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Roberte Hamayon

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# Shamanism as what makes living on hunting ideologically possible

## Recapitulation of analyses of Siberian data

Roberte Hamayon (UMR 7535 Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative)

The data come from the small stateless societies living on hunting in the Siberian forest, considered in their traditional way of life that is in the pre-Soviet era and subsequently, insofar as it was maintained through the changes imposed by the Soviet regime. According to this analysis, shamanism appears to be a symbolic system providing that humans engage in an exchange relationship with the animal species they live on. This exchange appears to function as what makes living on hunting possible from an ideological point of view. Shamanic rituals are meant to stage the exchange process at a symbolic level and the shamanic mode of behaviour is meant to express aspects of this process.

The model drawn from these data stresses exchange as a process meant to legitimate the predation to which those who have nothing must resort. The underlying principle at work is that taking edible wild resources is possible only if included in an exchange process with Nature. In other words, hunting is conceived of as a part of an imaginary life-exchange involving imaginary partners. Thus, the notion of exchange is analysed as a conceptual creation, and taking appears to be what actually gives the impulse to the process. As a first step, this model attributes a determinant part in the symbolic thinking of the society to the very fact of living directly on wild resources which accounts for similarities between hunting societies the world over by virtue of their common dependence on nature. Its characteristics are better evidenced if compared to those of the models drawn from neighbouring pastoral kin societies. For this reason, I shall also briefly comment on some changes occurring in relation with the vanishing of hunting as a way of life and the adoption of stock-breeding. Whereas no determinant part can be claimed for stock-breeding as such, the whole system of relationships with the natural environment is modified, beginning with the triggering event that moves the exchange process forward : the impulse shifts from taking to giving, and this gives rise to the practice of sacrifice in these societies. As a second step, however, the determinant part is rather to be attributed to a certain type of view of the world and relation to it : the world consists of limited goods of various kinds, whose common points are that they are not produced but provided for, therefore not available to anybody at any time : game, rain, fertility, health, success all that is considered to be depending on good luck or fortune.

The shamanic worldview is enacted in the framework of rituals that are often but not necessarily conducted by the religious figure called shaman. The rituals staging the exchange process can be conducted as well by the hunters themselves or by the whole human community. As a rule, a shaman is invested by a community to conduct the ritual as its temporary representative and under its control, for all that his person is not an institutional shaman and he has to re-qualify periodically. The function remains clearly perceived as collective, and its monopolisation by a specialist appears to be no more than a sociological modality among others. In Siberian languages, as a rule, the notion of shamanizing applies to the mode of behaviour prescribed for the ritual (see below) and is not reserved for the shaman. Hunting : a tricky game with imaginary partners

More precisely, according to the world-view of the hunting societies of the Siberian Forest, life rests on an exchange relationship between the human community and the spirits of the wild animal species they eat. The spirits are, so to speak, imagined in order to make hunting possible by turning it into an exchange where they serve as partners. In this case, the notion of exchange emerges as a symbolic construction which cannot be reduced to a functional organization of socio-economic realities. This exchange is conceived of as reciprocal and symmetric : just as humans live on game, consuming the meat and vital force of animals, so

animals' spirits feed on humans, devouring their flesh and sucking the vital force in their blood. The progressive loss of vitality linked to ageing, as well as death, are considered to be part of the natural order of things : in the hunters' way of thinking, humans are to become quarry for the animal spirits. Sickness (experienced as loss of vital force) and death are not only a kind of payment to the spirits for the food that is given, but also the prerequisite for the provision of food for future generations. Thus, life is perpetuated in both the realm of humans and that of game animals, in the shape of an everlasting mutual consumption that also brings death to the two. The exchange law operating between these realms makes them partners as well as objects of exchange for one another : they are both hunters and quarry in a reciprocal hunt.

## Taking first, then letting the partner take

Such is the ideological formulation of the exchange law. It properly applies to society itself, as a self-reproducing whole. An implicit side-rule is necessary for the exchange to operate at the level of individuals, in as much as one should eat before dying, be hunter before becoming quarry. Therefore taking and giving back (used here as analytical concepts) must be disconnected both in their carrying out and in time. In symbolic terms, they reflect the alternation of life and death. More precisely, in the hunters' perception of exchange, a time lag between taking and giving back (perceived in terms of spirits' taking) is what allows individual life to happen. In other words, taking is associated with living, giving back with dying. This makes the interval between them correspond more or less to the length of one's life, hence it is compulsory. Although at first glance this delay would seem to go against the alleged reciprocal character of the exchange, this is not so. Reciprocity with animal spirits may remain explicitly proclaimed as the ideological ground of a hunting society, while being factually denied. This leads us to emphasise that the exchange process is to be taken into account as a constituent element of it.

## A full partnership

Such claimed reciprocity is to be understood with reference to the idea that humans and animals have similar properties, in particular the above-mentioned one of having souls (or spirits) that animate bodies. Souls are supposed to be re-used from generation to generation within the same human line or the same animal species and this is, for these societies, what explains the periodical reappearance of game. This conception should not be labelled reincarnation, since the soul is not personalised. Soul is rather meant to serve as a sort of right to animate a living being which is to be inherited. It is simply said that another animal of the same species or another person of the same family as the dead is born. As a rule, a soul normally returns for a new life only in one's progeny. This is a good reason for the emphasis on having children. However, every new-born child is related to a dead member of his or her family without being considered to be the dead person re-born. Souls are supposedly located in the bones, in the same way that vital force is located in the meat (as flesh) and blood. Whereas vital force disappears with death, the soul remains attached to the bones for some time until it is ready to be re-used in a new individual. For this reason, funeral rites performed on humans as well as rites performed on hunted animals consist in preserving the bones and treating them so that the soul they convey could reappear in a new body for a new life. This conception is reflected in the language and practices of these societies. One never says to kill but to obtain game. One also say that the animal has given itself, has come by itself, spontaneously meeting the hunter's arrow which can also be interpreted as a rhetoric device to ideologically lessen the amount to be repaid to the spirits. Hunting rites are intended to both preclude any idea of murder and reduce hunting to just taking meat. Not only would killing a member of an animal species entail vengeance on the part of its fellows in the shape of some human's death. But above all it would amount to suppressing an individual of the animal species in question by hurting its soul and preventing it from reappearing for a new life, hence it would be detrimental to the success of further hunting. In fact, the hunter takes meticulous care not to damage the bones of the hunted animal and to perform the necessary rites for them to be revived in a new animal. Symmetrically, upon dying a human is supposed to be taken by the spirits. From this belief springs a custom praised by these societies as a hunter's ideal death : that of going alone far away into the depth of the forest to the end of being taken, that is eaten by the spirits. It is known in ethnographic literature as voluntary death, and it is to be paralleled to the supposed self-gift of the animal, although it is rather perceived as animal spirits' taking. On the whole, the life-exchange between humans and animal spirits can be described as a reciprocal and symmetrical exchange of flesh (or meat) between two groups of bones ensuring self- perpetuation. Now in these societies obeying patrilineal law and organised in two exogamic moieties, bone is used to conceptualise the principle of patrilineal descent, and flesh that of marriage alliance. Accordingly, an exchange between a human group and a game-animal species is likened to a marriage between two human groups. The similarity of the two exchange processes also derives from the identical essence of what is exchanged between the two sides : meat (flesh) in one case, women in the other. This accounts for the wide use of hunting and marriage (seen from a male's point of view) as

privileged metaphors for each other so are game and women, as well as, from another point of view, eating and sexual intercourse. The shamanic management of the exchange relation

There can be no substitute for human compensation (i. e. human flesh and vital force) owed to the animal spirits. Absolute loyalty to the principle of exchange is compulsory. However, this does not preclude the possibility of seeking to put it into practice in the most advantageous manner. In the first place, this is done at the symbolic level, conceived of as both determining and foreshadowing the real level. To put it differently, the shamanic relation to the spirits is a prerequisite for the hunting relation to the animals. The shamanic function consists in ritually setting the terms of the exchange. Given that marriage alliance is understood as the institutional frame most appropriate for carrying out an exchange, alliance relations are staged one way or another in the collective periodical rituals meant for ensuring hunting life, which are the main rituals performed by these societies. In societies with shamans, the shaman must ritually marry the game-giving spirit's sister or daughter in order to obtain good luck for the hunting season to come, that is promises-of-game, in the shape of animal vital force. Only in his capacity as husband (in contrast to an abductor) is he entitled to rightfully obtain promises- of-game from his spiritual wife. In other words, his legitimacy as shaman comes from his marrying a spirit. The ritual either stages a wedding as such (as in the Alta.) or hunting with one's in-laws (which is the way a marriage relation is ritually marked out among the Ienissei Tungus). As far as the shaman's wife is thought of as an animal, he play-acts his husband's part in a male animal's shape (costume, head-dress, body movements, voice and vocabulary). At the end of the ritual, he lies for some time completely motionless on his back on a rug depicting a forest with wild animals. He is supposedly being devoured by their spirits, and he is to be ritually revived afterwards. In sum, during this type of ritual the shaman behaves as if he were an animal, first in a stag's part to push his rivals away and copulate with his female spirit-wife, and lastly as self-offered quarry, thus completing the whole exchange process on his own. His symbolic self-offering is intended to serve as a token of the group's future repayment to the spirits. The ritual ends with a divinatory sequence where the shaman proceeds to determine the supposed life expectancy of the participants. Some of them may then be marked out for dying soon. Their eventual death will be interpreted in terms of payment to the spirits, like the old hunter's so-called voluntary death : it is necessary that some members die for the group to survive. Thus, repayment to the spirits is individualised, whereas the meat obtained from them is shared out among all members of the group. Now, the shaman is to try to take as much animal vital force as possible as soon as possible. In like manner, he tries to have the spirits take back as little human vital force as possible at the last possible moment. In other words, the shaman takes advantage of the delay between taking and giving back imposed by the vital exchange process insofar as it must respect the alternation of life and death. He is expected to use this lag to act both on the timing and the amount of human vital force to be repaid to the spirits. Not only does taking come first in the process. What is more, only taking is embraced as an attitude from an ideological standpoint : Siberian hunting peoples think of themselves exclusively as takers and they perceive giving as losing. Any hunting community claims for itself a taker's position and properties and keeps silent on the duty of giving back, which it nevertheless deems compulsory to fulfil. Symmetrically, a taker's attitude is eventually also ascribed to the animal spirits, who are imagined to be greedy and voracious.

## The duty of redistribution

Furthermore, the primacy of taking appears to make redistribution into a duty. The moral connotation of this term is appropriate here. Not only must the taker not keep for himself a good taken from wild resources, but share it out : eating one's game would be equated with committing incest and, as a rule, the hunter passes on the game obtained to his in-laws, who then divide it up. But he is also led to consider cooperation among hunters to be the most essential relationship within society, for it is what makes living on hunting concretely possible : marrying a wife is first of all perceived as acquiring in-laws with whom to live and hunt. In the same way, the shaman's ritual activity is closely controlled by the community, to the point of prohibiting private performances for his own family. In particular, the promises-of-game (good luck) the shaman is to obtain from the spirits are for the benefit of the community. In other words, the duty of the taker, whether hunter or shaman, is to act as a provider for his group, while he is at the same time fully entitled to expect benefits from his fellows' takings. Thus, on the whole, the life-exchange process is set up so as to both preclude any monopolising and to subordinate human individual actions to collective interest. Individual shots are aimed at providing the whole group with game. Individual deaths are meant for repaying the spirits on behalf of the whole group. Insofar as the exchange process is managed to the benefit of the human partner, a crucial part falls to the shaman in charge of handling relationships with the spiritual partner. The good shaman is the one who takes as much and as soon as possible and repays as little and as late as possible. This explains why his practice is not a highly prescribed liturgy to be carried out faithfully, but rather an art to be perpetually renewed in a personalised way. As an art, the shaman's is made up of seduction and cleverness, and, as long as it respects the rule of paying the spirits with human flesh and force, this art must include some trickery in timing and amount. Stock-breeding : offering prayers and sacrifices to ancestors.

Only a few of the many changes that occur in the way of life of Siberian peoples when hunting is replaced by stock-breeding will be mentioned below. The idea of a life- exchange process with spirits is still operative, but unlike the hunters'. Food is no longer obtained and shared out, but produced and possessed, that is both reserved for oneself (therefore transmissible within one's line) and accumulative. The spirits involved are no longer animals but, so to speak, human : they are the souls of the ancestors from whom herds and pasturelands have been inherited, so that reference to ancestors is used to legitimate property rights. What is supposed to be obtained from they would rather say provided by the ancestors is rain, good grazing, protection against wolves and so on, that is, all that is necessary to breed stock. Thus, while stock-breeding is a productive activity, the spirits supposed to command this activity are essentially conceived of along the same lines as the game-giving spirits, as providers of things that are uncertain (although the se things are prerequisite s of food instead of being food as in the case of game animals). In return for their help as providers, the ancestors request from their descendants sacrificed domestic animals, that is, products of their activity as stock-breeders. More precisely, domestic animals are seen as a sort of produced progeny of humans insofar as they have been bred by them which makes them appropriate as substitutes for humans in repayment to the spirits. Thus, sacrifice is clearly derived from a logic of substitution, it can be analysed as taking over from such practices as voluntary death. Sacrificing, or shifting to the primacy of giving

The exchange relationship with spirits is no longer held to be reciprocal and symmetrical. It is perceived as reflecting a fixed hierarchy, where positions are not reversible. The living are subordinate to their ancestors, as being both descended from and dependent on them. What they receive from them is not identical in essence and function to what they offer them. Moreover, the subjective dynamic that moves the exchange process forward is turned around if compared to the hunter's : for the stock-breeder, giving takes precedence and triggers the process. Hence all ideological emphasis is put on sacrificing domestic animals, which amounts to investing products of work, with the perspective of profit in return. Sacrifice is held to be the most profitable and honourable way to compel ancestors to grant their favours, more especially since it goes with prayers, which are the other constituent element of worship. Worship is adapted to such spirits as ancestors who are located on mountains and assigned a permanent higher status. Let us note the fixedness of positions, (compared to their alternation in the hunters model), which precludes their symbolic manipulation. Worshipping the ancestors falls to the elders of lineages, who conduct collective rituals with prayers and sacrifices as priests would do. In these rituals, the part of the shaman is reduced but still essential, since it is to return to the living the benefit of the ancestors' worship, that is to get their fortune and grace. The shamanic institution, while still having a specific function, has become subordinate to patrilineal rules and authorities. Private healing and divining activities develop in relation to the souls of dead people which balances the decrease of the shaman's influence on the group as a whole. Nevertheless, the shaman still maintains relations with animal spirits in some fertility rituals. On the whole, the pastoral worldview contrasts in several ways with that of the hunters : the spirits commanding the environment are humans instead of animals, relations with them develop vertically, as a hierarchy, instead of being horizontal and egalitarian, and positive or negative values replace the principle of general ambivalence. The shamans' power in society decreases. Their place is more and more that of professionals paid for private services and less and less that of representatives of an entire social group. Moreover, if one agrees that shamanism depends on making spirits into partners, the more a ritual is infused with hierarchy, the less it is shamanic. However, the increase in kinship ties with life-giving spirits observed among the case described here is only one among many other possibilities of change in shamanic institution and activities.