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Cuckoo the informer and fly agaric the communicator

No phenomenon of folk culture gives rise to such various, often mutually exclusive, opinions as shamanism. The only thing on which all scholars – native and foreign; modern and of the past; medicine men, ethnographers and cultural studies specialists – agree is that shamanism is based on belief in spirits.

The sources of this belief are in ancient animistic ideas according to which all things surrounding a man and all natural phenomena have a soul. The Sun and the Moon are spouses, and because of the wife's incessant chatter her husband Moon gets thinner every month. Trees, like people, whisper to one another, the fly agaric watches how people behave, and the cuckoo passes on to people the words of the celestial god.

Key words: shaman, shamanism, shamanistic ritual, tambourine, spirits, shamanistic attributes, tampon



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From of old, weirdly shaped trees have been associated with the underworld. It was thought that spirits of the locality, water or the mountain could be seen in such places. The people passing by would leave offerings.

In the photo is the sacred tree in the vicinity of the village of Khonuu, Moma ulus, Yakutia. When a local airport was constructed, the residents asked the builders not to cut the tree, and the builders spared it.

Photo by Yu. A. Sleptsov
On the left is a young Khanty shaman learning how to handle a tambourine. The old shaman should spot his mistakes by ear. *Photo by A. Mikhalev (1989)*



This god is the creator of everything. He lives in the very upper circle of the sky. There, it is always light and warm, a light birch wood rustles its leaves, and there is no black color, death, diseases or hunger. This beautiful Upper World meets the earth somewhere far in the south, where the springheads of the rivers Ob and Yenisei stream down the mountains.

An old man and an old woman live there. With a stone knife they whittle sticks to make animal and fish traps. As the chips fall into the water, they turn into fish, and the old couple becomes young again after taking a dip in the water.

Lower downstream is the Middle World, the chamber of people. In this world night follows day, and death follows life. Here, there is black and white, plentiful food and starvation, health and diseases, kind and evil spirits. To these spirits a man should give gifts, and a shaman tells which gifts go to which spirits.

Far in the north, by the large sea, the Middle World meets the Lower World – the world of ancestors, the world under the moss cover. The supreme god does not rule here; this world has its own god, wearing black clothes – the celestial god's eternal adversary. The underworld is dark and damp;



Wooden idols – shaman's spirit helpers. As the shaman's soul comes into them, it becomes as immortal as they are. Photo by A. Mikhalev (1989)



A tambourine is one of the shaman's main attributes, a means of communication with the spirits. Fastened below the tambourine's handle are metal charms, "shaman's helpers," which chime the shaman's message to the spirits. Berezovo Museum of Local Lore, Khanty Mansi Autonomous Okrug

the time and rivers flow in the opposite direction, and, instead of birches, a dark cedar forest grows here. People who have died in the Middle World are born anew in the Lower World, and their life goes backwards until the moment of birth. And then the person reappears in the Middle World as a newly born baby.

If a baby's cradle is made out of birch, the baby gets the supreme god's protection. It is the cuckoo that informs the god about it. If a cradle is made out of cedar, it is for a person who goes from the Middle World to the Lower World, and the underworld god finds this out from the fly agaric. Its red cap unites the properties of the white and black colors, so it can communicate with the representatives of all the three worlds.



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In the top photo: V. Kulemzin after a wood grouse hunt. The expedition to the Khanty, River Yugan, 1974



Before performing a *kamlaniye* (shamanistic ritual), the shaman warms the tambourine so that the leather on the rim tautens and the sounds calling the kind and warding off the evil spirits become louder. Photo by V.M. Kulemzin (1972)

If a man who has not broken hunting rules or spoken badly of the god or the spirits and who has shared what was needed with the community dies suddenly in the Middle World, a shaman can return this man from the Lower World back to the earth. To do this, he plants a fly agaric inside himself and goes down to the nether world.

Such beliefs, conveying sacral meaning to shamanistic practices, are plenty. Like shatters of the past, they make up a mosaic encompassing the whole world and man inside it. From generation to generation, these beliefs are cherished in the memory of those who live on the rich past of their people: shamans, clairvoyants, magicians, story-tellers and healers.