

7-1-1998

From the Earth to the Sky: Shamanic Roots of Russian Transpersonalism

Cynthia Clement

Department of Psychology University of Hawai'i

Julia Trott

Department of History University of Hawai'i

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clement, C., & Trott, J. (1998). Clement, C., & Trott, J. (1998). From the earth to the sky: Shamanic roots of Russian transpersonalism. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 17(2), 161–166.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 17 (2). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies/vol17/iss2/9>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#). This Article is brought to you for free and open access by International Journal of Transpersonal Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Transpersonal Studies by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact the editors.

From the Earth to the Sky

Shamanic Roots of Russian Transpersonalism

Cynthia Clement

Department of Psychology
University of Hawai'i
Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA

Julia Trott

Department of History
University of Hawai'i
Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA

The cultural and spiritual heritage of Russia owes much to a shamanistic tradition of great antiquity. We first place the tradition in its historical context and then briefly describe its salient features with particular reference to the work among the Tungus of the pioneering Russian ethnographer Shirokogoroff. The fate of Russian spirituality in the course of the twentieth century's political and social turbulence is then considered and a parallel is suggested between the role of the shaman in the remote past and the role of certain inspired intellectuals and transpersonal thinkers in Russia. V. V. Nalimov is taken as an example of a survivor of psychic assault who, like the traditional shaman, emerged strengthened from his own ordeals to act as a voice and a catalyst of healing for the future of his society.

There is no object on earth which cannot be looked at from a cosmic point of view.

—F. M. Dostoevsky, "Critical Articles" (1895)

THE GORGEOUS gilded icons of the Orthodox Church, haunting flat images of sad-eyed, haloed saints, are the ultimate symbols of the Russian soul to foreigners. But beneath the gold leaf of the artistic tradition inherited from Byzantium, Russian spirituality has earlier if less exquisite sources of profound importance. Russians themselves rarely forget that among their ancestors were many who sprang from genetic and spiritual roots deeper and more earth-encrusted than those of the exotic Christianity their nation has cultivated and cherished in historical times.

Ultimately, as far as we can know from the physical evidence of archaeology and palaeo-anthropology, and from the circumstantial evidence of, for example, C. G. Jung's psychology, all humans trace their psychic life back to similar ancestral archetypes. We assume from the simple rituals of the first peoples that their cosmology and their relation to the earth were of the same order as those identified today as *shamanism*.

This worldview, with its related practices, may once have been global; now, (except in the unknown reaches of the human psyche), it is virtually extinct. However, it lingered longest in certain remote areas, especially in the vast northern belt of Eurasia that was formerly claimed by the Soviet Union and is still partly within Russia's borders.

From the time of Herodotus, the lands that we call southern Russia and the Ukraine were crossed and recrossed, conquered and reconquered by nomads from as far east as Manchuria. There were Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, Huns, and many others, whose descendants settled and even today are represented in the ethnicity or the culture of minorities such as the Ossetians and the Yakut. Slavic migrants, future Russians, moved northwards through the forest zone to the brink of territories inhabited by a multitude of palaeo-Siberian hunting and herding tribes, living much as the Finno-Ugrians and others have always done until lately; and while many of these tribes were displaced and destroyed, some of their members were assimilated. In the 13th century A.D., the Golden Horde, a mix of nomads of various backgrounds, mainly Turkic and Mongolic

but also Indo-European, occupied the steppe and ruled the forests for several centuries. All of these peoples were shamanists, although some accepted Orthodox Christianity or Buddhism or Islam or even (like the Khazars of the Caucasus) Judaism. Beneath their adopted faiths, however, like permafrost beneath the wildflowers of the tundra, was the age-old art of animistic ecstasy.

During the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th, pioneering ethnographers such as M. A. Czaplicka, S. M. Shirokogoroff, W. Jochelson, W. Bogoras, and V. Dioszegi, (to name only a handful whose work has been published in English), underwent great hardships in their efforts to record the shamanic traditions of northern Eurasia before they were suppressed, forgotten, or rendered hopelessly self-conscious. Thanks to such scholars, a record exists of the worldview that belonged, proto-historically, and in many different guises, to the indigenous peoples of the steppe, the taiga and the tundra, embracing what is now Russian soil.

To what extent does this tradition also belong to modern Russians, who, though always capable of inner freedom, have only recently regained the right to public freedom of thought and worship? The spiritual lives of Russians, founded on humankind's common store of archetypes and on a religious heritage of great power, surely have an unbroken link to the past, despite the ravages of generations of atheistic Soviet rule. There is every hope and indication that the experience of meaningless suffering and bereavement, endured but not always survived by Russians in this century, has been transmuted by some individuals into extraordinary spiritual tenacity and wisdom.

In the classic studies of northern shamanism, notably that of Mircea Eliade, but particularly also in many reports of fieldwork in Siberia, one can find a striking metaphor for the process of transmuting suffering into wisdom. The future shaman—man or woman—typically finds the vocation during a period of illness known as “shaman's sickness.” To those versed in modern psychopathology, it appears that the illness is merely a manifestation of mental instability; the onset of depression, perhaps, or more serious conditions like schizophrenia or psychosis. However, the experience in its cultural context is different and much more meaningful. Of course,

there is a danger that the shaman will not, as the culture perceives it, *master* the spirits that assail consciousness at this time, in which case mental illness might indeed be the penalty; but success implies the achievement of integration of the Self.

The specific metaphor for transmutation is derived from the words of persons recounting the subjective ordeals involved in their initiatory illness. One of the worst ordeals is an assault: the seizure of the shaman's body by spirit figures, who actually chop it up into pieces and strip the bones of flesh. The ordeal may be symbolic only, but the pain is described as terribly, graphically real. Afterwards, the body is reassembled with bones of iron, (iron being a metal abhorred by spirits),¹ signifying that the shaman is now in a sense indestructible and invulnerable to psychic attack. The shaman's Self, if it resists disintegration and emerges stronger from the ordeal, is fit to function for the benefit of those in distress and of the community as an entity in its own right.

• The Shaman's Function •

THE APPLICATION of the above metaphor of shamanistic transmutation to the ordeal of modern citizens of the Soviet Union is simple. The periodic “sicknesses” of Soviet society, especially under Stalin—the purges, the disappearances, the horrors of the Gulag, the interrogations, the show trials and summary executions—were a supremely destructive assault on psychic health and a threat to dismember human personality. Untold millions of victims did not survive their ordeal. Some survived so shattered that they could never be reassembled or healed. And a few, rare individuals emerged, forged into formidable personalities, the turbulent spirits of the age mastered, ready to regulate, heal, and defend—to shamanize—on behalf of their shell-shocked compatriots.

The successive states of late Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union were convulsed by a World War, two Revolutions, a Civil War, another World War, and the onset of a Cold War—not to mention famines, disasters and class struggles—all within one appalling half-century. At the same time the people strove to redesign their souls and their society, to become first Marxist-Leninist, then Stalinist; and to industrialize their economy and

modernize their nation from scratch. If nations were patients, a psychiatrist would no doubt diagnose this vast Eurasian body politic—with such a childhood and adolescence—as having suffered most of the disorders in the manual. In such a complex case, such a case of complexes, the cure might be worse than the disease. But in the realm of injuries that medicine cannot reach, could there be contemporary “shamans” of the soul with the power to divine and resolve them?

Interestingly enough, Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff, compiling the results of his ethnographic fieldwork among the Tungus some sixty years ago, addressed the same problem on a smaller scale. Shirokogoroff was in exile from his homeland, and his book entitled *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* (1935) was produced in the Chinese city then known as Peiping. It was a scholarly study of the way in which a shaman contributes to the psychic life of the clan. Despite the nature of his subject matter, Shirokogoroff would have vigorously denied the accusation that he was in any way associated with transpersonal issues. A scientist first and last, he protests perhaps a shade too much that his work is strictly objective, emphasizing the point with the use of a ponderous specialized vocabulary.

But it is impossible to devote one's life to the investigation of such a phenomenon as shamanism without confronting realities that exist outside the realm of the objective, and that tend to open one's mind. Having witnessed extrasensory communication between shamans, thought-reading and telepathy, and the “auto-suggestive regulation of dreams,” Shirokogoroff could only look for a scientifically “respectable” explanation on the fringes of theory. He hypothesized that some sort of physical carrier waves as yet undetected were at work, about which the only observable fact was that, because they seemed to work better at night and in darkness, they might be disrupted by the rays of the sun (1935, p. 361). Nevertheless, his testimony gains in impressiveness from his very refusal to resort to supernatural explanations.

To Shirokogoroff, the practice of shamanism is not a religion or a philosophy; it is an *intuitive art*, comparable to poetry or literary composition (p. 361). For the shaman to heal the body, as a “medicine man,” is not a primary concern. His or

her role in the community is as a “*safety valve*” for its psychomental tensions (p. 358, italics added); the most vital function is “*a regulation of the individual and mass psychosis*” of fellow members (p. 359, italics added). Also highly important, in the light of the minority peoples’ (at the time of writing in the 1930s) impending collectivization, Russification, and modernization, is the shaman's mediation in helping the group to absorb *novel elements or situations* into its preexistent cultural framework; to combat the *anomie* which afflicts minorities whose lifestyles are forced to change at too drastic a pace (p. 360). Shirokogoroff stated emphatically that “the adjustment of new cultural elements to the existing complex is a real creative work continuously carried out by ‘good’ shamans” (p. 375).

This is done by devising, in a state of inspiration, ways of making the novel elements symbolically comprehensible. (For example, in the 19th century, when encroachment by Russian traders brought smallpox to remote shamanist clans, the fact of the disease was made less fearful, though not less deadly, by giving it an identity as a female spirit who could be fought or propitiated by the same ritual methods as those used for familiar clan spirits.)

The unique gift required of a shaman is the ability to divine or intuit what precisely is wrong with the spiritual condition of the clan member or the clan (p. 359). In Shirokogoroff's opinion, the shaman's intuition comprises “imagination with the help of an abbreviated thinking” (p. 360), acting to solve problems “in the strata of subconsciousness” (p. 362). Access to the altered state of mind in which cognition does not obstruct intuition is not easy and even the most gifted shaman may need a lifetime of practice to do it well (p. 362).

The means of reaching the altered state, that of trance or ecstasy, are numerous and somewhat controversial. Among the most harmless preparations for the attempt is sleep, which Shirokogoroff thought was used for two purposes. During sleep, a shaman could deepen insight by the technique that modern researchers call lucid dreaming; that is, for the sleeper to allow a succession of dream images to pass before the mind's eye while consciousness is still just sufficiently alert to take note of them, possibly

manipulate them, guess at their import, and recall them. Sleeping before a trance session also enabled the shaman to hover in semiconsciousness upon waking, when the state would be deliberately prolonged and heightened by chanting, drumming, and dancing (pp. 361-362). Many shamans utilized alcohol, tobacco, and the smoke of other strange narcotics and hallucinogens (so eagerly studied in the 1960s): agaric and other fungi, and plants like hemp, might be used to promote ecstasy.² But the more successful shamans avoided excess in order to retain control of their powers.

During the trance itself, a shaman would see and talk to spirits, identify those causing trouble, and deal with the "patient" by viewing the problem or question in a spiritual or psychological dimension. The language of this dimension, as in that of dreams, is symbolic. Shamanistic cosmology postulates a lower and an upper world, and it was sometimes thought necessary for the shaman to travel to one of these, giving an account of his or her inner journey by a series of cryptic utterances. In the role of what Eliade calls a *psychopomp*, shamans or their spirit helpers were responsible for managing the soul of a sick or dying person, bringing it back or, if death occurred, guiding it to the other world and protecting it from hazards on the way.³

Shirokogoroff had many years of experience in observing shamanic trances. He understood very well that the genuine art of ecstasy was rare. He was also in a position to analyze it as few ethnographers have been since the 1930s, as the authentic shamanic tradition rapidly disappeared and fieldwork became a matter of applying theory based on the research of others to the fading memories of aged informants.

It was Shirokogoroff's conclusion that the creative activity of the shaman, producing numinous symbols in a trance state, was comparable to that of all gifted artists, poets, and musicians when they had induced the "creative mood" (p. 365). He cites for example "writers-psychologists" like Dostoevsky who could become possessed of fictitious characters as cathartic symbols and capture them on paper: "When a talented writer assumes a complex [of ideas] to be described, he does not lose his power of recording, as if he were an observer from the

outside" (p. 362). To Shirokogoroff, the shaman's spirits, although they may be naively visualized as human, bird, or animal, are really "hypotheses...which formulate observations of psychic life" (p. 370). Similarly, the narrative told by shamans of their journeys in the other worlds could be an inspired metaphor for psychic processes taking place in the lives of clan members.

There is thus a parallel to be drawn between the shaman's and the artist's intuitive methods, the state of mind in which the work of both blossoms, and its fruits. The former's subconsciously discovered spirit entities, and the latter's characters or images or themes, appearing in utterly disparate milieus, share a common birthplace in the subconscious. The parallel is clear; it is complete when one returns to the issue of the function of such creative activity on behalf of society.

The above remarks, if they are true at all, must apply to the arts everywhere. Is there any special connection between shaman and artist in Russia? The shaman acted as psychiatrist, priest, poet, professor, and even performer in his small community. In a complex modern society, one person, however versatile and gifted, could hardly function in so many ways alone.

The extreme popularity of poetry in Russia is certainly put in an intriguing perspective by these considerations. Foreigners sometimes marvel that poets are so greatly respected there, apparently so much *needed*, (whereas in the western world it would be fair to say that public appreciation of poetry is slight, and most poets remain culturally insignificant and unrewarded as compared, say, with popular actors or musicians).

The fearful ordeals of 20th-century Russian life, while stripping away all the harmonies and refinements of peace, have forged remarkable, fully integrated individuals to share in the task of regulating, exploring, and healing the souls of their nation. Writers, poets, musicians and artists are extremely important in this respect. However, the nature of their work must remain intuitive, semiconscious, in order for it to be truly creative. The further task of perceiving and articulating the malaise is in the hands of "neoshamans" in a different sector of society. The cities and universities of the modern state are obviously not

inhabited by tribal shamans in costumes hung with metal charms: instead, we must look for these inspired mediators in a rather unlikely guise—among the *intelligentsia*.

• The Function of Transpersonalism in Russia •

...to be overly conscious is a sickness, a real, thorough sickness.

—F. M. Dostoevsky,
Notes From Underground (1864/1994)

DOSTOEVSKY'S OBSERVATION about consciousness must apply to more people in Russia today than when it was made in the mid-19th century. Jung and many other psychologists have noted that increases in consciousness are brought about by *pain*. Since Russia's modern history has been so very painful for most of those who lived through it, it is reasonable to assume that the "real, thorough sickness" of being too conscious must have reached epidemic proportions.

The Soviet regime, notorious for ideological and religious intolerance, had been unusually tolerant of that which is unknown to science; it not only allowed but funded serious studies of paranormal phenomena, in the hope of using the powers studied to further its own ends. However, individuals whose work addressed transpersonal issues were apparently in jeopardy; at least, they could not speak or publish their thoughts and felt that they were under official scrutiny during the Soviet years. In the Western world, neglect would be admixed with ridicule in the case of an intellectual and a scientist who expected to retain the respect of his peers while also being an ecumenical theologian, philosopher, writer, artist or poet, let alone an investigator of the paranormal. But in the last few decades Russia has persisted in recognizing, as other nations might not, the value of its creative intellectuals; and its society has been enriched by their versatility and openmindedness to unconventional ideas.

For example, the late Vassily Vassilievich Nalimov (1910–1997) seems to have been an individual accomplished in both the sciences and the humanities. (See *Voices of Russian*

Transpersonalism, 1997). He was eminently capable of mastering several of the most precise and abstruse of scientific disciplines—mathematics and statistics, physics, chemistry, and biology (Granovsky, 1997, p. 9). With this empirical and objective standpoint, the ground firmly beneath his feet, Nalimov was not content. He was both an innovator and synthesizer in the work he did in those conventional sciences. Still, this intellectual stimulus was not enough. He expanded his explorations beyond quantitative science to its philosophic dimensions, and to humanistic, qualitative topics: linguistics, abstract art, ecological problems, and the cultures of the world (p. 11).

Ultimately, Nalimov obeyed an atavistic impulse to reach down from the surface of science to his "shamanic roots" (Roy, 1977, p. 7). Like a shaman, he was transformed by the long years of imprisonment, deprivation, and danger. Nalimov achieved "the powerful mastery of his nature that emanated from him" (Zakgeim, 1997, p. 8). He launched himself into the worlds of the unconscious, mapping them (as a shaman would describe them in trance) as a result of his journeys. Unlike a shaman or a creative artist, however, Nalimov spoke of his intuitive discoveries in the language of the intellect, of mathematics and philosophy, albeit in terms so pure and abstract that they may be as meaningless to most of us as an entranced shaman's bird cries. The title of his 1982 book, *Realms of the Unconscious: The Enchanted Frontier*, could more easily denote the translation of a shamanic text than a monograph on "the probabilistic approach to the concept of the unconscious" (Granovsky, 1997, p. 12).

The themes of Nalimov's works became more and more "shamanistic" as he neared the end of his life. In particular, his "conception of multiple worlds of different spirituality and wanderings through worlds and ages" (Granovsky, 1997, p. 13) suggests that his thought took flight on a shaman's quest into the most rarified spheres of the conscious intellect, where few could follow. It is most significant that he returned from the quest preoccupied with the proper shamanic function of using his insights to aid his group to assimilate new elements: "He paid special attention to the critical state of modern culture, to the search for a new culture and a different civilization...and

the danger which grows as culture [did he also mean *consciousness*?] becomes richer and more complicated" (p. 13).

There is, of course, no comparison between the *content* of the works of a great intellectual of Nalimov's caliber and the cryptic utterances of a shaman, any more than there is between the extraordinary quality of Nalimov's personality—as attested by those who knew him—and the dissociative, untutored nature of a typical practitioner of shamanism. The comparison to be made here is a *functional* one, leading to the conclusion that at least one Russian intellectual, albeit of a vanishing generation, emerged from the past strengthened and inspired, drawing upon the strengths of all the components of his variegated cultural heritage. His legacy, provided it is not forgotten by younger intellectuals with their own dangerous spirits to master, seems to offer them the same adaptive, integrative, and prophetic services once provided by their shamanic ancestors.

Notes

1. Some of the iron symbols attached to the traditional costume of such shamans are shaped and placed to represent the new skeleton resulting from the process of dismemberment and reassembly; it may be the skeleton, not of a human, but of an animal or bird, into which the shaman is thought to change when in a trance.

2. Interestingly, the archaeologist S. I. Rudenko and his successors, during their excavation of nomads' tombs in the Altai beginning earlier in this century, found evidence that the eastern Scythians of ca. 500 B.C. possessed the apparatus for burning hemp and inhaling the smoke as part of their funeral ritual. This confirms a report of the practice made by Herodotus.

3. In literate religions with a shamanistic component, Tibetan Buddhism, for example, the instructions for the journey of the soul are recorded in sacred books like the *Bardo Thodol*, a version of which was first published in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957). When the Tibetan monk chants this text to the deceased, he is performing the role of a shamanistic psychopomp.

References

- Dostoevsky, F. M. (1895). Critical articles: Introduction. In *Polnoye sobraniye sochinyeni* [Complete Collected Works], Vol. 9.
- Dostoevsky, F. M. (1994). *Notes from underground* (R. Pevear & L. Volokhonsky, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books. (Originally published 1864).
- Evans-Wentz, W. Y. (Ed.). (1957). *The Tibetan book of the dead: Or the after-death experiences on the bardo plane, according to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English rendering* (3rd ed.). London: Oxford University Press.
- Granovsky, Yu. V. (1997). Dedicated to the memory of V. V. Nalimov. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 16(2), 9–14.
- Nalimov, V. V. (1982). *Realms of the unconscious: The enchanted frontier*. Philadelphia: ISI Press.
- Roy, R. (1997). Vassily Nalimov—Modern Russian high priest. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 16(2), 6–7.
- Shirokogoroff, S. M. (1935). *Psychomental complex of the Tungus*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.
- Voices of Russian Transpersonalism (Vol. 4), V. V. Nalimov Memorial Issue. (1997). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 16(2).
- Zakgeim, A. (1997). A teacher. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 16(2), 8.

