Chapter 6

LEGITIMIZATION BY ILLNESS AND ANCESTOR SHAMANS

Siberian shamans, as we know well from numerous historical accounts, are “chosen by the spirits”⁷⁹ (ancestor) spirits cause an illness that can only be healed by accepting the spirits’ call and becoming a shaman. Indeed, contemporary Darhad shamans present their shamanship as forced upon them by spirits and inherited from ancestors who were shamans. In this chapter I show that the spirits’ call is not a determinant cause in the becoming of a shaman. Starting with unsuccessful attempts of disciples at shamanizing, I introduce the social dimensions of the shamans’ selection by ancestor spirits. Thereby, I approach shamanic illness and the inheritance of shamanship as part of the legitimization strategies of shamans.

In her analysis of a failed séance of a Naxi shaman in China, Emily Chao (1999) reflected on ritual theory, arguing that anthropological analysis favored rituals that are routinely performed while ignoring failed rituals. She suggests

[...] that examining failed ritual redirects our analytic gaze to local processes of legitimation and authentication, while it simultaneously avoids accepting merely temporary arrangements of power as a timeless cultural essence. Although shifting the analytic focus from ritual to ritualization avoids the reification of ritual by attending to processes, it is still informed by the functionalist celebration of

⁷⁹ Title of Basilov (1990).
normative practice. Understanding the failure of ritual draws us into the complex arena of conflict and contingency, where social dynamics enable new identities or create marginal ones (Chao 1999: 505–506).

Chao addresses a central concern of this book: the focus on processes of legitimization and contestation replacing a view of Darhad shamans as functionaries of a community of shamanists. In the last chapter, I analyzed the Darhad shaman’s séance as performance of power relations. Even with the successful performance of a séance, a practitioner is not automatically recognized as a shaman in local arenas. This chapter explores the initial illness and the inheritance of shamanship as fields of legitimization; the next chapter focuses on the relationship to the urban center for the constitution of Darhad shamans’ reputation and, finally, Chapter 8 discusses how the evolution of historical shamans is intertwined with the authenticating processes of shamans. To launch this perspective, I follow Chao’s advice and start with accounts of failed rituals. Whereas Chao discussed a séance that was rebuffed by the local audience as not successful in terms of healing, the episodes I present here are concerned with shaman disciples who failed to perform a proper séance. I talk about people who were designated to become shamans but who were at that moment not able to receive the spirits they summoned, which was recognized by the audience in that the ongod did not talk during the séance. The aim of this focus on failure is not to delimit a category of shamans from failed disciples or non-shamans. Rather, I use the episodes of failure as a first dislocating perspective on processes of legitimization and contestation of shamanizing persons in general. If persons whose ancestry contains shamans and who have been ill fail to perform proper séances, then this indicates that the election by ancestor spirits is not a determining cause to become a shaman.

Shirokogoroff (1935: 346–358) is one of the very few authors writing on Siberian shamans who has illuminated the social processes of legitimization. Shirokogoroff discussed the social acknowledgment of shamans, which could include an informal selection, periods of trial, the examination of the disciple’s séance and the formal recognition of shamans. Particularly interesting is his detailed description of the making of a new shaman from a well-known family, which he observed over a period of two years. He reported