

## CONTENTS

*Foreword to the 2004 Edition* xi

*Foreword* xvii

*Note on Orthography* xxix

I. **General Considerations. Recruiting Methods. Shamanism and Mystical Vocation** 3

*Approaches, 3—The Bestowal of Shamanic Powers, 13—Recruiting of Shamans in Western and Central Siberia, 15—Recruiting among the Tungus, 17—Recruiting among the Buryat and the Altaians, 18—Hereditary Transmission and Quest in Obtaining Shamanic Powers, 20—Shamanism and Psychopathology, 23*

II. **Initiatory Sicknesses and Dreams** 33

*Sickness-Initiation, 33—Initiatory Ecstasies and Visions of the Yakut Shamans, 35—Initiatory Dreams of the Samoyed Shamans, 38—Initiation among the Tungus, the Buryat, and Others, 43—Initiation of Australian Magicians, 45—Australian—Siberian—South American and Other Parallels, 50—Initiatory Dismemberment in North and South America, Africa, and Indonesia, 53—Initiation of Eskimo Shamans, 58—Contemplating One's Own Skeleton, 62—Tribal Initiations and Secret Societies, 64*

III. **Obtaining Shamanic Powers** 67

*Siberian Myths concerning the Origin of Shamans, 68—Shamanic Election among the Goldi and the Yakut, 71—*

CONTENTS

*Election among the Buryat and the Teleut, 75—The Shaman's Female Tutelary Spirits, 79—Role of the Souls of the Dead, 81—"Seeing the Spirits," 85—The Helping Spirits, 88—"Secret Language"—"Animal Language," 96—The Quest for Shamanic Powers in North America, 99*

iv. Shamanic Initiation 110

*Initiation among the Tungus and the Manchu, 110—Yakut, Samoyed, and Ostyak Initiations, 113—Buryat Initiation, 115—Initiation of the Araucanian Shamaness, 122—Ritual Tree Climbing, 125—Celestial Journey of the Carib Shaman, 127—Ascent by the Rainbow, 131—Australian Initiations, 135—Other Forms of the Rite of Ascent, 139*

v. Symbolism of the Shaman's Costume and Drum

145

*Preliminary Remarks, 145—The Siberian Costume, 148—The Buryat Costume, 149—The Altaic Costume, 152—The Shaman's Mirrors and Caps, 153—Ornithological Symbolism, 156—Symbolism of the Skeleton, 158—Rebirth from the Bones, 160—Shamanic Masks, 165—The Shamanic Drum, 168—Ritual Costumes and Magical Drums throughout the World, 176*

vi. Shamanism in Central and North Asia: 181

I. Celestial Ascents. Descents to the Underworld

*The Shaman's Functions, 181—"Black" and "White" Shamans. "Dualistic" Mythologies, 184—Horse Sacrifice and the Shaman's Ascent to the Sky (Altaic), 190—Bai Ülgän and the Altaic Shaman, 198—Descent to the Underworld (Altaic), 200—The Shaman as Psychopomp (Altaians, Goldi, Yurak), 205*

CONTENTS

VII. Shamanism in Central and North Asia: 215  
II. Magical Cures. The Shaman as Psychopomp

*Summoning and Searching for the Soul: Tatars, Buryat, Kazak-Kirgiz, 217—The Shamanic Séance among the Ugrians and Lapps, 220—Séances among the Ostyak, the Yurak, and the Samoyed, 225—Shamanism among the Yakut and the Dolgan, 228—Shamanic Séances among the Tungus and the Orochi, 236—Yukagir Shamanism, 245—Religion and Shamanism among the Koryak, 249—Shamanism among the Chukchee, 252*

VIII. Shamanism and Cosmology 259

*The Three Cosmic Zones and the World Pillar, 259—The Cosmic Mountain, 266—The World Tree, 269—The Mystical Numbers 7 and 9, 274—Shamanism and Cosmology in the Oceanian Region, 279*

IX. Shamanism in North and South America 288

*Shamanism among the Eskimo, 288—North American Shamanism, 297—The Shamanic Séance in North America, 300—Shamanic Healing among the Paviotso, 302—The Shamanic Séance among the Achomawi, 305—Descent to the Underworld, 308—Secret Brotherhoods and Shamanism, 313—South American Shamanism: Various Rituals, 323—Shamanic Healing, 326—Antiquity of Shamanism in the Two Americas, 333*

X. Southeast Asian and Oceanian Shamanism 337

*Shamanic Beliefs and Techniques among the Semang, Sakai, and the Jakun, 337—Shamanism in the Andaman Islands and Nicobar, 342—Malayan Shamanism, 344—Shamans and Priests in Sumatra, 346—Shamanism in Borneo and Celebes, 349—The “Boat of the Dead” and the Shamanic Boat,*

CONTENTS

*355—Otherworld Journeys among the Dyak, 359—  
Melanesian Shamanism, 361—Polynesian Shamanism, 366*

XI. Shamanic Ideologies and Techniques among the  
Indo-Europeans 375

*Preliminary Remarks, 375—Techniques of Ecstasy among the  
Ancient Germans, 379—Ancient Greece, 387—Scythians,  
Caucasians, Iranians, 394—Ancient India: Ascensional Rites,  
403—Ancient India: Magical Flight, 407—Tapas and Dīkṣā,  
412—“Shamanic” Symbolisms and Techniques in India,  
414—Shamanism among the Aboriginal Tribes of India, 421*

XII. Shamanic Symbolisms and Techniques in Tibet,  
China, and the Far East 428

*Buddhism, Tantrism, Lamaism, 428—Shamanic Practices  
among the Lolo, 441—Shamanism among the Moso, 444—  
Shamanic Symbolisms and Techniques in China, 447—  
Mongolia, Korea, Japan, 461*

XIII. Parallel Myths, Symbols, and Rites 466

*Dog and Horse, 466—Shamans and Smiths, 470—“Magical  
Heat,” 474—“Magical Flight,” 477—The Bridge and the  
“Difficult Passage,” 482—The Ladder—The Road of the  
Dead—Ascension, 487*

XIV. Conclusions 495

*The Formation of North Asian Shamanism, 495*

Epilogue 508

*List of Works Cited 513*

*Index 571*

CHAPTER ONE

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# General Considerations. Recruiting Methods. Shamanism and Mystical Vocation

## *Approaches*

SINCE the beginning of the century, ethnologists have fallen into the habit of using the terms “shaman,” “medicine man,” “sorcerer,” and “magician” interchangeably to designate certain individuals possessing magico-religious powers and found in all “primitive” societies. By extension, the same terminology has been applied in studying the religious history of “civilized” peoples, and there have been discussions, for example, of an Indian, an Iranian, a Germanic, a Chinese, and even a Babylonian “shamanism” with reference to the “primitive” elements attested in the corresponding religions. For many reasons this confusion can only militate against any understanding of the shamanic phenomenon. If the word “shaman” is taken to mean any magician, sorcerer, medicine man, or ecstatic found throughout the history of religions and religious ethnology, we arrive at a notion at once extremely complex and extremely vague; it seems, furthermore, to serve no purpose, for we already have the terms “magician” or “sorcerer” to express notions as unlike and as ill-defined as “primitive magic” or “primitive mysticism.”

We consider it advantageous to restrict the use of the words “shaman” and “shamanism,” precisely to avoid misunderstandings and to cast a clearer light on the history of “magic” and

### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

“sorcery.” For, of course, the shaman is also a magician and medicine man; he is believed to cure, like all doctors, and to perform miracles of the fakir type, like all magicians, whether primitive or modern. But beyond this, he is a psychopomp, and he may also be priest, mystic, and poet. In the dim, “confusionistic” mass of the religious life of archaic societies considered as a whole, shamanism—taken in its strict and exact sense—already shows a structure of its own and implies a “history” that there is every reason to clarify.

Shamanism in the strict sense is pre-eminently a religious phenomenon of Siberia and Central Asia. The word comes to us, through the Russian, from the Tungusic *šaman*. In the other languages of Central and North Asia the corresponding terms are: Yakut *ojuna* (*oyuna*), Mongolian *bügä*, *bögä* (*buge*, *bü*), and *udagan* (cf. also Buryat *udayan*, Yakut *udoyan*: “shamaness”), Turko-Tatar *kam* (Altaic *kam*, *gam*, Mongolian *kami*, etc.). It has been sought to explain the Tungusic term by the Pali *samaṇa*, and we shall return to this possible etymology (which is part of the great problem of Indian influences on Siberian religions) in the last chapter of this book.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the immense area comprising Central and North Asia, the magico-religious life of society centers on the shaman. This, of course, does not mean that he is the one and only manipulator of the sacred, nor that religious activity is completely usurped by him. In many tribes the sacrificing priest coexists with the shaman, not to mention the fact that every head of a family is also the head of the domestic cult. Nevertheless, the shaman remains the dominating figure; for through this whole region in which the ecstatic experience is considered the religious experience par excellence, the shaman, and he alone, is the great master of ecstasy. A first definition of this complex phenomenon, and perhaps the least hazardous, will be: shamanism = *technique of ecstasy*.

As such, it was documented and described by the earliest travelers in the various countries of Central and North Asia.

1 Pp. 495 ff.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

Later, similar magico-religious phenomena were observed in North America, Indonesia, Oceania, and elsewhere. And, as we shall soon see, these latter phenomena are thoroughly shamanic, and there is every reason to study them together with Siberian shamanism. Yet one observation must be made at the outset: the presence of a shamanic complex in one region or another does not necessarily mean that the magico-religious life of the corresponding people is crystallized around shamanism. This can occur (as, for example, in certain parts of Indonesia), but it is not the most usual state of affairs. Generally shamanism coexists with other forms of magic and religion.

It is here that we see all the advantage of employing the term "shamanism" in its strict and proper sense. For, if we take the trouble to differentiate the shaman from other magicians and medicine men of primitive societies, the identification of shamanic complexes in one or another region immediately acquires definite significance. Magic and magicians are to be found more or less all over the world, whereas shamanism exhibits a particular magical specialty, on which we shall later dwell at length: "mastery over fire," "magical flight," and so on. By virtue of this fact, though the shaman is, among other things, a magician, not every magician can properly be termed a shaman. The same distinction must be applied in regard to shamanic healing; every medicine man is a healer, but the shaman employs a method that is his and his alone. As for the shamanic techniques of ecstasy, they do not exhaust all the varieties of ecstatic experience documented in the history of religions and religious ethnology. Hence any ecstatic cannot be considered a shaman; the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld.

A similar distinction is also necessary to define the shaman's relation to "spirits." All through the primitive and modern worlds we find individuals who profess to maintain relations with "spirits," whether they are "possessed" by them or control them. Several volumes would be needed for an adequate study of all the

## SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

problems that arise in connection with the mere idea of “spirits” and of their possible relations with human beings; for a “spirit” can equally well be the soul of a dead person, a “nature spirit,” a mythical animal, and so on. But the study of shamanism does not require going into all this; we need only define the shaman’s relation to his helping spirits. It will easily be seen wherein a shaman differs from a “possessed” person, for example; the shaman controls his “spirits,” in the sense that he, a human being, is able to communicate with the dead, “demons,” and “nature spirits,” without thereby becoming their instrument. To be sure, shamans are sometimes found to be “possessed,” but these are exceptional cases for which there is a particular explanation.

These few preliminary observations already indicate the course that we propose to follow in order to reach an adequate understanding of shamanism. In view of the fact that this magico-religious phenomenon has had its most complete manifestation in North and Central Asia, we shall take the shaman of these regions as our typical example. We are not unaware, and we shall endeavor to show, that Central and North Asian shamanism, at least in its present form, is not a primordial phenomenon free from any external influence; on the contrary, it is a phenomenon that has a long “history.” But this Central Asian and Siberian shamanism has the advantage of presenting a structure in which elements that exist independently elsewhere in the world—i.e., special relations with “spirits,” ecstatic capacities permitting of magical flight, ascents to the sky, descents to the underworld, mastery over fire, etc.—are here already found integrated with a particular ideology and validating specific techniques.

Shamanism in this strict sense is not confined to Central and North Asia, and we shall endeavor later to point out the greatest possible number of parallels. On the other hand, certain shamanic elements are found in isolation in various forms of archaic magic and religion. And they are of considerable interest, for they show to what extent shamanism proper preserves a substratum of “primitive” beliefs and techniques and to what extent it has in-

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

novated. Always endeavoring to define the place of shamanism within primitive religions (with all that these imply: magic, belief in Supreme Beings and spirits, mythological concepts, techniques of ecstasy, and so on), we shall constantly be obliged to refer to more or less similar phenomena, without implying that they are shamanic. But it is always profitable to compare and to point out what a magico-religious element similar to a certain shamanic element has produced elsewhere in a different cultural ensemble and with a different spiritual orientation.<sup>2</sup>

For all that shamanism dominates the religious life of Central and North Asia, it is nevertheless not *the* religion of that vast region. Only convenience or confusion has made it possible for some investigators to consider the religion of the Arctic or Turko-Tatar peoples to be shamanism. The religions of Central and North Asia extend beyond shamanism in every direction, just as any religion extends beyond the mystical experience of its privileged adherents. Shamans are of the "elect," and as such they have access to a region of the sacred inaccessible to other members of the community. Their ecstatic experiences have exercised, and still exercise, a powerful influence on the stratification of religious ideology, on mythology, on ritualism. But neither the ideology nor the mythology and rites of the Arctic, Siberian, and Asian peoples are the creation of their shamans. All these elements are earlier than shamanism, or at least are parallel to it, in the sense that they are the product of the *general* religious experience and not of a particular class of privileged beings, the ecstatics. On the contrary,

<sup>2</sup> In this sense, and only in this sense, do we regard identifying "shamanic" elements in a highly developed religion or mysticism as valuable. Discovering a shamanic symbol or rite in ancient India or Iran begins to have meaning only in the degree to which one is led to see shamanism as a clearly defined religious phenomenon; otherwise, one can go on forever talking of "primitive elements," which can be found in any religion, no matter how "developed." For the religions of India and Iran, like all the other religions of the modern or ancient East, display a number of "primitive elements" that are not necessarily shamanic. We cannot even consider every technique of ecstasy found in the East "shamanic," however "primitive" it may be.

## SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

as we shall see, we frequently find the shamanic (that is, ecstatic) experience attempting to express itself through an ideology that is not always favorable to it.

In order not to encroach on the subject matter of the following chapters, we will here say only that shamans are persons who stand out in their respective societies by virtue of characteristics that, in the societies of modern Europe, represent the signs of a vocation or at least of a religious crisis. They are separated from the rest of the community by the intensity of their own religious experience. In other words, it would be more correct to class shamanism among the mysticisms than with what is commonly called a religion. We shall find shamanism within a considerable number of religions, for shamanism always remains an ecstatic technique at the disposal of a particular elite and represents, as it were, the mysticism of the particular religion. A comparison at once comes to mind—that of monks, mystics, and saints within Christian churches. But the comparison must not be pushed too far. In contrast to the state of affairs in Christianity (at least during its recent history), peoples who profess to be shamanists accord considerable importance to the ecstatic experiences of their shamans; these experiences concern them personally and immediately; for it is the shamans who, by their trances, cure them, accompany their dead to the “Realm of Shades,” and serve as mediators between them and their gods, celestial or infernal, greater or lesser. This small mystical elite not only directs the community’s religious life but, as it were, guards its “soul.” The shaman is the great specialist in the human soul; he alone “sees” it, for he knows its “form” and its destiny.

And wherever the immediate fate of the soul is not at issue, wherever there is no question of sickness (= loss of the soul) or death, or of misfortune, or of a great sacrificial rite involving some ecstatic experience (mystical journey to the sky or the underworld), the shaman is not indispensable. A large part of religious life takes place without him.

The Arctic, Siberian, and Central Asian peoples are made up

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

chiefly of hunters-fishers or herdsmen-breeders. A degree of nomadism is typical of them all. And despite their ethnic and linguistic differences, in general their religions coincide. Chukchee, Tungus, Samoyed, or Turko-Tatars, to mention only some of the most important groups, know and revere a celestial Great God, an all-powerful Creator but on the way to becoming a *deus otiosus*.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the Great God's name even means "Sky" or "Heaven"; such, for example, is the Num of the Samoyed, the Buga of the Tungus, or the Tengri of the Mongols (cf. also Tengeri of the Buryat, Tängere of the Volga Tatars, Tingir of the Beltir, Tangara of the Yakut, etc.). Even when the concrete name of the "sky" is lacking, we find some one of its most characteristic attributes—"high," "lofty," "luminous," and so on. Thus, among the Ostyak of the Irtysh the name of the celestial god is derived from *sänke*, the primitive meaning of which is "luminous, shining, light." The Yakut call him "Lord Father Chief of the World," the Tatars of the Altai "White Light" (Ak Ayas), the Koryak "The One on High," "The Master of the High," and so on. The Turko-Tatars, among whom the celestial Great God preserves his religious currency more than among their neighbors to the north and northeast, also call him "Chief," "Master," "Lord," and often "Father."<sup>4</sup>

This celestial god, who dwells in the highest sky, has several "sons" or "messengers" who are subordinate to him and who occupy lower heavens. Their names and number vary from tribe to tribe; seven or nine "sons" or "daughters" are commonly mentioned, and the shaman maintains special relations with some of them. These sons, messengers, or servants of the celestial god are charged with watching over and helping human beings. The pantheon is sometimes far more numerous, as, for example, among

<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon, which is especially important for the history of religions, is by no means confined to Central and North Asia. It is found throughout the world and has not yet been entirely explained; cf. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 46 ff. If only indirectly, it is hoped that the present work will throw some light on this problem.

<sup>4</sup> See Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 60 ff.; J.-P. Roux, "Tängri. Essai sur le ciel-dieu des peuples altaïques."

#### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

the Buryat, the Yakut, and the Mongols. The Buryat mention fifty-five "good" and forty-four "evil" gods, who have been forever opposed in unending strife. But, as we shall show later,<sup>5</sup> there is reason to believe that both this multiplication of gods and their mutual hostility may be comparatively recent innovations.

Among the Turko-Tatars goddesses play a rather minor role.<sup>6</sup> The earth divinity is not at all prominent. The Yakut, for example, have no figurines of the earth goddess and offer no sacrifices to her.<sup>7</sup> The Turko-Tatar and Siberian peoples know several feminine divinities, but they are reserved for women, their spheres being childbirth and children's diseases.<sup>8</sup> The mythological role of woman is also markedly small, although traces of it remain in some shamanic traditions. The only great god after the God of the Sky or the Atmosphere<sup>9</sup> is, among the Altaians, the Lord of the Underworld, Erlik (= Ärlük) Khan, who is also well known to the shaman. The very important fire cult, hunting rites, the conception of death—to which we shall return more than once—complete this brief outline of Central and North Asian religious life. Morphologically this religion is, in general, close to that of the Indo-Europeans: in both there is the same importance of the great God of the Sky or of the Atmosphere, the same absence of goddesses (so characteristic of the Indo-Mediterranean area), the same function attributed to the "sons" or "messengers" (Aśvins, Dioscuri, etc.), the same exaltation of fire. On the sociological and economic planes the similarities between the protohistorical Indo-Europeans and the ancient Turko-Tatars are even more strikingly clear: both societies were patriarchal in structure, with the head of the family enjoying

<sup>5</sup> Below, pp. 184 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eveline Lot-Falck, "À propos d'Ätügän."

<sup>7</sup> Uno Harva (formerly Holmberg), *Die religiösen Vorstellungen der altaischen Völker*, p. 247.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gustav Ränk, "Lapp Female Deities of the Madder-Akka Group," especially pp. 48 ff.

<sup>9</sup> For in Central Asia, too, we find the well-known transition of a celestial god to a god of the atmosphere or of storm; cf. Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 91 ff.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

great prestige, and on the whole their economy was that of the hunters and herdsmen-breeders. The religious importance of the horse among the Turko-Tatars and the Indo-Europeans has long been noted. And the most ancient of Greek sacrifices, the Olympian, has been shown to possess characteristics of the sacrifice practiced by the Turko-Tatars, the Ugrians, and the Arctic peoples—precisely the typical sacrifice of the primitive hunters and herdsmen-breeders. These facts have their bearing on the problem with which we are concerned. Given the economic, social, and religious parallels between the ancient Indo-Europeans and the ancient Turko-Tatars (or, better, Proto-Turks),<sup>10</sup> we must determine to what extent the various historical Indo-European peoples still preserve shamanic survivals comparable to Turko-Tatar shamanism.

But, as can never be sufficiently emphasized, nowhere in the world or in history will a perfectly “pure” and “primordial” religious phenomenon be found. The paleoethnological and prehistoric documents at our disposition go back no further than the Paleolithic; and nothing justifies the supposition that, during the hundreds of thousands of years that preceded the earliest Stone Age, humanity did not have a religious life as intense and as various as in the succeeding periods. It is almost certain that at least a part of prelithic humanity’s magico-religious beliefs were preserved in later religious conceptions and mythologies. But it is also highly probable that this spiritual heritage from the prelithic period underwent continual changes as a result of the numerous cultural contacts among pre- and protohistorical peoples. Thus, nowhere in the history of religions do we encounter “primordial” phenomena; for history has been everywhere, changing, recasting, enriching, or impoverishing religious concepts, mythological creations, rites, techniques of ecstasy. Obviously, every religion that, after long

10 On the prehistory and earliest history of the Turks, see René Grousset’s admirable synthesis, *L’Empire des steppes*. Cf. also W. Koppers, “Urtürkentum und Urindogermanentum im Lichte der völkerkundlichen Universalgeschichte”; W. Barthold, *Histoire des Turcs d’Asie Centrale*; Karl Jettmar: “Zur Herkunft der türkischen Völkerschaften”; “The Altai before the Turks”; “Urgeschichte Innerasiens,” pp. 153 ff.

## SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

processes of inner transformation, finally develops into an autonomous structure presents a “form” that is its own and that is accepted as such in the later history of humanity. But no religion is completely “new,” no religious message completely abolishes the past. Rather, there is a recasting, a renewal, a revalorization, an integration of the elements—the most essential elements!—of an immemorial religious tradition.

These few remarks will serve for the present to delimit the historical horizon of shamanism. Some of its elements, which we shall indicate later, are clearly archaic, but that does not mean that they are “pure” and “primordial.” In the form in which we find it, Turko-Mongol shamanism is even decidedly marked by Oriental influences; and though there are other shamanisms without such definite and recent influences, they too are not “primordial.”

As for the Arctic, Siberian, and Central Asian religions, in which shamanism has reached its most advanced degree of integration, we may say that they are characterized on the one hand by the scarcely felt presence of a celestial Great God, and on the other by hunting rites and an ancestor cult that imply a wholly different religious orientation. As will be shown later, the shaman is more or less directly involved in each of these religious areas. But one has the impression that he is more at home in one area than in another. Constituted by the ecstatic experience and by magic, shamanism adapts itself more or less successfully to the various religious structures that preceded or are cotermporal with it. Replacing the description of some shamanic performance in the frame of the general religious life of the people concerned (we are thinking, for example, of the celestial Great God and the myths about him), we sometimes find ourselves amazed; we have the impression of two wholly different religious universes. But the impression is false; the difference lies not in the structure of the religious universes but in the intensity of the religious experience induced by the shamanic performance. The shaman’s séance almost always has recourse to ecstasy; and the history of religions is there to show us that no other religious experience is more subject to distortion and aberration.

### 1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

To close these few preliminary observations here: In studying shamanism we must always remember that it values a certain number of special and even “private” religious elements and that, at the same time, it is far from exhausting the religious life of the rest of the community. The shaman begins his new, his true life by a “separation”—that is, as we shall presently see, by a spiritual crisis that is not lacking in tragic greatness and in beauty.

### *The Bestowal of Shamanic Powers*

In Central and Northeast Asia the chief methods of recruiting shamans are: (1) hereditary transmission of the shamanic profession and (2) spontaneous vocation (“call” or “election”). There are also cases of individuals who become shamans of their own free will (as, for example, among the Altaians) or by the will of the clan (Tungus, etc.). But these “self-made” shamans are considered less powerful than those who inherited the profession or who obeyed the “call” of the gods and spirits.<sup>11</sup> As for choice by the clan, it is dependent upon the candidate’s ecstatic experience; if that does not follow, the youth appointed to take the place of the dead shaman is ruled out.<sup>12</sup>

However selected, a shaman is not recognized as such until after he has received two kinds of teaching: (1) ecstatic (dreams, trances, etc.) and (2) traditional (shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc.). This twofold course of instruction, given by the spirits and the old master shamans, is equivalent to an initiation. Sometimes initiation is public and constitutes an autonomous ritual in itself. But absence of this kind of ritual in no sense implies absence of an initiation; the latter can perfectly well occur in dream or in the neophyte’s ecstatic experience. The available documents on shamanic dreams clearly show that they involve an initiation

11 For the Altaians, see G. N. Potanin, *Ocherki severo-zapadnoi Mongolii*, IV, 57; V. M. Mikhailowski, “Shamanism in Siberia and European Russia,” p. 90.      12 See below, p. 17.

### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

whose structure is well known to the history of religions. In any case, there is no question of anarchical hallucinations and of a purely individual plot and *dramatis personae*; the hallucinations and the *mise en scène* follow traditional models that are perfectly consistent and possess an amazingly rich theoretical content.

This fact, we believe, provides a sounder basis for the problem of the psychopathy of shamans, to which we shall soon return. Psychopaths or not, the future shamans are expected to pass through certain initiatory ordeals and to receive an education that is sometimes highly complex. It is only this twofold initiation—ecstatic and didactic—that transforms the candidate from a possible neurotic into a shaman recognized by his particular society. The same observation applies to the origin of shamanic powers: it is not the point of departure for obtaining these powers (heredity, bestowal by the spirits, voluntary quest) that is important, but the technique and its underlying theory, transmitted through initiation.

This observation seems important, for more than one scholar has sought to draw major conclusions concerning the structure and even the history of this religious phenomenon from the fact that a certain shamanism is hereditary or spontaneous, or that the “call” that determines a shaman’s career appears to be conditioned (or not) by his psychopathic constitution. We shall return to these methodological problems later. For the moment we will confine ourselves to reviewing some Siberian and North Asian documents on the “election” of shamans, without attempting to arrange them under headings (hereditary transmission, call, appointment by the clan, personal decision), for, as we shall presently see, the majority of the peoples with whom we are concerned have more than one method of recruiting their shamans.<sup>13</sup>

13 On the grant of shamanic powers, see Georg Nioradze, *Der Schamanismus bei den sibirischen Völkern*, pp. 54–58; Leo Sternberg, “Divine Election in Primitive Religion,” *passim*; id., “Die Auserwählung im sibirischen Schamanismus,” *passim*; Harva, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen*, pp. 452 ff.; Åke Ohlmarks, *Studien zum Problem des Schamanismus*, pp. 25 ff.; Ursula Knoll-Greiling, “Berufung und Berufungserlebnis bei den Schamanen.”

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

*Recruiting of Shamans in Western and Central Siberia*

Among the Vogul, N. L. Gondatti reports, shamanism is hereditary and is also transmitted in the female line. But the future shaman exhibits exceptional traits from adolescence; he very early becomes nervous and is sometimes even subject to epileptic seizures, which are interpreted as meetings with the gods.<sup>14</sup> Among the eastern Ostyak the situation appears to be different; according to A. A. Dunin-Gorkavich, shamanism is not learned there, it is a gift from heaven, received at birth. In the Irtysh region it is a gift from Sänke (the Sky God) and is manifest from earliest years. The Vasyugan also hold that one is born a shaman.<sup>15</sup> But, as Karjalainen remarks,<sup>16</sup> hereditary or spontaneous, shamanism is always a gift from the gods or spirits; viewed from a certain angle, it is hereditary only in appearance.

Generally the two forms of obtaining shamanic powers coexist. Among the Votyak, for example, shamanism is hereditary; but it is also granted directly by the Supreme God, who himself instructs the future shaman through dreams and visions.<sup>17</sup> Exactly the same is true among the Lapps, where the gift is transmitted in a family but the spirits also grant it to those on whom they wish to bestow it.<sup>18</sup>

Among the Siberian Samoyed and the Ostyak shamanism is hereditary. On the shaman's death, his son fashions a wooden image of his father's hand and through this symbol inherits his powers.<sup>19</sup> But being the son of a shaman is not enough; the neophyte must also be accepted and approved by the spirits.<sup>20</sup> Among

14 K. F. Karjalainen, *Die Religion der Jugra-Völker*, III, 248.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 248-49.      16 *Ibid.*, pp. 250 f.

17 Mikhailowski, p. 153.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 147-48; T. I. Itkonen, *Heidnische Religion und späterer Aberglaube bei den finnischen Lappen*, pp. 116, 117, n. 1.

19 P. I. Tretyakov, *Turukhansky krai, evo priroda i zhiteli*, p. 211; Mikhailowski, p. 86.

20 A. M. Castrén, *Nordische Reisen und Forschungen*, IV, 191; Mikhailowski, p. 142.

### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

the Yurak-Samoyed the future shaman is marked from birth; infants born with their "shirt" (i.e., caul) are destined to become shamans (those born with the "shirt" covering only the head will be lesser shamans). Toward the approach of maturity the candidate begins to have visions, sings in his sleep, likes to wander in solitude, and so on; after this incubation period he attaches himself to an old shaman to be taught.<sup>21</sup> Among the Ostyak it is sometimes the father himself who chooses his successor among his sons; in doing so, he does not consider primogeniture but the candidate's capacities. He then transmits the traditional secret knowledge to him. A shaman without children transmits it to a friend or disciple. But in any case those destined to become shamans spend their youth mastering the doctrines and techniques of the profession.<sup>22</sup>

Among the Yakut, W. Sieroszewski writes,<sup>23</sup> the gift of shamanism is not hereditary. However, the *ämägät* (sign, tutelary spirit) does not vanish after the shaman's death and hence tends to incarnate itself in a member of the same family. N. V. Pripuzov<sup>24</sup> supplies the following details: One destined to shamanship begins by becoming frenzied, then suddenly loses consciousness, withdraws to the forests, feeds on tree bark, flings himself into water and fire, wounds himself with knives. The family then appeals to an old shaman, who undertakes to teach the distraught young man the various kinds of spirits and how to summon and control them. This is only the beginning of the initiation proper, which later includes a series of ceremonies to which we shall return.<sup>25</sup>

Among the Tungus of the Transbaikal region he who wishes to become a shaman announces that the spirit of a dead shaman has appeared to him in dream and ordered him to succeed him. For this declaration to be regarded as plausible, it must usually be accompanied by a considerable degree of mental derangement.<sup>26</sup> According to the beliefs of the Turukhansk Tungus, one destined to

21 T. Lehtisalo, *Entwurf einer Mythologie der Jurak-Samojeden*, p. 146.

22 Belyavsky, cited by Mikhailowski, p. 86.

23 "Du chamanisme d'après les croyances des Yakoutes," p. 312.

24 Cited by Mikhailowski, pp. 85 f.

25 Cf. below, pp. 113 f.      26 Mikhailowski, p. 85.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

become a shaman has dreams in which he sees the devil called Khargi perform shamanic rites. In this way he learns the secrets of the profession.<sup>27</sup> We shall return to these “secrets,” for they constitute the essence of the shamanic initiation that sometimes takes place in seemingly morbid dreams and trances.

*Recruiting among the Tungus*

Among the Manchu and the Tungus of Manchuria there are two classes of “great” shamans—those of the clan and those independent from the clan.<sup>28</sup> In the former case the transmission of shamanic gifts usually takes place from grandfather to grandson, for, engaged in supplying his father’s needs, the son cannot become a shaman. Among the Manchu the son can succeed; but if there is no son the grandson inherits the gift, that is, the “spirits” left available after the shaman’s death. A problem arises when there is no one in the shaman’s family to take possession of these spirits; in such a case a stranger is called in. As for the independent shaman, he has no rules to obey.<sup>29</sup> We take this to mean that he follows his own vocation.

Shirokogoroff describes several cases of shamanic vocation. It seems that there is always a hysterical or hysteroid crisis, followed by a period of instruction during which the postulant is initiated by an accredited shaman.<sup>30</sup> In the majority of these cases the crisis occurs at maturity. But one cannot become a shaman until several years after the first experience.<sup>31</sup> And recognition as a shaman is bestowed only by the whole community and only after the aspirant has undergone the initiatory ordeal.<sup>32</sup> In default of this, no shaman can exercise his function. Many renounce the profession if the clan does not recognize them as worthy to be shamans.<sup>33</sup>

Instruction plays an important role, but it does not begin until

27 Tretyakov, p. 211; Mikhailowski, p. 85.

28 S. M. Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*, p. 344.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 346.                      30 *Ibid.*, pp. 346 ff.                      31 *Ibid.*, p. 349.

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 350–51. On this initiation, see below, pp. 111 ff.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 350.

### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

after the first ecstatic experience. Among the Tungus of Manchuria, for example, the child is chosen and brought up with a view to becoming a shaman; but the first ecstasy is decisive: if no experience supervenes, the clan renounces its candidate.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes the young candidate's behavior determines and hastens his consecration. Thus it may happen that candidates run away to the mountains and remain there seven days or longer, feeding on animals "caught . . . directly with their teeth,"<sup>35</sup> and returning to the village dirty, bleeding, with torn clothes and hair disheveled, "like wild people."<sup>36</sup> It is only some ten days later that the candidate begins babbling incoherent words.<sup>37</sup> Then an old shaman cautiously asks him questions; the candidate (more precisely, the "spirit" possessing him) becomes angry, and finally designates the shaman who is to offer the sacrifices to the gods and prepare the ceremony of initiation and consecration.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Recruiting among the Buryat and the Altaians*

Among the Alarsk Buryat studied by Sandschejew shamanism is transmitted in the paternal or maternal line. But it is also spontaneous. In either case vocation is manifested by dreams and convulsions, both provoked by ancestral spirits (*utcha*). A shamanic vocation is obligatory; one cannot refuse it. If there are no suitable candidates, the ancestral spirits torture children, who cry in their sleep, become nervous and dreamy, and at thirteen are designated for the profession. The preparatory period involves a long series of ecstatic experiences, which are at the same time initiatory; the

<sup>34</sup> Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex*, p. 350.

<sup>35</sup> Which indicates transformation into a wild beast, that is, a sort of reintegration into the ancestor.

<sup>36</sup> All these details have an initiatory bearing, which will be explained later.

<sup>37</sup> It is during this period of silence that the initiation by the spirits is completed, concerning which Tungus and Buryat shamans supply most valuable details; see below, pp. 75 ff.

<sup>38</sup> Shirokogoroff, p. 351. On the continuation of the ceremony proper, see below, pp. 111 ff.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

ancestral spirits appear in dreams and sometimes carry the candidate down to the underworld. Meanwhile the youth continues to study under the shamans and elders; he learns the clan genealogy and traditions, the shamanic mythology and vocabulary. The teacher is called the Father Shaman. During his ecstasy the candidate sings shamanic hymns.<sup>39</sup> This is the sign that contact with the beyond has finally been established.

Among the Buryat of Southern Siberia shamanism is usually hereditary, but sometimes one becomes a shaman after a divine election or an accident; for example, the gods choose the future shaman by striking him with lightning or showing him their will through stones fallen from the sky;<sup>40</sup> one who had chanced to drink *tarasun* in which there was such a stone was transformed into a shaman. But these shamans chosen by the gods must also be guided and taught by the old shamans.<sup>41</sup> The role of lightning in designating the shaman is important; it shows the celestial origin of shamanic powers. The case is not unique; among the Soyot, too, one who is touched by lightning becomes a shaman,<sup>42</sup> and lightning is sometimes portrayed on the shaman's costume.

In the case of hereditary shamanism, the souls of the ancestral shamans choose a young man in the family; he becomes absent-minded and dreamy, loves solitude, and has prophetic visions and sometimes seizures that make him unconscious. During this period, the Buryat believe, the soul is carried off by the spirits—eastward if the youth is destined to become a “white” shaman, westward if a “black.”<sup>43</sup> Received in the palace of the gods, the neophyte's soul is instructed by the ancestral shamans in the secrets of the profession, the gods' forms and names, the cult and names of the spirits, and so on. It is only after this first initiation that the soul

<sup>39</sup> Garma Sandschejew, “Weltanschauung und Schamanismus der Alaren-Burjaten,” pp. 977–78.

<sup>40</sup> On “thunder-stones” fallen from the sky, see Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 53 ff.

<sup>41</sup> Mikhailowski, p. 86.

<sup>42</sup> Potanin, IV, 289.

<sup>43</sup> For the distinction between these two types of shaman, see below, pp. 184 ff.

#### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

returns to the body.<sup>44</sup> We shall see that the initiatory process continues long after this.

For the Altaians the shamanic gift is generally hereditary. While still a child, the future shaman, or *kam*, proves to be sickly, withdrawn, contemplative. But his father gives him a lengthy preparation, teaching him the tribe's songs and traditions. When a young man in a family is subject to epileptic attacks, the Altaians are convinced that one of his ancestors was a shaman. But it is also possible to become a *kam* of one's own volition, though this kind of shaman is considered inferior to the others.<sup>45</sup>

Among the Kazak Kirgiz (Kirgiz-Kaisak) the profession of *baqça* (shaman) is usually transmitted from father to son; exceptionally, the father transmits it to two of his sons. But there is a memory of an ancient time when the neophyte was chosen directly by the old shamans. "In former days the *baqças* sometimes enlisted very young Kazak Kirgiz, usually orphans, in order to initiate them into the profession of *baqça*; however, to succeed in the profession a predisposition to nervous disorders was essential. The subjects intending to enter the *baqçylyk* were characterized by sudden changes in state, by rapid transitions from irritability to normality, from melancholia to agitation."<sup>46</sup>

#### *Hereditary Transmission and Quest in Obtaining Shamanic Powers*

Two conclusions already appear from this rapid examination of Siberian and Central Asian data: (1) that a hereditary shamanism

<sup>44</sup> Mikhailowski, p. 87; W. Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, X, 395 ff.

<sup>45</sup> Potanin, IV, 56-57; Mikhailowski, p. 90; W. Radlov, *Aus Sibirien*, II, 16; A. V. Anokhin, *Materialy po shamanstvu u altaitsev*, pp. 29 ff.; H. von Lankenau, "Die Schamanen und das Schamanenwesen," pp. 278 f.; W. Schmidt, *Der Ursprung*, IX, 245-48 (Altaic Tatars), 687-88 (Abakan Tatars).

<sup>46</sup> J. Castagné, "Magie et exorcisme chez les Kazak-Kirghizes et autres peuples turcs orientaux," p. 60.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

exists side by side with a shamanism bestowed directly by the gods and spirits; (2) that morbid phenomena frequently accompany both spontaneous manifestation and hereditary transmission of the shamanic vocation. Let us now see what the situation is in regions other than Siberia, Central Asia, and the Arctic.

It is unnecessary to dwell at length on the question of hereditary transmission or spontaneous vocation in the case of the magician or medicine man. In general, the situation is the same everywhere: the two ways of access to magico-religious powers coexist. A few examples will suffice.

The profession of medicine man is hereditary among the Zulu and the Bechuana of South Africa,<sup>47</sup> the Nyima of the southern Sudan,<sup>48</sup> the Negritos and the Jakun of the Malay Peninsula,<sup>49</sup> the Batak and other peoples of Sumatra,<sup>50</sup> the Dyak,<sup>51</sup> the sorcerers of the New Hebrides,<sup>52</sup> and in several Guianan and Amazonian tribes (Shipibo, Cobeno, Macusi, etc.).<sup>53</sup> "In the eyes of the Cobeno, any shaman by right of succession is gifted with a higher power than one whose title is due only to his own seeking."<sup>54</sup> Among the Rocky Mountain tribes of North America shamanic power can also be inherited, but the transmission always takes place through an ecstatic experience (dream).<sup>55</sup> As Willard Z. Park observes,<sup>56</sup> inheritance seems rather to be a tendency in a child or other relative to acquire the power by drawing from the same source as the sha-

47 Max Bartels, *Die Medizin der Naturvölker*, p. 25.

48 S. F. Nadel, "A Study of Shamanism in the Nuba Mountains," p. 27.

49 Ivor H. N. Evans, *Studies in Religion, Folk-lore, & Custom in British North Borneo and the Malay Peninsula*, pp. 159, 264.

50 E. M. Loeb, *Sumatra*, pp. 81 (the northern Batak), 125 (Menangkabau), 155 (Nias).

51 H. Ling Roth, *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo*, I, 260; also among the Ngadju Dyak, cf. H. Schärer, *Die Gottesidee der Ngadju Dajak in Süd-Borneo*, p. 58.

52 J. L. Maddox, *The Medicine Man: a Sociological Study of the Character and Evolution of Shamanism*, p. 26.

53 Alfred Métraux, "Le Shamanisme chez les Indiens de l'Amérique du Sud tropicale," pp. 200 f.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 201. 55 *Shamanism in Western North America*, p. 22.

56 *Ibid.*; p. 29.

#### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

man. Among the Puyallup, Marian Smith remarks, the power tends to remain in the family.<sup>57</sup> Cases have also been known in which the shaman transmits the power to his child during his own lifetime.<sup>58</sup> Inheritance of shamanic power appears to be the rule among the Plateau tribes (Thompson, Shuswap, southern Okanagon, Klallam, Nez Perce, Klamath, Tenino) and those of northern California (Shasta, etc.), and it is also found among the Hupa, Chimariko, Wintu, and western Mono.<sup>59</sup> Transmission of the "spirits" always remains the basis of this shamanic inheritance, in distinction from the more usual method among most North American tribes—acquiring "spirits" by a spontaneous experience (dream, etc.) or by a deliberate quest. Among the Eskimo shamanism is occasionally hereditary. An Iglulik became a shaman after being wounded by a walrus, but in a sense he inherited his mother's qualification, she having become a shamaness as the result of a fire-ball entering her body.<sup>60</sup>

The office of medicine man is not hereditary among a considerable number of primitive peoples, whom it is unnecessary to cite here.<sup>61</sup> This means that all over the world magico-religious powers are held to be obtainable either spontaneously (sickness, dream, chance encounter with a source of "power," etc.) or deliberately (quest). It should be noted that nonhereditary acquisition of magico-religious powers presents an almost infinite number of forms and variants, which are of concern rather to the general history of religions than to a systematic study of shamanism; for this type of acquisition includes not only the possibility of obtaining

57 Cited by Marcelle Bouteiller, "Du 'chaman' au 'panseur de secret,'" p. 243. "A girl known to us acquired the gift of curing burns from an old woman neighbor, now dead, who taught her the secret because she had no family but had been initiated herself by an older relative."

58 Park, p. 30.

59 Ibid., p. 121. Cf. also Bouteiller, "Don chamanistique et adaptation à la vie chez les Indiens de l'Amérique du Nord."

60 Knud Rasmussen, *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*, pp. 120 ff. Among the Diomed Islands Eskimo the shaman sometimes transmits his powers directly to one of his sons; see E. M. Weyer, Jr., *The Eskimos*, p. 429.

61 Cf. Hutton Webster, *Magic*, pp. 185 ff.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

magico-religious powers spontaneously or deliberately and thus becoming a shaman, medicine man, or sorcerer, but also the possibility of obtaining such powers for one's own safety or personal advantage, as is the case almost everywhere in the archaic world. The latter method of acquiring magico-religious powers implies no distinction in religious or social practice from the rest of the community. The man who, by using certain rudimentary but traditional techniques, increases his magico-religious potential—to ensure the abundance of his crop, to defend himself against the evil eye, and so on—does not intend to change his socio-religious status and become a medicine man by this act of reinforcing his potential for the sacred. He simply wishes to increase his vital and religious capacities. Hence his moderate and limited quest for magico-religious powers falls in the most typical and rudimentary category of human behavior in the presence of the sacred. For, as we have shown in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, in primitive man as in all human beings the desire to enter into contact with the sacred is counteracted by the fear of being obliged to renounce the simple human condition and become a more or less pliant instrument for some manifestation of the sacred (gods, spirits, ancestors, etc.).<sup>62</sup>

In the following pages the deliberate quest for magico-religious powers or the grant of such powers by gods and spirits will concern us only in so far as it entails a massive acquisition of the sacred destined to make a radical change in the socio-religious practice of the subject, who finds himself transformed into a specialized technician. Even in cases of this kind we should discover a certain resistance to “divine election.”

*Shamanism and Psychopathology*

Let us now examine the relations allegedly discovered between Arctic and Siberian shamanism and nervous disorders, especially

<sup>62</sup> On the meaning of this ambivalent attitude to the sacred, see Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 459 ff.

### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

the various forms of arctic hysteria. From the time of Krivoshapkin (1861, 1865), V. G. Bogoraz (1910), N. Y. Vitashevsky (1911), and M. A. Czaplicka (1914), the psychopathological phenomenology of Siberian shamanism has constantly been emphasized.<sup>63</sup> The last investigator to favor explaining shamanism by arctic hysteria, Å. Ohlmarks, is even led to distinguish between an Arctic and a sub-Arctic shamanism, according to the degree of neuropathy exhibited by their representatives. In his view shamanism was originally an exclusively Arctic phenomenon, due in the first place to the influence of the cosmic milieu on the nervous instability of the inhabitants of the polar regions. The extreme cold, the long nights, the desert solitude, the lack of vitamins, etc., influenced the nervous constitution of the Arctic peoples, giving rise either to mental illnesses (arctic hysteria, *meryak*, *menerik*, etc.) or to the shamanic trance. The only difference between a shaman and an epileptic is that the latter cannot deliberately enter into trance.<sup>64</sup> In the Arctic the shamanic ecstasy is a spontaneous and organic phenomenon; and it is only in this zone that one can properly speak of a "great shamanizing," that is, of the ceremony that ends with a real cataleptic trance, during which the soul is supposed to have left the body and to be journeying in the sky or the underworld.<sup>65</sup> But in the sub-Arctic the shaman, no longer the victim of cosmic oppression, does not spontaneously obtain a real trance and is obliged to induce a semitrance with the help of narcotics or to mime the journey of the soul in dramatic form.<sup>66</sup>

63 Ohlmarks, *Studien zum Problem des Schamanismus*, pp. 20 ff.; Nioradze, *Der Schamanismus*, pp. 50 ff.; M. A. Czaplicka, *Aboriginal Siberia*, pp. 179 ff. (Chukchee); V. G. Bogoraz (Waldemar G. Bogoras), "K psikhologii shamanstva u narodov severo-vostochnoi Azii," pp. 5 ff. Cf. also W. I. Jochelson: *The Koryak*, pp. 416-17; *The Yukaghir and the Yukaghirized Tungus*, pp. 30-38.

64 *Studien*, p. 11. See Eliade, "Le Problème du chamanisme," pp. 9 f. Cf. Harva, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen*, pp. 452 ff. See also D. F. Aberle, "'Arctic Hysteria' and Latah in Mongolia." On ecstasy as a specific characteristic of Arctic religion, cf. R. T. Christiansen, "Ecstasy and Arctic Religion."

65 Concerning these journeys, see the following chapters.

66 Ohlmarks, pp. 100 ff., 122 ff., etc.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

The thesis equating shamanism with mental disorder has also been maintained in respect to other forms of shamanism than the Arctic. As long as seventy-odd years ago, G. A. Wilken asserted that Indonesian shamanism had originally been a real sickness, and it was only later that the genuine trance had begun to be imitated dramatically.<sup>67</sup> And investigators have not failed to note the striking relations that appear to exist between mental unbalance and the different forms of South Asian and Oceanian shamanism. According to Loeb, the Niue shaman is epileptic or extremely nervous and comes from particular families in which nervous instability is hereditary.<sup>68</sup> On the basis of Czaplicka's descriptions, J. W. Layard believed that there was a close resemblance between the Siberian shaman and the *bwili* of Malekula.<sup>69</sup> The *sikerei* of Mentawai<sup>70</sup> and the *bomor* of Kelantan<sup>71</sup> are also neuropaths. In Samoa epileptics become diviners. The Batak of Sumatra and other Indonesian peoples prefer to choose sickly or weak subjects for the office of magician. Among the Subanun of Mindanao the perfect magician is usually neurasthenic or at least eccentric. The same thing is found elsewhere: in the Andaman Islands epileptics are considered great magicians; among the Lotuko of Uganda the infirm and neuropathic are commonly candidates for magic (but must, however, undergo a long initiation before being qualified for their profession).<sup>72</sup>

According to Father Housse, candidates for shamanship among the Araucanians of Chile "are always sickly or morbidly sensitive, with weak hearts, disordered digestions, and subject to vertigo. They claim that the divinity's summons to them is irresistible and that a premature death would inevitably punish their resistance

67 *Het Shamanisme bij de Volken van den Indischen Archipel*, passim.

68 "The Shaman of Niue," p. 395.

69 "Shamanism: an Analysis Based on Comparison with the Flying Tricksters of Malekula," p. 544. The same observation is made in Loeb, "Shaman and Seer," p. 61.

70 Loeb, "Shaman and Seer," p. 67.

71 Jeanne Cuisinier, *Danses magiques de Kelantan*, pp. 5 ff.

72 And the list could easily be extended; cf. Webster, *Magic*, pp. 157 ff. Cf. also T. K. Oesterreich's lengthy analyses, *Possession*, pp. 192 ff., 236 ff.

SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

and infidelity.”<sup>73</sup> Sometimes, as among the Jivaro,<sup>74</sup> the future shaman is only reserved and taciturn in temperament or, as among the Selk’nam and the Yamana of Tierra del Fuego, predisposed to meditation and asceticism.<sup>75</sup> Paul Radin brings out the epileptoid or hysteroid psychic structure of most medicine men, citing it to support his thesis of the psychopathological origin of the class of sorcerers and priests. And he adds, precisely in the sense of Wilken, Layard, or Ohlmarks: “What was thus originally due to psychical necessity became the prescribed and mechanical formulae to be employed by anyone who desired to enter the priestly profession or for any successful approach to the supernatural.”<sup>76</sup> Ohlmarks declares that nowhere in the world are psychomental maladies as intense and as prevalent as in the Arctic, and he cites a remark of the Russian ethnologist D. Zelenin: “In the North, these psychoses were far more widespread than elsewhere.”<sup>77</sup> But similar observations have been made in respect to numerous other primitive peoples, and it does not appear in what way they help us to understand a religious phenomenon.<sup>78</sup>

Regarded in the horizon of *homo religiosus*—the only horizon with which we are concerned in the present study—the mentally

<sup>73</sup> *Une Épopée indienne. Les Araucans du Chili*, p. 98.

<sup>74</sup> R. Karsten, cited by Métraux, “Le Shamanisme chez les Indiens de l’Amérique du Sud tropicale,” p. 201.

<sup>75</sup> M. Gusinde, *Die Feuerland Indianern. I: Die Selk’nam*, pp. 779 ff.; *II: Die Yamana*, pp. 1394 ff.

<sup>76</sup> *Primitive Religion*, p. 132.

<sup>77</sup> *Studien*, p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> Even Ohlmarks admits (*ibid.*, pp. 24, 35) that shamanism is not to be regarded solely as a mental malady, the phenomenon being more complex. Métraux saw the crux of the problem better when he wrote, in regard to the South American shamans, that temperamentally neuropathic or religious individuals “feel drawn to a kind of life that gives them intimate contact with the supernatural world and allows them to expend their nervous force freely. In shamanism the uneasy, the unstable, or the merely thoughtful find a propitious atmosphere” (“Le Shamanisme chez les Indiens de l’Amérique du Sud tropicale,” p. 200). For Nadel, the problem of the stabilization of psychoneurotics by shamanism remains open (“A Study of Shamanism in the Nuba Mountains,” p. 36); but see below, p. 31, his conclusions concerning the mental soundness of the Sudanese shamans.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

ill patient proves to be an unsuccessful mystic or, better, the caricature of a mystic. His experience is without religious content, even if it appears to resemble a religious experience, just as an act of autoeroticism arrives at the same physiological result as a sexual act properly speaking (seminal emission), yet at the same time is but a caricature of the latter because it is without the concrete presence of the partner. Then too, it is quite possible that the assimilation of a neurotic subject to an individual possessed by spirits—an assimilation supposed to be quite frequent in the archaic world—is in many cases only the result of imperfect observations on the part of the earliest ethnologists. Among the Sudanese tribes recently studied by Nadel epilepsy is quite common; but the tribesmen consider neither epilepsy nor any other mental maladies to be genuine possession.<sup>79</sup> However this may be, we are forced to conclude that the alleged Arctic origin of shamanism does not necessarily arise from the nervous instability of peoples living too near to the Pole and from epidemics peculiar to the north above a certain latitude. As we have just seen, similar psychopathic phenomena are found almost throughout the world.

That such maladies nearly always appear in relation to the vocation of medicine men is not at all surprising. Like the sick man, the religious man is projected onto a vital plane that shows him the fundamental data of human existence, that is, solitude, danger, hostility of the surrounding world. But the primitive magician, the medicine man, or 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. Often when the shaman's or medicine man's vocation is revealed through an illness or an epileptoid attack, the initiation of the candidate is equivalent to a cure.<sup>80</sup> The famous Yakut shaman Tüspüt (that is, "fallen from the sky") had been ill at the age of twenty; he began to sing, and felt better. When Sieroszewski met

79 "A Study of Shamanism," p. 36; see also below, p. 31.

80 Cuisinier, p. 5; J. W. Layard, "Malekula: Flying Tricksters, Ghosts, Gods and Epileptics," cited by Paul Radin, *Primitive Religion*, pp. 65-66; Nadel, p. 36; Harva, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen*, p. 457.

### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

him, he was sixty and displayed tireless energy. "If necessary, he can drum, dance, jump all night." In addition, he was a man who had traveled; he had even worked in the Siberian gold mines. But he needed to shamanize; if he went for a long time without doing so, he did not feel well.<sup>81</sup>

A shaman of the Goldi (Amur region) told Leo Sternberg: "The old folks say that some generations back there were three great Shamans of my gens. No Shamans were known amongst my nearest forefathers. My father and mother enjoyed perfect health. I am now forty years old. I am married, but have no children. Up to the age of twenty I was quite well. Then I felt ill, my whole body ailed me, I had bad headaches. Shamans tried to cure me, but it was all of no avail. When I began shamaning myself, I got better and better. It is now ten years that I have been a shaman, but at first I used to practice for myself only, and it is three years ago only that I took to curing other people. A shaman's practice is very, very fatiguing."<sup>82</sup>

Sandschejew had come to know a Buryat who, in his youth, had been an "anti-shamanist." But he fell ill and, after vainly seeking a cure (he even traveled to Irkutsk in search of a good doctor), he tried shamanizing. He was immediately cured, and became a shaman for the rest of his life.<sup>83</sup> Sternberg also observes that the election of a shaman is manifested by a comparatively serious illness, usually coincidental with the onset of sexual maturity. But the future shaman is cured in the end, with the help of the same spirits that will later become his tutelaries and helpers. Sometimes these are ancestors who wish to pass on to him their now unemployed helping spirits. In these cases there is a sort of hereditary transmission; the illness is only a sign of election, and proves to be temporary.<sup>84</sup>

81 Sieroszewski, p. 310.

82 "Divine Election in Primitive Religion," pp. 476 f. The remainder of this important autobiography of a Goldi shaman will be found below, pp. 71 ff.

83 "Weltanschauung und Schamanismus," p. 977.

84 "Divine Election," p. 474.

### 1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

There is always a cure, a control, an equilibrium brought about by the actual practice of shamanism. It is not to the fact that he is subject to epileptic attacks that the Eskimo or Indonesian shaman, for example, owes his power and prestige; it is to the fact that he can control his epilepsy. Externally, it is very easy to note numerous resemblances between the phenomenology of *meryak* or *menerik* and the Siberian shaman's trance, but the essential fact remains the latter's ability to bring on his epileptoid trance at will. Still more significantly, the shamans, for all their apparent likeness to epileptics and hysterics, show proof of a more than normal nervous constitution; they achieve a degree of concentration beyond the capacity of the profane; they sustain exhausting efforts; they control their ecstatic movements, and so on.

According to the testimony of Belyavsky and others, collected by Karjalainen, the Vogul shaman displays keen intelligence, a perfectly supple body, and an energy that appears unbounded. His very preparation for his future work leads the neophyte to strengthen his body and perfect his intellectual qualities.<sup>85</sup> Mytchyll, a Yakut shaman known to Sieroszewski, though an old man, during a performance outdid the youngest by the height of his leaps and the energy of his gestures. "He became animated, bubbled over with intelligence and vitality. He gashed himself with a knife, swallowed sticks, ate burning coals."<sup>86</sup> For the Yakut, the perfect shaman "must be serious, possess tact, be able to convince his neighbors; above all, he must not be presumptuous, proud, ill-tempered. One must feel an inner force in him that does not offend yet is conscious of its power."<sup>87</sup> In such a portrait it is difficult to find the epileptoid who has been conjured up from other descriptions.

Although shamans of the Reindeer Tungus of Manchuria perform their ecstatic dance in a yurt crowded with onlookers, in a very limited space, and wearing costumes that carry more than thirty pounds of iron in the form of disks and other objects, they

<sup>85</sup> Karjalainen, *Die Religion der Jugra-Völker*, III, 247-48.

<sup>86</sup> "Du chamanisme," p. 317.      <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

never touch anyone in the audience.<sup>88</sup> And the Kazak Kirgiz *baqça*, when in trance, “though he flings himself in all directions with his eyes shut, nevertheless finds all the objects that he needs.”<sup>89</sup> This astonishing capacity to control even ecstatic movements testifies to an excellent nervous constitution. In general, the Siberian and North Asian shaman shows no sign of mental disintegration.<sup>90</sup> His memory and his power of self-control are distinctly above the average. According to Kai Donner,<sup>91</sup> “it can be maintained that among the Samoyed, the Ostyak, and certain other tribes, the shaman is usually healthy and that, intellectually, he is often above his milieu.” Among the Buryat the shamans are the principal guardians of the rich oral heroic literature.<sup>92</sup> The poetic vocabulary of a Yakut shaman contains 12,000 words, whereas the ordinary language—the only language known to the rest of the community—has only 4,000.<sup>93</sup> Among the Kazak Kirgiz the *baqça*, “singer, poet, musician, diviner, priest, and doctor, appears to be the guardian of religious and popular traditions, preserver of legends several centuries old.”<sup>94</sup>

The shamans of other regions have given rise to similar observations. According to T. Koch-Grünberg, “the Taulipang shamans [of Venezuela] are generally intelligent individuals, sometimes wily but always of great strength of character, for in their training and the practice of their functions they are obliged to display energy and self-control.”<sup>95</sup> Métraux remarks concerning the Amazonian shamans: “No physical or physiological anomaly or peculiarity seems to have been selected as the symptom of a special predisposition for the practice of shamanism.”<sup>96</sup>

88 E. J. Lindgren, “The Reindeer Tungus of Manchuria,” cited by N. K. Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy*, p. 17.

89 Castagné, “Magie et exorcisme,” p. 99.

90 Cf. H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, III, 214; N. K. Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy*, pp. 17 f. The Lapp shaman must be perfectly healthy (Itkonen, *Heidnische Religion*, p. 116).

91 *La Sibérie*, p. 223.

92 Sandschejew, p. 983.

93 H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, III, 199.

94 Castagné, p. 60.

95 Cited by Métraux, “Le Shamanisme chez les Indiens de l’Amérique du Sud tropicale,” p. 201.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 202.

1. *General. Recruiting Methods. Mystical Vocation*

Among the Wintu of California the transmission and perfecting of speculative thought are in the hands of the shamans.<sup>97</sup> The intellectual effort of the Dyak prophet-shaman is immense and denotes a mental capacity well above that of the collectivity.<sup>98</sup> The same observation has been made concerning African shamans in general.<sup>99</sup> As for the Sudanese tribes studied by Nadel: "No shaman is, in everyday life, an 'abnormal' individual, a neurotic, or a paranoiac; if he were, he would be classed as a lunatic, not respected as a priest. Nor finally can shamanism be correlated with incipient or latent abnormality; I recorded no case of a shaman whose professional hysteria deteriorated into serious mental disorders."<sup>100</sup> In Australia matters are even clearer: medicine men are expected to be, and usually are, perfectly healthy and normal.<sup>101</sup>

And we must also consider the fact that the shamanic initiation proper includes not only an ecstatic experience but, as we shall soon see, a course of theoretical and practical instruction too complicated to be within the grasp of a neurotic. Whether they still are or are not subject to real attacks of epilepsy or hysteria, shamans, sorcerers, and medicine men in general cannot be regarded as merely sick; their psychopathic experience has a theoretical content. For if they have cured themselves and are able to cure others, it is, among other things, because they know the mechanism, or rather, the *theory* of illness.

All these examples bring out, in one way or another, the exceptional character of the medicine man within society. Whether he is chosen by gods or spirits to be their mouthpiece, or is predisposed to this function by physical defects, or has a heredity that is equivalent to a magico-religious vocation, the medicine man

97 Cora A. du Bois, *Wintu Ethnography*, p. 118.

98 N. K. Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy*, pp. 28 ff.; H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, III, 476 f.

99 N. K. Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy*, p. 30.

100 "A Study," p. 36. One cannot, then, say that "shamanism . . . absorbs mental abnormality at large" or that it "rests on uncommonly widespread psychopathic predispositions; it certainly cannot be explained merely as a cultural mechanism designed either to achieve the former or to exploit the latter" (*ibid.*).

101 A. P. Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, pp. 22-25.

### SHAMANISM: ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

stands apart from the world of the profane precisely because he has more direct relations with the sacred and manipulates its manifestations more effectively. Infirmity, nervous disorder, spontaneous vocation, or heredity are so many external signs of a "choice," an "election." Sometimes these signs are physical (an innate or acquired infirmity); sometimes an accident, even of the commonest type, is involved (e.g., falling from a tree or being bitten by a snake); ordinarily, as we shall see in greater detail in the following chapter, election is announced by an unusual accident or event—lightning, apparition, dream, and so on.

It is important to bring out this notion of peculiarity conferred by an unusual or abnormal experience. For, properly considered, singularization as such depends upon the very dialectic of the sacred. The most elementary hierophanies, that is, are nothing but a radical ontological separation of some object from the surrounding cosmic zone; some tree, some stone, some place, by the mere fact that *it reveals that it is sacred*, that it has been, as it were, "chosen" as the receptacle for a manifestation of the sacred, is thereby ontologically separated from all other stones, trees, places, and occupies a different, a supernatural plane. We have elsewhere<sup>102</sup> analyzed the structures and the dialectic of hierophanies and kratophanies—in a word, of the manifestations of the magico-religious realities. What it is important to note now is the parallel between the singularization of objects, beings, and sacred signs, and the singularization by "election," by "choice," of those who experience the sacred with greater intensity than the rest of the community—those who, as it were, incarnate the sacred, because they live it abundantly, or rather "are lived" by the religious "form" that has chosen them (gods, spirits, ancestors, etc.). These few preliminary observations will find their application after we have studied the various methods of training and initiating future shamans.

102 See Eliade, *Patterns*, passim.

## I N D E X

### A

- Aarne, Antti, 98*n*  
*abagaldet*, 151  
Abakan Tatars, 153*n*, 193, 208, 266, 270  
Abaris, 388, 389*n*  
*abassy*, 74*f*, 206; *-oibono*, 234; */ojuna* (*oyuna*), 184  
Abbott, J., 475*n*  
Aberle, David F., 24*n*  
aberration, shamanic, 12, 493*f*  
*abhijñās*, 409*n*  
“above” and “below,” 186 & *n*  
Abyrga, 122*n*  
accidents: and initiation/vocation, 45, 81; medicine man and, 32  
*acham*, 435  
Achomawi, 105, 305*ff*  
Ackerknecht, Erwin H., 323*n*  
Adam, 161, 268  
Adam of Bremen, 375  
Adriani, N., and Kruyt, A. C., 354*n*, 358*n*  
Aegean, 379, 388  
*aerobates*, 390  
Africa, 374*n*; children’s souls, 273; ladder in, 490; mentality of shamans, 31; origin of man from trees, 273*n*; shamanic costume, 178; smiths in, 472*f*; South, 21; West, 92  
Agapitov, N. N., and Khangalov, M. N., 69*n*, 115*n*, 150, 152, 185*n*, 250*n*  
*Agaricus muscarius*, 400  
age, paradisaal, *see* time  
aggressiveness, 509  
Aghorīs, 434*n*  
ahistoricity, of religious life, xxv  
Ahlbrinck, W., 127*n*  
Ahmed ibn Fadlan, 384  
Ahriman, 122*n*, 271*n*  
Ahura-Mazda, 399  
Ai Oyuna, *see* Aji Ojuna  
Ai/Aji, 70*n*  
Aijā/Aiĵo/Aije, 71*n*  
Ainu, 262  
Aisyt, 80*n*, 185*n*  
*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, 403*n*, 412*n*  
Ai Toyon, 69*f*, 275  
Aji Ojuna/Ai Oyuna/*aji oyuna*, 71*n*, 184  
*akarata*, 370*n*, 371  
Ak Ayas, 9  
*ak kam*, 189  
Akwaala, 109  
Alarsk Buryat, *see* Buryat  
Alaska, 336; southern, 334*n*; *see also* Eskimo, Alaskan  
Alcestitis, 391  
alchemy: and flight, 411, 479; Indian, 410; ladder in, 490  
Alchera/Alcheringa, 46, 48  
alcohol, 401  
Aleksyev, Gavril, 36  
Alexander, Hartley Burr, 163*n*, 262*n*, 490*n*  
Alföldi, András, 459*n*  
Algonkin, 262, 321, 334  
Alibamu, 312*f*  
*allara kyrar*, 234  
alligator bench, 128  
*a'lma*, 245  
Almgren, O., 355*n*  
Alpine countries, 161*n*  
Altai/Altaians/Altaic shamans, 44, 84, 166, 181, 208, 263, 278; and Araucanians, comparison, 326; ascent to sky, xx, 275; bow, 175; costume, 146, 152*ff*, 155, 156; and death, 206; “flues,” 262; gods, 10, 277; groups of, 189; and heavens, 406; recruiting, 20; refrains of, 96; sacrifices, 182, 198*f*; séances among, 190*ff*; and souls/spirits of dead, 84, 88, 89, 169; and Supreme Being, 198*ff*  
Altai Kan, 193  
Altai mountains, 201  
Altai Tatars, 9, 120, 182*f*, 205, 261, 266  
alter ego, 94, 170  
Altheim, Franz, 165*n*, 396*n*, 460*n*, 470*n*; and Haussig, Hans-Wilhelm, 70*n*  
*Ama*, 226  
*āmāgāt*, 16, 90, 149, 231, 233  
Amahuaca, 83  
*Amana*, 129  
Amandry, Pierre, 387*n*

INDEX

- Amazonian: region, 327; shamans, 30; tribes, 21  
Amazulu, 55  
Ambat, 361  
America, peopling of, 332n  
America, Central, 92  
America, North, xiv, 5, 21, 92, 97, 122n, 139, 182, 184, 297ff, 338n, 491, 503; caves, 52, 101; costume, shamanic, 178f; initiation rites, 65, 108, 125, 436; ladder in, 490; séance in, 300ff; shaman's quest in, 99ff, 108f; sources of shamanic power, 102, 104; transvestitism, 258  
America, South, xiv, 161, 310, 323ff, 332n, 335, 491, 503, 506; costume, shamanic, 178; initiation, 82, 84, 97, 131, 141; initiatory illness, 53ff, 65; rock crystals, 52f, 91, 139; spirits, guardian, 91; transvestitism, 258  
AmIn Ahmad Rāzi, *see* Rāzi  
Ammasalik, *see* Eskimo  
Amschler, Wolfgang, 197n  
amulets, 488  
Amur region, 496  
Anakhai, 37n  
An Alai Chotoun, 187  
Anavatapta, lake, 409  
ancestors: choice of shamans by, 67, 71, 82; cult of, 12, 67, 506; and drum, 170f; lunar, 277; mythical, tiger as, 339, 344; of nations, 40n; reintegration into, 18n; theriomorphic, 171; *see also* dead  
Anchimalen, 329  
Andaman Islands, 25, 68n, 86, 342  
Andean region, 327  
Andree, Richard, 164n, 472n  
Andres, Friedrich, 127n, 128n, 129n, 130n  
androgynization, ritual, 153n; *see also* transvestitism  
androgyny, 329, 352  
*angakok* (*angakut*), 58, 90, 288ff, 435, 438  
*angakoq*, 60f  
*angga*, 354  
*Anguttara-nikāya*, 408n  
animal(s): behavior, and ecstasy, 385; bones, 161n; burial of, 159; and Chinese shamanism, 458f; cries, 440; dance and, 459, 461; in dreams, 104; and drum, 170; friendship with, 99; human solidarity with, 94; language of, *see* language; mythical, 460; shamanic, 254; shaman's relation with, 184, 459; and shaman's "death," 93f; as helping spirits, 89, 92ff, 104; torture by, 44; transformation into 18n, 93, 94, 328f, 381, 385, 459f, 467, 477f; *see also* ante-lope; ants; bat; bear; bee; bird; boa constrictor; buffaloes; bull; cat; centaurs; chicken; cock; colt; coyote; crow; cuckoo; deer; dog; duck; eagle; elk; emu; ermine; falcon; fish; fly; fox; gander; goat; goose; grebe; gull; hare; hens; heron; horse; jaguars; kingfisher; lambs; leopard; lions; lizard; mouse; ostrich; otter; owl; panther; parrots; pig; pigeon; ram; reindeer; roebuck; sea serpents; serpents; shark; sheep; snake; sparrow; sparrow-hawk; spider; squirrel; stag; swan; tiger; toad; vulture; walrus; wildcat; wolf; worms  
Animals, Goddess/Lady/Mother of the, 41n, 42, 81, 294, 459, 460  
Anisimov, A. F., 94n  
Anokhin, A. V., 20n, 44n, 76, 153n, 155n, 173n, 189, 197n, 200, 201, 208n, 263n, 275, 276  
Antarctic, 332  
*antar jyotih*, 61  
antelope, 105; -charming, 184n  
Anthony, St., 377  
ants, poisonous, 129  
Anuchin, V. I., 153n, 223n  
anvils, 41  
Apache, 178, 299  
Apapocuva, 83  
Apinaye, 83, 327 & n  
apocalypses, 484  
Apollo, 387n, 388  
Apollodorus, 66n  
apples, magical, 78  
*Apsarases*, 408  
Arabs, and "bridge," 484  
Aranda, 46, 48, 161  
Arapaho, 102n, 258  
Araucanians, 233n, 467; initiation among, 25, 51, 53, 54, 122ff; initiatory journey, 141; *ngillatun* ceremony, 324f, 325n; transvestitism, 258  
*arba*, 153  
Arbman, Ernst, 407n, 418n, 466n  
Archer, W., 468n  
archetype(s), xiv, xxiii; of gaining existential consciousness, 394; and hierophany, xxiii; of magician, 412; of shaman, 160  
Arctic peoples: nervous constitution, 24; religion, 7  
arhats, 408, 410, 434  
*ariki*, 366  
*Arimaspeia*, 388n, 395

INDEX

- Aristât, 397  
Aristeas of Proconnesus, 388f  
Aristophanes, 390  
Arjuna, 420  
Arnobius, 392n  
*aroeltawaraare*, 82  
arrow (s), 100, 152 & n, 175n, 217, 227, 388; chain of, 121, 362, 430, 490f; magical, and sickness, 364  
Arsari, 37n  
art: of N.W. America and Asia, 394n; Renaissance, 34  
*Artay Virāf* (*Book of*), 142n, 393, 398, 399, 400, 419  
Art Toyon Aga, 186f, 188  
Arunta, *see* Aranda  
ascension/ascent: celestial, xx, 5, 24, 51, 58, 76ff, 85, 89, 112, 119ff, 132, 135ff, 139ff, 177, 194ff, 198ff, 242, 430, *et passim*; evaluations of, 377; and flying, 479, *see also* flying; in India, 403ff; and initiation, 34, 38, 43, 49f, 61, 121; and Sky God, 505; *see also* flying; journey; ladder; levitation; tree  
Ascension of Isaiah, 142  
ashes, daubing with, 64  
Asia, *passim*: influence on Polynesia, 366; masks in, 166; shaman as healer in, 182  
Asia, Central, 4, 6, 109, 120, 244, 276, *et passim*; divination, 257n; healing, 215; influences from South, 237, 266, 500; initiation in, 110; passage rites, 65; pillar in, 262; religions of, 7  
Asia, North, 4, 6, 120, 184, 215, 244, 266, *et passim*; decadence of shamans in, 237; drum in, 176; eagle in, 245; formation of shamanism in, 495ff; instruction, shamanic, 110; and North America, 333; passage rites, 65; religions of, 7; sacrifices, 198; shaman as psychopomp in, 209; southern influences, 500  
Asia, South, 179, 366; Southeast, 279  
Asín Palacios, Miguel, 484n, 489n  
Assam, 263, 442n  
Assiniboin, 108n, 109  
*astodan*, 163  
Aštōvidatu, 163n  
*asuras*, 271  
Aśvaghōṣa, 428  
*aśvamedha*, 80n, 199, 420n; *see also* horse sacrifice  
Aśvins, 10  
*Atharva Veda*, 261n, 408, 414f, 418n, 419n  
*ātman*, 61  
atmosphere, gods of, 199; *see also* Sky God; storms, god of  
*atnongara*, 47 & n, 48  
Atsugewi, 102  
Aua/aua, 90f  
Aukelenuiaiku, 133  
*auśadhi*, 416  
Australia(ns), 31, 82, 84, 85, 92, 108, 134, 250, 503; Central, 491, 492n; fate of dead in, 491; initiation in, 45ff, 50f, 64, 65, 135ff; and South America, 332; *see also* names of peoples  
Austria, 161n  
Austroasiatic civilization, 287n  
Austronesians, 361n  
autoeroticism, 27  
Avalokiteśvara, 440  
Avam Samoyed, *see* Samoyed  
Axis, Cosmic/*axis mundi*/Axis of World, 120, 169, 194n, 224, 239n, 259f, 261ff, 280, 404, 430, 439, 447, 492; *see also* Center of the World  
*ayami*, 71ff, 80f  
Aztecs, 163n
- B
- Baba, Barak, *see* Barak Baba  
Babylonia: and cosmic pillar/mountain, 264, 267; cosmology, 406; hair of kings in, 152n; and number seven, 122n, 134  
Bacchanalia, 387  
bacchantes, 391  
Bacham, 281  
Bachelard, Gaston, 477n, 480n  
backbone, 150  
Bacot, Jacques, 444n  
Baffinland, 161n, 292  
Baholoholo, 473n  
Baiaime, 135, 137, 138  
Bai Baianai, 187, 276n  
Baiga, 421n, 425, 426, 502n  
Baikal, Lake, 238, 497  
Bai Ülgän, 76, 77, 88, 153, 182, 191, 192f, 196, 197, 198ff, 201, 266, 270, 275, 276, 278, 325, 403, 407  
*bajasa*, 353f  
Bakairi, 53, 326  
*Bakchai*, 387  
Balagansk, 117, 119  
Balan Bacham, 281  
Balázs, János, 225n, 476n  
Balder, 383  
*Baldrs draumar*, 382n

INDEX

- Bali, 468  
*balian*, 340, 352*f*, 357  
Balkans, 379  
Balolo, 473*n*  
Bamiyan frescoes, 134  
Bandopal, 468  
*bangha*, 399*ff*  
Banks Islands, 364*f*  
banquet: at Buryat initiation, 120; funerary, 208, 210  
Banzarov, Dordji, 495  
*baqqa*, 20, 30, 44, 97, 155*n*, 157, 175  
Barak Baba, 402*f*  
Barama, 91  
Barbeau, Marius, 459*n*  
*bardo*/*Bardo thödol*, 435, 438, 442  
Bare'e Toradja, 353  
Barents Sea, 503  
*bari* (Bororo shaman), 82  
Bari (of White Nile), 472*n*  
*barich*, 350  
Bartels, Max, 21*n*  
Barthélemy, M. A., 399*n*  
Barthold, W., 11*n*  
Bartle Bay, 365*n*  
*barua*, 426  
Bashkir, 261  
basil shrub, 426  
*basir*, 352*f*  
Basongo, 473*n*  
*baş-tut-kan-kiši*, 191, 195, 197  
Basuto, 141  
bat(s), 129  
*bata ilau*, 350  
Batak, 21, 25, 82*n*, 96, 273, 346–47*n*;  
  cosmology, 286; dancing, 340; funerary  
  beliefs, 340*f*; and horse-stick, 467;  
  position of shaman among, 346*ff*  
Batarov, P. P., 218*n*  
Batavia, 429  
bath, steam/vapor, 322, 334*n*, 335, 394,  
  475*f*  
*bâtons de commandement*, 503*n*  
Batradz, 476  
Batu Herem, 280  
Batu Ribn, 280  
*Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra*, 412*n*  
Baumann, Hermann, 81*n*, 273*n*, 374*n*  
Bawden, C. R., 165*n*  
Bayeke, 473*n*  
Beaglehole, Ernest and Pearl, 371*n*, 372*n*  
Beal, Samuel, 420*n*  
bear(s), 44, 59, 62, 72, 93, 101, 105, 153;  
  ceremonialism, 458, 459, 461, 503;  
  sacrifice, 166; and shamanic costume,  
  156; spirit as, 59, 89, 90, 103, 106, 221,  
  458  
bearskin, 452*n*, 458  
Bebrang, 282  
Bechuana, 21  
bee, 256*n*  
beer, 170  
beginning of world, 103, 406; *see also*  
  creation of world  
*begu*, 346*f*  
behavior: change in, and initiation, 35;  
  study of, xxiv  
*bekliiti*, 57, 58  
Bektashi, 402  
Belet, 281  
Belgium, 161*n*  
*belian*, 351; *see also* dances  
bells, 177, 278, 453*n*  
belt, 146  
Beltir, 9, 183, 205, 208  
Belyavsky, —, 16*n*, 29  
Benedict, Ruth, 92*n*, 157  
Benua, 344  
Benua-Jakun, 342*n*  
Bergema, Hendrik, 270*n*  
Bernardino de Sahagún, 429  
Berndt, R. M., 127  
*berserkir*, 385, 399*n*  
Besis, 282, 346  
Bessarabia, 161  
*besudi*, 57  
*bethel*, 488  
Bethlehem, 482  
“beyond”: orientation of, 356; sea as,  
  235  
Bhaiga, 44*n*  
*bhakti*, 416*n*  
Bharhut, 430  
Bhil, 177*n*, 421*n*, 425, 468, 502*n*  
Bhrgu, 419  
Bhuiya, 425  
Bhutan, 432, 433*n*  
Biallas, P. Franz, 451*n*  
Bible, *see* Genesis; Job; Judges; Mat-  
  thew; Revelation; *also* Ascension of  
  Isaiah  
Bickermann, E., 392*n*  
Bidez, Joseph, 393*n*; and Cumont,  
  Franz, 393*n*  
Bilby, J. W., 59*n*  
Binbinga, 48, 51  
Biot, Édouard, 452*n*  
Birartchen, 147, 149*n*, 153

INDEX

- birch tree, 39, 116*ff*, 191, 194, 232; and first shaman, 70; and World Tree, xx, 169, 173, 270, 403
- bird(s)/Bird, 39, 82, 89; aquatic, 234; Black, 196; giant, 38; Lord of the, 70; as psychopomp, 98, 479; and snake, 273, 285; on stick, 481; transformation into, 403; and Tree, 273, 480*f*; water, on shaman's costume, 153; wooden, 357; *see also* costume, ornithomorphic; Märküt; Thunder Bird; *and list s.v.*
- animals
- bird-fairy, 158*n*
- Bird-Mother, 36–38
- bird song, 97*f*
- bird-soul, *see* soul
- bird-spirit, 204*n*
- Birhor, 424*n*, 425, 473
- Birket-Smith, Kaj, 288*n*
- birth, of shamans, initiatory, 37*f*
- bis, 186
- bisexuality, 352
- biunity, divine, 352
- Blackfoot Indians, 262*n*
- blacksmiths, *see* smiths
- Blagden, C. O., *see* Skeat, W. W.
- Bleichsteiner, Robert, 164*n*, 395*n*, 396*n*, 434*n*, 436
- Blok, H. P., 487*n*
- blood: goat's, 121; pig's, 73; purification with, 117; sucking, 306*f*
- boa constrictor, 149*n*, 497
- Boas, Franz, 59*n*, 101*n*, 104*n*, 138, 257*n*, 309*n*
- boat: bone, 164; of the dead, 355*ff*, 360, 417; drum as, 172; ritual, uses of, 356; "of the spirits," 356
- bodhisattvas, 434
- body: entering another's, 416; intrusion of object into, 45, 47, 50, 52, 57, 132, 135, 215, 301, 316, 327, 330, 343, 373, *see also* rock crystals; naming parts of, 62; voluntary abandonment of, 480
- Boehm, Fritz, 165*n*
- bögä, *see* bögä
- Bogdan, 161*n*
- Bogoras, Waldemar G. (V. G. Bogoraz), 24, 93*n*, 108 & *n*, 125*n*, 216*n*, 219*n*, 252, 253*ff*, 258*n*, 262*n*, 333*n*, 351*n*
- bögü, 495*n*; *see also* bögä
- boiling: of initiate, 41*ff*, 44*n*, 159; of Pelops, 66
- Bö-Khân, 77
- Bö-Khâ-nâkn, 77
- Bolivia, 161*n*, 323
- Bolot Khan, 214*n*
- Bolte, J., and Polivka, G., 66*n*
- bonor, 25, 93, 339; *bonor belian*, 339*n*, 345
- Bondo, 425
- Bon *ditkar*, 432
- Bon-po/Bon religion, 410, 431*ff*, 440, 444, 453*n*; priests, 177; White, 432
- bonds, magic of, 419
- bones: animal, breaking, 161*n*; cult of shaman's, 324; divination by, 164*f*, 246*n*, 249, 257*n*; in India, 163*f*; iron symbolic, 36, 158*f*; naming, 62*f*; re-birth from, 160*ff*; replacement of, 57; as source of life, 63, 159; soul and, 159; *see also* skeleton
- Bonnerjea, Biren, 81*n*, 468*n*
- Bonsu, 339
- "book, heavenly," 393, 489*n*
- Book: of *Artay Viräf*, *see s.v.*; of Fate, *see s.v.*; of the Ladder, 489*n*; of Life, 273
- Book of the Dead, 392; Egyptian, 163*n*, 480, 487; Tibetan, *see* Tibetan Book of the Dead
- books, *datu's*, 347
- boot, shaman's, 156
- Borneo, 334*n*, 349*ff*, 358*n*; *see also* Dusun; Dyak; Sarawak
- Borobodur, 267
- Bororo, 92
- Borsippa, 267
- Boshintoi, 471*f*
- Botiugne, 188
- bottle, girl's soul in, 68
- Boulanger, A., *see* Gernet, L.
- Bounak, V., 498*n*
- Bourke, John G., 179*n*
- Bousset, Wilhelm, 488
- Bouteiller, Marcelle, 22*n*, 101*n*, 178*n*, 299*n*, 301*n*, 302*n*, 313*n*
- Bouvat, L., 402*n*
- bow: drum as, 174; shaman's, 175
- Boyerb, 137
- Brahmalokas, 430
- brahman, 183*n*
- Brähmaṇas*, *see Aitareya; Jaimin'ya; Pañcaviṃśa; Śatapatha; Taittir'ya*
- Brähmanism, 406; *see also* Hinduism
- brähmarandhra*, 164
- brain washing, 57
- Brand, J., 451*n*
- brandy, 210, 232
- break-through in plane, 173, 251*n*, 259*f*, 265, 269, 296, 467, 484
- Breasted, James H., 488*n*

INDEX

breath, control of, 412*f*  
 Breuil, H., and Obermaier, H., 434*n*  
*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 406*n*, 408*n*  
 bridge, 121, 202, 282, 311, 417, 430, 431, 441, 447, 482*ff*; Činvat, 396*f*, 399; and drum, 135, 173; Gjallar, 383*n*; hair-breadth, 202, 203*f*, 287, 395, 396*n*, 397*f*, 483; Islamic conception, 484*n*; *see also* rainbow; swords  
 Briggs, George W., 163*n*  
*brimures*, 132  
 British Columbia, 100, 104, 308, 309, 334*n*  
 Brodeur, Arthur Gilchrist, 162*n*  
 Brown, A. R., 86*n*, 475*n*  
*bü*, *see* *bügä*  
 Buandik, 491  
 Buchacheyev, Bulagat, 44  
 Büchner, V. F., 495*n*  
 Buck, Peter H., *see* Hiroo, Te Rangi  
 Buddha, 119*n*, 407, 436; and magic flight, 409; miracles, 428, 430; Nativity of, 400, 405*f*; and rainbow, 134  
 Buddhaghosṣa, 409*n*  
 Buddhism, 440, 458; and Amur Tungus, 119*n*; in Central and North Asia, 496, 506, 507; and magical flight, 408*f*, 411; and miracles, 428*ff*; Mongolian, 435; Tibetan, *see* Lamaism; and Tungus shamanism, 498*f*; yoga of, 61, 164, 407  
 Buddruss, Georg, *see* Friedrich, Adolph  
 Budge, E. A. Wallis, 487*n*, 488*n*  
 buffaloes, black, 187  
*bügä/bögä/buge/bü*, 4  
 Buga (Supreme Being), 9, 242, 499  
 bull, 90  
*Bundahišn*, 397*n*  
 Bundjil, 134  
 burial, symbolic, 64, 343; *see also* death; initiation  
 Burkert, Walter, 387*n*  
*burkhan*, 119 & *n*, 497*n*  
 Burma, 442, 443, 455  
 "burning," 475; sorcerer, 363  
 Burrows, Edwin G., 366*n*  
 Burrows, Eric, 268*n*, 269*n*  
 Buryat, 28, 30, 35*n*, 37*n*, 42*n*, 43*f*, 67, 68, 69, 94, 100*n*, 112, 115*ff*, 122 & *n*, 133*n*, 159, 165, 182*n*, 194*n*, 197*n*, 206, 213, 217, 242, 250*n*, 261, 263, 266, 271, 276, 277, 469, 500; Alarsk, 18; costume, 149*ff*; dualism among, 185, 186; election among, 75*f*; gods of, 10; initiation among, 43*ff*, 75, 110, 115*ff*; and origin of shamans, 69; religion, 9;

"shaman's horse," 173, *see also* horse; shamans and politics, 181*n*; shamanic recruiting, 18*ff*; and smiths, 471*f*; three souls, 216*n*; *see also* Olkhonsk "bush soul," 92  
 Buschan, Georg, 357*n*  
 Bushmen, 161  
*butchu*, 211  
*bwili*, 25, 56, 477

C

caftan, 148, 149*n*, 152  
 Cahuilla, 103  
 Caingang, 327*n*  
 Caland, Willem, 415*n*  
 caldron, 41, 43, 44*n*, 50, 282, 446  
 California: Central, 262; Northern, 21, 31, 102, 105, 262; Southern, 103, 109  
 "call" to shamanic career, *see* vocation  
 Callaway, Henry, 56*n*  
 Calypso, 79  
 Campa, 83  
 candle flame, 345  
 cannibalism, 434*n*  
 canoes, 369*f*; for dead, 355*f*; drum as, 254  
 cap, shaman's, 146, 148, 150, 154*f*, 462; *see also* headdress; hat  
 Carbonelli, Giovanni, 490*n*  
 Carib, 91, 128*n*, 326; first shaman, 97; initiation among, 54, 127*ff*; séance, 329*n*  
 Caribou, Mother of the, 62  
 Car Nicobar, 343*f*  
 Carpenter, Rhys, 390*n*  
 carpets, 340  
 Cashinawa, 83  
 casque, 150  
 Castagné, J., 20*n*, 30*n*, 97, 155*n*, 158*n*, 175*n*, 219*n*  
 Castrén, Alexander M., 15*n*, 67*n*, 213*n*, 227  
 cat, 287  
 Caucasus/Caucasians, 161*n*, 395*f*  
 caul, birth with, 16  
 cave(s), 41; and initiation, 46*f*, 51*f*, 136*n*; painted, 51*n*; retirement to, 389; temples, 204  
 Celebes, 353  
 Celsus, 121  
 Celts, 82, 382  
 Cenoï/Chenoï/Chinoï/Cinoï/*cenoï*, 52*n*, 96, 125, 138, 280, 337*ff*  
 centaurs, 387

INDEX

- Center of World, 37*n*, 42, 71, 75, 120, 134, 168*ff*, 171, 194*n*, 224, 226, 259*ff*, 265, 266, 269, 274, 492, *et passim*;  
Buddha and, 406; inverted, 418; and North, 279; *see also* Axis; Tree, Cosmic  
Ceram, 354*n*  
Cerulli, Enrico, 489*n*  
Ceylon, 179  
Chadwick, H. Munro and Nora K., 30*n*, 31*n*, 78*n*, 133*n*, 204*n*, 214*n*, 287*n*, 360*n*, 478*n*, 490*n*  
Chadwick, Nora K., 30*n*, 31*n*, 110*n*, 133*n*, 141*n*, 179*n*, 204*n*, 367*n*, 381*n*, 478*n*  
chain, golden, 431*n*  
Chakât-i-Dâitîk, *see* Kakâd-i-Dâitîk  
Changsha, 460  
Chao, King, 51  
Chard, Chester S., 500*n*  
chariots, flying, 449*f*  
Charlemagne, 263  
Charles, Lucile H., 511*n*  
chastity, ordeal of, 311*f*  
Chavannes, Édouard, 448*n*, 449*n*; and Lévi, Sylvain, 410*n*  
*chebuch*, 339  
Cenoi, *see* Cenoi  
Cheremis, 276, 487*n*  
chest, 151  
Cheyenne Indians, 258, 335  
chicken, sacrifice of, 351  
"Chief of the Religion," 455  
child(ren): sacrifice of, 347; souls of, 272, 273*n*, 281*f*; torture of, by spirits, 18  
childbirth: difficult, 181; divinities of, 10  
Chile, 25, 51  
Chimariko, 21  
China/Chinese, 122, 164*n*, 179, 264, 270*n*, 386*n*, 410, 419, 452*n*, 453*n*, 457*f*, 461*n*, 501; ancient, and America, 334*n*; artistic influence, 334*n*; divination in ancient, 257*n*; influence of, on Manchu, 113; kite in, 133*n*; magic, 442*f*; matriarchy, 449; and Polynesian religion, 366*n*; rope trick in, 429; shamanism in, 448*ff*; —, modern, 456*f*; Tree of Life in, 271*n*; and Tungus shamanism, 237  
Chingpaw, 443  
Chinói, *see* Cenoi  
Chinói-Sagar, 281  
Chivalkov, —, 201  
*chöd* (*gchod*), 108*n*, 436*f*  
Cholko, Ivan, 43  
Chou li, 458  
Christensen, Arthur, 267*n*  
Christianity: ecstatic experience and, 8; and Ghost-Dance Religion, 320; influence, on Altaians, 208*n*; —, on Lapps, 224; inner light in, 61; ladder in, 489; levitation in, 481*f*; temptations of saints in, 377; *see also* saints  
Christiansen, Reidar T., 24*n*, 133*n*  
*Chronicon Norvegiae*, 383, 384  
chronology, and history of religion, xxiii*ff*  
Ch'uang, 455*n*  
Chudyakov, I. A., 187*n*  
Chukchee, xviii, 35*n*, 93, 96, 97, 165, 176, 181*n*, 206, 235, 247, 260, 262, 288, 335; and after-death state, 216; religion, 9; séances among, 252*ff*; transvestitism, 125*n*, 351 & *nn*  
Chung-li, 451  
Chuvash, 37*n*, 276  
Ch'ü Yüan, 451  
Cinói, *see* Cenoi  
Činvat, *see* bridge  
circle, magic, 345  
clairvoyance, 184, 304  
Clark, Walter Eugene, 409*n*  
clay, lumps of, 426  
Clemen, Carl, 390*n*  
Clements, Forrest E., 215*n*, 300*n*, 310*n*, 327*n*, 415*n*  
Cline, Walter, 472*n*, 473*n*  
Closs, Alois, 381*n*, 382*n*, 390*n*, 504*n*  
coals, walking on, *see* fire-walking  
coat, shaman's, 226; *see also* costume  
Cobeno, 21, 52, 327*n*  
Cocama, 327*n*  
cock, 384, 426  
coconut, 58, 368; palm, 78*n*  
Cocopa, 109  
Codrington, R. H., 364*n*, 365*n*, 475*n*  
Coe, Michael D., 456*n*  
Coëdes, G., 280*n*  
*coincidentia oppositorum*, 352  
cold, resistance to, 113, 335; *see also* heat; sheets  
Cole, Fay-Cooper, 337*n*, 341*n*  
Collins, Col. —, 45  
Coleman, Sister Bernard, 317*n*  
colors: of Buryat costume, 185; of celestial regions, 261; seven, 134; *sibaso* and, 347  
colt, 90  
Coman, Jean, 390*n*, 391*n*  
concentration, 29, 167, 175, 179, 420  
confession, 60, 296; collective, 289

INDEX

- Confucianism, 454  
Congo tribes, 473n  
Conibo, 83  
contraries, opposition of, 285  
Conze, Edward, 429n  
Cook, Arthur Bernard, 486n, 488n  
cooking, *see* boiling  
Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., 169n, 262n, 268n, 270n, 274n, 404n, 405n, 430n, 479n, 485n, 486, 489n  
Coomaraswamy, Luisa, 485n  
Cooper, John M., 164n, 323n  
cord, *see* rope; threads  
Cornford, Francis Macdonald, 387n  
corpse(s): exposing, 163; sleeping near, 358  
Cosmic: Axis, *see s.v.*; Mountain, *see s.v.*; Tree, *see s.v.*  
cosmogony in reverse, 413  
costume, shamanic, 29, 111, 145ff, 460n, 497; Altaic, 152f; in Africa, 178; of "black" and "white" shamans, 185; Buryat, 149ff; buying, 147; degeneration in making, 147n; disuse of special, 252; eagle and, 71, 156, 178; finding, 147; Goldi, 156, 157; Manchu, 157, 158; in North America, 178f; ornithomorphic elements in, 71, 131, 156ff, 404, 478; sacred, outside shamanism, 179; Siberian, 148f; Soyot, *see s.v.*; of *spākona*, 386; and "spirits," 147; submarine motifs in, 294; Tungus, 146, 147ff, 154f, 156; of "white" shamans, 189; Yakut, *see s.v.*; Yukagir, *see s.v.*  
Coto, 327n  
Couvreur, S., 448n  
Coxwell, C. Fillingham, 161n, 163n  
coyote, 100, 103, 105; "language," 100  
Crawley, Ernest, 177n, 420n  
creation of world, 284, 412; *see also* beginning of world  
Creator: of the Earth, 250; of Light, 248  
Cree Indians, 335  
Creel, Herrlee Glessner, 164n  
cries: animal, 440; shamanic, 97f  
crisis, and shamanic vocation, xviii, 253  
Croats, 225n  
Crooke, William, 426  
Cross, of Christ, 268, 489n  
crow(s), 89, 106, 232, 389; Odin's, 381  
Crow Indians, 102n, 335n  
crystal gazing, 363  
crystals: volcanic, 364; *see also* rock; quartz  
Cuchulain, 476  
cuckoo, 176, 196  
Cuisinier, Jeanne, 25n, 27n, 93n, 286n, 339n, 345n, 346n, 356n  
Cumont, Franz, 121n, 392n, 488n; *see also* Bidez, Joseph  
Curetes, 473  
Curtin, Jeremiah, 69n, 198n  
"cutting," 55  
cushion, *see fanya*  
cycles, cultural, xix  
Cyclopes, 473  
Czaplicka, M. A., 24, 25, 35n, 90n, 148n, 184, 470n, 477n
- D
- Dactyli, 473  
Dähnhardt, Oskar, 66n  
Dahor, 497  
Dākinī/*dakinīs*, 410, 437, 440  
Dakota (Indians) 161n  
*dalabči*, 150  
Dalton, E. T., 473n  
*damagomi*, 105f, 305  
*damaru*, 420n  
dance: and animal, 459, 461; among Batak, 340; *belian*, 344; of dead, 312; ecstatic, in China, 449, 451; among Goldi, 73; on horse-stick, 467f; initiatory, 128f; among Kirgiz, 175; Paviotso, 304; skeleton, 164, 434f; among Tungus, 29, 247; *see also* Ghost-Dance Religion  
dancer, woman, 303  
Dante Alighieri, 399, 489  
Daramulun, 137  
Darkness, Spirit of, 114  
Dasuni, 422  
*Dātastān i dēnīk*, 397n  
David-Neel, Alexandra, 436n, 438n  
Davidson, D. S., 332n  
Dawa-Samdup, Lama Kazi, 437n, 438n  
*daya beruri*, 350  
Dayachan, 242  
Deacon, A. Bernard, 126n, 361n  
dead: ambivalence toward, 207; canoes for, 355f; converse with, and initiation, 34; Eskimo beliefs, 291; fate of, in Australia, 491; Indian beliefs concerning, 417f; possession by, 365f; precautions against return of, 207; Pygmy beliefs concerning, 281; ships of the, 285; souls of, and recruiting of shamans, 81ff, 102; *see also* ancestors; souls; spirits

INDEX

- Dead: Boat of the, *see s.v.*; Book of the, *see s.v.*; King of the, 270, *see also* Erlik Khan; Land of the, 61, *see also* Shades; Lord of the, 173; Mountain of the, 457
- De Angulo, Jaime, 105*n*, 106, 305*ff*
- death: Central and North Asian conception of, 10; and initiation, 33*ff*, 64, 76, 206, 506; knowledge of, shaman and, 509*f*; ritual, repetition of, 95; simulated, and resurrection, 36, 45, 53*ff*, 59, 64, 76, 84; symbolic/ritual, 33, 34, 53, 80, 84; *see also* burial; initiation death watch, 208*n*
- Death, Waters of, 355
- decadence, of shamans, 67, 68, 112, 130, 237, 249, 250, 252, 254, 256, 258, 290, 364, 376, 401, 500
- deer, 101, 105; *see also* antelope; stag
- degeneration, of humanity, 480
- Dehon, P., 473*n*
- deities, *see* gods; goddess(es)
- Delphi, oracle of, 387*n*
- Demeter, 66
- demons: converse with, and initiation, 34; expulsion of, by boat, 356; Moso and, 445*f*; shamans as enemies of, 508; *see also* devil(s)
- descent, *see* journey; underworld
- deus otiosus*, 9, 286, 505
- Devas, 453*n*
- Devata Sangiang, 285
- devil(s): and first shaman, 68; and initiation, 37*f*, 113; shoots flame from mouth, 474
- “devil’s hand,” 47
- Dhurwa, 468
- dialogue: between shaman and God, 199; in initiation, 34; with gods and spirits, 227
- diamonds, 139
- Diegueno, 109
- Dieri, 491
- Dieterich, Albrecht, 122*n*
- dikšā*, 413*f*
- dinang* tree, 354
- Dinkart*, 397*n*
- Diomedea Islands, 22*n*
- Dionysus, 388
- Dioscuri, 10
- Diószegi, Vilmos, 94*n*, 154, 168*n*, 223*n*, 225*n*, 461*n*, 498*n*
- Dirr, A., 81*n*
- disease(s): children’s, divinities of, 10; classification, 300, 305; soul and, 215; spirits of dead and, 206; *see also* epilepsy; hysteria; hysteroid; illness; mental disease; psychopathy; sickness; “sickness-vocation”; syphilis
- disks, iron, 148
- dismemberment, 430*n*; and initiation, 34, 36*ff*, 53*ff*, 108, 130, 429, *et passim*; rejuvenation by, 66; *see also* initiation
- displayed object, identity with, 179
- divination, 184, 257*n*, 382; by bones, 164*f*, 246*n*, 249; in Dobu, 364; drums and, 176, 239; epileptics and, 25; Epimenides and, 389; among Eskimo, 257*n*, 297; among Koryak, 164; Lolo, 442; among Samoyed, 228; by skulls, *see s.v.*; among Yukagir, 249, 391, 435*n*
- divinities, feminine, *see* goddesses
- Dixon, Roland B., 104*n*, 105*n*, 302*n*, 323*n*, 490*n*
- Djangar, 426
- Djara, 108*n*
- dMu, 431
- dmu-l’ag*, 431
- Dobrudja, 161
- Dobu, 363*f*, 474
- Dodds, E. R., 387*n*, 389*n*, 391*n*
- Doerr, Erich, 355*n*
- dog(s), 153; as helping spirit, 90; sacrifice of, 188; underworld, 203, 248, 251, 295, 466*ff*; Yama’s, 417
- Dogon, 472*n*
- Dolgan, 40, 41, 156, 191*n*, 272, 470; séance among, 233*ff*
- dolls, on shaman’s costume, 153
- Dombart, Theodor, 267*n*
- Dongson, 177
- Donner, Kai, 30, 122*n*, 145*n*, 148*n*, 152*n*, 154*n*, 155*n*, 158, 171*n*, 172*n*, 181*n*, 223*n*, 228*n*, 232*n*, 277*n*, 278*n*, 496*n*, 501*n*
- door(s), 52 & *n*, 340; *see also* gate, strait; passage, difficult
- Doré, P. H., 456*n*
- double, shaman’s, 94
- Downs, R. E., 354 & *n*
- dragon, 122*n*; bearded, 449
- dreams: flying, 225*n*; initiatory, 14, 33*ff*, 104, 168, 377, 429, 446; —, Buryat, 43*f*; —, Samoyed, 38*ff*; instruction and, 103*f*; premonitory, 109; sickness, 43; and vocation, 67, 101*ff*
- drinks: to produce unconsciousness, 64; *see also* alcohol; beer; brandy; narcotics; *tarasun*
- Drucker, Philip, 138*n*, 309*n*

INDEX

- drugs, *see* narcotics  
drum(s), xix, 121, 168ff, *et passim*; animating, 170; Bon, 433; choice of wood for, 169f; description of, 171ff; and divination, 176, 239; double, Tibetan, 502n; family, 247, 252; and feminine magic, 465; in India, 420, 426; and initiation, 38, 40; lacking among Eskimo, 289; Lamaist, 176, 497f; Lapp, 172, 175ff, 334; metal, 442n; and rainbow, 135; as shaman's horse, 173f, 233, 407; Soyot, 173, 174; and spirits, 174; symbols on, 172ff, 224; and World Tree, 40n, 168ff  
Drum, Masters of the, 192  
drumsticks, 503  
*dto-mba*, 446, 447  
Dto-mba Shi-lo, 445ff, 508  
dualism: Buryat, 185, 186; cosmological, 284; Iranian, 68, 163n; Yakut, 186ff  
DuBois, Constance Goddard, 55n  
Du Bois, Cora Alice, 31n, 320n  
Duchesne-Guillemet, Jacques, 398n  
duck(s), 39; costume, 149  
Dudley, Guilford, xii  
duels, intershamanic, 290  
*dukun*, 348  
Dumézil, Georges, 378f, 380n, 383n, 384n, 385n, 386n, 387n, 395n, 396n, 397n, 476  
Dumont, Louis, 424n  
Dumont, Paul Émile, 80n, 420n  
Dunin-Gorkavich, A. A., 15  
Durme, P. J. van, 410n  
*dūrohaṇa*, 403  
Dusadh, 426  
Dusun, 97, 178, 283, 287, 349, 357, 487  
dwarf, 102  
Dyak, 21, 31, 273n, 350ff, 358, 359ff, 478; initiation, 57; Ngadju, 284, 352f; Sea, 138, 177, 258, 350; and World Tree, 285  
Dyaus, 199  
Dyrenkova, N. P., 44n, 459n  
Dzhe Manido, 316  
Dzokuo, Mount, 37n
- E
- eagle, 140, 153, 204n, 218; feathers of, 101, 155, 179, 302, 321f; as helping spirit, 89, 90, 105, 106; and origin of shamans, 69ff, 160, 185f; and shaman's costume, 71, 156, 178; and shaman, mythical relations, 128n, 157f; Supreme Being as, *see s.v.*; two-headed, 70  
ears, piercing of, 42, 363  
earth/Earth: Creator of the, 250; -Diver, xiv; goddess, 10; Lord of the, 39; -Owner, 248; Spirit(s), 243, 277  
Eberhard, Wolfram, 449n, 451n, 453n, 457 & n, 458n, 462n  
ecstasy, 200, 221ff, 243, 493f, *et passim*; and animal behavior, 385; and cosmic opening, 265f; first, 18; foundation for, 190; as initiation, 33f, 35ff; Iranian, 400; martial, 385; nonshamanic, 5, 7n, 379; parashamanic, 253; and ritual death, 95; séance and, 12; shaman as master of, 4, 107; and shaman's prestige, 236; sovereign and, 449; symbols of, 174; technique of, 4; *see also* journey; trance  
ecstatic: Chinese, 448; and shaman, distinction, 5  
*Eddā, Prose (Gylfaginning)*, 161, 162n, 383  
Eder, Matthias, 462, 463n, 464 & n  
Edsman, Carl Martin, 66n, 161n, 162n, 270n, 386n, 488n, 489n  
Eells, Myron, 309n  
effigy, of deceased, 439  
egg, birth of shaman from, 37  
Egypt(ians), 163n, 264, 487f  
Ehatisht Nootka, 138  
Ehnmak, Erland, 296n  
Ehrenreich, Paul, 133n, 260n  
*Eiriks Saga Rautha*, 386  
Eisenberger, Elmar Jakob, 164n  
Eisler, Robert, 260n, 473n, 476n  
Elbruz, 267, 397  
election: illness and, 28; resistance to, 23, 109; of shamans, 13ff, 67ff; signs of, in medicine man, 32; supernatural, in India, 425; *see also* initiation  
Eliade, Mircea, xiff; and assumptions in work, xii; as crypto-theologian, xv; as Fascist and anti-Semite, xi-xii; as hierogian, xv; and Iron Guard (Romania), xi; and postmodern ideas, xiii; and primitives/primitivism, xii  
Eliade, Mircea (other works): *Birth and Rebirth*, 64n, 126n, 132n, 136n, 465n, 486n, 506n; *Cosmologie și alchimie babiloniană*, 262n, 267n, 268n, 269n; *Death and Initiation*, xxvii, 64n; "Dūrohaṇa and the 'Waking Dream,'" 403n, 480n; "Einführende Betrachtungen über den Schamanismus," xxvii; *The Forge and the Crucible*, 139n, 461n, 470n, 472n, 473n, 475n; *Images and Symbols*, 260n, 419n; *The Myth of the*

INDEX

- Eternal Return*, 265*n*, 267*n*, 269*n*, 325*n*, 357*n*, 446*n*; *Mythology of Death*, xxvii, 205*n*, 491*n*; *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 33*n*, 99*n*, 134*n*, 319*n*, 377*n*, 410*n*, 480*n*; "Nostalgia for Paradise in the Primitive Traditions," 509*n*; *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, xii, xx, xxiii, 9*n*, 10*n*, 19*n*, 23, 31*n*, 107*n*, 133*n*, 134*n*, 139*n*, 169*n*, 187*n*, 199*n*, 260*n*, 265*n*, 269*n*, 270*n*, 271*n*, 272*n*, 273*n*, 277*n*, 313*n*, 337*n*, 352*n*, 358*n*, 398*n*, 442*n*, 489*n*, 505*n*; "Le Problème du chamanisme," xxvii, 24*n*; "Recent Works on Shamanism," xxviii; "Remarques sur le 'rope trick,'" 428*n*, 430*n*; "Sapta padāni kramati . . .," 406*n*; "The Seven Steps of Buddha," 406*n*; "Shamanism," xxvii; "Significations de la 'lumière intérieure,'" 61*n*, 137*n*, 509*n*; *Techniques du Yoga*, 413*n*, 416*n*; *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 61*n*, 164*n*, 287*n*, 407*n*, 409*n*, 410*n*, 413*n*, 416*n*, 428*n*, 430*n*, 434*n*, 436*n*, 453*n*
- elk, 90
- Elkin, Adolphus Peter, 31*n*, 46*n*, 86*n*, 87*n*, 108*n*, 127 & *n*, 132*n*, 136*n*, 138*n*, 476*n*
- Elliott, Alan J. A., 456*n*
- Ellis, Hilda R., 224*n*, 381*n*, 382*n*, 383*n*, 384*n*
- Ellis, William, 371 & *n*
- Elmendorf, William W., 300*n*
- Elwin, Verrier, 58*n*, 421, 426, 468, 469*n*
- Empyrean, 122
- Emsheimer, Ernst, 39*n*, 70*n*, 168*n*, 169*n*, 170*n*, 243*n*
- emu, 46
- Enareis, 395
- eñeñalan*, 251
- Engishiki*, 463
- England, 161*n*
- enstasis, 417
- enthusiasm/*enthousiasmos*, 387, 388
- entrance, difficult, 292; *see also* gate, strait; passage, difficult
- epic: origins of, 214, 395; themes, and shamanism, 510*f*; *see also* literature; poetry
- epidemics, 344, 356*f*, 442, 443
- epilepsy/epileptics, xvii, 15, 20, 24, 25, 27, 31; as diviners/magicians, 25; in Sudan, 27; *see also* psychopathy
- Epimenides, 389
- Er, 393*f*
- éréní*, 498
- Erkes, Eduard, 448*n*, 449*n*, 451*n*, 452*n*, 466*n*
- Erlik Khan, 10, 153, 173, 199, 200*ff*, 218, 471*n*; *see also* Irle Kan ermine, 39, 41
- eroticism, mystical, 416*n*
- Eruncha*, 46, 47
- erunchilda*, 47
- eschatology, 322
- Eskimo, 22, 82, 93, 161*n*, 184, 229*n*, 235, 261, 288*ff*; Alaskan, 90, 166; American, 257*n*; Ammasalik, 58; Asiatic, 258; Copper, 289*n*; drums, 176; Habakuk, 231*n*; and helping spirits, 90; Iglulik, 21, 60*f*; initiation among, 44*f*, 58*ff*, 288, 435; Labrador, 59, 438; and mask, 166; and resistance to cold, 113; and ritual nudity, 146; séance among, 290; and secret language, 96, 97; Smith Sound, 51; songs, of shaman, *see* songs; and submarine journey, 254
- Estonians, 261
- ethnologist, approach to shamanism, xviii*f*
- Etruscans, 394*n*
- Euahlayi, 45, 134, 137
- Europe: incursion of shamanizing horsemen, 369*n*; rope trick in medieval, 429, 430*n*
- Eurydice, 391
- Evans, Ivor H. N., 21*n*, 52*n*, 91*n*, 93*n*, 96*n*, 97*n*, 177*n*, 178*n*, 231*n*, 280, 281, 282*n*, 283*n*, 337*n*, 338*n*, 339*n*, 340*n*, 341*n*, 342*n*, 349*n*
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E., 374*n*, 490*n*
- Evans-Wentz, W. Y., 61*n*, 437*n*, 438*n*
- Evenki, 41, 94*n*
- evil, powers of, struggle against, 508
- experience, religious, variety of, xxiv
- "Exposition of the Road of Death," 438*ff*
- eyes: change of, 42, 54; tearing out, 54
- Ezekiel, 162*f*, 163*n*

F

- face, anointing/daubing of, 64, 166
- fainting spells, 53
- Fairchild, William P., 463*n*
- fairly wife, 77*f*, 361; *see also* wives, celestial
- fakirism, 228, 254, 256, 428, 479
- Falahi, 348
- falcon(s), 478, 480
- Fall, the, 99, 133, 484, 493
- family head, and domestic cult, 4, 247
- fan, winnowing, *see* winnow
- fanya* (cushion), 210*ff*
- fasting, and initiation/vication, 43, 84, 129
- fat, daubing face with, 166

INDEX

- Fate, Book of, 272, 273  
fatigue, 84  
fault, ritual, 505  
feathers, 492; and ascension, 177;  
chicken, 343; in China, 450; owl, 57; on  
shaman's cap, 155; and shamanic  
costume, 156; *see also* eagle  
fee, shaman's, 302  
female line, transmission in, 15  
feminization, 395; *see also* transvestitism  
*ferg*, 476  
fertility: Bai Ülgän and, 198, 199; god-  
dess, 80*n*; gods, 505; and prehistoric  
hunters, 503; rites, 79, 80*n*  
Fiji, 365*n*, 372*f*, 456  
*fili*, 382  
Filliozat, Jean, 415*n*, 417*n*  
Findeisen, Hans, 44*n*, 70*n*, 114*n*, 145*n*,  
158*n*, 159, 168*n*, 459*n*, 470*n*, 502*n*, 503*n*,  
504*n*  
Finns, 71*n*, 261, 473*n*, 485  
fir tree: giant, 37; ninefold, 270  
fire: and celestial destiny, 206; cult of, 10;  
inner, 475; and magic, 363; mastery  
over, 5, 257, 316*n*, 335, 373, 412, 438,  
472, 474*ff*; meditation by, 412; origin  
from vagina, 363*n*; "playing with,"  
232*n*, 335; smiths and, 472-73  
Fire, Master of the, 193  
fireball, 21  
fire-handlers, 315  
fire-walking, 54, 112, 206, 372, 442, 456  
Fischer, H. T., 133*n*, 483*n*  
fish, 93  
flame, emission of, 474  
Flannery, Regina, 335*n*  
flight, *see* flying  
Florida (Solomon Islands), 364  
flues, 262  
fly, 256*n*  
flying: in alchemy, *see* alchemy; bird cos-  
tume and, 157; in China, 448, 450*f*;  
Freudianism and, 225*n*; in India, 407*ff*;  
magical, 5, 121, 136, 138*f*, 140*f*, 154,  
160, 239*n*, 245, 289, 400, 405, 408*f*,  
477*ff*, *et passim*; power of, 56, 57, 126;  
spiritual, 479; *see also* ascension;  
levitation  
folklore: European, smith in, 474;  
Indian, bones in, 163; shamanic adven-  
tures and, 180  
footsteps, four, 400  
Forde, C. Daryll, 103*n*, 310*n*  
forgetfulness, 64*f*  
Formosa, 456*n*  
Fornander, A., 369  
Forrest River, 131  
Fortune, R. F., 363*n*, 364*n*, 475*n*  
forty-nine (number), 208*n*  
Fo-t'u-têng, 453*n*  
fountain of youth, 78  
four, footsteps, 400  
fox, 90, 103  
Fox Indians, 335  
Foy, W., 268*n*  
France, 161*n*, 244  
*Fravaši-yašt*, 399  
Frazer, James G., 92*n*, 102*n*, 160, 309*n*,  
354*n*, 355*n*, 366*n*, 479, 487*n*, 490*n*,  
491*n*, 492*n*  
Freudianism, and shamanic flight, 225*n*  
Freyja, 385, 386*n*  
Friederici, Georg, 332*n*  
Friedrich, Adolf, 94*n*, 159*n*, 161, 163 &  
*n*, 164*n*, 171*n*, 177*n*, 209*n*, 374*n*,  
504*n*; and Buddruss, Georg, 37*n*, 94*n*,  
95*n*, 114*n*, 160 & *n*, 170, 176*n*, 275*n*,  
471*n*  
Fritzner, Johan, 224*n*  
Frobenius, Leo, 133*n*, 160*f*, 479  
Fruit Island, 281*n*, 282  
Fuegians, 333; *see also* Tierra del Fuego  
Fühner, H., 130*n*  
function, alteration of, 174  
funerary beliefs; Batak, 340*f*; Japanese,  
355; Sea Dyak, 359*ff*  
funerary ceremonies: Goldi, 207, 209,  
210*ff*; Malayan/Indonesian, 355; sha-  
man and, 181, 207*f*; Yurak, 212*f*  
funerary geography, 509  
fur(s), 150, 179  
*furor*, 476

G

- Gabriel, Archangel, 489*n*  
Gabriellino, 109, 312  
Gaerte, W., 280*n*  
Gagauzi, 161  
Gahs, Alexander, 81*n*, 167*n*, 187*n*, 192*n*,  
199*n*, 228*n*, 264*n*, 277, 502*n*  
*galdr*, 98  
Galla, 263  
*gam*, *see* *kam*  
*gamana*, 409  
gander, 405  
*gandharvas*, 408  
Ganjikka (Ganykka), 38, 228  
Gaokērēna, 122*n*, 271*n*  
*garabancias*, 225*n*

INDEX

- Garide/Garuda, 267  
garment, new, 447  
Garo, 415*n*, 442*n*, 468  
Garôdmân, 400  
Garuda, *see* Garide  
gashes, seven, 277  
gate, strait, 260*n*, 293, 295, 483; *see also*  
door; passage, difficult  
Gâthās, 397, 398*n*, 399  
*Gawei antu*, 360  
Gayton, A. H., 311*n*, 312*n*  
gaze, Platonic, 402*n*  
*gchod*, *see chöd*  
Genesis, Book of, 488*n*  
Gennep, Arnold van, 64*n*, 137*n*, 469*n*,  
490*n*  
“Gentle Mother Creatress,” 187  
“Gentle Lady of Birth,” 187  
geography, funerary, 509  
Georgi, J. G., 172  
Gerizim, Mount, 268  
Germans, ancient, 161*n*, 162, 224, 267,  
273, 355, 380*ff*, 473  
Gernet, L., and Boulanger, A., 473*n*  
Gesser Khan, 161*n*  
Getae, 389*f*  
*ghanṭa*, 420  
Gheerbrant, Alain, 129*n*  
*Gheraṇḍa Samhitā*, 409*n*  
ghosts, 229; incarnating, 454; possession  
by, 462  
“Ghost Ceremony” society, 54  
Ghost Dance, 311  
Ghost-Dance Religion, 142*f*, 299, 314,  
320*ff*, 391*n*  
giant, visit to underworld, 383  
gibbet, 380  
Giedion, S., 503*n*  
Gifford, E. W., 54*n*  
Gilgamesh legend, 78, 313*n*  
Gilgit, 431*n*  
Gillen, F. J., *see* Spencer, Baldwin  
Gilyak, 474*n*  
*Gisla Saga*, 382  
Gjallar, bridge, 383*n*  
Gjessing, Gutorm, 500*n*  
glove, 278  
Gmelin, Johann Georg, 150*n*, 234*n*, 236*n*  
Gñā-k’ri-bstan-po, 430  
goat(s): black, 240; blood of, 121; hair  
of, 16; sacrifice of, 119; Thor’s, 161*f*  
god(s)/God: of atmosphere, 199; “bind-  
ing,” 419; bipartition of, 186; Buryat,  
10; celestial, 9, 12; —, replacement of,  
199; the Father, 329; fertility, 505; and  
first shaman, 68; Great/celestial, of  
Asian nomads, 9; —, names of, 9;  
groups of seven or nine, 275*ff*; Indian,  
267; invocation of, 88; marriage with,  
464; messengers of, 9, 10; multiplica-  
tion of, 10; “nephews” of, 337; ninety-  
nine, 277; renunciation of, 113;  
“sons”/“daughters” of, 9, 10; of  
storms, *see* storms; Sun, 487; thirty-  
three, 276; uranian, 199; —, and telluric,  
186*ff*; village of, 353; visits from, 324;  
Yakut, 186*ff*, 276; *see also* Supreme  
Being; *names of specific gods*  
Goddess of the Animals, *see* Animals  
goddess(es): earth, 10; fertility, 80*n*;  
Great, 505; Turko-Tatar, 10  
Goeje, C. H. de, 127*n*  
gold dust, 57  
Goldi, 28, 82*n*, 97, 166, 204*n*, 439*n*; and  
Cosmic Tree, 270*f*, 272; election  
among, 71*ff*; funerary ceremonies, 207,  
209, 210*ff*; initiation among, 114, 120;  
shaman’s costume, 156, 167  
Golgotha, 268  
Goloubew, V., 177  
Golther, W., 355*n*  
Gomes, Edwin H., 57*n*, 126*n*  
Gond, 44*n*, 58*n*, 425*n*, 426, 468; *see also*  
Nodora  
Gond-Pardhan, 468  
Gondatti, N. L., 15  
gong, 179  
goose, 89, 191*f*, 195, 203, 204  
Gorakhnāth, 163  
gourd, 312  
Graebner, Fritz, xix, 262*n*, 491*n*  
*grana nour*, 232  
“Grandfather, Indian,” 128  
“Grandfather Vulture,” 128*f*  
Grand Medicine Society, 315*ff*; *see also*  
Midē’wiwin  
Granet, Marcel, 269*n*, 449, 458*n*, 461*n*,  
473*n*  
grave: lying by, 82; sleeping on, 45,  
102*n*, 382  
Great Basin, 102, 104  
Great Crow, 250  
Great Hell, 438*f*  
Great Medicine Lodge, 317  
grebe, 234  
Greece, 264, 387*ff*, 488  
Greeks, migrations of, 379  
Greenland, 59, 90  
“green man, little,” 102  
Grey, George, 78*n*

INDEX

- Griaule, Marcel, 472*n*  
*Grimnismál*, 383  
Grønbech, K., 243*n*  
Groot, Jan J. M. de, 448*n*, 452*n*, 453, 454*n*, 455*n*, 456*n*  
Gros Ventre Indians, 102*n*  
Grousset, René, 11*n*  
Grube, W., 212*n*  
Grünwedel, Albert, 163 & *n*  
gShen rab mi bo, 433  
*gtüm-mō*, 437*n*  
Guarani, 83, 324  
Guardians of the Sky, 276  
Gudgeon, W. E., 372*n*  
Guiana, 21, 97, 329*n*; Dutch, 127, 326  
guitar, 220, 221*f*  
gull, 153, 234  
Güntert, Hermann, 405*n*, 466*n*  
Gunther, E., *see* Haeberlin, Herman  
*guru*, 347  
Gusinde, Martin, 26*n*, 53*n*, 84*n*, 331*n*  
Guthrie, W. K. C., 388*n*, 391*n*, 392*n*, 488*n*  
Gutmann, B., 472*n*  
*gydhjur*, 385  
*Gylfaginning*, *see* *Edda, Prose*
- H
- Haavio, Martti, 485*n*  
Hades, 387, 389, 391, 392, 399  
Hadia, 263  
Hadingus, 383*f*  
Haeberlin, Herman, 310*n*; and Gunther, E., 107*n*  
Haekel, Josef, 99*n*, 126*n*, 278*n*, 313*n*  
Haguenauer, Charles, 462*n*, 464  
Haida, 178  
hair: horse, 469; long, 152*n*, 407; and shamanizing for reindeer, 41; Takánakapsáluk's, 295*f*  
*hala/halak*, 52*n*, 93, 96, 125, 138, 337*ff*, 341  
Halak Gihmal, 340  
Halliday, W. R., 395*n*  
Hallowell, A. Irving, 334, 458*n*  
Hamites, 161  
Han period, 461  
Hančar, Franz, 502*n*  
hand, father's, image of, 15  
Handy, E. S. C., 287*n*, 366*n*, 367*n*, 368*n*, 369*n*, 370*n*, 371*n*, 372*n*, 485*n*  
hanging, of initiation candidate, 380  
Harabrezaiti (Elbruz), *see* Elbruz  
hare(s): guardian spirit as, 89; hunt, 196 & *n*; among Winnebago, 319  
Harper, Edward B., 424*n*  
Harva (Holmberg), Uno, xvii, 10*n*, 14*n*, 24*n*, 27*n*, 37*n*, 68*n*, 69*n*, 70*n*, 81*n*, 82*n*, 89*n*, 92*n*, 94*n*, 114*n*, 115*n*, 116*n*, 120*n*, 121 & *n*, 122*n*, 133*n*, 135*n*, 145*n*, 146*n*, 148*n*, 152*n*, 153*n*, 155*n*, 156*n*, 158 & *n*, 159*n*, 166*n*, 167, 169*n*, 171*n*, 172*n*, 173*n*, 174 & *n*, 175*n*, 176*n*, 184, 185*n*, 189*n*, 190*n*, 191*n*, 197*n*, 198*n*, 201*n*, 204*n*, 205*n*, 206*n*, 207*n*, 208*n*, 211*n*, 212*n*, 213*n*, 217*n*, 218*n*, 229*n*, 232*n*, 233*n*, 234*n*, 235*n*, 260*n*, 261*n*, 262*n*, 263*n*, 266*n*, 267*n*, 268*n*, 270*n*, 271*n*, 272, 273*n*, 274*n*, 275*n*, 276*n*, 277*n*, 279*n*, 489*n*, 497*n*  
harvest ritual, 468  
hashish, 402  
*hasira*, 464  
Haslund-Christensen, Henning, et al., 243*n*  
hat, lambskin, 189  
Hatibadi, 421  
Hatt, Gudmund, 333*n*, 486*n*, 491*n*  
Hauer, J. W., 407*n*, 413*n*, 420*n*  
Haussig, Hans-Wilhelm, 396*n*, 495*n*; *see also* Altheim, Franz  
*Hávamál*, 380*n*  
Hawaii, 78*n*, 133, 369, 372 & *n*  
"He Above," 249  
head: forging of shaman's, 41, 471*n*; opening, 55; sacrifices of, 199; spirit of, 89  
headcloth, 146*f*  
headdress: two-horned, 402; *see also* cap; hat  
head-holder, 191, 195  
healing, magical/shamanic, 5, 182, 215*ff*, 283, 289, 300*ff*, 326*ff*, *et passim*  
heat: and evil, 475; in France, 244; inner, 412; and magic, 363, 474*ff*; mystical, 437*f*; —, in South America, 335; physical, 113; *see also* *tapas*  
heaven(s): ascent to/through, 197, *see also* ascent, journey; —, in China, 449; and earth, communication, 449*n*; nine, 233, 274, 383, 406; number of, 275; planetary, 271, 274; sacrifice to, 444; seven, 122, 134, 274, 275, 383, 405; shaman's knowledge of, 278; ten, 492; thirty-three, 277; Trayastrīṃśā, 430  
"heavenly book," *see* "book, heavenly"  
Hebrus, 391

INDEX

- Heine-Geldern, Robert von, 268*n*, 333*n*, 334*n*, 361*n*, 442*n*, 460*n*  
 Heissig, Walther, 154*n*, 174*n*, 461*n*  
 Hel, 382, 383  
 hell, 397, 446*f*; and ancestor cult, 458; *see also* Hades; underworld  
 Hell, Great, 438*f*  
 Hellenistic East, 501  
 Hemberg, Bengt, 473*n*  
 hemorrhage, hysterical, 308  
 hemp, *see* smoke  
 Henning, W. B., 398*n*  
 Henry, A., 442*n*  
 hens, transformation into, 56, 478  
 Hentze, Carl, 94*n*, 179*n*, 270*n*, 271*n*, 272*n*, 273*n*, 334*n*, 435*n*, 449*n*, 458*n*, 459*n*, 460*n*, 461*n*  
 Hera, 391, 488  
 Herakles, xxii, 392, 506*n*  
 herb, miraculous, 78  
 heredity, transmission of power by, 13, 21, 372  
 Hermanns, Matthias, 431*n*, 432*n*  
 hermaphrodites, 352  
 Hermes Psychopompos, 392  
 Hermódhr, 380, 383  
 Hermotimos of Clazomenae, 389  
 hero(es): and animal, 94; ascent of, 491; civilizing, 361, 362; and crystal mountains, 139; culture, Orpheus as, 391; descent to underworld, 94, 367*f*; fairy women and, 78, 81; journey of, 94, 204*n*; long hair and, 152*n*  
 Herodotus, 389*n*, 394, 395, 434*n*  
 heron, 478  
 hierogamy, heaven/earth, 285  
 hierophanies: as compared to theophany, xiii; concept of, xiii; dialectic of, xviii, 32, 107; and history, xxii; repetition of, xxiv; spontaneity of, xxv  
*hik*, 452  
 Hiku, 368  
 Hilden, K., 197*n*  
 Hillebrandt, Alfred, 413*n*  
 Himingbjörg, 267  
 Himmelsdiener, 493*n*  
 Hinduism, 286, 408  
 Hiroa, Te Rangi (Peter H. Buck), 370*n*, 371*n*  
 historiography, xxiv  
 history: and myth, xiii, 355, 362; polyvalence of term, xxii; of religions, *see* religions; and transformation of archaic religious schema, 376*f*  
 Hiung-Nu, 183  
 Hivale, Shamrao, 468*n*  
 hobby-horse, Morris, 469; *see also* horse  
 Hocart, Arthur Maurice, 410*n*, 478*n*  
 Hoffman, W. J., 313*n*, 315 & *n*, 316*n*, 317*n*, 318*n*  
 Hoffmann, Helmut, 165*n*, 177, 274*n*, 431*n*, 432*n*, 433*n*  
 Hoffmann, John, 425*n*  
 Höfler, Otto, 355*n*, 380, 384*n*, 467*n*, 469*n*, 473*n*  
 "Hole of the Spirits," 234  
 Holm, G., 289*n*  
 Holmberg, Uno, *see* Harva, Uno  
 Holmer, Nils M., and Wassén, S. Henry, 323*n*  
 Holt, Catharine, *see* Kroeber, Alfred Louis  
*homo religiosus*, xiv  
 homosexuality, *see* inverts; pederasty  
 Honko, Lauri, 215*n*  
 Hopkins, Edward Washburn, 409*n*  
 Hopkins, L. C., 452*n*  
 Hornell, James, 332*n*, 366*n*  
 horns; on shaman's cap, 155, 462; stag, 462  
 horse, 217, 407, 467*ff*; eight-hooved/-legged, 380, 469; gray, 89; hairs of, 469; mythology of, 467; Odin's, 380; religious importance, 11; sacrificial, 405, *see also* horse sacrifice; shaman's, 151, 173*f*, 175, 325, 408, 467; *see also* drum; skull of, 232; stars as, 261; and tree, 270*n*; white, 55, 154; wooden, 325, 408; *see also* drum; hobby-horse  
 horse sacrifice, 79*f*, 182, 183, 190*ff*, 198*ff*, 325, 471; agrarianization of, 197*n*; in India, 199; *see also* *asvamedha*  
 Horse-stick, Lord and Lady of the, 118  
 house: and Center of World, 265; purification after death in, 208  
 Housse, Émile, 25, 53, 123, 124*n*, 325*n*, 330  
 Howell, W., 360*n*  
 Howitt, A. W., 45 & *n*, 136, 137*n*, 138*n*, 490*n*, 491*n*  
 Huai-nan Tse, 451  
 Huart, Clément, 401 & *n*  
 Huang Ti, 449  
 Huchnom, 54  
 Hudson Bay, 161*n*  
 Huggin, 381  
 Hultkrantz, Åke, 241*n*, 300*n*, 310*n*, 311*n*, 313*n*, 391*n*  
 humanism, and spiritual tradition, xxvi  
 Hummel, Siegbert, 432*n*, 438*n*, 444*n*, 466*n*, 470*n*  
 Hungarian shamans, *see* *táltos*

INDEX

- hunters: and guardian spirits, 104;  
ideology of, 435; paleolithic, 503; Siberian, 502
- hunting: rites, 10, 12, 184, 385; shaman and, 299, 459
- Huottarie, 39
- Hupa, 21, 105
- hurricane, 359
- hut: initiatory, 128, 131; leaf, 341; shaking of, 335, 338
- Hu Ti, 457
- Hutu, 367f
- hymns, shamanic, 19; *see also* songs
- Hyperboreans, 388
- hysteria, 31; arctic, 24
- hysteroid: crisis, and vocation, 17; disease, xvii
- I
- Ibn Baṭūṭah, 429
- ice, diving in, 113
- Ichirō, Hori, 462
- ichiya-tsuma*, 463
- Ida, Mount, 389
- ideology: religious, 7; shamanic, 300, 310, 373, 378, 413, 504, 507
- ié-kyla*, 89f
- Iglulik, *see* Eskimo
- ikikuchi*, 462
- Ila, 473n
- illness: and shamanic election, 28; shamans and, 31; and violation of taboos, 289; *see also* disease; epilepsy; hysteria; hysteroid; insanity; mental disease; psychopathy; sickness; "sickness-vocation"; syphilis
- illud tempus*, *see* time
- illumination, shaman's, 90, 91, 420
- Ilpailurkna, 47f
- immersion, 235
- Immortality: Medicine of, 446; Tree of, 271; *see also* soul
- Im Thurn, Everard F., 97n
- incisions, seven, 283
- India, xiv; aboriginals, 287n; bones in, 163f; "burning" concept, 475f; drum in, 420, 426; fire-walking, 372; influence of, 4, 165, 279, 496, 500; —, on Batak, 286, 346, 348; —, on Buryat ritual, 122n; —, on China, 453n; journey to, 204; magical flight in, 407ff; possession in, 424; psychopomp in, 418; rope trick in, 127, 428ff; seven colors and, 134; Vedic, 328; —, sacrifice in, 199; skulls in, 421, 434n; and World Pillar/Center, 264, 266, 268, 272
- "Indian Grandfather," 128
- Indians: North American, *see* America, North; South American, *see* America, South; *for both*, *names of specific tribes*
- Indochina, 443
- Indo-Europeans, 10f, 375ff; contact with urban culture, 379; and horse sacrifice, 198; religion of, 10, 375ff; and Turkotatars, resemblances, 10f, 378
- Indonesia(ns), 5, 182, 273, 279, 355, 357, 455; Chinese art and, 334n; drumming, 177; eternal return, 246n; mourners, 396n; multiple souls, 215; rainbow in, 133; shamanism, and sickness, 25; transvestitism, 258
- Indra, 199, 267, 439
- Ingjugarjuk, 59–60n
- inheritance, of shamanic profession, 13, 15ff, 20ff; *see also* heredity; initiation
- inhibition, neurotic, 402n
- Ini, 352
- initiation, 14, 110ff, 343, *et passim*; and accidents, 45, 81; celestial and infernal, 34; dreams and, 33ff; ecstasies and, 33ff; fasting and, 43, 84, 129; martial/military, 385, 467; and medicine man, 32; morphological similarities, 362n; and shaman's journey, 236; and shamanic powers, 109; sickness and, 33ff, 38ff; tribal, and guardian spirits, 107; —, and shamanic, 64, 65; *see also* dismemberment
- insanity, 365n; *see also* psychopathy; mental disease
- insensibility, physical, 244
- inspiration, 253
- instruction, of shaman, 13f, 31, 33, 34, 110ff, 425; *see also* initiation
- integrity, psychic, 508f
- interpreter, shaman's, 302f, 306
- Interpreters of the Sky, 276
- intoxication, 223, 395, 399ff; *see also* alcohol; mushrooms; narcotics; smoke; toxins
- inverts, sexual, as shamans, 125n
- invisibility, 86, 140
- invulnerability, 100
- Ipiutak culture, 334n
- Iran(ians): and Cosmic Axis/Mountain, 266, 267, 272; dualism, 68, 163n; and hemp, 395; influence of, 501; —, on Buddhist India, 163; —, on Buryat, 122; —, on shamanism, 68, 122, 400, 506;

INDEX

- , on Yakut, 186; Islamized, 401;  
otherworld ideas, 396ff  
Ireland, prophets, 179  
*i'rkiye*, 245  
Irkutsk, 28  
Irlé Kan, 213, 270; *see also* Erlik Khan  
*Irmínsül*, 261n, 263  
iron/Iron, 50, 231; bones fastened with,  
36, 158f; Man-Pillar of, 263; Mountain  
of, *see s.v.*; on shamanic costumes, 29,  
148, 150, 152, 158; snake, 426  
Irtysh, 9, 15, 183, 220  
*Irontarinia*, 46f, 48  
Ishtar, 506n  
Islam: "bridge" in, 484; in Central Asia,  
402; influence on Altaians, 208n; — on  
Menangkabau, 286; levitation in,  
481; *see also* Mohammedanism  
isolation: psychic, 33; of shamanic  
candidates, 128, 131  
Israel, 393n; *see also* Jews; Judaism  
Issedones, 434n  
Itkonen, Toivo Immanuel, 15n, 30n, 90n,  
93n, 175n, 176n, 224n, 278n, 477n  
Itonama, 327n  
Ivanov, Pyotr, 36  
Ivanov, S. V., 146n
- J**
- Jacob's Fountain, 268  
Jacob's Ladder, 488  
Jacoby, Adolf, 70n, 428n, 429n, 430n  
jaguars, 129  
*Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, 415n, 419n  
*Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa*, 405n  
Jajyk (Yaik) Kan, 88  
Jakun, 21, 91, 177n, 283, 341; *see also*  
Malay Peninsula; Negritos  
*Jambuvīpa*, 439  
Jangmai, 421f  
Japan(ese), xiv, 285n, 380n; and bridge, 484;  
funerary beliefs, 355; and rainbow, 133,  
134; shamanism in, 462ff; smiths, 473  
Jäschke, H. A., 431n  
*Jātakas*, 436  
Java, 429, 467  
Jenness, Diamond, 333n  
Jensen, A. E., and Niggemeyer, H., 490n  
Jeremias, Alfred, 134n, 267n, 269n, 488n  
Jerusalem, 489  
*jēs'sakkid'*, 315f, 318  
Jesus Christ, 66  
Jettmar, Karl, 11n, 500n, 501n  
Jews, 161n; *see also* Israel; Judaism  
*jhānas*, 406  
jimson weed, 109  
*jīvan-mukta*, 413  
Jivaro, 26, 84  
Job, Book of, 261n  
Jochelson, Waldemar I., 24n, 145n, 156n,  
186n, 216n, 221n, 229n, 232n, 234n,  
245n, 246n, 247, 248n, 249n, 250n,  
251n, 252, 262n, 435n, 470n, 491n  
John Climacus, St., 489  
John of the Cross, St., 489n  
Johnson, Frederick, 302n  
Johore, 342n  
Joseph of Cupertino, St., 126f, 482  
journey, shamanic/ecstatic, 8, 72n, 114,  
127ff, 182, 223, 236, 289, *et passim*;  
and birds, 98; to Center of World, 269;  
drum and, 173ff; "for joy alone," 291;  
and guardian spirits, 95, 103, 157;  
undersea/underwater, 289, 293; *see also*  
ascent; underworld; sky  
Juaneno, 109  
Juang, 425  
Judaism, 134; *see also* Israel; Jews  
Judges, Book of, 268n  
jugglers, 315  
jungle, 343  
juniper, 116, 118n, 192, 445  
Jupiter, pillars of, 261n  
*juṭpa*, 153  
Juynboll, H. H., 354n, 490n
- K**
- Kachin, 426n, 442n  
*Kadang baluk*, 339n  
Kagarow, E., 169n, 270n  
Kahn, Charles H., 389n  
Kahtyr-Kaghtan Bourai-Toyon, 188  
*kahu*, 371, 372  
Kaira Kan, 88, 192, 193, 198f, 275, 276  
Kakād (Chakāt)-i-Dāitfk, 397, 399  
Kakhyen, 455n  
Kalau, 249, 251  
Kalmyk, 122n, 164, 261, 266, 267, 271  
Kaltenmark, Max, 450n  
*kam/gam/kami/qam*, 4, 20, 76, 190ff,  
495, 502n  
*kāmaru*, 502n  
Kamchadal, 100n, 165, 257n, 258  
*kami*, *see kam*  
*kamikuchi*, 462  
Kamilaroi, 134  
*kamlanie*, 155n  
Kaniška, 420

INDEX

- Kānpḥaṭā Yogis, 164  
Kāpālikas, 434*n*  
Kapilavastu, 428  
*kapnobatai*, 390  
Karagas, 155, 156, 174, 279  
*karain bö*, 185  
*kara kam*, 189  
Karakuš, 196  
Karei, 231*n*, 337, 338  
Karen, 442, 455  
Karginz, 208  
Kari, 337  
Karjalainen, K. F., 15, 29, 89 & *n*, 145*n*, 154*n*, 164*n*, 182*n*, 183*n*, 220*n*, 221, 222, 262*n*, 263*n*, 276*n*, 278*n*, 279*n*  
Karsten, Rafael, 26*n*, 169*n*, 176*n*, 224*n*, 323*n*, 329*n*  
Karšüt, 197*n*  
*kaṭā.na*, 465  
Katanov, N. V., 277  
*Katha Upaniṣad*, 405*n*, 485  
Katshina, 183  
*kaula*, 370*n*  
Kawaiisu, 109  
Kawelu, 368  
Kazak Kirgiz, *see* Kirgiz  
*kazatauri*, 210  
K'daai Maqsin, 470*ff*  
Kebrenoi, 390  
Keith, Arthur Berriedale, 413*n*, 417*n*, 418*n*  
Kelantan, 25, 93, 231*n*, 338, 339, 344  
*ké'let*, 255, 257  
*kemoit*, 281  
Kena, 368  
*kennikī oyuna*, 185*n*  
Kenta, 341  
Kenya, 263  
kerchief, 148, 167  
*kerēi*, 85  
Kerényi, Carl, 392*n*  
Keres, 316*n*  
Ket, 70*n*, 216*n*, 223*n*  
*khamu-at*, 174  
Khantalov, M. N., 115, 120; *see also* Agapitov, N. N.  
Khans: black and white, 185, 186; western, 118, 119*n*  
*khārāgā-khulkhā*, 117  
Khara-Gyrgān, 68  
Khargi, 17  
Khasi, 263  
Khingān, 153  
Khond, 425  
Khosru, Emir, 410*n*  
*khubilgan/khubilkhu*, 94  
King: of the Dead, *see s.v.*; of the Underworld, *see s.v.*  
kings: and ascent to heaven, 431; flying, 408, 481  
kingfisher, 232  
Kintara, 421*f*  
Kirchner, Horst, 156*n*, 382*n*, 396*n*, 481, 503  
Kirfel, Willibald, 267*n*, 406*n*  
Kirgiz, 97, 164, 175, 261, 497; Kazak, 30, 44, 155*n*, 157; —, recruitment among, 20  
kite/kiteflying, 78*n*, 133, 367, 373  
Kittredge, George Lyman, 92*n*, 93*n*, 164*n*, 478*n*  
Kiwai, 57  
Klallam, 21  
Klamath, 21  
Klaproth, J. H., 431*n*  
*klimax*, 488  
knives, ladder of, 442, 443, 484  
Knoll-Greiling, Ursula, 14*n*  
knots, 419  
*kobuz*, 175  
Koch, Theodor, 326*n*, 482*n*  
Koch-Grünberg, T., 30  
Koita, 365*n*  
*Kojiki*, 463  
Kolarians, 424  
*Kommandostäbe*, 503  
Kollantz, Arnulf, 396*n*  
*koori*, 204*n*, 211  
Koppers, Wilhelm, xix, 11*n*, 53*n*, 80*n*, 177*n*, 198*n*, 243*n*, 323*n*, 327*n*, 332, 421*n*, 425*n*, 426*n*, 466*n*, 469*n*, 487*n*, 501*n*, 502*n*  
Köprülüzadé, Mehmed Fuad, 67*n*, 402, 403*n*  
Koran, 163*n*  
Korea, 461*f*, 496  
Korku, 424*n*, 425, 468  
Körmös, 197, 206  
Körner, Theo, 449*n*  
Korwa, 425  
Koryak, 206, 261, 491*n*; divination among, 164; family shamanism, 247; and masks, 165; ritual transformation into woman, 258; séances among, 249*ff*; and sky god, 9  
Kosingas, 390, 488  
*kotchai*, 233  
*kougos*, 232  
Krader, Lawrence, 186*n*, 218*n*  
kratophanies, dialectic of, 32

INDEX

Kremsmayer, Heimo, 452*n*  
Kretschmar, Freda, 466  
Krivoshapkin, —, 24  
Kroeber, Alfred Louis, 52*n*, 103*n*, 105*n*, 109*n*, 311*n*, 477*n*; and Holt, Catharine, 167*n*  
Kroef, Justus M. van der, 352*n*  
Krohn, Kaarle, 71*n*  
Kroll, Josef, 392*n*  
Kruyt/Kruijt/Krujt, A. C., 347*n*, 358*n*; *see also* Adriani, N.  
Ksenofontov, G. V., 37*n*, 38*n*, 43, 44*n*, 114, 469*n*  
Kuala Langat, 282  
Kubaiko, 213*f*  
Kubu, 285, 349  
*kuei*, 454  
*kuei-ju*, 453  
*kujur*, 55  
Kuksu, 55  
Kulin (Australian tribe), 134, 491  
*kulin* ("snakes"), 149  
Kumandin, 79, 176*n*, 197*n*  
Kunlun, Mount, 457  
*Kuo yu*, 451  
*kupitja*, 48  
Kurkutji, 49  
Kurnai, 491  
*kut*, 206  
Kwakiutl, 138  
Kwangsi, 455*n*  
Kysugan Tengere, 27*f*

L

Laborde, —, 131  
Labrador, 164*n*  
labyrinth, 51  
laces, 419  
Lä-ch'ou, 447  
ladder, 58, 123, 126, 129, 326, 328, 391, 410, 430*f*, 487*ff*; in India, 407, 426; Mithraic, 121*f*; soul, 283, 285, 487; *see also* knives; sword-ladder  
*Ladder, Book of the*, 489*n*  
Lady: of the Animals, *see s.v.*; "of the Earth," 187; "Gentle, of Birth," 187; Great, of the Night, 367; of the Underworld, 368; of the Waters, 39, 42; "of the White Colt," 188; *see also* mother  
Lafont, Pierre-Bernard, 443*n*  
Lagercrantz, Eliel, 96*n*  
*laghiman*, 409  
Lakher, 442*n*  
Lalou, Marcelle, 438

Lamaism, 208*n*, 266, 506; drum in, 176, 497*f*; Mongols and, 461, 500; skulls in, 421, 434*f*; and soul, 440*f*; *sutura frontalis* in, 164; and Tungus shamanism, 112, 237, 497; *see also* Tibet  
lamas: and shamanism, 433*ff*, 498; and shamans, compared, 440  
lambs, sacrifice of, 123  
Lamotte, Étienne, 409*n*  
lance, 47, 285, 343, 491  
Lancelot, 484  
Land: of the Dead, *see s.v.*; "pure," 409; of the Shamanesses, 39  
Landtman, G., 57*n*  
language: animal/secret/shaman's, 62, 93*ff*, 96*ff*, 290, 338*n*, 511; Eskimo, 288*n*; Lapp, 96; Sogdian, 496; of the spirits, 347, 440; Tibetan secret, 440; "twilight," 440  
Lankenau, H. von, 20*n*, 173*n*, 219*n*  
Lanternari, V., 132*n*  
Laos, 443*n*  
Lapp(s), 93, 161*n*, 224, 235, 261, 263, 278, 288, 335; and American tribes, 334; and drum, 172, 175*ff*, 334; helping spirits, 90*n*; recruiting of shamans, 15; séance among, 223; secret language, 96  
Larsen, Helge, 334*n*  
Laru Kaj, 468  
Lascaux, 481, 503, 504  
Lattimore, Owen, 241*n*  
Laufer, Berthold, 119*n*, 133*n*, 164*n*, 333*n*, 430*n*, 434*n*, 448*n*, 449*n*, 451*n*, 460*n*, 495, 501*n*  
laurel, 130*n*  
Laval, Honoré, 370*n*  
Laviosa-Zambotti, Pia, 279*n*, 280*n*  
Law, Tables of the, 393*n*  
Layard, John W., 25, 27*n*, 56*n*, 126*n*, 361*n*, 477*n*, 478*n*  
laymen, imitation of shamanism by, 252*f*  
leap(s), ceremonial, 338, 443  
Lebed Tatars, *see* Tatars  
Leeuw, Gerardus van der, 489*n*  
Lehmann, Walter, 332*n*  
Lehtisalo, T., 16*n*, 37*n*, 38 & *n*, 39*n*, 42*n*, 44*n*, 93*n*, 96*n*, 97*n*, 98, 145*n*, 161*n*, 174, 213*n*, 226*n*, 228, 264*n*, 277*n*, 278*n*  
leopard, 55  
Lepers Island, 365*n*  
Lepcha, 432*n*, 433*n*  
Leroy, Olivier, 373*n*, 481*n*, 482  
Lesbos, 391  
Lessing, F. D., 433*n*  
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, xiv

INDEX

- Lévi, Sylvain, 403, 405*n*, 413*n*, 496*n*;  
and Chavannes, É., 410*n*  
levitation, 61, 243, 481*f*; *see also* ascension; flying  
Levy, Gertrude R., 51*n*, 272*n*  
Lévy, Isidore, 393*n*  
Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien, 478*n*  
liana, 328  
Li An-che, 432*n*  
Li byin ha ra, 37*n*  
Lie, House of the, 398  
Lietard, Fr., 443  
Life: Book of, *see s.v.*; Master of, *see s.v.*;  
Tree of, 271 & *n*, 282  
life-substance, 160  
Light/light: Creator of, *see s.v.*; inner,  
61, 420, 508; mystical, 60*f*; solidified,  
137*f*, 508; white, 9  
lightness, 485  
lightning, 19, 55, 81, 100 & *n*, 170, 206  
Ligoi, 280  
Lillooet Indians, 102  
Lindgren, E. J., 30, 110*n*, 145*n*  
Lingo Pen, 468  
Lindquist, Sigurd, 409*n*  
Linton, Ralph, 371*n*, 372*n*  
lions, mountain, 101  
Li Shao-kun, 451  
literature, traditional, 361; *see also* epic;  
poetry; *Saga*  
Liu An, 451  
Liungman, Waldemar, 161*n*  
liver, eating, 250  
lizard(s), 122*n*, 155*n*, 271*n*, 484  
*Llü-bu*, 444*n*  
Loeb, Edwin Mayer, 21*n*, 25*n*, 54*n*, 55*n*,  
64*n*, 65*n*, 82*n*, 86*n*, 87*n*, 96*n*, 97*n*,  
126*n*, 140*n*, 178*n*, 286*n*, 287*n*, 347*n*,  
348*n*, 349*n*, 369*n*  
log, rotten, 311*f*  
Loima-Yékamush, 54*n*  
*Lokasenna*, 385  
Loki, 386*n*  
Lol-narong, 56  
Lolo, 164*n*, 209, 426*n*, 441*f*  
Lommel, Hermann, 417*n*  
Lopatin, Ivan A., 115*n*, 210*n*, 212*n*, 244*f*  
Lord(s): Universal, 42, 168; of the Birds,  
*see s.v.*; of the Dead, *see s.v.*; of the  
Earth, *see s.v.*; and Lady of the  
Horse-stick, *see* Horse-stick; of Mad-  
ness, *see s.v.*; of the Sea, *see s.v.*; of the  
Tree, *see s.v.*; of the Underworld, *see*  
*s.v.*; of the Water, *see s.v.*; of the World,  
*see s.v.*; *see also* "White Lord Creator"  
Losun, 267  
Lot-Falck, Eveline, 10*n*, 81*n*, 149*n*, 168*n*  
Lotuko, 25  
Lowie, Robert H., 310*n*, 334 & *n*, 335  
Lublinski, Ida, 54*n*, 84*n*, 97*n*, 141*n*, 326*n*  
Lucifer, 139  
Luiseno, 55, 109  
Lunga, 108*n*  
Luomala, Katharine, 367*n*  
*lupa*, 344, 345*f*  
Lushai, 442*n*  
lycanthropy, 467; *see also* werewolves  
lyric poetry, 510

M

- Maanyan, 357  
Macchioro, Vittorio, 391*n*  
*machi*, 53, 123*ff*, 141, 325, 327, 329*f*, 467  
McMahon, A. R., 455*n*  
Macusi, 21  
Madagascar, 309*n*  
Maddox, John Lee, 21*n*, 177*n*  
Madness: Lord of, 39; Spirit of, 149  
Madsen, W., 323*n*  
*maga*, 398  
magic: Chinese, 442*f*; fire and, 363; heat  
and, 363, 474*ff*; Indian, 348; powers,  
acquisition of, 21*f*; —, quest for, 107;  
primitive, 3; shamanic elements in, 6*f*;  
universality of, 5  
magician(s): black, 297*ff*, 362, 508; and  
shaman, distinction, 5; use of term, 3;  
women as, 363  
magico-religious powers, methods of  
acquiring, 22*f*  
*Magna Mater*, 121  
Magyars, *see* Hungarian shamans  
*Mahābhārata*, 409, 410*n*, 420*n*  
MahIdhara, 405*n*  
Maidu, 54, 102*n*, 104, 179, 262  
*maiqabāi*, 151  
*Majjhima-nikāya*, 405, 406, 437*n*  
Maki, 126  
Malacca, 358*n*  
*malakhaī*, 155*n*  
Malakot, 468  
Malay Peninsula/Archipelago/Malays/  
Malaysia, 177*n*, 281, 282, 344*ff*, 355*ff*,  
475, 487, 503; *see also* Jakun; Negritos  
Malekula, 25, 51, 56, 126, 362*n*, 477, 478  
Maler, 425  
males, initiation of, 65  
Malinowski, Bronislaw, 283*n*, 478*n*  
Malten, Ludolph, 467*n*

INDEX

- malu*, 165  
Mampes, 281  
Mampüi, 200  
*mana*, 475  
Manabozho, 321  
Manacica, 326  
*manang*, 57, 126, 350*ff*  
*manang bali*, 258, 351  
*manas*, 479  
Manasi, 141, 323, 324  
Mänchen-Helfen, Otto, 173, 501*n*  
Manchu/Manchuria, 214*n*, 240, 497;  
initiation among, 110, 112*f*, 438;  
Northern, 154, 242; recruiting among,  
17*f*; shamanic costume, 157, 158; *see also* Tungus  
*mane kisu*, 364*f*  
Mangaian, 368  
Mangar, 487  
Mangareva, 369, 370*n*  
Mani, 119*n*  
Manidou, 317  
Man in the Moon, *see* Moon  
Manker, Ernst, 168*n*, 173*n*, 175, 176*n*  
Mankova, 240  
*Männerbünde*, 467, 473; *see also* men's  
societies  
Mannhardt, Johann Wilhelm Emanuel,  
162*n*  
Man-Pillar of Iron, *see* Iron  
Manquilef, Manuel, 330*n*  
"Manual," of Buryat shamans, 115 & *n*,  
150  
*Manyak*, 189  
*m'ao*, 241  
Maori, 367, 369, 492; *see also* New  
Zealand  
Mapic Tree, 281, 282  
*maqet*, 488  
Mara, 49*f*, 51, 137  
*maraca*, 178  
*marae*, 370*n*  
*marang deora*, 426  
*maraque*, 129  
Marcel-Dubois, Claudie, 420*n*  
*marebito*, 463  
Maricopa, 103  
Marind, 478  
Mariner, W., 371 & *n*  
Maringer, Johannes, 51*n*, 168*n*, 434*n*,  
481*n*  
Marka Pandum, 468  
Märküt, 193  
Marquesas Islands/Marquesans, 368,  
371, 372  
marriages: initiatory, 421; of shamaness  
to god, 463; spirit, 424; *see also* wives,  
celestial  
Mars (planet), 83  
Marshall, Harry Ignatius, 442*n*  
Marstrander, Carl, 66*n*  
Martino, Ernesto de, 255*n*, 290*n*, 372*n*  
Mary of Jesus Crucified, Sister, 482  
*marya*, 399*n*  
Masai, 472*n*  
masks, 93, 148, 149, 151, 165*ff*, 177, 179  
Maspero, Henri, 441*n*, 448*n*, 449*n*, 453  
massage, 123, 364  
Massignon, Louis, 402*n*, 429*n*  
Massim, 365*n*  
Master(s): of the Fire, 193; of Life, 142,  
320, 321; of the Drum, 192  
Mat Chinoi, 340  
matriarchy: and celestial god, 505; "ce-  
lestial wife" and, 78, 81; Chinese, 449;  
Japanese elements, 464; and Sea  
Dyak, 352; and secret societies, 166*f*;  
and sex change, 258; and Tree of  
Life, 282  
Matthew, Gospel of, 485*n*  
Maui, 362, 367  
Mauss, Marcel, 45*n*, 85, 136*n*  
Max Müller, Frederick, 488*n*  
*māyayā*, 410  
May-junk-kān, 222  
Mazdaism, 396*n*  
Më, 444  
meal, celestial wife and, 77, 80  
meaning, transfer of, 152*n*  
Medea, 66  
Medicine of Immortality, 446  
medicine man: Australian, consecration,  
50*ff*, 65; hereditary profession, 21*f*;  
Melanesian, 362; psychopathy of, 26;  
and shaman, distinction, 300; special  
character, 31*f*; use of term, 3  
Medicine Rite, Winnebago, 319*f*  
meditation: on bones, 62*f*; Buddhist, 407;  
by fire, 412; yogic, 406  
Mediterranean civilizations, 379  
mediumship, 370, 456; spontaneous, 347  
Meier, Fritz, 402*n*  
Meillet, A., 496*n*  
Meisen, Karl, 384*n*  
Melanesia(ns), 358; and ascent to sky,  
491; Asiatic art and, 334*n*; rainbow  
in, 133; and ritual boat, 356; shamanism  
in, 361*ff*; three cultural types, 361  
Melnikow, N., 218*n*  
Melton, E., 429

INDEX

- memory, loss of, 65  
 “men, wooden,” 246  
 Menangkabau, 86, 286, 348  
 Menasce, Jean de, 398n  
 Mendes Correa, 332  
*menerik*, 24, 29  
 Menghin, O., 280n  
 Menomini, 55, 97, 316, 335  
 Menri, 231n, 338  
 men’s societies, 166f, 469; see also  
     *Männerbünde*  
 mental capacity, of shamans, 29f  
 mental disease: shamanism and, xvijf;  
     24f; see also insanity; psychopathy  
 Mentawai(ans), 25, 85, 87, 96, 140,  
     178, 349  
 Menteg, 282  
 Meo, 443  
 “Merciful Emperor Heaven,” 198, 275  
 Mergen Tengere, 276  
 Meru, Mount, 266, 409, 439  
*meryak*, 24, 29  
*meshibitsu*, 463  
 Mesopotamia, 393n, 480, 501, 506; and  
     India, 268; and rainbow, 134; and  
     world Center/Pillar, 264, 266, 274  
 messengers of god, see god  
 Messenger, Spirit, 137  
 metallurgy: and Africa, 473; Chinese,  
     461n; secrets of, 474; and shamanism,  
     42n; see also smith(s)  
 Metawand, 468  
 meteors/meteorites, 139, 260  
 Métraux, Alfred, 21n, 26n, 30, 51n, 52n,  
     53 & n, 54n, 83n, 91n, 92n, 97n, 98n,  
     123n, 125n, 129n, 130n, 131, 141n,  
     178n, 323n, 324n, 325n, 327n, 328n,  
     329n, 330, 331n, 351n, 477n  
 Meuli, Karl, 159n, 160, 166n, 180n,  
     192n, 193n, 334n, 388n, 390n, 394, 395,  
     413n, 460n, 473n  
 Mexico, 92, 319, 429, 430n  
 microcosm, 261, 265, 415; drum as, 172f  
*midē*, 316ff  
*midēwigan*, 317  
 Midē’wiwin, 103n, 143, 299, 313n, 314,  
     315ff, 321  
*mīgis*, 316ff  
 migrations, ancestral, and boat of the  
     dead, 355  
 Mikhailof, A. N., 75  
 Mikhailowski, V. M., 13n, 15n, 16n,  
     17n, 19n, 20n, 68n, 69n, 89n, 90n,  
     100n, 114n, 115n, 145n, 148n, 150n,  
     153n, 155n, 173n, 181n, 185n, 190n,  
     201n, 218n, 219n, 220n, 224n, 226n,  
     227n, 228n, 236n, 243n, 255n, 278n  
 Mikkulai, 38  
*miko*, 463, 464  
*mikogami*, 463  
 Mi-la ras-pa, 433  
 military elements, 508  
 milk, oblations of, 263  
 Milk, Ocean of, 409  
 Milky Way, 260, 271n, 292  
 Mimir, head of, 382, 391  
 Mi’nabō’zho, 316f  
 Mindanao, 25  
 Ming dynasty, 241, 497  
 Minitari Indians, 159n  
 Minnungarra, 49  
 Minusinsk Tatars, 156  
 miracles, 4, 67, 228, 324, 412, 511  
 Mironov, N. D., and Shirokogoroff,  
     S. M., 496n, 497n  
 mirror(s), 151, 153f, 498  
 Mithraic mysteries, 121, 488  
*miwi*, 86  
 Miwok, 54  
 Mjöllnir, 162  
 Modi, Jivanji Jamshedji, 163  
 Moerenhout, Jacques A., 371n  
 Moesbach, —, 123, 124  
 Mogk, E., 71n  
 Mohaghir, 426  
 Mohammed, ascent to heaven, 377, 489  
     & n  
 Mohammedans, Indian, 475  
 Mohave, 103  
 Mojo, 323  
*mompanrilangka*, 353  
*mompemate*, 354  
 Mongolia/Mongols, 10, 261, 267, 276,  
     277, 497, 498; and Buddhism, 496;  
     Cosmic Mountain, 266, 270, 271;  
     divination, 164; Iranian influence, 501;  
     and Lamaism, 461, 500  
 Monguor, 461  
 Mono, 21  
 monotheism, in religious history, xxiv  
 monster, cannibal, 251–52n  
 Montandon, Georges, 167n  
 mood changes, 20  
 moon/Moon: 196, 327; Man in the, 292;  
     Spirit of the, 62  
 Mooney, James, 142n, 320n, 321n, 322n  
 Mordo Kan, 193  
 Moréchand, Guy, 443n  
 Mori, 354  
 Morris, J., 432n

INDEX

- Morris horse, 469; *see also* horse  
Moses, 393*n*  
Moso, 392, 444*f*  
Moss, Rosalind, 355*n*, 356*n*, 358*n*, 482*n*  
Mota Lava, 365  
mother(s)/Mother(s): animal, 89; of the Animals, *see s.v.*; Bird-, *see s.v.*; of the Caribou, 62; "Creatress, Gentle," 187; Divine/Holy, 463; and Father Tree, *see* Tree; Goddesses, 379; Queen, of the West, 457; of the Sea Beasts, *see s.v.*; Tasygan, 193; *see also* Lady  
motion, imagination of, 480  
Mount of the Lands, 267  
mountain(s)/Mountain(s): artificial, 267; Cosmic, 41, 42, 266*ff*, *et passim*, *see also* Axis, Center of the World, Tree; crystal, 139; of the Dead, *see s.v.*; in funerary mythology, 283, 355; as guardian spirits, 90, 106; Iron, 201, 266, 270, 439*n*; of Siva, 420; Taliang, 441  
mourners: Indonesian, 396*n*; women, 358, 359*f*  
mouse, 39, 41  
Mu, King of Chu, 457  
*muday*, 464  
Mühlmann, Wilhelm Emil, 286*n*  
Mukat, 103  
Mula djadi na bolon, 286  
Mu-lian, 457, 458  
Müller, F. Max, *see* Max Müller, Frederick  
Müller, Werner, 138*n*, 313*n*, 317*n*, 318*n*, 319*n*  
Mu-monto, 213  
Munda, 424*n*, 425, 426*f*, 473, 502*n*  
Mundadji, 49  
*muni*, 152*n*, 407*f*, 411  
Muninn, 381  
Munkácsi, Bernhardt, 401*n*  
Munkaninji, 49  
Münsterberger, Werner, 284*n*, 286*n*  
Muria, 325, 380, 425, 469  
Murray, Margaret Alice, 92*n*  
Mus, Paul, 267*n*, 268*n*, 269*n*, 405*n*, 406*n*  
Musaeus, 388  
mushrooms, 220*f*, 223, 228, 278, 400*f*  
music: and ecstasy, 223; magic of, 175, 180  
musical instruments, autonomy of, 180  
Muster, Wilhelm, 386*n*, 397*n*  
*Mwod Mod*, 443*n*  
Mysore, 424*n*  
mystic, unsuccessful, 27  
mysticism, xxiv, xxv; agricultural, 379; Buddhist, 64; Christian, 63, 489, 508; and inner light, 61; Islamic, 402, 489; North American, 299*f*; primitive, 3; shamans and, 265; and shamanism, 8, 508  
Mytchyll, 29  
myth, *see* history  
mythical personage, incarnation of, 167*f*  
mythology: of horse, 467; lunar, 285, 358*n*, 506; matriarchal, 10, 78, 351; Scandinavian, 176, 224; and shamanism, 7; *see also* woman
- N
- Nachtigall, H., 159*n*  
Naciketas, 418  
Nadel, S. F., 21*n*, 26*n*, 27, 31, 55*n*, 141*n*, 373*n*  
*nāga* (snake-spirit), 420  
Nāgārjuna, 409*n*  
Nagas (tribe), 287*n*  
Nagatya, 45  
*nagual*, 92  
Nail Star, 261  
Na-khi, 431, 444*ff*, 508  
Nam, 188  
name-card, 439  
Nandi, 263  
Nandimitra, 410*n*  
Nārada, 409  
narcotics, xix, 24, 64, 84, 109, 130*n*, 220, 402*n*, 417, 477; in yoga, 416  
Na-ro bon-č'un, 433  
Narr, Karl J., 501*n*, 502-03*n*, 503, 504  
Narrinyeri, 491  
Nart, 476  
Nda-pa, 444  
Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de, 37*n*, 175*n*, 177*n*, 482*n*, 433  
necromancy: Greek, 387; Odin and, 382  
Negelein, Julius von, 479  
Negritos, 21, 138, 337, 340; *see also* Jakun; Malay Peninsula  
Nehring, Alfons, 390*n*  
Nelson, Edward William, 292*n*  
Németh, Julius, 495  
Nepal, 487  
nervous disorders, *see* psychopathy  
Nespelem, 179  
net, 419  
Newbold, T. J., 344*n*  
New Guinea, 65, 334*n*, 363, 365; *see also* Papuans

INDEX

- New Hebrides, 21  
New Ireland, 334*n*  
New Year, 357  
New Zealand, 133*n*, 368, 485, 492; *see also* Maori  
Nez Perce, 21  
Ngadju Dyak, *see* Dyak  
*Ngenechen*, 53  
*ngillatun* ceremony, 324*f*, 325*n*  
Nguyēn-vān-Khoan, 442*n*  
Nias/Niassans, 140, 287, 348  
Nicobar Islands, 342*ff*, 356*n*  
Nicola Valley, 100  
Niggemeyer, H., *see* Jensen, A. E.  
Night, Great Lady of the, 367  
“night, spirit of the,” 104*f*  
*nigurasun*, 150  
*Nihongi*, 463  
*nijamas*, 478*n*  
Nil, Archbishop of Yaroslavl, 151, 165  
Nilsson, Martin P., 387*n*, 388*n*  
*ningan*, 210  
nine: gods, 275*ff*; heavens, *see s.v.*; levels of underworld, 383; the number, 274*ff*; Seas, 39; sons/brothers, 471; trees, 233  
Nine Seas, 39  
ninety-nine gods, 277  
Ninwa, 348  
Nioradze, Georg, 14*n*, 24*n*, 89*n*, 145*n*, 147*n*, 148*n*, 150*n*, 153*n*, 166*n*  
Nirṛti, 415, 419  
Nirvāṇa, 406, 407  
Nišan, 241  
*Nišan šaman*, 241  
Niue, 25  
Nodora Gond, 58*n*  
noise, magic of, 174*f*  
Nölle, W., 396*n*, 420*n*  
nomads/nomadism, 9, 501  
Nootka Indians, 138, 309  
Nordenskiöld, Erland, 323*n*  
north: birth of shamans in, 37; as “Center,” 279  
North America, *see* America, North  
nose, piercing of, 48  
Nourry, Émile, 161*n*  
Nuba, 141; Mountains, 55  
nudity, ritual, 146, 224  
Num, 9, 199, 213*n*, 227, 264*n*  
Numazawa, Franz Kiichi, 133*n*, 441*n*, 483*n*  
numbers: mystical, 36; *see also* three; four; seven; nine; thirty-three; forty-nine; ninety-nine  
numerals, 501  
Num-tôrem, 276  
Nü Ying, 448  
Nyberg, H. S., 396*n*, 398, 399*n*  
*nyen-jomo*, 432  
Nyima, 21  
Nyuak, Leo, 57*n*
- O
- Ob, 501  
Obermaier, H., *see* Breuil, H.  
*óboro*, 57  
“obstacles,” initiatory, 384; *see also* passage, difficult; *pudak*  
ocean, cosmic, 456  
Ocean of Milk, 409  
Oceania, 5, 25, 257*n*, 279, 362, 419; initiation in, 65; ladder in, 490; rock crystals in, 139; and South America, 332*n*  
Ochirvani, 267  
Odin, 71*n*, 270*n*, 375, 380*ff*, 385; shamanic attributes, 381*n*  
Oesterreich, T. K., 25*n*, 347*n*  
offerings, ritual, paleolithic, 503  
Ohlmarks, Åke, 14*n*, 24, 26, 89*n*, 145*n*, 157, 158*n*, 166*n*, 167*n*, 223*n*, 224*n*, 231*n*, 386*n*  
O Huang, 448  
*oibonküngätä*, 148  
*oigös timir*, 149  
*ojha*, 426  
Ojibwa, 143, 315*ff*  
*ojuma (oyuna)*, 4  
Oka, Masao, 462  
Okanagon, 21, 104*n*  
Okladnikov, A. P., 500*n*  
*oko-jumu*, 342  
*öksökjou*, 232  
Oktu Kan, 193  
Olaf, St., 489  
Old Dixie, 105*f*, 109*n*  
Oldenberg, Hermann, 413*n*  
Oleny Island, 503  
Olkhonsk Buryat, 151  
*oloh*, 232  
Olsen, Magnus, 386*n*  
omnipotence, 299  
ontological separation, 32  
opening: cosmic/central, 259, 265; in earth and sky, 251  
“Opening into the Earth,” 234  
opposites, transcending, 486  
Opler, Morris Edward, 300*n*, 302*n*  
O’Rahilly, Thomas F., 382*n*

INDEX

- Oraon, 415, 425, 426*f*, 473  
orations, funeral, 358  
ordeals: initiatory, 14, 17; *see also* tor-  
tures  
organs, mystical, 328  
*örgiski*, 238  
*orgoï*, 150  
Oriental civilizations, and Indo-  
Europeans, 379  
Oriental religion, xx  
Origen, 121*n*  
Orissa, 421  
ornaments, metal, on shaman's costume,  
149  
Orochi, séances among, 244*f*  
Orochon, 70, 471*n*  
*or.o-s.u.*, 464  
Orpheus, 389*n*, 391*f*; "motif," 214*n*,  
241; —, in China, 457*f*; myth, 383; —,  
North American, 311; —, Polynesian,  
368  
Orphic plates, *see* plates  
Orphism, 391*f*; initiation, 488  
*orto oyuna*, 185*n*  
Osmanli Turks, *see* Turks  
Osset, 395  
ostrich, 402*f*  
Ostyak, 30, 89, 96, 152*n*, 154*n*, 222, 262,  
263, 264*n*, 273, 275, 278; drum  
among, 171; Eastern, 15; initiation  
among, 114; Irtysh, 9, 183, 220; and  
number seven, 278; recruiting of  
shamans, 15, 16; séance among, 220,  
225*ff*; Yenisei, 70, 172, 223; *see also*  
Vasyugan  
otherworld: Iranian ideas of, 396*ff*; as  
reverse of this world, 205  
otter, 360; skin, 316*f*, 319  
owl, 89, 90, 103, 105, 155, 156; feath-  
ers, 57  
*oyuna*, *see* *ojuna*
- P
- Padmasambhava, 434  
Pahang, 338  
pain, as symbolic death, 33  
"pains," 105  
Paisyn Kan, 193  
palaces, crystal, 139  
Palaung, 442*n*  
Palawan, 340  
Paleolithic: age, 11, 503; hunters, 503;  
man, 332*n*  
Palestine, 268  
Pallas, P. S., 149  
Pallisen, N., 199*n*  
*pana*, 360  
*panáptu*, 154  
*Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa*, 404, 415*n*, 479  
Pander, Eugen, 432*n*  
*pānkh/panga/pango/pongo*, 401  
panther, 72  
Papuan, 57, 361  
paradise(s): Buddhist, 409; lost, 431;  
myth, 99, 133, 171, 282*n*, 486; nostalgia  
for, 508*f*; *see also* time  
paradox, difficult passage and, 483, 485*f*  
*paraṇwakāyapraveśa*, 416  
Pare, 367*f*  
Park, Willard Z., 21, 22*n*, 52*n*, 101 & *n*,  
102*n*, 103*n*, 104*n*, 105*n*, 106*n*, 109 & *n*,  
178*n*, 179*n*, 184*n*, 298, 301, 302*n*,  
303*n*, 304*n*, 305*n*, 310*n*  
Parker, K. Langloh, 46*n*, 137*n*  
Parrot, A., 267*n*  
parrots, 82  
Parsons, Elsie Clews, 316*n*  
Partanen, Jorma, 115 & *n*, 120*n*, 145*n*,  
150, 152*n*, 168*n*  
Pärvan, Vasile, 390*n*  
passage: death as, 510; difficult/  
dangerous/narrow, 482*ff*; paradoxical,  
*see* paradox; rite(s) of, 64*f*, 486; *see also*  
bridge; gate  
Pasuka, 84  
Patagonians, 258  
Patañjali, 409, 411, 416  
patriarchal society, 10  
Patwin, 262; River, 55  
Paul, St., Vision of, 484  
Paul, Otto, 398*n*  
Paulson, Ivar, 81*n*, 159*n*, 209*n*, 210*n*,  
215*n*, 216*n*, 243*n*  
Pavlotso, 101, 102, 104, 184*n*, 299, 301,  
302*ff*  
*pawang*, 341, 345*f*  
Pawnee Indians, 313*n*, 319  
*pawo*, 432  
pebbles, *see* stones  
pectoral, 148  
pederasty, 258  
Pekarsky, E. K., 148*n*, 158  
Pelias, 66  
Pelliot, Paul, 199*n*, 466*n*, 496*n*, 501*n*  
Pelops, 66  
Penard, F. P. and A. P., 127*n*  
Penzer, Norman Mosley, 98*n*, 405*n*,  
409*n*, 478*n*  
Perham, J., 57*n*, 126, 351, 360*n*

INDEX

- Pering, Birger, 269*n*  
 Perpetua, St., 489  
 Perry, W. J., 69*n*, 356*n*, 477*n*, 488*n*  
 Pestalozza, Uberto, 70*n*, 119*n*  
 Petri, B. E., 120  
 Petri, Helmut, 136*n*  
 Petrullo, Vincenzo, 325*n*  
 Petrus Comestor, 268  
 Pettazzoni, Raffaele, 68*n*, 122*n*, 134*n*,  
 136*n*, 137*n*, 138*n*, 143*n*, 337*n*, 490*n*,  
 491*n*  
 Pettersson, Olof, 385*n*  
 phallus, 79  
 phenomenologist, attitude of, xxi  
 Phillips, E. D., 389*n*  
 Philostratus, 98*n*  
*pi'ai*, 91, 97  
 Piddington, Ralph, 361*n*, 366*n*  
 pig, blood of, 73; sacrifice of, 114  
 pigeon, 267  
 pillar/Pillar(s): central, of dwelling,  
 262*f*; Golden/Iron/Solar, 261; World,  
 122*n*, 261*ff*, *see also* Axis; Center of  
 World  
 Pilsudski, Bronislav, 244*n*  
*pimo*, 441  
 Pindar, 66*n*  
 Piñola, 410*n*  
 pine bark, 116  
 Pineday Bascuñan, Nuñez de, 330*n*  
 pipe-smoking, ritual, 303*f*  
 Pippidi, D. M., 392*n*  
*pitaras*, 417  
*planetnik*, 225*n*  
 planets, nine, 274*n*; *see also* Mars  
 planes: and man, solidarity, 282; seven,  
 40; use in yoga, 416  
 Plateau Indians, 21, 102  
 plates, Orphic, gold, 391*f*, 438  
 platform, 326, 362*n*; incantation, 381*n*  
 Plato, 393  
 Pliny, 389*n*  
 plowshares, hot, 442  
 poem, shamanist, 241  
 poetry: lyric, 510; *see also* epic  
 Poland, 225*n*  
 pole, tent, 261*f*  
 Pole Star, 254, 260*ff*, 266, 267  
 Polivka, G., *see* Bolte, J.  
 Polyaeus, 390  
 Polynesia(ns), 133, 214*n*, 312, 355, 358,  
 361; and America, 366*n*; Hindu in-  
 fluences, 286*n*; *séance* in, 371*f*;  
 shamanism in, 366*ff*  
 Pomo, 54, 97, 125; Eastern, 262  
 Pomponius Mela, 390*n*  
 Pon, 246  
 Pondo, 69*n*  
*pongo*, *see* *pánkh*  
 Popov, A. A., xxvii, 38, 168*n*, 169*n*, 470*n*,  
 471*n*, 472  
 Poppe, Nicholas N., 214*n*, 461*n*, 497*n*  
 Porphyry, 390*n*  
 porter, underworld, 202, 203  
 Porter Spirit, 194  
 Port Jackson, 45, 50  
 possession: 5*f*, 236, 346, 507; among  
 Batak, 346–47*n*; in China, 450, 453; by  
 dead person, 365*f*; and disease, 215;  
 and helping spirits, 93, 328; in India,  
 424; in Polynesia, 368*ff*; spontaneous,  
 371; and vocation, 82, 85  
 post: bird on, 481; sacrificial, *see* *yūpa*  
 Potanin, G. N., 13*n*, 19*n*, 20*n*, 120, 152,  
 153*n*, 155*n*, 166*n*, 173*n*, 191*n*, 192*n*,  
 201, 203, 204, 218, 267*n*  
 Potapov, L. P., 170 & *n*, 189  
 pouch, otterskin, 316*f*, 319  
*Pouru-bangha*, 399  
 power, shamanic: definition of, 101;  
 sources of, 102, 106*ff*; *see also* spirits,  
 guardian  
*poyang*, 91, 341, 342, 344  
 Pozdneyev, A. M., 115 & *n*, 120, 164*n*  
 Prajāpati, 199, 412  
*prakṛti*, 413  
*prāṇāyāma*, 413, 437  
 prayer, 92, 183  
 prelithic period, 11  
 prestige, and shamanism, xviii  
*pretaloka*, 439  
 pride, smith's, 473  
 priest(s): colleges of, 369; in North  
 America, 297*ff*; replaced by shaman,  
 183; sacrificing, 4  
 priestesses, Dusun, 349  
 Priklonsky, V. L., 114*n*, 234*n*, 276*n*  
 Pripuzov, N. V., 16, 68*n*, 113, 148*n*, 185,  
 276*n*  
*Prose Edda*, *see* *Edda*  
 prophet(s): Irish, 179; Polynesian,  
 370*n*, 371; *see also* *taula*  
 Propp, V. I., 44*n*, 467*n*, 470*n*, 474*n*, 487*n*  
 prostitution, 352  
 Proto-Turks, 11, 183, 501*n*  
 Prudentius, 121*n*  
 Przulyski, Jean, 268*n*, 420*n*  
 psychologist, approach of, to shamanism,  
 xvii–xviii

INDEX

- psychopathy/psychopathology, shamanic, 14, 23ff; *see also* epilepsy; insanity; mental disease  
psychophoria, 199, 236  
psychopomp, 354, 445; ancestral spirit as, 85; animals as, 93; birds as, 98, 479; horse as, 467, 470; in India, 418; mourner as, 359; shaman as, 4, 182, 205ff, 208f, 237, 283, 326, 354, 358, 392f, 442, 445, 447; Valkyries as, 381n; Vayu as, 397; Zarathustra as, 398  
*puḍak*, 201, 205, 275, 279  
Puë di Songe, 353  
*pujai/pūyēi*, 127 & n, 130, 131, 133n  
Pukapuka, 372  
*puntidir*, 48  
*pūra*, *see* horse sacrifice  
purification, 116f; of deceased's house, 208  
*puteu*, 337n, 341  
Puyallup, 22  
*pūyēi*, *see* *pujai*  
Pygmies, *see* Batak: Semang  
*Pyramid Texts*, 488n  
pyramids, 341  
Pythagoras, 389n, 393
- Q
- qam*, *see* *kam*  
Qat, 361f  
*qaumaneq*, 60, 62, 420  
*qilaneq*, 296  
*qolbugas*, 150, 151  
quartz, 47, 50, 52n, 125, 339, 350; liquefied, 138; *see also* rock crystals  
Quebec, 164n  
Queen Mother of the West, 457  
quest, voluntary, for shamanic power, xiii, 14, 101, 108f  
Quigstad, J., 224n  
Qutb ud-dīn Haydar, 126, 402n
- R
- Rā, 487  
Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., 342  
Radesco, General N., xxvii  
Radin, Paul, 26, 56n, 142n, 319  
Radlov, Wilhelm, 20n, 44n, 88n, 146, 166n, 173n, 181, 189, 190 & n, 200, 205n, 208n, 209f, 266n, 270n, 275n, 276n, 395, 470n  
Rahmann, Rudolf, 44n, 421n, 424ff, 455n, 469n, 502n  
rainbow, 78n, 118, 132ff, 173, 490  
Rainbow-Serpent, 132, 138  
Raingear, P., 392n  
rain rites, 420  
*rākṣasa*, 439  
Ral gcing ma, 37n  
ram, 213; divination by bone of, 164; rejuvenation of, 66  
*Rāmāyaṇa*, 409n  
Ramree Island, 351n  
Ramstedt, G. J., 495, 496n  
Ränk, Gustav, 10n, 80n, 210n, 487n  
Ranke, Kurt, 166n  
*raqs*, 402n  
Räsänen, Martti, 135n, 173n, 482n  
Rasmussen, Knud, 22n, 59n, 60n, 61n, 62 & n, 67n, 90–91 & n, 93n, 96n, 100n, 146n, 184n, 231n, 289n, 290, 291n, 293n, 296n, 297n  
Rasuno, 424  
rattle, 91, 178  
Rāzi, Amīn Ahmad, 402n  
Reagan, Albert B., 299n  
rebirth, 246  
recruitment, of shamans, 13ff; *see also* election; initiation  
regeneration: perpetual, 319; universal, 321  
regions, cosmic, *see* zones  
reindeer, xiv, 41, 93, 147n, 248; costume, 149, 156; horns, 155; sacrifice of, 239; shaman's battle animal, 95n  
Reindeer Tungus, *see* Tungus  
Reinhold-Müller, F. G., 432n  
rejuvenation, 66  
religion: chronological perspective, xxiii ff; of Indo-Europeans, 10, 375ff; Polynesian, sources, 366n; primitive, and shamanism, 3, 6, 7; Samoyed, 9, 199; Turco-Tatar, 7, 9, 10; *see also* "Chief of the Religion"  
religions, history of, xix ff, 11  
Rémusat, Abel, 432n  
Renaissance art, 34  
Renel, C., 133n  
renewal: nonshamanic, 66; physical, 34  
resurrection, as initiation, 33, 38, 45, 55, 64, 76; *see also* death  
return, eternal, xxii f, 246, 285  
Revelation, Book of, 134n  
reversibility, of religious positions, xxiv f  
*rewē*, 123f, 325  
*Rg-Veda*, 152n, 264n, 272n, 404, 407f, 408n, 412, 414f, 417n, 418, 479  
*rgyal-rabs*, 431n

INDEX

- Rhine frontier, 488  
Ribbach, S. H., 433*n*  
ribbons, 149, 150, 152*n*; colored, 117*f*, 121, 135  
rice: sicknesses of, 442; soul of, 353  
Richthofen, Bolko, Freiherr von, 333*n*  
Riesenfeld, A., 126*n*, 356*n*, 361*n*, 362*n*, 490*n*  
rishis, 409  
Risley, H. H., 487*n*  
rite(s)/ritual(s): fertility, 79, 80*n*; harvest, 468; hunting, *see s.v.*; initiatory, 64; Medicine, *see s.v.*; of passage, *see s.v.*; of "road," *see s.v.*  
Rivers, W. H. R., 361*n*  
Rivet, Paul, 53*n*, 288*n*, 323*n*, 332  
"road": ritual of the, 441; for spirits, 111*f*, 369  
"Road desire," 446  
Robles Rodriguez, Eulojio, 123 & *n*, 124  
Röck, Fritz, 274*n*  
Rock, Joseph F., 431*n*, 444*n*, 445*n*, 446–47*n*  
rock crystals, 47, 50*n*, 52, 91 & *n*, 132, 135, 136, 137, 138*f*; *see also* quartz  
Rockhill, William Woodville, 432*n*, 434*n*  
Rocky Mountain tribes, 21  
Röder, Joseph G., 284*n*, 354*n*  
Rodriguez, E. Robles, *see* Robles Rodriguez  
roe buck, shaman's, 174  
Rohde, Erwin, 387*n*, 388*n*, 389*n*, 390*n*, 394*n*  
Röheim, Géza, 126*n*, 174*n*, 224–25*n*, 481*n*  
Romania, 225*n*  
Romanov, Timofei, 36  
Rome, ancient, 501  
rope, 117, 232; for celestial ascent, 50, 78*n*, 121, 136, 226, 484*f*, 490; as emblem of celestial marriage, 75; for tree climbing, 127; as "spirit road," 111*f*; in Tibet, 430*f*  
rope trick: in Europe, 429, 430*n*; Indian, 127, 428*ff*; shamanic, 511  
Roro, 365*n*  
Rosales, Juan de Dios, 54  
Rosenberg, F., 496*n*  
Rosetti, A., 261*n*  
Rossel Island, 475  
Roth, H. Ling, 21*n*, 57*n*, 97*n*, 126*n*, 350*n*, 351*n*, 352*n*, 360*n*  
Rousselle, Erwin, 164*n*, 452*n*  
Roux, Jean-Paul, 9*n*, 199*n*, 461*n*, 495*n*  
Rowland, Benjamin, Jr., 134*n*, 488*n*  
Roy, Sarat Chandra, 473*n*  
Ruben, Walter, 406*n*, 407*n*, 408*n*, 421*n*, 474*n*  
Rudolf of Fulda, 261*n*  
Rudra-Śiva, 418  
Runeberg, Arne, 93*n*, 385*n*, 386*n*, 479*n*  
runes, 380  
Russia, North, 500  
Russians, 40, 487*n*  
Russu, Ion I., 390*n*  
Ryukyū, 484*n*
- S
- saargi*, 43  
Saaytani, Assembly of the, 44  
saber, 465  
sacrifice(s), 198*ff*, 444; at Araucanian initiation, 123*f*; bear, 166; blood, 263, 275, 277; Brāhmanic, and bridge, 483; —, and ecstatic experience, 411; at Buryat initiation, 118, 119; Central and North Asian, 11; of chicken, 351; of child, 347; directions for, 249–50*n*; of dog, 188; of goat, 119; at Goldi initiation, 115; in India, 403*ff*, 411; not shaman's function, 181; Olympian, 11; among Semites, xxii; shamans and, 183; and shaman's journey, 235; of sheep, 118, 123, 331; *soma*, 413*f*; and soul recovery, 216; spirits and, 92; Tungusic, 238*ff*; Vedic, 126, 183*n*, 199, 478, 493; Vogul, 183; of white animals, 188; at Yakut initiation, 114, 275; Yurak-Samoyed, 264*n*; *see also* horse sacrifice  
*Saga Hjǫlmthérs ok Olvers*, 381*n*; *see also* *Gisla*; *Sturlaugs*; *Ynglinga*  
Sagai, 208  
*sagani bö*, 185  
Sahagún, *see* Bernardino de Sahagún  
*sahib-josh*, 475  
Sahor, 357  
*sai kung*, 455, 456  
*saingy*, 80*n*  
saints, Christian, 377; *see also* Anthony; John; Joseph; Olaf; Paul; Perpetua  
Saintyves, P., 161*n*  
Śaivism, 434*n*; *see also* Śiva  
*saka*, 475  
Sakai, 93, 282, 285, 337, 341  
Salish, 100, 104, 106  
Salmony, Alfred, 460*n*  
Salym, 264*n*  
*samādhi*, 416, 417

INDEX

- šaman*, 4, 237, 495, 496  
*samaŋa*, 4, 495  
*ša-men*, 495  
*Šaṃhitās*, see *Gheraṇḍa*; *Taittiriya*  
 Samoa, 25, 369  
 Samoyed, 30, 136*n*, 205, 232*n*, 260, 262, 288; Avam, 39; drum, 171; initiation among, 38*ff*, 114; recruiting among, 15; religion, 9, 199; séance among, 227*f*; shaman's cap and mask, 154*n*, 155, 167*n*; Tadibeï, see *s.v.*; Tavgi, see *s.v.*; see also Yurak-Samoyed  
 Samson, 152*n*  
 Sanchi, 430  
 Sandschejew, Garma, 18, 19*n*, 28, 30*n*, 69*n*, 119*n*, 120, 145*n*, 181*n*, 182*n*, 185*n*, 216*n*, 218*n*, 277*n*, 469*n*, 471*f*  
 Sangiang, 352, 353  
 Sängimāghiz, 163  
*sänke*/Sänke, 9, 15, 220*f*, 263*n*, 278*n*  
 Sanpoil, 179  
 Santa Cruz (Solomons), 364  
 Santal, 421*n*, 424*n*, 425, 426, 427, 502*n*  
 Saora, see Savara  
 Sarawak, 126, 138  
*sārgā*, 118  
*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 403*n*, 404, 415, 419*n*  
*satīāvāsas*, 406  
 Saturn, heaven of, 489  
 Saulteaux, 335  
 Sauvageot, Aurélien, 288*n*  
 Savara/Saora, 73*n*, 421*ff*, 424*n*, 426, 464; séance among, 424  
 Saxl, F., 488*n*  
 Saxo Grammaticus, 383*f*  
*sayan*, 69  
 Sayan steppe, 213  
 Saymali Taš, 95  
 Scandinavia(n), 176, 224, 380*ff*; and America, 335  
 scapulimancy, 164 & *n*  
 scarf/scarves, 136, 444*n*  
 scepter, 343  
 Schaeffner, A., 177*n*  
 Schärer, Hans, 21*n*, 273*n*, 284*n*, 285*n*, 352*n*, 360*n*  
 Schebesta, Paul, 52*n*, 96*n*, 280*n*, 281*n*, 337*n*, 338*n*, 339*n*  
 Schlerath, Bernfried, 466*n*  
 Schmidt, J., 398*n*  
 Schmidt, Leopold, 161*n*, 165*n*  
 Schmidt, Wilhelm, xix, 20*n*, 89*n*, 95*n*, 110*n*, 114*n*, 115*n*, 118*n*, 119*n*, 145*n*, 148*n*, 150*n*, 153*n*, 156*n*, 167*n*, 168*n*, 172*n*, 173*n*, 183*n*, 184*n*, 185*n*, 189*n*, 190*n*, 192*n*, 197*n*, 198*n*, 199*n*, 200*n*, 201*n*, 218*n*, 227*n*, 228*n*, 234*n*, 237*n*, 262*n*, 263*n*, 274*n*, 275*n*, 276*n*, 280*n*, 323*n*, 332*n*, 337*n*, 358*n*, 461*n*, 490*n*, 491*n*, 493*n*, 497*n*, 502*n*  
 Schoolcraft, H. R., 143*n*  
 Schott, W., 495  
 Schram, L. M. J., 461*n*  
 Schröder, Dominik, 95*n*, 177*n*, 433*n*, 461*n*, 470*n*, 493*n*, 497*n*, 504*n*, 507*n*  
 Schurtz, Heinrich, 64*n*  
 Schuster, Carl, 332*n*, 334*n*  
 Scythia(ns), 388, 390, 394*ff*  
 sea: as "beyond," 235; endless, 40  
 Sea Beasts, Mother of the, 289, 294; see also Animals, Mother of the  
 Sea Dyak, see Dyak  
 Sea(s): Lord of the, 193; Nine, 39  
 seal, 164  
 Sea Serpents, 348  
 séance(s), 190*ff*, 209*f*, 249*ff*, et *passim*; animal spirits and, 92*f*; dramatic structure of, 511; and ecstasy, 12; "little," 237; role of drum in, 168, 171, 173; and sickness, 217*ff*  
 seclusion, 64, 128, 131  
 second sight, 124  
 second state, 476, 510  
 secret societies, 313*ff*; and dog, 467; and initiation, 65, 109; and masks, 166; Melanesian, 362; men's 166*f*, 398–99*n*; of smiths, 473; see also *Männerbünde*; Midé'wiwin  
 secrets, professional, 17, 34, 474  
 sects, mystical, and shamanism, 315  
 Seed Eaters, 102  
 Seerradeetta, Vyriirje, 213*n*  
*seidhmenn/seidhkonur*, 385*f*  
*seidhr*, 224, 385*f*  
 Selangan, 282  
 Seler, Edward, 429*n*  
 Seligman, C. G., 363*n*, 364*n*, 365*n*  
 Selk'nam, 26, 84, 131, 331*n*  
 Semang, 52, 68*n*, 93, 125, 337*ff*, 491*n*; cosmology of, 280; and secret language, 96  
 Semites, sacrifice among, xxii  
 Semurgaon, 468  
 Serbs, 225*n*  
 serpents: diamonds and, 139; see also snake  
 Servants, Spirit, 137  
*seven*, 240; see also *syvén*

INDEX

- seven (number), 121, 122n, 154, 264n, 274ff, 279, 341; branches, 285; gashes, 277; gods, 275ff; heavens, *see s.v.*; incisions, 283; planes, 40; stairs, 275; stones, 40f; strides, 405f; virgins, 153
- sex, change of, 257f
- sexual energy, transmutation of, 437
- sexuality, and shamanism, 71ff, 79ff
- sexual organs, drawings on shaman's costume, 153
- Shades/Shadows, Kingdom/Realm of, 8, 166, 246ff; *see also* Dead, Land of the Shakers, 321
- shaman(s): "black," 69, 114n, 493n; —, and descent to underworld, 200ff; —, and "white," 19, 184ff, 189; "common," "great," and "last," 185n; dancing, 452; decadence of, *see s.v.*; distinguishing features of, 107, 188f; etymology of word, 4, 495f; Father, 19, 115ff; first, xviii, 68, 69, 70, 71, 77, 97, 160, 391, 445ff, 506; "great," 17; Greek, 389n; Hungarian, *see táltos*; instruction of, 13f; and laymen, difference, 315; North American, distinguishing features, 298f; "prince of," 188; re-cruitment, 13ff; "self-made," 13; "summer," 80n; treatment at death, 341; tying, 229; use of term, 3–4; "white," 493n, *see also* "black"
- Shaman, Great, celestial, 125
- shamaness(es), 221, 241, 256; Altaic, 189; Araucanian, 53, 123, 325, *see also machi*; Buryat, 69; in China, 452n; Japanese, functions, 462f, in Korea, 462; Land of the, 39; tutelaries and, 423f; Yukagir, 246
- shamanism: aberrant, 12, 493f; Arctic and sub-Arctic, 24; family/domestic, 246, 252f; and guardian spirits, 106f; identification of, 5; imitation of, 456; Indo-Aryan, 162; "little," 237, 238, 240, 242; and mental disease, xiii, xvii–xviii; origin in America, 333ff; "primitive" elements in, 6; use of term, 4, 5
- "shamanizing, great," 24
- Shang period, 334n
- shark, 90, 91
- Shashkov, S., 68n, 148, 198n
- Shasta, 21, 102
- Shawano, 321
- sheep: sacrifice of, 118, 123, 331; *see also* ram
- sheets, drying on body, 113, 437–38n, 476
- shell(s): shooting into body, 319; as substitute for drum, 179; *see also* *mīgis shen*, 452, 453, 454
- Shimkevich, P. P., 212n
- Shimkin, B. D., 70n, 153n, 186n, 206n, 216n, 223n, 226n
- shinikuchi*, 462
- Shipibo, 21
- Shirokogoroff, Sergei M., 17, 18n, 70n, 73, 110, 111ffn, 119n, 145n, 147n, 149, 154n, 156f, 157, 158n, 165, 172, 176n, 236n, 237, 238n, 239n, 240, 241, 242, 243n, 244n, 420n, 456n, 496ff, 502n; *see also* Mironov, N. D.
- shirts, ghost, 322
- Shor, 146
- Shoshone, 102
- Shun, Emperor, 448
- Shuswap, 21, 100, 102, 308
- sibaso*, 346f
- Siberia(ns), xiv, 4, 220, 501; drum in, 176; costume, 146; psychopomp in, 418; rites of passage, 65; shamans, 53, 84, 89, 108, 509; shamanic initiation, 34, 50f, 110; Southern influence, 237; Western, 15f, 155; *see also* names of *specific tribes*
- Sibo, 120, 275
- sickness(es): dreams, 43; "female," 395; pathological, as initiation, 33ff, 38ff; Polynesian conception, 373; of rice, 442; and shamanic vocation, 25ff, 67; *see also* disease; epilepsy; hysteria; hysteroid; illness; mental disease; psychopathy; syphilis
- "sickness-vocation," 33f
- siddhis*, 409, 410n, 416
- Siduri, 78
- Sieroszewski, Wenceslas, 16, 28, 29, 70n, 80n, 82, 90, 148, 170n, 172n, 182n, 185n, 186n, 187n, 188n, 206n, 229, 232, 233, 260n, 276n, 470n
- sikerei*, 25
- Sikkim, 432, 433n
- Sila, 289f, 294
- sin(s): expulsion of, 357; of first man, 441
- Sinkyone, 102
- Singapore, 456
- Sining, 461
- sinner: punishment of, 399; torture of, 202
- Sinor, D., 501n
- Sitakigailau, 87

INDEX

- Siva, 427; Mountain of, 420; *see also* Rudra; Śaivism  
*sjaadai*, 264*n*, 277  
*skambha*, 261*n*  
 Skeat, W. W., 177*n*, 345 & *n*, 356*n*; and Blagden, C. O., 281*n*, 337*n*, 341*n*, 342*n*, 346*n*, 487*n*  
 skeleton, 132; contemplating own, 45, 62*ff*; and Lamaism, 435; reduction to, 59, 63; and shaman's costume, 158*ff*; *see also* bones; skulls  
 skies, superimposed, 133*n*  
 skin, rubbing, 53–54*n*  
 skulls: cult of, in India, 421, 434*n*; in Lamaism, 421, 434*f*; shamans', divination by, 245, 383, 391  
 sky, 260*f*, 505; contemplation of, 321, 325; god of, xiii, 9, 10, 198; journey/ascent to, *see* ascension; opening in, 251*n*, 260  
 Sky: Father, 325; God, xiii, 9, 226, 505, *see also* sky, god of; House, 262; Nail, 260  
 slaughter, autumn, 252  
 Slawik, Alexander, 166*n*, 285*n*, 355*n*, 380*n*, 462*n*, 466*n*, 467*n*, 473*n*, 484*n*  
 sled, 211  
 sleep: candidate's, 53; hypnotic, 64; "long," 225*n*  
 Sleipnir, 380, 382, 383, 386*n*  
 Slipežova, N. M., 74  
 Slocum, John, 142, 321  
 smallpox, 39  
 "smell of the living," 368  
 Smith, Marian, 21  
 smith(s), 41*f*, 42*n*, 66, 470*ff*; ambivalence toward, 472; "black," 471; curing of, 472; eagle and, 70; and fire, 472*f*; mythology of, 474; and nine sons/brothers, 471; *see also* metallurgy  
 smoke, 490; hemp, 390, 394, 395, 399*ff*, 475  
*snahud*, 337*n*  
 snake(s), 55, 68, 98, 340; and bird, 273, 285; cosmic, 286; on shaman's costume, 152, 497; as helping spirit, 92; and initiation, 48, 108*n*, 135; iron, 426; and tree, 273  
 Snellgrove, David L., 439*n*, 440*n*  
 Snorri Sturluson, 380*f*, 383, 385  
 societies, secret, *see* secret societies  
 Society Islands, 372  
 sociologist, approach to shamanism, xviii  
 Söderblom, Nathan, 396*n*, 397*n*  
 "soft men," 257  
 Sogdian(s), 122, 501*n*; language, 496  
*sokha*, 427  
 Solboni, 75  
*solomonar*, 225*n*  
 Solomon Islands, 364, 475, 478*n*  
*soma* sacrifice, 413*f*  
 songs: and descent to underworld, 201*ff*, 358; of Eskimo shamans, 96, 303, 306*ff*; magical, taught in dreams, 83; ob-scene, 79; shamanic, 91, 96*ff*, 180, 222, 225*ff*, 290; —, Lapp and North American, 335; —, Shuswap, 100; Zarathustra and, 398; *see also* hymns  
 "sons, shaman's," 116*ff*  
 Sons of God, 276, 277  
 sorcerer(s), 301, 324; "burning," 363; defense against, 299; Polynesian, 371*f*; use of term, 3  
 sorceresses, Chinese, 453*f*  
 soul(s), *passim*; as bird, 206, 392, 479, 480*f*; and bones, 159; bush, 92; calling back, 217, 414, 442; capturing, 419*f*; of children, 272, 273*n*, 281*f*; crushing, 372; of dead, 84, 88, 89, 169; destiny of, 216; extraction of, 60; flight of, 350, 357, 448; immortality of, 480; instability of, 415; Lamaism and, 440*f*; "life," 94; loss of, 8, 87, 300*f*, 307*f*, 310, 327, 335; multiple, 215*f*, 256*n*; plurality of, 417; projection into effigy, 212*n*; rape of, 215; restoring to body, 256*n*; of rice, 353; search for, 183, 208, 210, 217*ff*, 433; Semang beliefs, 281; shaman and, 8; shaman as guardian of, 182; shaman's knowledge of, 216; theft of, 289, 309, 348; three, 209, 246; weighing of, 282  
 "soul ladder," *see* ladder  
 "soul-shade," 154  
 sounds, mystical, 453*n*  
 South America, *see* America, South  
 Sovereign, terrifying, 379  
 Soyot, 223*n*, 277, 279; drum, 173, 174; and lightning, 19, 100*n*; and shaman's costume, 155, 156, 157; tent pole, 261  
*spákona*, 385*f*  
 sparrow, 245  
 sparrow-hawk, 39  
 specialization, infernal, 235  
 spectacle, séance as, 511  
 Speech, Tree of, 441  
 speed, miraculous, 174  
 Speiser, Felix, 358*n*, 361*n*  
 Spencer, Baldwin, and Gillen, F. J., 47 & *n*, 48, 48–50*nn*, 136*n*  
 spider, 68; web, 78*n*, 490*n*  
 Spier, Leslie, 103*n*, 315*n*, 320*n*

INDEX

- “spindle of necessity,” 393*f*  
Spies, Walter, *see* Zoete, Beryl de  
Spirit: of Madness, *see s.v.*; of the Moon, *see s.v.*; Messenger, *see s.v.*; “of the night,” 104*f*; Porter, *see s.v.*; Servants, *see s.v.*; of Thunder, *see s.v.*; Wind, *see s.v.*  
spirit(s), *passim*; abduction by, 87; acquiring, 21; “boat of,” 356; consultation of, 296; of darkness, 226; descent of, 97; evil, drum and, 174; —, Eskimo and, 293; familiarity with, 81, 88; feminine, 73, 77, 79*ff*; guardian, 89, 91, 95, 100, 103, 106, 157, 197; helping/tutelary, 6, 28, 44, 52, 62, 63, 71, 72, 81, 88*ff*, 100*n*, 104, 157, 222, 226*f*, 249, 278, 297, 328, 341, 381, 425, 427; —, nonshamanic, 106*f*; “Hole of the,” 234; language of, 347, 440; marine, 309; marriage with mortals, 73*ff*; mountain, 90; “road” for, 111*f*, 369; “seeing,” 84, 85*ff*; sexual relations with, 74; shaman’s relations with, 5*f*; torture of children by, 18; various kinds, 6; visions of, 85*ff*; of warriors, 104; world of, 179; *see also damagomi*; souls  
spirituality, Chinese, 451  
spirit-women, 133*n*, 344*f*; *see also* spirit(s), feminine  
spittle, 114  
spoon, 222  
spouses, one-night, 463  
squirrel, flying, 278  
*šramaṇa*, 495  
*srung-ma*, 444*n*  
staff: *guru*’s, 347; magical, 128  
stag(s), 89, 156, 160 & *n*, 462; black, 164  
stairs, 391, 400, 443; *see also* ladder; seven, 275  
stairway, spiral, 136, 137  
Star/stars, 260, 261; Pole, *see s.v.*  
Stefánsson, Vilhjálmur, 59*n*  
Stein, Rolf A., 155*n*, 208*n*, 431*n*, 466*n*, 510*n*  
Steinen, Karl von den, 326*n*  
Steiner, F. B., 501*n*  
Steinmann, Alfred, 285*n*, 286*n*, 357*n*, 358*n*  
Stepanov, Mikhail, 43  
sterility, 181, 289  
“Stern Woman with the Handled Stick,” 222  
Stenberg, Leo, 14*n*, 28, 67, 70*n*, 71 & *n*, 73*ff*, 74*n*, 76*n*, 156*n*  
Stevenson, Matilda Coxé, 316*n*  
Steward, Julian H., 323*n*  
Stewart, C. S., 371*n*  
stick(s): for divination, 228; eagle feather, 302*f*; horse-headed, *see* horse; magical, 177  
“stick-horse,” 150  
Stieda, L., 115*n*, 145*n*, 218*n*  
Stiglmayr, Engelbert, 136*n*, 337*n*, 342*n*, 504*n*  
Stirling, Matthew W., 85*n*  
Stöhr, Waldemar, 351*n*  
stone(s), 135; cylindrical, 426; holding, 40; —, hot, 54; inserted in head/body, 46, 49; Jacob’s, 488; “light,” 138, 508; rubbing, 59; seven, 40*f*; striped, 124, 125; *see also atnongara*; quartz; rock crystals  
Stone Age, 11, 500  
*ston-pa*, 445  
storms: controlling, 290; foreseeing, 342; god of, 10*n*, 198, 505; *see also* hurricane  
Strabo, 390  
strides, seven, 405*f*  
Strömbäck, Dag, 224*n*, 385*n*, 386*n*  
*Sturlaug’s Saga Starfsama*, 381*n*  
Subandhu, 415  
Subanun, 25  
suction, 243*n*, 256, 301, 304, 307, 329, 330, 331, 345, 348, 364  
Sudan(ese), 21, 26*n*, 27, 31, 55  
suet, 166  
suffering, and initiation, 33  
Sufism, 402*n*  
*sulde-tengri*, 276  
Sulta-Khan, 197*n*  
Sumatra, 21, 25, 82*n*, 86, 96, 140, 178, 286*f*, 334*n*, 346*ff*, 358*n*, 475  
Sumbur/Sumer/Sumur/Sumeru, 266, 267, 271, 277  
Summers, Montague, 93*n*  
Sumner, William G., 234*n*  
Sumur, *see* Sumbur  
Sun, 196, 276; as guardian spirit, 106; God, 487; orifice of, 148  
sunbeam, ascent by, 490  
Sungkai, 339*n*  
Sung Yü, 448  
Supreme Being, 81, 105*n*, 107, 128, 135*f*, 142, 220, 242, 249, 444, 504*f*; as eagle, 69, 70, 158; sacrifices to, 198; and trance, 34; *see also* Buga; god  
*Sūtras*, *see Bandhyāyana*; *Dharma*; Patañjali  
*sutura frontalis*, 164  
Svadhilfari, 386*n*

INDEX

- Śvetadvīpa, 409  
 swan(s), 39, 68, 153, 155, 176  
 Swanton, John R., 55*n*, 82*n*, 178*n*, 298  
 sweat-house, 100  
 sweating, and creation, 334*n*, 412  
 Sweden, 161*n*  
 swiftmess, 485  
 sword-ladder, 455  
 swords, bridge of, 456, 484  
 Sydow, C. W. von, 162*n*  
 Sykaiboai, 391  
 symbolism: degeneration of, 450; lunar, 272; uranian, 139  
 symbols, on drum, 172*ff*, 224  
 syphilis, 39  
*syvén*, 71, 92; see also *séven*
- T
- tabjan* (*tabyan*), 149*n*  
 taboos, 296; and initiation, 59*n*; violation of, and illness, 289  
 Tabor, Mount, 268  
*tabyan*, see *tabjan*  
*tabytala*, 149  
 Tadibei Samoyed, 148  
*tadu*, 353  
 Tagarao, 362  
 Tagaro, 365*n*  
 Tahiti, 78*n*, 369, 371*n*  
*tahu*, 371  
 T'ai, Mount, 456  
 Taino, 323  
*Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, 418*n*  
*Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, 404*n*, 415*n*, 483*n*  
*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 417*n*  
 Takánakapsáluk, 289, 294*ff*  
*takini*, 130  
 Taliang mountains, 441  
 talker, shaman's, 302  
 Tallgren, Aarne Michael, 500*n*, 503*n*  
*táltos*, 95*n*, 126, 174, 225*n*, 481, 509  
*tamziq*, 402*n*  
*tangara*, 186  
 Tangara, see Tengri  
*tangata wotu*, 372  
 Tängere, see Tengri  
 Tängri, 471  
*tanjō*, 463  
 Tansalus, 66  
 tantrism, 164, 373, 408, 420, 421, 434*n*, 436*f*; see also *yoga*  
 Tao, 449  
 Taoism/Taoists, 432*n*, 450*f*, 453*ff*; and animals, 460  
*tao shih*, 455  
*tapas*, 408, 412*ff*, 475  
 Ta Pedn/Tata Ta Pedn, 125, 280*n*, 282, 337*f*; see also Tapern  
 Tapern, 280, 340; see also Ta Pedn  
 Tapirape, 323*n*  
*tapti/tapty*, 76, 191, 194*f*, 275  
*tapu*, 371  
*tarasun*, 19, 116  
 Tarō, Nakayama, 462  
 Tasygan, Mother, 193  
 Tata Ta Pedn, see Ta Pedn  
 Tatars: Abakan, see *s.v.*; Altai, see Altai/Altaians; Black, 146, 166; and descents to underworld, 213*f*; and drum, 172; Indian/Iranian influence, 500, 501; Lebed, 146, 175, 197*n*; Minusinsk, 156; Siberian, 205, 261, 266, 270, 273; *Volga*, see *s.v.*  
*taua*, 370*n*  
*taula*, 366, 369, 370*n*  
*taula atua*, 369  
 Taulipang, 30, 327*f*  
*taura*, 370*n*  
*taurobolion*, 121  
 Tavgi Samoyed, 40, 41  
 Tawhaki, 78*n*, 133  
 Tawney, Charles Henry, 98*n*, 405*n*, 479*n*  
 Taz River, 226  
 Tchaky race, 188  
 Tcheng-tsu Shang, 456*n*  
 Tegnaeus, Harry, 490*n*  
 Teit, James A., 102*n*, 106*n*, 309*n*  
 Tekha Shara Matzkala, 75  
 Telchines, 473  
 Telenginsk, 150*n*  
 Telengit, 197*n*  
 Teleut, 44, 70, 79, 206, 207, 208, 217, 219*n*, 261; ascent to heaven among, 76*f*, 275; costume, 146, 155, 156; horse sacrifice, 192*n*, 197*n*  
 Telumni Yokuts, see Yokuts  
*Temir taixa*, 201  
 ten heavens, 492  
 Teng, 339  
 Tengere Kaira Kan, see Kaira Kan  
 Tengri/Tengeri/Tängere/Tingir/Tangara (Great God), 9, 69, 199, 250*n*, 271, 276  
 Tenino, 22  
 terror: and helping spirits, 100*n*; and initiation, 91  
 Thai, Black, 443*n*

INDEX

- Thalbitzer, William, 58*n*, 59*n*, 90*n*, 96*n*, 261*n*, 288*n*, 289*n*, 290*n*, 293, 333, 477*n*, 502*n*  
thief, discovery of, 365, 372  
thirty-three (number), 276*f*  
Thjalfi, 162  
Thompson, B., 372*n*  
Thompson, E. P., xii  
Thompson, Stith, 64*n*, 78*n*, 92*n*, 93*n*, 98*n*, 134*n*, 158*n*, 479*n*, 483*n*, 490*n*  
Thompson Indians, 21, 102, 106, 309  
Thor, 161*f*  
Thorndike, Lynn, 98*n*  
Thought, Tree of, 441  
Thracians, 389*ff*  
thread(s), 217, 338*f*  
three (number), 274; souls, 209, 246  
throne, 343  
thunder/Thunder: as guardian spirit, 106; Spirit of, 38  
Thunder Bird, 106, 244, 245  
thunderstones, 139  
Thurn, Everard F. Im, *see* Im Thurn  
thyme, wild, 116, 118*n*  
*t'iao-shen*, 449  
Tibbu, 472*n*  
Tibet(an), xiv, 37*n*, 108*f*, 163, 164, 204, 212*n*, 392, 410, 430*ff*, 440, 502*n*; *see also* Bon  
Tibetan Book of the Dead, 61, 208*n*, 418, 438, 444, 446  
T'ien, 444  
Tierra del Fuego, 26, 53, 131, 327, 336  
Tiger/tiger(s): Ancestor, 339; evocation of, 345*f*; changing into, 93, 281, 339; as helping spirit, 72; spirit, 344  
time(s), dream/mythical/paradisal/primordial, 94, 99, 103, 132, 144, 171, 265, 282, 287, 322, 354, 446*n*, 480, 483, 486, 492, 505  
Tin, Pe Maung, 409*n*  
*tindalo*, 365  
Tingir, *see* Tengri  
Tipiknits, 311*f*  
Tlingit, 55, 82*n*, 178, 335*n*  
toad, 68  
Toba, 54  
tobacco(juice), 54, 83, 84, 128, 129, 131, 220, 254, 330, 401  
tobacco box, 340  
*tohunga*, 366, 369, 370*n*  
Toivoinen, Y. H., 271*n*  
Tokharian, 496  
*toli*, 151  
Tomsk, 79, 166, 227  
*tondi*, 346  
Tongârsoak, 59  
tongue: perforation of, 46, 47; tearing out, 54  
Tôrem-karevel, 276  
Toradja, 286*n*, 358*n*; Bare'e, 353  
tortures: infernal, 213; initiatory, 33*ff*, 64, 84, 109  
totemism, 160; Chinese, 459  
*to t'ui*, 455  
toxins, and ecstasy, 221; *see also* mushrooms; narcotics; tobacco  
Toyon Kötör, 70  
trance, *passim*; Altaic shamans and, 200; cataleptic, 331, 393; deliberate, 24; epileptics and, 24; erotic, 73; among Eskimo, 291*f*; of Lapp shamans, 224; *muní's*, 411; as shamanic speciality, 5; Yurak-Samoyed, 227*f*; *see also* ecstasy; *lupa*  
Transbaikal, 16, 149, 242; Tungus, 16, 110, 172  
transformation, through display, 197*f*; into woman, 257*f*  
transvestitism, 125*n*, 168, 258, 351 & *nn*, 461; *see also* androgynization; feminization  
Transylvania, 161*n*  
Trayastrimśa Heaven, 430  
tree(s): climbing, 123*ff*, 125*ff*, 137, 169, *see also* ascension, initiation; inverted, 169, 270*n*; nine, 233; relation to shaman, 70; snake and, 273; underworld, 270; *see also* birch; *dinang*; fir  
Tree, Cosmic/Universal/World, xx, 37*n*, 38, 42, 70, 71 & *n*, 120, 122*n*, 157, 194*n*, 206, 211, 269*ff*, 282, 395, 492; and bird, 273; and boat, 357*f*; destruction of, 284; and drum, 40*n*, 168*ff*, 171, 172*f*, 270; seven branches of, 285; and snake, 273; *see also* birch; drum  
Tree: of Immortality, 271; of Life, 271, 282; Lord of, 39*f*; —, Mapiç, 281; —, Mother and Father, 118*n*; of Speech, 441; of Thought, 441  
Tree Yyjk-Mas, 37*n*  
Tremyugan, 89, 183, 220  
Tretyakov, P. I., 15*n*, 17*n*, 68*n*, 114, 225, 226*n*  
tricks, shamanistic, 255*n*  
trident, 426  
tripartition, divine, 378  
tripod, Delphic, 387*n*  
Trobriands, 282*n*, 365*n*  
Troshchansky, V. F., 73, 158, 234*n*  
Tshe-spong-bza, Queen, 434

INDEX

- Tsingala, 221*n*, 263, 278*n*  
Tubalares, 170  
tube, bamboo, 96  
Tucci, Giuseppe, 430*n*, 432*n*  
Tucuna, 327*n*  
T'u-jen, 461  
Tukajana, 129, 130  
*tukang tawur*, 353  
Tukue, 183  
Tuma, 282*n*  
Tumnin river, 244  
*tumsa*, 443*n*  
Tungus, 40, 70–71*n*, 82*n*, 112, 149, 205, 209, 212*n*, 235, 254, 272, 420, 471*n*, 497, 498*ff*; drum, 172, 176; and helping spirits, 92, 249; and Indian influences, 496; initiation among, 43*ff*, 110*ff*; masks, 165; recruiting among, 17*ff*; Reindeer, 29, 240, 242; religion, 9; séances among, 236*ff*; and secret language, 96; shamanic costume, 146, 147*ff*, 154*f*, 156; shamanism, two strata, 244; Transbaikal, 16, 110, 172; Turukhansk, 16, 68, 185, 208  
Tun Huang, 438  
Tuonela, 485  
Tupi-Imba, 53*f*  
Tupinamba, 178, 323*n*  
Turkestan, 204  
Turkic peoples, and sacrifice, 198  
Turko-Mongol shamanism, and Oriental influences, 12  
Turko-Tatar peoples, 198, 260, 274, 276, 395; and Indo-Europeans, resemblances, 10*f*, 378; religion of, 7, 9, 10  
Turks, 135, 462; Osmanli, 273  
*turö*, 111  
Turukhansk, 16, 68, 185, 208  
Tüspüt, 27, 82, 90, 229  
Tuvas, 498  
Twana Indians, 309  
Tylor, Edward B., 333

U

- Ubi-Ubi, 137  
Ucayali, 83  
*udagan/udayan/udoyan*, 4  
Ude/Udekhe, 244  
*udeši-burkhan*, 117, 194, 263  
*udoyan*, see *udagan*  
Uganda, 25  
Ugrian peoples, 263, 276, 279*n*, 400, 501; drums among, 175; ecstasy among,

- 222*f*; sacrifice among, 183; séance among, 220*ff*  
Uigur, 135, 496, 497; Yellow, 207  
Ukko, 71*n*  
Ülgän, see Bai Ülgän  
Ulka, 244  
Ulū-Toyon, 185*n*, 187*f*  
Ulū-tüyer Ulū-Toyon, 187  
Ulysses, 79  
unconsciousness, as symbolic death, 33  
understaffing, effects of, 270*f*  
underworld, *passim*; Altaic, 200*ff*; descent/journey to, 5, 24, 39, 50*f*, 211*ff*, 234*ff*, 311*ff*, 418; —, in North America, 308*ff*; —, hero's, 94, 367*f*; dogs, see *s.v.*; entrance to, 278; geography of, 205*f*; initiation and, 34, 36*f*, 39, 43, 47, 50, 51, 64; levels of, 279, 383; porter, 202, 203; submarine, 153, 254; tree in, 270; and Tungus, 238*ff*; see also Hades; hell  
Underworld, King of the, 213; Lady of, see Lady; Lord of, 10, 39, 42, see also Erlik Khan; Tipiknits  
unity of cosmos, 284  
Unmatjera, 47  
Universal Tree, see Tree  
*üör*, 229  
Upaniṣads, 61, 420; see also *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*; *Jaiminiya*; *Kaṭha*; *Taittirīya*  
Upi, 348  
Ur, 267  
uranian symbolism, 139  
Uriankhai, 77  
"Urkultur," 262*n*  
Ürün/Ürüng, 187  
*üsa kyrar*, 234  
*utcha*, 18, 67  
Ute, 258  
Ut-Napishtim, 313*n*  
*üzüt pairamy*, 208*n*

V

- vada*, 364*n*  
Väinämöinen, 71*n*, 485  
Vairocana, 434  
Vajda, Lászlo, 145*n*, 168*n*, 501*n*  
Valkyries, 381*n*  
values, origin of, 263*n*  
Vanaspati, 404  
Vancouver Island, 138  
Vandier, Jacques, 488*n*  
Vannicelli, Luigi, 164*n*, 441*n*, 442*n*, 443*n*, 451*n*, 483*n*

INDEX

- Varuṇa, 199, 375, 379, 419  
 Vasilyev, V. N., 145*n*, 148*n*, 234  
 Vasyugan, 15, 89, 164, 183, 221, 270, 276  
 vats, 476  
 Vayu, 397, 407  
 Veā Island, 309*n*  
 Vedas, *see Atharva Veda; Rg Veda*  
 Vedic: divinities, 88; sacrifices, 126, 183*n*, 199, 478, 493  
 Venezuela, 30  
 ventriloquism, 255*n*, 335  
 Venus statuettes, 503  
 Verbitsky, V. L., 190 & *n*, 197*n*, 277  
 vertigo, 25  
 Vidēvat, 397*n*, 398*n*, 399  
*vileo(s)*, 125  
 village: of the gods, 353; spirit, 348  
 vine: connecting earth and sky, 354, 362, 430, 483, 490; connecting earth and underworld, 368  
 virgins, seven, 153  
 Viriga family, 369  
 Vishtāsp, narcotic of, 399  
 visions, 227*f*; of spirits, 85*ff*  
 Visser, Marinus Willem de, 409*n*, 410*n*  
 Vitashevsky, N. Y., 24, 229*n*, 234*n*  
 vocation: mystical, 35; and dreams, 67, 101*ff*; necessity of, 65; and possession, 82, 85; spontaneous, 13, 109; *see also* election  
 vodka, 170  
 Vogul, 29, 154*n*, 222, 264*n*, 275, 276; character of shamans, 29; mushrooms, 401; number seven among, 278; recruiting of shamans, 15; sacrifice, 183  
 “voices, separate,” 255*n*  
 Volga Tatars, 9  
*Völuspa*, 382*n*  
 volva, 383, 386  
 Voronezh, 487*n*  
 Votyak, 15  
 Vourukasha, lake (sea), 122*n*, 271*n*  
*vrātya*, 408*n*  
 Vries, Jan de, 98*n*, 380*n*, 385*n*  
 “Vulture, Grandfather,” 128*f*
- W
- Wābēnō', 315*f*  
 Wachaga, 473*n*  
*waka*, 370  
 Walapai, 103  
 Wales, H. G. Quaritch, 177, 268*n*, 280*n*, 354*n*, 355*n*, 358*n*  
 Waley, Arthur, 452*n*  
 Walleser, Max, 478*n*  
 walrus, 21, 44, 381  
 Wanderobo, 472*n*  
 Wang Ch'ung, 454  
 Warburton Ranges, 46  
 Warneck, J., 273*n*, 347*n*, 467*n*  
 Warramunga, 48  
 Warrau, 54*n*  
 warriors, spirits of, 104  
 Washington (State), 309  
 Wassén, S. Henry, *see* Holmer, Nils M.  
 water/Water: gazing into, 363; as guardian spirit, 106; Lords of the, 39; purification by, 116; spiced, 475  
 Water-babies, 105  
 Waters: of Death, 355; Lady of the, *see s.v.*  
 Watson, William, 460*n*  
 weather control, 289*f*, 304  
 Webster, Hutton, 22*n*, 25*n*, 52*n*, 59*n*, 64*n*, 82*n*, 85*n*, 90*n*, 92*n*, 177*n*, 178*n*, 351*n*, 472*n*, 475*n*  
 weddings, shaman and, 181*f*  
*Wee*, 455  
 Wehrli, Hans J., 443*n*  
 Weil, R., 487*n*  
 Weinberger-Goebel, Kira, 363*n*, 482*n*  
 Weisser-Aall, Lily, 93*n*  
 Wensinck, A. J., 268*n*, 269*n*, 273*n*  
 werewolves, 324, 381*n*; *see also* lycanthropy  
 Werner, Alice, 490*n*  
 Wernert, P., 434*n*  
 West, E. W., 397*n*  
 Weyer, Edward Moffatt, Jr., 22*n*, 58*n*, 59*n*, 90*n*, 96*n*, 184*n*, 289*n*, 290*n*  
 wheel, 433  
 whip, 151, 174  
 whirlwind, 92, 423*f*  
 White, C. M. N., 374*n*  
 Whitehead, George, 343*n*, 356*n*  
 “White Lord Creator,” 187  
 Widengren, George, 273*n*, 385*n*, 393*n*, 397*n*, 398*n*, 399*n*, 407*n*, 489*n*  
 Wieschoff, Heinz, 177*n*  
 wife, fairy, 77*f*, 361; *see also* wives, celestial; spirit-women  
*wigtwam*, 317  
*wigwan*, 239  
 Wikander, Stig, 385*n*, 397*n*, 398*n*, 399*n*, 401*n*  
 wildcat, 46  
 Wilhelm, Richard, 457*n*  
 Wilke, Georg, 273*n*, 480*n*  
 Wilken, G. A., 25, 347*n*

INDEX

- Williamson, Robert W., 361*n*, 366*n*, 371*n*  
wind, *see* hurricane  
Wind Spirit, 359  
wings, 392  
Winnebago, 142, 319*f*  
winnow, 425*f*  
Winstedt, Richard O., 286*n*, 345*n*  
Wintu, 21, 31, 102  
Wiradjuri, 134, 135, 137  
Wirz, Paul, 179*n*, 478*n*  
Wissler, Clark, 298, 313*n*  
witchcraft, 298  
witches/wizards, 478  
Witoto, 327*n*  
wives, celestial, 76*ff*, 79*ff*, 133*n*, 168, 381*n*, 421; *see also* wife, fairy; spirit-women  
wizards, *see* witches  
wolf/wolves, 72, 89, 90, 93, 106, 241, 467  
Wolfram, R., 469*n*  
Wolof, 472*n*  
Wolters, Paul, 388*n*  
woman/women: dressing as, *see* transvestitism; as magicians, 363; as source of magic power, 449; mythological role/mythology of, 10, 78, 351; transformation into, 257*f*  
Wombu, 136  
Wongaibon, 127  
wood, choice of, for drum, 169  
world/World: beginning of, *see* beginning; Center of the, *see s.v.*; creation of, *see s.v.*; Lord of the, 70  
worms, 89  
Wotjobaluk, 45, 137, 490*n*  
Wovoka, 142  
Wright, Arthur Frederick, 453*n*  
*wu*, 452, 454, 455  
*wu*-ism, 454  
*wurake*, 353  
Wurundjeri, 137  
*wu-shih*, 455  
Wüst, Walther, 398*n*  
*wut*, 476  
*Wütende Heer*, 384*n*  
Wylick, Carla van, 355*n*
- Y
- Yahgan, 327  
Yahweh, 393*n*  
Yaik Kan, *see* Jajyk Kan  
*yaika*, 303  
Yakşas, 453*n*  
Yakut, 40, 160*n*, 182*n*, 205, 249, 272, 288, 481, 497; bones, 158, 159; classes of gods, 186*ff*, 276; classes of shamans, 184*f*, 185*n*; drums, 172, 173, 174; eagle among, 70*n*; and earth divinity, 10; fertility goddess, 80*n*; gods, 9, 10; "first shaman," 68*f*; initiations, 35*ff*, 113*f*, 120; masks, 165; recruiting of shamans, 16; and sacrifices, 118, 275; séance among, 228*ff*; secret language, 96, 97; sex relations with spirits, 74; shaman, character of, 29; —, costume, 148*f*, 152*n*, 156; and smiths, 470*f*; and souls of dead, 206; and stars, 260; vocabulary, 30  
*yálgil*, 247  
Yama, 272, 417*f*, 419  
Yamana, 26, 53, 131, 331  
Yao, Emperor, 448  
Yap, 478*n*  
Yaralde, 86  
Yaruro, 83, 178, 325*n*  
Yasser, J., 243*n*  
Yašt, 399  
yawning, 415  
Yayutši, 196  
Yecuana, 328  
*yefatchel*, 331  
*yékamush*, 54*n*  
*yekush*, 331  
Yellow Emperor, 449  
Yellow Uigur, *see* Uigur  
Yenang, 282  
Yenisei, 501; *see also* Ostyak  
*yer mesi/yer tunigi*, 202  
Yesevi, Ahmed, 402  
Ygdrasil, 71*n*, 270*n*, 380, 383  
Yima, 272  
Yjyk-Mas, Tree, 37*n*  
*Tnglinga Saga*, 381*n*, 382*n*  
*Toga-sūtras*, *see* Patañjali  
yoga, 416*f*; baroque, 416; Buddhist, 61, 416; and flying, 409, 410, 411; and mastery over fire, 373; shamanic, 417; tantric, 413; and *tapas*, 413; *see also* tantrism  
yogin(s), 113, 163*f*, 409, 436, 476, 479; Buddhist, 61, 164, 407  
Yokuts, Telumni, 311  
*yorra*, 212  
Ysabel, 364  
Yü the Great, 449, 458  
Yuin, 137

INDEX

- Yukagir, 216; costume, 156; divination, 249, 391, 435*n*; masks, 165, 166; séances among, 97, 245*ff*  
Yuki, 54  
Yule, Henry, 429*n*, 432*n*, 443*n*  
Yuma, 103, 309  
Yunnan, 441, 444  
*yūpa*, 403*f*  
Yuracare, 161*n*  
Yurak Samoyed, 89*n*, 209, 213*n*, 277, 278; cap, 154; drum, 135, 174; funerary ceremonies, 212*f*; initiation among, 38; recruiting among, 15; sacrifices, 264*n*; séance, 225*ff*  
Yurok, 102  
Zarathustra/Zoroaster, 119*n*, 393, 397*ff*  
Zateyev, Sofron, 36  
Zelenin, D., 26, 70*n*, 79*n*, 166*n*, 197*n*  
Zemmrlich, Johannes, 482*n*  
Zerries, Otto, 81*n*, 161*n*, 323*n*  
Zhi-mä, 446  
*žiber*, 151  
ziggurat, 134, 264, 267  
Zimmer, Heinrich, 485*n*  
Zoete, Beryl de, and Spies, Walter, 468*n*  
zones, cosmic: 37*n*, 259*ff*, 282, 284, 397; communication between, 265; and drum, 176  
Zoroaster, *see* Zarathustra  
Zulu, 21  
Zuni, 316*n*

Z

- Zalmoxis, 390  
Zambu, 122*n*, 271

*Index by A. S. B. Glover*