trained surgeon who also uses some of the curing techniques of her father (see Figure 1).¹⁸

A contrasting version of soul flight is today encouraged by the head of the Association of Folk Medicine, Vladimir Kondakov, who exhorts potential Sakha healers as follows:

In spring or summer, rise early in the morn with the sun; as the song says, "Friend, stand early to greet the sun on a high mountain." Climb a mountain or hill, where all around is silence, and observe nature everywhere. Fear not, empty your head, feel the earth, the water, the height from which to see grazing cattle grounds; rejoice, go forward, feel yourself one with nature. Let the first rays of sun and the first songs of birds give you strength and energy. Then, together with the golden rays of the sun, rise higher. As the sun rises, so shall you fly higher. Fly as high as the clouds. Feel the height of the Sky. Fly until your head blanks out

the sparkle of light and your body loses strength. Look from above down to the green earth. Perhaps the warmth of Aiyi [kind spirits] will come to you and will reach your land and help people. Slowly come back to earth. Calm yourself. Breathe! At first it will be hard to walk, but soon it will be possible. If everything has gone well, it means you have a special Gift.¹⁹

This courting of spiritual experience is not typical of standard portrayals of Siberian shamanism, in which a shaman resists the call of the spirits until given little choice. Rather, it is closer to the vision quests of North America, although the voluntariness of North American training and the involuntariness of Siberian training each may have been overstressed in the ethnographic literature.²⁰ Kondakov's exhortation represents a democratization of shamanism in current Sakha culture, as does the founding of his Association of Folk Medicine in 1990 (Balzer 1993c; see also Gellner 1994). Kondakov has tapped into a yearning for spiritual fulfillment prevalent in post-Soviet Siberia by reaching deep into what he perceives to be past traditions. His flight training is meant to be more than a metaphor, becoming also a means toward the ultimate goal of helping his people out of a spiritual void and physical-ecological devastation.

In the political and social climate of the Sakha Republic in the 1990s, only about seven Sakha, Even, and Evenk men and women are reputed to be shamans. This number is sometimes disputed, with some believers emphasizing that no "true" shamans are alive today, while others claim many folk healers are undergoing shamanic sickness and using shamanic techniques. Far more people have made aspects of shamanism, especially soul and spirit beliefs, integral to their ways of defining themselves and their environment.

Multiple Interpretations of Multivocal Symbols

The attraction of shaman stories and the experiences behind them can inspire flights of fancy about flights into the sacred. This material is rich but ultimately poetic to the point of unknowability without direct experience. Various modes of interpretation are possible, each potentially rewarding but none culminating. Yet they can build on each other, with an interpenetrating layering.

An interpretive mode that is widely explored in Siberia is that of historical diffusionism. Ethnographers such as Anatoly I. Gogolev (1983, 1986) and Nikolai A. Alekseev (1984), who are themselves Sakha, are tracing their roots and finding sometimes unexpected links. Native anthropologists who are interested in family trees as well as shamanic ones can help us reconsider the implications of close examination of cultural influence through time (Balzer 1995).

The striking reverence for the raven and eagle across north Asia and North America is relevant here, but analysis can be refined to describe variations on the theme.²¹ For example, intense respect for the raven as a god-spirit among peoples of the Bering Sea area wanes when focus is further inland on the latecomer Sakha, who stress the eagle. Perhaps Turkic ancestors of the Sakha, traveling north from an area around Lake Baikal, encountering and intermarrying with Tungusic, Yukagir, and Chukchi groups, found their shamans to be especially frightening and powerful. Reverence for the raven was adopted or adapted with mixed feelings, accounting for the association of the raven with death, the underworld, and evil spirits. Indeed, many Sakha still say that Even, Evenk, Yukagir, and Chukchi shamans are more powerful and more dangerous than Sakha shamans. In keeping with the logic of these reputations, a rich cross-fertilization of shamanic traditions continues. For example, a famed Evenk shaman recently summoned a promising young Sakha shaman for a pilgrimage and apprenticeship.

Another mode of interpretation, mischievously mixing Malinowski's (1945) functionalism with that of Shirokogoroff's *The Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* (1935), focuses on the heuristic, underlying usefulness of shamanism for personal, familial, and community-wide healing. Bird-shamans within this context become one of several powerful means of communication, cleverly structured to convince local human audiences of the shaman's otherworldly abilities. Here, whether shamans play tricks or produce real miracles makes no difference; what is important is that the community of active shamanist believers perceives that the shaman becomes a bird for their benefit. All the symbols of the shaman—cloak, drum, and *əməgət*—become stage props toward this end. Skeptics were and are subdued by a cycle of reinforced belief, as each story of a cure confirms shamanic power and each story of failure is deemed exceptional. This cycle was never fully undermined even in the Soviet period.

Stories of shamanic curing abound in current Sakha discussions. These are stories Sakha tell each other, not just visiting ethnographers. Some Sakha claim that a young Viliuisk shaman, the one I recommended to Tokoyeu's grandson, has cured a Russian woman doctor of cancer by conducting full-fledged seances with a raven and other helper spirits. One diabetic patient, grateful for this shaman's alleviation of chronic symptoms, explains that he loves manipulating the theater of seances. He directs his patients and their subsequent therapy, "playing psychological games with us for our own good. . . . I do not understand how he does it but it works."

A third mode of interpretation is Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1962, 1963[1958]) dualist structuralism,

modified by the insights of his student, the French theorist Roberte Hamayon (1990), and the Russian Siberianist Elena Novik (1984). Here we can agree that birds are "good to think" and that some of the shamanic world is divided into realms of the sacred and profane, white and black, good and evil, upper and lower cosmos, male and female, wild and tamed. The eagle, raven, crane, loon, and lark become mediators, valued for their specific talents, absorbed by the shaman-mediator, and protected (not hunted) by those who revere them. Birds and bird-shamans serve as particularly effective mediators among cosmic worlds, since they perch or swim on earth, dive under water, and fly through the sky. Further, they are associated with world-mediating trees, rooted in the lower world, flourishing on earth, and branching into the sky. The intricate cognitive capabilities of humans, combined with close observation of the natural world, make certain symbols sure-fire catchers of fancy for ecologically sensitive religious beliefs.²²

In Hamayon's (1990) view, sexual spirit partnership, exchange, dualism, and power within shamanism were born in the context of archaic hunting rituals of Siberia. For Elena Novik (1984), symbolism expressed in shamanic ritual is even more flexibly and forcefully expressed in related, changing myths. Today, even as many Sakha are bemoaning the demise of their national epics, they are also resurrecting these epics in drama and opera theaters. Familiar dualistic symbols recur, pitting "black" shamans against "white" ones, tugging at the heart strings of Sakha audiences, merging myth and ritual.

To deepen the understanding of birds, Siberianists may follow the leads of Victor Turner's multivocal symbolism (1969) and the work of Mary Douglas (1970, 1975) on implicit and explicit meanings, together with the poetic beauty of Steven Feld's Kaluli monograph (1990[1982]) and nuanced approaches to Siberian data by the Finnish scholar Anna-Leena Siikala (1978; Siikala and Hoppál 1992:87–106). More should be learned, for example, about how shamanic ranking in nests or hollows of trees is defined and evolves, and what makes one shaman, "chosen by the spirits" (Basilov 1984, 1992), become a privileged interlocutor with an eagle, while another is stuck with a woodgrouse vulnerable to shooting. The personalities, talents, and emotions of shamans resonate with specific birds, as hunters (eagle), scavengers (raven), singers (lark, cuckoo), divers (loon), and flitters (woodgrouse).

Shamans hone their skills through their helper spirits in a mutual courtship more subtle than most of the ethnographic literature portrays. In Yurok (Native American) shamanic thinking, "The Hawk is not just a beautiful bird who has certain physical characteristics; it is a spiritual source of power. It can be used for seeing because it is a good seer; it can be used for protection

because it is a strong fighter; it can be used for soul travel because it can fly long distance against great odds and the forces of nature" (Medicine Grizzlybear Lake 1991:4). Sakha believers similarly describe a range of power properties for helper spirits, for example the all-seeing pivot eyes, high flying, and endurance of the eagle, and the acute senses, wisdom, targeted violence, size, and nurturance of the bear. Shamans expect to gain diverse helper spirits over their lifetimes as they build power and expertise.

Birds should be placed in the context of multiple, interpenetrating symbolic systems that are complete with contradictions, as complexities of the Sakha mother-beast suggest. Birds are only one part of the shamanic calling, as the existence of multiple spirit helpers, including shamanic ancestors, reveals. The shamanic drum, in the Sakha and other Turkic and Mongolic peoples' symbol systems, often represents a horse. In some seances, a dancing bird-shaman can ride a horse-drum and wear iron reindeer antlers in a head-dress. Such virtuosity is more common in historical depictions than today, however (see Kulakovsky 1979; Seroshevsky 1896).

The seance is more than a tidy liminal ritual system that returns community participants to some status quo ante. Spirits, patients, and shamans are interwoven within a constantly adapting symbol system. For example, Konstantin oiun sewed gifts that grateful patients had given him onto his shamanic cloak. Thus he added the spirit of their love to the bones and metal ornaments symbolizing his connections with helper spirits, including the raven and bear. An elderly Evenk female shaman has given at least one patient a small brass bell that she instructed the patient to ring in emergency, so that the shaman could fly through the tundra to the urban patient's aid. The patient, touching the bell with awe, explained in 1994 that she has used this boon with success, but sparingly.

As anthropological approaches are tested against various degrees of insider, esoteric knowledge, one of the greatest challenges is to understand how metaphoric and allegoric meaning and belief may have been lost, changed, or (re)invented in successive interactions and generations (Fernandez 1991). As I have said to surprised Sakha audiences, each generation re-creates its own traditions, and none is in full solidarity with itself. While some members of the Sakha intelligentsia rail against "superficiality" and "artificiality" in ritual (re)creation, others, for example members of the group Kut-siur, have revived rituals they learned from archives and have repopularized the powerful concept that words themselves have spirit (*ichchi*), especially when used in prayer.

In 1991, at the urging of a Sakha friend, I read a paper on the interconnection with shamanism of the

popular Sakha national instrument, the *khomus* (jaw harp, Jew's harp), for a conference in the Sakha Republic. I had only circumstantial evidence, but the argument was accepted and even expanded because members of the revitalizing Sakha intelligentsia wanted to believe in the link and in the curing powers of the *khomus*. In Ksenofontov 1992(1928):56 is confirmation that an obsolete word for some of the magic of shamanic seances is *khomusun*. This puts in marvelous perspective Sakha assertions that the *khomus* at its uncanny best sounds like and becomes a loon or a cuckoo.

By 1995, Sakha experiments in group and individual therapy with the *khomus* had been launched by the International Khomus Center and expanded by two well-known and respected curers, Klavdia Maksimova and Piotr Sleptsov. I watched as one group of about 20, in their tenth and culminating therapy session, danced and tranced in a field to *khomus* music, played by Spiridon Shishigin and Matriona Il'ina. Many of the patients, who had been quite ill before they joined the program, danced with bird and other animal movements, jumped, contorted, and rolled on the ground. At the end people stood in the field, raising their hands to the sky and pulling solar energies toward their chests, chanting after Klavdia Maksimova: "I am well. I am Sakha. I am here, in and with this land." They then related their experiences and feelings in testimonies about released creativity, physical recoveries from paralysis, ecstasy through trancing, and joy at finding community in each other. They had (re)created the kernels of the seance experience, democratized it, and made it actively theirs.²³

These experiments invite comparison with "new age" shamanism in America and Europe (Goodman 1990; Harner 1982). The two have in common a straining to get at some inner core of human affect, to break the bonds of received distinctions between reality and unreality, and to touch people spiritually and aesthetically. Belief that sighted ravens are more than ravens can take place only in a psychological climate of openness to altered states—of consciousness, of politics, and of conditions of life. Such beliefs can come through deep involvement in a particular shamanic cosmology, provoking for anthropologists what Piers Vitebsky (1993:256) calls bisentience, and what I think has the potential to become multisentience. They also can come through trance or dream experiences that are interpreted as tapping universal, archetypal symbols. I was intrigued several years ago when a Cherokee friend, who uses Jungian theories in psychotherapeutic practice, insisted the reason his spirits have so much in common with Siberian shamanic spirits was not that they have common roots, but rather that "the spirit worlds are the same."

Sakha believers make similar statements as they broaden the scope and venues of their spiritual quests. Art produced by one of the participants in the khomus seance is filled with images of her human-bird free-flying soul soaring heavenward. Some Sakha healers are turning to Slavic-style "new age" seminars for "extrasense" training in Moscow and Kiev, whether or not purist ethnographers approve. They find it feasible to add theories about energy transference, auras, and Indian chakras to their shamanic heritage. Some call them charlatans, and indeed their curing abilities vary widely. But one patient's charlatan can be another's curer. One of the most interesting and reputable healers with whom I have worked is an ethnically mixed rural woman who combines Sakha and Russian folk healing traditions.

Some recent works on shamanism explore the varied, historically grounded interrelationship of the social and the personal through the analysis of ritual dialogues and family dramas. This approach is well exemplified in the monographs of Laurel Kendall (1985) on Korean women's shamanism and Piers Vitebsky (1993) on East Indian Sora shamanism. Both scholars became deeply involved in the personal problems and shamanic practices of the families they joined. Their work brings to mind Siberian shamans who use spirit helpers to troubleshoot interlinked psychological and physical illnesses, wheedling out of patients details of their personal lives that the patients sometimes had no intention of revealing. Khanty seances sometimes climaxed in cathartic confessions of culturally defined sins, followed by an expiation through a reindeer sacrifice to specific spirits (Balzer 1991).

A few Sakha cases involve the working out of re-creations over the death of a child in families with a practicing shaman. Confidentiality is a serious problem within the ethnography of personal tragedy, solved by some with pseudonyms. But in Siberia, and I suspect in many other contexts, these are thin disguises so far as the communities involved are concerned. I write assuming that some Sakha will read my work in English and that it may eventually be translated.

Some Sakha believe that shamans cannot begin their practice without the sacrifice of family members. Siberian shamans have reputations from the Christian and Soviet literatures as being quite capable of terrorizing patients, families, and communities. But several Sakha believers made it clear to me that shamans are not truly great unless they evoke mixed feelings of both love and fear. Analysis of family dramas allows us to see shamans precisely in this more nuanced light. It also renders more understandable a Sakha tradition associated with childbirth ritual (and the goddess Aiyhyt) that has been resurrected in certain recent shamanic seances. The ritual involves laughter therapy, an all-out

guffaw-til-you-drop communal or familial mirth session provoked by shamanic or helper-spirit clowning (see Figure 4).²⁴

Other recent studies of shamanism focus on the sociopolitical and economic contexts of shamanism. Among them are works by Jane Monnig Atkinson (1990, 1992), various authors in Thomas and Humphrey's volume *Shamanism, History and the State* (1994), and the stunning and disturbing work of Michael Taussig, who calls shamans "the shock absorbers of history" (1987:237). As in South America, Christian colonists in Siberia fought, hounded, and demeaned shamans, while at the same time surreptitiously coming to them for cures. Early Russian Orthodox missionaries were fascinated with the "devilish" bird-shamans and with stories of birds flying out of the ashes of burned "idols" (Novitsky 1884[1715]:71). Later repression of shamans in the Soviet period eclipsed anything the initial colonizers had done. The experience of Tokoyeu's grandson in the psychiatric hospital is an especially graphic example of repressive politics that lasted well beyond the Stalin era. Tokoyeu himself was nearly dragged into court in 1947 when the sister of a local Komsomol leader died after a seance.

The contexts in which people who turn into birds are defined as sane and can even become community leaders were diminished but not fully demolished in Soviet Siberia. Stories of shamans escaping from Soviet jails in the form of their helper spirits, including birds, are quite popular in the Sakha Republic of the 1990s. Confessions of both young and old that they regret not having been able to meet the potential of their familial shamanic backgrounds are poignant. But there is a tendency to romanticize "true traditional" Sakha shamans as fully benevolent, priestly, and "white." A fuller historical perspective must confront the implicit menace of Sakha stories about still-avoided shamans' graves, about ravens as bad omens, and about shamanic curses against Komsomol enthusiasts that are said to have affected some families for several generations.

Shamans, healers, and charlatans are all making a living and building reputations in post-Soviet Siberia. Sometimes a prospective patient, anthropologist, or combination of the two, as I have been, has trouble telling them apart. Ancient shamanic techniques, for which contemporary researchers still have no "scientific" explanation, are being used in new sociopolitical contexts. One modern female shaman reputedly used spirit power to fix a broken bus on the way to a meeting with Native American visitors. Another has built a reputation for finding stolen cars, and still others have been remarkably successful in helping the police find missing people. A friend confided that one curer had used "X-ray vision" to discover she was wearing an IUD, this at a time when such contraceptive devices were rare in



Figure 4

Laughter therapy after a khomus seance, led by Klavdia Maksimova. Photography of the most sacred parts of the seance understandably was not allowed. Photo by Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, 1995.

the republic and my friend had given no clues to its existence. Some healers are also ecology activists, building on their fabled shamanic harmony with nature through helper spirits, meditation, and telepathy.

The eclecticism and openness of current Sakha shamans to other cultural traditions mitigates against any simple correlation of Sakha shamanic revival with Sakha nationalism. Ethnic purity has not been an expressed shamanic goal and efforts to build an official, republic-sponsored "house of spirits" in Yakutsk have fallen flat. Shamanism is far from being a "state religion" of the Sakha republic. Nonetheless, the idioms and practice of shamanism are part of politically salient, conscious cultural vitalization. A new and determined iteration of ethnonational pride is reflected in the romanticism of the focus on "white" priestly shamanism, as healers try to salve the wounds of past cultural and political repression with public prayers and private seances.

Members of the Sakha intelligentsia are debating the degree to which spiritual revitalization should be tied to their ethnicity. Folklore about competitions be-

tween shamans of different ethnic groups, through spirit-helper proxies, makes some Sakha uneasy, revealing past sociopolitical and sometimes warfare-level cleavages among indigenous peoples of the north that they would rather forget. Ethnicity is about selective memory and selective forgetting (see Balzer and Vinokurova 1996; Grant 1995). The democratization of shamanism can mean expansion of its appeal beyond ethnic boundaries without rejecting the richness of specific cultural traditions. Sakha writer N. Bugaev (1992), rebutting criticisms of neoshamanism as empty, artificial, and potentially chauvinist, pleaded in a newspaper article, "If a scientist . . . rejects the right of his people to a spiritual culture, then are we [that people] alive?"

Open Body-Soul Mindedness

The Sakha refer to a person who is susceptible to spirit belief, particularly one who could potentially become a shaman and thus mediate between spirit and human worlds, as *ahaghas attäakh kihi*, or "person with an open body." This is a way of discussing altered

consciousness, but “consciousness” is perceived as coming through all pores into the center of one’s being, one’s *kut-siur*, or “soul-mind-life force.” While few aspire to such a state of simultaneous strength and vulnerability, many Sakha have renewed respect for those who do. Social and political disorientation means increased potential for (or vulnerability to) open, intuitive body-minds.

Anthropologists coping with their disorientations, open-minded to various degrees, could benefit from this tantalizing version of openness, correlating it with anthropological appeals for greater emotional, aesthetic, and experiential sensitivity.²⁵ My purpose is not to “go native” in some unrealistic or absolute sense but to be part of shifting degrees of mutual, interactive influences that leave their mark in deeply felt, occasionally tearful, multicultural exchanges. As I sacrifice scientific presumption, I gain multisentient rapport and engaged analysis. Syncretic modes of interpretation based on rapport help alleviate the urge to elevate any one theory or model to the realm of the sacred.

Notes

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1. Tokoyeu, who died in 1959, was so strong by reputation that a novel (Kurilov 1983), widely read in the republic, dramatizes his usually benevolent deeds. A version of the novel was directed by Andrei Borisov for the Yakut National Theater in 1986, to much acclaim.

2. For background, see Balzer 1990:vii–xviii, 1991, 1993a, 1993c, 1996 and Grigoryants 1989.

3. These terms provide only a sample of the range of terms. I am grateful to several shamans and folk healers with whom I have worked for these glosses, as well as to museum founder Egor S. Laptev, and ethnographer colleagues Anatoly I. Gogolev, Aiza P. Reshetnikova, and Ekaterina N. Romanova. Compare Balzer 1990; Eliade 1964[1951]; Gogolev et al. 1992; and Siikala and Hoppál 1992.

4. Since 1991, I have taped some portions of seancelike (re)creations and participated in some seances without taping. A valuable (re)creation by former shaman assistant Sergei Zverev, taped by ethnomusicologist Eduard E. Alekseev in 1978, is available from Melodiya records (no. 33 D 030639–40).

5. Indeed, every Sakha shaman cloak I have seen, whether on grimacing museum mannequins or in private possession for use, features bird symbolism. Examples are in Yakutsk (Museum of Music and Folklore and the Republic Yaroslavsky Museum), and in St. Petersburg (State Museum of the Peoples of Russia and the Kunst Kamera Peter the Great Museum).

6. I am grateful to Arsan Laptev, grandson of Kursan (Эбэ оиун) for this story, told in August 1994 in Khatingnaakh Village in the Sredn’aia Kolyma region.

7. This story is from Arsan Laptev (August 1994), who knew both Parilop and Kharkha.

8. This account is from the Sakha folklore enthusiast Dmitry G. Zhirkov (August 1994), who coaxed Tokoyeu into talking on World War II Victory Day, when everyone was in an unusually open mood. Zhirkov took notes and later sent them to the archive of the Institute of Languages Literature and History (IlaLI) in Yakutsk. He related the interview from memory, since he considered it one of his most important deeds.

9. Troshansky 1903 exemplifies a Christian-biased ethnography. A special *ichchi* exhibit was mounted in the Republic Yaroslavsky Museum in 1992, with numerous examples of *əməgət*. Some Sakha visitors commented that the images had not lost their spirit power, even in the museum. Some gave coin offerings at a display honoring the sky goddess *Aiyyhyt*.

10. See Afanas’ev 1993; Afanas’ev et al. 1990; and Utkin 1994. I am grateful to Tōris (Lazar’ Afanas’ev), Ksenofont Utkin, Aleksei Romanov, and Ughan (Ivan Nikolaev) for conversations about *Kut-siur*.

11. I am indebted to Innokenty F. Volkhov, of Oiusardaakh Village in the Sredn’aia Kolyma region (August 1994) for this story. During some fertility rituals, various “sins” and relationships are revealed. In older versions, the focal woman ideally was surrounded by eight virgins and nine pure youths (see Kulakovsky 1979:93–100). *Aiyyhyt* is similar to other fertility goddesses of Turkic and Mongolic peoples (see Sleptsov 1989:85–118).

12. To return to earth, the daughters of dark sky clouds (rain and fertility bringing) wrap the *salgyn-kut* in a swan skin, or, by some accounts, if the shaman is to have dealings especially with the lower world, a raven skin. Compare Ksenofontov 1992[1928]; Kulakovsky 1979:59–61; and Popov 1947:283.

13. The site is near present-day Belaia Gora, and the story reveals complexities of defining “white” (ours) and “black” (theirs, enemy) shamans. I am grateful to Aleksandra K. Chirkova for this story, to Arsan Laptev for information on Parilop, and to Ivan E. Alekseev for data on Nikon. Nikon died just on the verge of perestroika, which he is said to have predicted.

14. Compare Alekseev 1984:80; Ksenofontov 1992[1928]:50, 69–71; Kulakovsky 1979:92; and Seroshevsky 1896:626.

15. The quote is from Kulakovsky 1979:92; I have heard similar eagle epithets.

16. Compare Alekseev 1984:81; Anisimov 1958:136–138; and Ksenofontov 1992[1928]:52.

17. Ksenofontov 1992[1928]:58, 54. Sakha ethnographers decided to reprint Ksenofontov’s work in time for an international conference on shamanism in 1992 (see Balzer 1993b).

18. I am grateful to Aida for this account, which is part of a complex interaction among Aida, Aleksandra, and myself, given fuller analysis in a forthcoming work on Aleksandra's life.

19. While I have had many conversations with Vladimir Kondakov, and observed some of his rituals, I have not seen or heard him directly exhort followers to do this (see Balzer 1993c). The passage is from a limited distribution pamphlet (Kondakov 1993:38). The translation benefited from Zinaida Ivanova's poetic sensitivity. Kondakov considers himself an oiun, and many of his followers agree, although he is controversial and is also cautious about calling himself an oiun in public.

20. Compare Basilov 1984; Bogoras 1930; and *Medicine Grizzlybear Lake* 1991.

21. Compare Chowning 1962; Dzeniskevich 1976; Furst 1977; Jochelson 1904; Meletinsky 1980; and Seamans and Day 1994 for raven and eagle beliefs and distribution. See also A. Irving Hallowell's (1926) masterful survey of bear ceremonialism.

22. Compare Furst 1977:95–117; Hall 1919; and Siikala and Hoppál 1992:65, 134–137 for discussions of shamanic bird symbolism in diverse geographical regions and time periods.

23. At other sessions, Klavdia Maksimova used a drum to induce trance in the patients, though not herself. I am grateful to those named and to the patients for allowing my presence.

24. I have seen one version of laughter therapy led by Klavdia Maksimova. Widespread parallels include Native American clowning, trickster and coyote traditions, teachings of the Hindu mystic Osho, and the Dutch Center in Favor of Laughing.

25. Examples include Feld 1990; Geertz 1973; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Roseman 1991; Stoller 1994; and Taussig 1993.

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