

Role of Mask in Asian Shamanism

Koyalyashko Calina

Kazakh National University of Art,
Astana City
Kazakhstan

ABSTRACT

In the article there is considered a phenomena of shamanism as a cultural universal. Analysis object is a clay mask of National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It was found in Keder settlement (Kuiryktobe), located in Otrar Oasis at one of the most busy part of the Silk Road. The mask as shamanistic ritual attribute is considered as an obligatory condition for meditative function of shaman.

Keywords: Mircea Eliade, Keder, the Silk Road, shamanism, mask, shamanistic ritual, mediator, cross-cultural parallels.

Introduction

One of the most known researchers of archaic techniques of ecstasy, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) carried out a deep research of shamanism as a special cultural phenomenon in his book “Shamanism: archaic techniques of ecstasy”. Despite recognition in the scientific world, in our opinion his heritage is not actively used in contemporary culturology. First of all, it should be said that scientist described a cultural phenomenon of shamanism in different regions of the world (Europe, Oceania, Asia, South America, Australia) in sufficient details. According to Eliade, shamanism in a strict sense it is primarily Siberian and Central Asian religious-mystical phenomenon which is however specific for entire humanity. Thus, the phenomenon of shamanism is a cross-cultural universal which functions, attributes, meditative psychotechniques had many similarities. Tunguska word “shaman” has become a part of all European languages from Russian language. In Russian language the work has come in the first half of XVII century from Evenki language, who lived along the river Ude. Translated from Evenki language it meant “wise man”, “the one who knows”.

According to a well-known Orientalist V. Bartold: “Bahshi” is a borrowed (probably from the Sanskrit bhikhu) word which appeared in Oriental-Turkic and Persian languages during Mongol era. Nowadays, for Kalmyks, Mongols and Manchus this word means a high spiritual rank, for Kazakhs (dialectal forms of bucksy and bucksa) it is a wizard and soothsayer who cure sick using incantation, for Turkmens it is a folk singer (also for Kyrgyz bucksy accompanies his incantations with sounds of his musical instrument — kobuz). The functions of shaman were also similar everywhere: shaman it is a person who has specific and direct connections with spirits; he sees them

face to face, talks to them, asks them, prays — but “controls” only a limited number of them. “Shaman is a specialist in trance during which his soul, as it is commonly cited, leaves a body in order to rise up to Heaven or descend into Hell” [12; 10]. “This elected mystical elite controls not only religious life of humanity, but also takes care of his “soul”. Shaman is a great specialist in the human soul; only he can “see” it, because he knows its “form” and “destination”.

Consequently, shamanism as a set of ideas concerning the ways of interaction with the other world, was integrated into the system of archaic religious beliefs (magic, animism, fetishism, totemism). M. Eliade emphasizes the differences between shamans and priest. Indeed, in various archaic cultures along with shaman, there is also a priest-sacrificer. In the area where ecstatic experience is a part of culture, the shaman, only shaman is an absolute master of special meditative techniques of ecstasy. Shaman commands his “spirits”, can get in contact with dead, “demons” and “spirits of Nature”. This is the main argument in favor of the thesis of non-religious status of shaman. Eliade often emphasizes the fact that shamanism has a mystical nature and it is prohibited to combine it with “religious” phenomena due to its specialty and meditateness. According to many other modern researchers there is a range of religious components in shamanism which allows suggesting that shamanic techniques have a religious nature. Thus, there are two different approaches to interpretation of the cultural phenomenon of shamanism. Shaman it is a chosen one of higher powers, but not tribesmen.

In Siberia and North-East Asia, the main methods of shamans selection are either hereditary transmission of shamanic profession or a call of natural (a “call” or “choice”). There are also cases when one can become shaman at his own will (for example, Altai), or at family will (Tungus and others.). The latter, however, are considered to be weaker than those who inherited the profession or heard the “call” of spirits. In any case, there were special rituals of shamanic initiation regardless of selection method. A candidate is recognized as shaman in two cases: the first — by ecstatic way (dreams, trances, etc.) the second, traditional — using a secret language of meditation, transcendental immersion into mythology and genealogy of the family, and even through a special physical effect. In one of the mounds of Kazakh Altai there was found Bucks burial, whose initiation apparently had a physical nature. Archaeologist Z. Samashev during digging in the Karakaba valley discovered a probable burial of shaman because paraphernalia and some physiological characteristics of dead indicated to such fact. Scientist says: “With the shamanism cult, there probably can be related a rare case of inter vivos trepanation of a pre-thinned ideal circle on a sincipital part of brain case.

According to knot formation at the edge of small trepanation holes after those medical procedures the person lived for some time. It is possible, that such operations were carried out during shamanic ritual of “choice” and are connected with the notion of special forms of communication with heaven Tengri and perception of information from on high by Spirit chosen ones. Sometimes initiation was public and was itself an autonomous ritual. However, this action had an alternative in the form of calling of neophyte in a dream or in ecstatic experience. In ancient times, on a huge territory of

Central and North Asia a magical-religious life of humanity was centered around shaman. There also was a common way to communicate with the spirits of shaman — shamanistic ritual. As it is known, the idea of such method lies in the fact that spirits come in the body of shaman and his soul is set out on a journey into the spiritsdom. The similarity of such world shamanic practice of all peoples is breathtaking, and its meaning and purpose is the same — protection of a human. Shamans using their trances can cure tribesmen who accompany their dead to the Shadowland and serve as intermediaries between them and their Gods — Heaven or Hell, big or small. Eliade writes: “KazakhKyrgyz Bucksy uses a mixed technique, where a shamanic cure is turned into incantation ceremony.

Session begins with a prayer to Allah and the Muslim saints, followed by a call to jinn and threat to the evil spirits. Bucksy sings all the time. At some moment, he is come over of the spirits, and during this trance he “begins iron fire walking with naked feet”, several times putting in the mouth an alight fuse. He touches a red iron with tongue, “and knifes his face with a sharp knife leaving no traces”. After these shamanistic acts he again turns to Allah: “Oh, God! Give happiness! Oh, I wish you look at my tears! I pray for your help!”. Further, Eliade underlines the importance of central procedure of expulsion of evil spirits which own a sick one. To carry out this task Bucksy introduces himself into shamanic trance, reaching insensitivity to fire and knife attack. In other words, it becomes a “spirit” and occurs the power to scare away and expulsion demons of disease. Thus, the meditative function of a Central Asian shaman is needed, above all, in a ceremony related to experiences of a human soul as a psychological substance which can leave body and become easy bag for demons and sorcerers. That’s because in entire Asia a shaman performs the function of sorcerer and healer. He diagnoses, looks for escaped soul of sick person, grabs it and connects with body, which it left. Shaman sees off a soul of dead to the Underworld, as only he — a real mediator, mediator between the human world and the world of supernatural spirits.

Using psychotechniques a soul of shaman can safely leave its body, reaches the Hell, puts high up into the Heaven, and at the same time to be a member of society. Obligatory attribute of such action was a shaman mask. Sacral Symbols of mask, marked special abilities of mediator, was a sign of supernatural power, incarnation of totem or ancestor, God/Goddess, was an obligatory condition for initiation to the transcendental world. Shaman, who wear a mask, became the another entity, come in contact with the another, occurred with it a mystic connection and became an embodiment of spirit, which it portrayed (Figure 1).

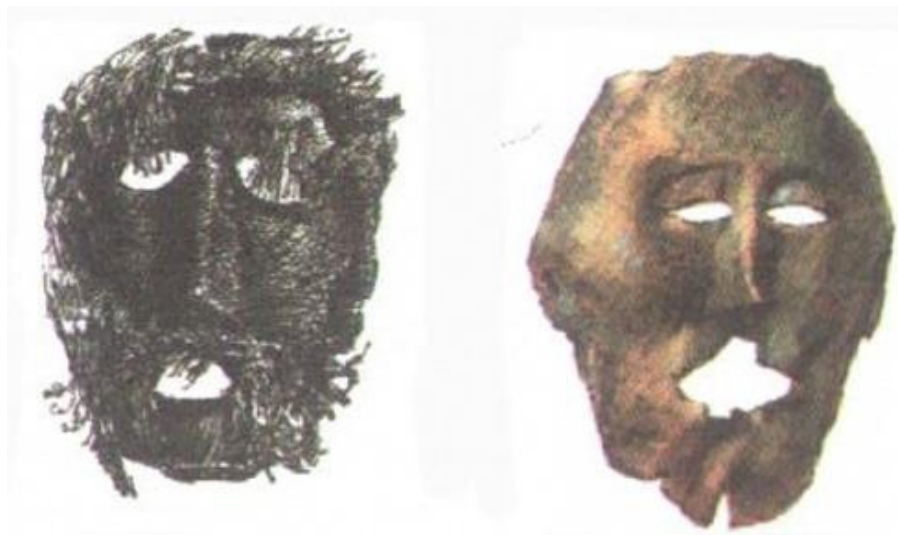


Fig. 1 Siberian shaman masks

C. Levi-Strauss in his book “The way of masks” describes various types of masks: “Some wore on head, other — on forehead, and another — in hand, the fourth — on fingers, fifth — in teeth. There were mask-sits that covered the whole body, as well as paired and group masks”. As an example we can point out to an exhibit with identification number 2090 in the hall “Ancient and medieval history” of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Fig. 2). This mask was found on the floor of a house in Kuiryktobe settlement, built as it was found in the IX–X centuries and existed up to the middle of the XIII century.



Fig. 2 Mask from the collection of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan

South Kazakhstan archaeological expedition for more than thirty years carries out large-scale diggings there. Kuiryktobe settlement is the largest settlement in the Otrar oasis and is identified with the city Keder, former capital of Otrar-Farad region in

the IX–XII centuries. In this south-eastern region of Kazakhstan there passed the most active section of the Silk Road on the territory of Zhetisu (Semirechye). There were found many valuable artifacts which illustrate the active crosscultural interactions of adjacent territories. The abovementioned mask with its mystical “facial expression” evokes transcendental associations connected with a particular purpose. Obviously, the mask was a part of shaman paraphernalia and strengthened psychoemotional impact on participants of recipient. The mask makes a very strong impression; mystical “facial expression” evokes transcendental associations, apparently associated with a particular purpose. It has oval shape, covered with red engobe and its height is 20 cm, width is 12 cm, thickness of ceramic wall is 3 cm, inside there are traces of fingers forming. On the convex side of the mask there are cut “eyes” in the form of narrow liquor and asymmetrical mouth.

With heavily accented reliefs there are hooked nose, eyebrows and chin; ears are marked with bas-relief glues, a tiara on top — three different-sized teeth, each of which has a bifurcate completion. Origin, evolution and use of masks in traditions of many peoples of the world is a common to humanity cultural universals. That’s why reconstruction of functional abilities of masks is an important interpretive element in understanding of different cultures. Since the appearance of cultural anthropology the study of masks has become one of the most important research topics. Investigation of mask place in culture was conducted by such scholars as M. Bakhtin, M. Kagan, Yu. Lotman, C. Levi-Strauss, M. Eliade, V. Ivanov, and many others. C. LeviStrauss and M. Eliade have formulated and justified axiomatic idea that the function of mask with each step of culture genesis transformed in proportion to evolutionary dynamics. The first masks it is generation and visual representation of ancient beliefs and cults which are spread throughout the ecumene, lived-in by an archaic man.

In antiquity they were an obligatory attribute of theatrical mystery, then — theatre performance. In the European Middle Ages, sacral function of a mask has been superseded by the carnival one; in the Central Asian and SouthEast Asian regions attribute qualities of dramatic or shamanic belonging was kept.



Fig. 3 Mask of Udegey shaman

Museum mask from Keder was not supposed to be fixed, and, probably as it is described by M. Eliade, it was held in hands of shaman at the initial stages of mystery. It was held in conditions of growing psychological pressure and turning of shaman-mediator on trance supposed in further a possibility of open demonstration of his drawn face, which in such form can be shown to participants. That's why during initial period of shamanic ritual the mask is held in his hand, and then in the moment of the highest affective condition participants of mystery it is not needed, as their mind has been already changed, the face of mediator is distorted and was almost not distinguishable from mask. Mircea Eliade writes about it in his famous book: "...shamanic ecstasy can be considered a revival of mythical illud tempus (time thereof), when people could actually communicate with the Heaven. Undoubtedly, divine lifting of shaman (or sorcerer, mage, etc.) is deep modified and sometimes degraded debris of this archaic religious ideology based on faith in God and the real relations between the Heaven and Earth.

However, shaman, as we have seen, due to his ecstatic experience which allows him to experience again the condition which is inaccessible to the rest of people,— is considered and considers himself as selected. Myths remember about more intimate relationship between the Supreme Being and shamans; first of all, it is about the First Shaman who was sent by the Supreme Being or its substitute (демиург or the Sun God) to the Earth to protect people from disease and evil spirits". For most of peoples, whose cultural development long kept the archaic tradition, masks were used not for fun or entertainment, because the power of mystical fear, inspired by after world features (cuts, color accents, plastic deformation, etc.) and meditation abilities of shaman to connect the worlds of humans and spirits, was too great.



Fig. 4 Buryat mask — persona of the XIX centuries.

In Asian culture (as well as, for example, in the South American), there are widely known the masks which scared demons and had color symbolism: red — advantage, white — venality, black — meanness. Also, it has to be reminded that the above museum mask is engobed with red and in connection with missing binary-stage identification it gives many reasons to consider its functional belonging as sacral culture of shamans: “Using it a person can be incarnation of divine or demonic, join to the world of animals, shadows or ghosts, or even enter into the human world, but to become a different personality which is dissimilar to the one who is under the mask”. The three-part tiara of museum masks also supports the version of its shamanic belonging. Images on tricorn hats (tricorn tiaras) was found on a set of artefacts relating to the Middle Ages, it is replicated by anthropomorphic sculptures, reliefs, plaques, masks (persona). During this period wide regions of Eurasia steppe have been undergone to active culture-treger influence (in a positive sense) of Turks, that is why this specific headwear according to L. Kyzlasov, S. Ahinzhakov and A. Sher is directly correlated with ancient turkic shamanic ritual practice. Such interpretation is also supported by modern Kazakhstan scientists A. Dosymbaeva, and G. Ternovaya and K. Baipakov, who believe as their predecessors, that such headwears is a doubtless shaman attribute.

A. Dosymbaeva clarifies that such tiara is typical for both men and women, who have a specific sacral status, which had representatives of maternal phratry from the tribe astaka (ashide). As the region of mask finding from Keder was one of the most active Kazakh part of the Silk Road, and it, in turn, was actively controlled by the power elite of the Western Turkic khanate; it can be said of a multiple cross-cultural parallels in the material and spiritual culture of that period. This state existed as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious political conglomerate, and one can reasonably argue that there are represented universal cultural patterns of many people in Keder mask, adjacent to the “Silk River”. Of course, mythologems and variety of semantic structures created by humanity on the whole area of inhabited oecumene, were generated by mental nature of that type of culture within which they are created. Worldview semantics of these structures creates a special cultural code, which synthesizes mythological ideas, beliefs, ritual practices and its plastic manifestation. A famous anthropologist and semiologist V. Ivanov writes about it:

Conclusion

“The role of mask (or its functionally similar ways to change a face with makeup, tattoos, plastic surgery) is different depending on social, historical and geographical factors. But in some way, the mask is always present there. The mask is presented in culture in a variety of contexts with different functions and values. It is an essential element of the ceremony, which participants, representing mythological characters, appeared in masks. Therefore, a mask was a way of mythological ideas realization and concepts which exist in minds of traditional culture bearer”. Thus, a mask had a polyfunctional nature. But the artifact from the National Museum of Kazakhstan, in our opinion, should be interpreted as a shaman’s attributes. Probably, for unknown reasons,

work with the mask has not been completed. There are no some elements of shamanic decoration: color accents, ornithological symbolism, natural materials, metal plaques, gender identity and etc. In our opinion, shamanism inhere a natural syncretism of almost any religion, because it is not based on the Holy Bible and contains no strictly fixed doctrine. Consequently, regional variations of shamanism were successfully integrated into the various religious systems. Likely, this is the universality of shamanism and ability to inculturation.

References

- Ahinzhakov S.N. Concerning ethnicity of stone sculptures in “tricorn” headwear from Semirechye.– Archaeological sites of Kazakhstan. – Almaty, 1978.
- Baipakov K.M., Kuiryktobe settlement – Keder city. – Almaty, 2005.
- Baipakov K.M., Ternovaya G.A. Religion and culture of medieval Kazakhstan (based on Kuiryktobe settlement). – Almaty, 2005.
- Bezertinov R.N. Ancient turkic worldviews “Tengriism”.– Kazan: RRC “School”, 2006. – 162 p.
- Dosymbaeva A. Western Turk Empire: cultural heritage of Kazakh steppe. – Almaty, 2006.
- Ivanov V.V. Selected works of semiotics and cultural history.T. 4: Sign systems of culture, art and science. – M., 2007.
- Kyzlasov L.R. Concerning history of shamanic belief in Altai.– KSIMK, 1949. – Ed. XXIX.
- Levi-Strauss C. Way of masks./Trans. From French of Ostrovskiy. – Moscow, 2000.
- Samashev Z. Musicians of ancient turkic era of Kazakh Altai.– Cultural heritage, 2014, № 5. P. 29–41.
- Tursunov Ye.Dd Appearance of bucksy, akyns, seri and zhyrau. – Astana: RKB “Foliant” 1999. – 252 p. 61–62.
- Sher A.Ya. Stone sculptures of Semirechye. – Moscow-Leningrad, 1966.
- Eliade M. Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy. – Kiev: Sofia, 2000. – 480 p.