PROBLEMS OF CENTRAL ASIAN AND SIBERIAN SHAMANISM

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The three decades after 1951 have been a very significant era in the modern history of studies in shamanism. It is true that few ethnographical materials have come out with the notable exception, perhaps, of Schamanengeschichten aus Sibirien, but the period in question has seen the publication of a series of important theoretical works which have explored the history and the structure of shamanism, more particularly, the Central Asian and Siberian shamanism that has been generally considered its "classical" form. In 1951, for instance, Mircea Eliade published his magnificent work Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase. In the meantime, Wilhelm Schmidt had completed his studies on the shamanism of the pastoral peoples of Central Asia and Siberia in the last four volumes of his monumental work Der Ursprung der Got tesidee (1949, 1952, 1954, 1955). Especially important is the twelfth and last volume, published posthumously, which contains a "Synthese der Schamanismen der innerasiatischen Hirtenvölker" (pp. 617-759). Eliade and Schmidt are extremely divergent in their interpretations of the history and the structure of shamanism in Central and North Asia, but, one may say with the advantage of hindsight that they have solidly laid the groundwork for the further inquiry to be made in the subsequent decades by ethnologists and historians of religions. In the course of time, two problems have emerged as major issues of basic importance. The first of the problems is the so-called "white" shamanism and the so-called "black" shamanism, and the other is the phenomenon of ecstasy in the state of which the shaman is believed to set out for the spiritual journey to the world beyond. In the following pages I propose first to outline these basic issues with special reference to the works of Eliade and Schmidt, and then I wish to suggest a path towards an improved understanding of Siberian shamanism and shamanic ecstasy. In this regard, closer attention will be paid to the intimate relationship...
that exists between the phenomenon of shamanic ecstasy and the belief in a variety of spirits.

It might be mentioned, parenthetically, that studies of shamanism are no longer inclined to refer to this religious phenomenon as a product of mental disease. Until 1945, a large group of scholars—with a few exceptions such as Sergei M. Shirokogoroff and Uno Harva—was of the opinion that shamanism, more particularly, the Siberian form of shamanism, is a psycho-pathological phenomenon peculiar to the Arctic and sub-Arctic zone, and that the shaman is a sick person of psychopathological type, suffering from "arctic hysteria." This view has, generally speaking, been rejected. The majority of students now maintain that psychic illness as such does not play any decisive role in the religious phenomenon of shamanism. The crucial point is that, if we borrow Eliade's succinct expression, "the shaman is not only a sick man; he is, above all, a sick man who has been cured, who has succeeded in curing himself." In sharp contrast to a large number of ethnologists prior to 1945, Eliade has insisted on interpreting the apparently pathological symptoms of the future shaman in terms of initiatory trials, which he is destined to undergo in order to become a "new being." The initiate suffers, but the suffering is for him something to be conquered. There will be some who will fail in the process, and others who will pass through it triumphantly. But, only those who have accepted the suffering as a spiritual crisis and conquered it are able to become "new beings," that is, strong shamans.

**White Shamanism versus Black Shamanism**

Ethnologists and historians of religions had long been well acquainted with the fact that there are two types of shamans, white and black, but it was not until the publication of Eliade's *Le Chamanisme* and Schmidt's *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, XII, that this old problem became a major issue in the modern study of shamanism. Both Eliade and Schmidt recognize the distinction that exists between two types of shamanism: white and black. And they define these two types generally in the same terms; white shamanism is characterized by the ecstatic heavenward journey of