

The Odul Folklore

On the Functional Significance of Shamans

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Abstract: This report reviews various legends, stories, and tales, as well as texts of shamanic rituals recorded by various scholars. The report focuses on the significance and role of a shaman in the Odul (Yukaghir) culture, and summarizes the functions a shaman carried out in the society as presented in these recorded texts.

Keywords: folklore, Oduls, Russian north, shamanism, Siberia, Yukaghirs

This report is based on various texts, including legends, stories, and tales recorded and made available by scholars studying the Odul (Yukaghir) culture. The report focuses on the role and functions of the Odul shaman (*almelalma* in Yukaghir) as a mediator between people and the world inhabited by supernatural beings; a healer; and a defender from adversaries.¹ Analyzed in this report are legends, stories, tales, texts of shamanic rituals as recorded by Vladimir Jochelson (2005a, 2005b) between the end of nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, as well as recordings made by Irina Nikolaeva (1997) and the report's author between 1996 and 1998 (Zhukova et al. 1989a; Zhukova and Chernetsova 1994).

The ethnonym Odul, translated as strong and powerful, is used by a group of the Yukaghirs, living at the upper streams of the Kolyma River, in the Magadan region and the northeast of the Republic of Sakha (Iakutiia). In academic literature this group is referred to as the Forest Yukaghirs or the Upper Kolyma Yukaghirs. Oduls are hunters for moose, fur animals, fowl, and are also fishermen. Vaduls are Yukaghirs linguistically, socially, and culturally distinct from Odul; they

live in the Arctic tundra at the lower streams of the Kolyma River and make a living by reindeer herding. They are often called the Tundra or Lower Kolyma Yukaghirs. The Yukaghirs of Chukotka are also referred to as Chuvantsy, they reside outside the boundaries of the Sakha republic and shifted to speaking Russian at the end of the nineteenth century. The contemporary name for the Yukaghirs used by the Tungus people translates as “ice people,” “frozen people” or “people with the frozen mouth” (Tougoloukov 1979: 5). In 2010 in the Republic of Sakha there were 1,603 people registered as Yukaghirs (Vserossiiskaia perepis’ naseleniia 2010).

Some scholars have argued that the ancient origins of the proto-Yukaghir culture can be dated back to the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, whereas others have insisted on later origins dating back to the Bronze or early Iron Age (Cherosov 1993). In any case, these results demonstrate that the Yukaghir is one of the most ancient hunting and fishing cultures of northern Eurasia. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Forest Yukaghirs still retain elements of a clan social and economic arrangement, in particular hunting and gathering as a mode of production, a community- and territory-based on kin relations, paganism as a form of their belief, and the high status of women in the society. Ancient ways of beliefs related to hunting, elements of traditional art, representations based on folklore and pagan beliefs are passed along the generations. Nevertheless, throughout the centuries the Yukaghir culture has incorporated innovations and borrowings that emerged through contacts with incoming groups and peoples. The contemporary Oduls, while retaining hunting as their subsistence mode, reside in a multi-ethnic settlement of Nelemnoe in flats supplied with electricity and central heating. They use motor boats, snowmobiles, mobile phone connections, and other modern technologies. The village school provides training in the native language and folklore, as the Odul dialect of the Yukaghir language is not used in everyday communication.

The systematic study of the Odul culture was pioneered at the end of the nineteenth century by Vladimir Jochelson, who initiated this research while in exile in Iakutiia. He participated in a number of scientific expeditions, including the Sibiriakov and Jesup expeditions (Jochelson 2005a). This initial research has been further continued in the works of contemporary scholars (Levin and Potapov 1956; Nikolaeva 1997; Okladnikov 1975; Prokop’eva 2009; Simchenko 1976; Spiridonov 1996; Tougoloukov 1979; Zhukova 2009, 2012, 2013; Zhukova et al. 1989a). Vladimir Jochelson was the only scholar who was able to

record the Odul shamans and described their shamanic views and rituals, and traditional clothing. His findings on shamanism were published in two monographs. One collection of folklore texts was first published in Saint Petersburg in 1900 and reprinted in 2005 on Jochelson's 150th anniversary. His second monograph *Yukaghirs and the Yukaghirized Tungus* was published in English (Jochelson 1926). The book was translated for the first time into Russian by Vladimir Ivanov and his wife Zinaida Ivanova-Unarova and published in Yakutsk in 2005 (Jochelson 2005a). Both monographs can be fairly called a unique encyclopedic of the Yukaghir culture.

Jochelson, a pioneer in the studies of the Yukaghir culture, wrote that shamanism played a significant role in the Yukaghir culture in the past. A shaman was an ancestor and a patron of the tribe with many functions. However, later, due to the influence of Christianity, the position of the shaman became weakened. This is what Jochelson wrote at the end of the nineteenth century: "If in the past the shaman acted as a priest and a mediator between the hunters and animals' spirits-protectors, at present the role of the shaman has lost its significance in this important sphere of the social life of the Yukaghirs, for whom hunting is the main source of existence" (Jochelson 2005a: 243). The main function of the shaman then became restricted to healing. In this specialization, in his attributes, clothing and other elements, Yukaghir shamanism has much in common with the neighboring people—Tungus and Yakuts (Jochelson 2005b).

The data collected by Jochelson and others is fragmented and is not by any means exhaustive. In 1896 Jochelson himself wrote that he "lived in an earth-house belonging to the old man Samsonov, nicknamed Nelbosh. When I asked him who was a shaman here, in Korkodon, he replied that they did not have a shaman any longer. The last shaman, according to him, was his son who had died just before my arrival. ... On my request Nelbosh agreed to reproduce a healing ritual the way his son used to do. ... Afterward, in 1901 when I visited Korkodon again and Samsonov was no longer alive, the Korkodon Yukaghirs pointed out that old Nelbosh was their tribal shaman" (Jochelson 2005b: 273). The scholar explained that the old Nelbosh was afraid that Jochelson would report him to the Orthodox priest in Verkhnevilyuisk, whom he feared greatly.

Nikolai Spiridonov (pen name Teki Odulok), a native Odul scholar and writer, born in Nelemnoe in 1906 and the first person among the minority peoples to receive a PhD in economics, was probably better informed about the shamanic traditions of his own people. He wrote:

“Responsibilities of *alma* include foreseeing the future with the help of spirit-protectors and spirit-masters of the land, water, mountains and forests and finding the easiest and more favorable ways in life, protecting and saving kin and to contacting all visible and invisible spirits for such purposes” (Spiridonov 1996: 37). However, the scholar has presented only limited and insignificant data about the shamans of his own people, fearing a hostile reaction from the atheist Soviet state to his writings. As a young native scholar from a remote Siberian periphery having just arrived in Leningrad in 1925, he had chosen economics as a safer research topic and successfully defended his PhD in 1934, establishing himself as an active social, political, and literary figure. Despite taking these precautions, Nikolai Spiridonov was accused of being a people’s enemy, and was shot in 1938 (Naumova 1996: 62).

Some material about the shamanism of the Forest Yukaghirs is contained in the works of ethnologists of the twentieth century; however, these do not contain any folklore texts about the shamans. Starting from 1986, research on shamanism among the Yukaghir was carried out by a then-graduate student of the Institute of Languages (Moscow), Irina Nikolaeva, currently professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (UK), with the author, then assistant at the History and Philology Department of the Yakutsk State University. Both scholars have recorded the legends, stories, and tales about the shamans from the Odul elders in Nelemnoe and some Odul families from the administrative center of Zyrianka (Zhukova et al. 1989a, 1989b; Zhukova, Chernetsova 1994). Notable are collections of oral stories by Pana Prokop’eva, a young native Yukaghir scholar from Nelemnoe, including the texts about the shamans (Zhukova and Prokop’eva 1991). In addition, there have been a number of works on shamanism among the Yukaghirs published recently by Aleksei Burykin, a scholar based in Moscow (Burykin 2007; Zhukova and Burykin 2000; Zhukova 2012).

In recent works the functions and responsibilities of the Odul shaman have been described as: “to protect his tribe from evil spirits, misfortune and unpleasant events with the help of spirits and magic actions. The shaman served as a mediator between deceased and living members of his tribe” (Zhukova and Burykin 2000: 128). Through the research on the Odul shamans, three functions become clear. First, the shaman serves as a mediator between people and the Master of the Earth, spirit-masters of natural phenomena, animal protectors, and ancestral spirits. He is also a medicine man and a protector from illnesses. Finally, the shaman is a protector from various strangers, visible and

invisible evil forces, machinations and trickery of other shamans, and he also competes for power with other shamans.

The shaman's primary function was to act on behalf of the clan in communication with supernatural beings to provide the clan with food. A shaman was there to help if the clan members experienced starvation and hunting was not successful. The shaman, with the help of various sacred practices would find a cause and suggest a way to correct the situation.² Often the shaman had penalizing functions. In cases when people violated hunting or other customs, the shaman would investigate each of these occurrences of violation. The life of the hunting collective depended on the shaman's decisions and advice.

One typical example of such critical situation is "The Ancient Legend" about a girl who felt sorry for a hunted moose.³ The Moose Master, a character often used in mythologies, had learned about the girl and angered by her behavior, he stopped offering moose to the hunters. When according to *alme's* advice the girl and two dogs were sacrificed (hanged), the hunting became successful again (Jochelson 2005a: 128–131). The girl's fault was in not knowing the sacred practices of the hunters and in interfering with the hunters' activities. The hunter's work is about searching, chasing, and capturing an animal in order to sustain the life of the clan and defend himself and the clan from the potential revenge of the spirit of the killed animal or its protectors. It was important to know that these sacred views and practices constituted the basis of hunting traditions and their surrounding environment. "The Ancient Legend" demonstrates the cruelty of the tribal hunting collective that allowed human sacrifice for the sake of the whole clan.

The "Legend of a Six-Legged Moose" as narrated by folklorist Vasilii Shalugin, is about an investigation that a shaman undertakes to find the causes of unsuccessful hunting. The Moose Master in the story rode a six-legged moose and scared animals away because people carelessly disposed of the bones of the animals, throwing them everywhere. The clan people, concerned with their unsuccessful hunting, sought advice from their shaman: "Have a look at our road" and the shaman replied: "I will." The shaman advised his people to bury the remaining bones of the animals properly in order to please the Moose Master and make him send trophies to the hunters: "From now on, if you get a moose, his skull, leg bones and hooves should be cleaned properly and put on the *labaz*."⁴ If you do it inappropriately, the Moose Master will not forgive you for the second time. He will go away from this area with all his moose" (Jochelson 2005a: 5). This advice of the

shaman is still followed; it is believed that treating the remains of the animal in a respectful manner, according to the tradition, helps an animal to be re-born, which is very important for populating the taiga with new animals and for a continuous food supply to the clans. Various ways of appropriate treatment of the skulls and bones of a bear, hoofed animals, small animals, birds, and fish can be found in the works of the researchers of the Odul culture (Jochelson 2005a; Okladnikov 1975; Tugolukov 1979). Re-telling of the folklore texts that referred to hunting ethics strengthened the authority of the shaman and helped to prolong hunting traditions. It also made these traditions comprehensible to new generations and adhered to rigidly without much variation; otherwise the hunting collective would starve to death.

The shaman's second function is to provide medical assistance and carry out healing. Jochelson made four records about healing rituals (2005b: 272–288). These rituals were about a shaman asking the spirit-helpers to assist him to expel the evil spirits that caused the illness from the body of a patient, and return the shadow or soul (*aibi*) that left the body. One such ritual was recorded among the Tundra Yukaghirs. Three other rituals were recorded in the Upper Kolyma from N. Samsonov, his son-in-law Afanasii (Tungus), and an Odul elder, Spiridonov.

The healing ritual performed by the Odul shaman N. Samsonov was described by Jochelson in detail. The ritual started with the shaman beating his drum, calling his spirit-helpers, and imitating animal and bird voices. He sang inviting other helpers: "My ancestors, my forefathers, bring me my girl-spirits." At the entrance he breathed in, inhaling the spirits of the ancestors and spirits that he had called upon, he talked to the spirit of his ancestor about the causes of the illness of his patient. As he laid his face down on the reindeer skin, his soul traveled to the Kingdom of Shadows. In his journey he came across a dog and an old woman with a scraper in her hands guarding a road and a dwelling. Helped by his spirit-helpers he managed to pass them. He then crossed to the other bank of the river on a boat, where he went into one of the dwellings, and there among many shadow-spirits of dead ancestors he found the soul of his patient. He forcefully took the soul, inhaled it, and returned. The soul of the shaman returned into his own body that he had left, he then got up and approached his patient, touched the sore spot on his body, and returned the soul of the ill person. He finally told the spirit-helpers to guard the soul of the sick person so that it did not run away again and let the spirit-helpers go (Jochelson 2005b: 273–276).

Jochelson considered this type of ritual and its particular element of “drawing the soul out of the Shadow Kingdom” specific to the Yukaghir shamans. In contrast, the Yakut shamans, for instance, pulled the evil spirit out from a patient’s body. Yet, as the researcher noted, in all rituals one can observe Koriak, Tungus, and Yakut influences.

The rituals of treating the sick have been described in various twentieth-century texts while plots of the stories differ. In some, *alme* is fighting with the Big Disease (smallpox and measles anthropomorphized as a woman) or the Devil, who took the heart of the sick person to the Shadow Kingdom (Jochelson 2005b: 27–29; Zhukova and Chernetsova 1994: 42–43). In one story about healing of the sick hunter recorded by Jochelson during his visit to the Oduls on the Iassachnaia River (a tributary of the Kolyma), the evil spirit that caused suffering and illness appeared to be a Lamut (Even) man, reflecting a continuous conflict between the Yukaghirs and the Lamuts (Jochelson 2005b: 242–243). A variation of this story has been presented and published by Spiridonov (1996). A story with the same plot was retold to Irina Nikolaeva and the author of this article by several residents of Nelemnoe with some variations, where the evil spirit was presented as a Girl-Devil (Zhukova et al. 1989b).

In his third function as a protector, the shaman faces strangers, visible and invisible adversaries, and the machinations of other shamans. To fight these, the shaman turns into birds, small and large animals, uses assistance from spirit-helpers (a mammoth, a dog and others), and applies sacred practices. In one story, *alme* defeats the Yakut shaman, who was eating the souls of his son’s children (Jochelson 2005a: 193–195). If he needed to kill the enemy, the *alme* could willingly depart from this life (Jochelson 2005a: 172–174). Spiridonov wrote, “Often the Odul *alma* would commit suicide in order to finish off his personal and tribal adversaries. This is considered a normal and acceptable practice, for after death a human being lives a mysterious life, gaining the ability to fly across spaces like a bird, swim in water like a fish and burrow into the ground like a mouse” (1996: 49). The enemies of the shaman in the Odul folklore are usually male shamans from other tribes and evil forces, as well as female characters such as the Big Disease, singing Girl-Devil, and Death herself (Zhukova et al. 1989b: 19–21).

If the shaman is defeated he stops shamanizing, the role of his helpers therefore is crucial for his life. The spirit-helpers are always present in the battles and the outcome of the fight is normally decided by the number of *alme*’s helpers and their power. In summer, the Oduls organized special contests for the shamans to test the powers of their

spirit-helpers (Jochelson 2005b: 188). From the texts it becomes apparent that *alme* had several helpers and it was imperative to possess them to become a shaman (Zhukova et al. 1989b: 21–24).

Alme could be of any age, but always a wise man, who gained his wisdom from his surroundings. Nikolaeva recorded a story told by Nikolai Likhachev, an articulate storyteller, an expert of his native culture, and the grandson of a shaman. He said that his grandfather, prior to becoming a shaman, had experienced madness for three years (Zhukova et al. 1989b: 25–27). Likhachev was assured that the taiga taught one how to become a shaman. For instance, he found it puzzling that there were no shamans among geologists who spent a long time in the taiga.

A shaman—as a fortune teller, an advice giver, and a savior in difficult situations—predicted upcoming difficulties along people’s life journeys. A shaman predicted when the Tungus people would come across the Yukaghirs and when the Yukaghirs would meet the Russians (Jochelson 2005a: 105–124, 2005b: 289–290). But an *alme* could also manipulate the time and, in addition to predicting the future, he could look and travel into the past.

An *alme* had the ultimate authority on questions that were within his competence. However, as Jochelson stated, a shaman’s advice to his relatives was not always strictly followed and observed: “the Yukaghir shamans rarely do predictions and those asking for these predictions are generally skeptical of the shaman’s revelation and advice” (2005b: 288). In “The Ancient Legend” the shaman often warned his clansmen: “My friends, do not fool around, the Lamut soldiers are about to come, we will all perish.” The young men did not listen to him, many were indeed murdered by the Lamuts, and only the shaman and his brother managed to escape (Jochelson 2005a: 157–158). Another legend tells the story of a shaman who gave his stomach to his wife for safekeeping: “This is my belly, keep it safe and protect it as your own eyes” and with these words he flew away together with the white cranes. While he was away, his wife ignored his warning, fell in love with another man, and tore apart her husband’s stomach. Her actions caused the death of the shaman, herself, and her new husband (Jochelson 2005a: 242–245).

For protection *alme* used the supernatural capacities of various elements, for instance, the intestines of a dog, the most important sacrificial animal for the Oduls. One legend described how the shaman protected his clan by asking them to sew antlers on their headgear.

There are stories where *alme* used tricks and singing in order to win over his enemy. For instance, when death came after him, he made her sleepy by his beautiful singing and then chased her out. On the second occasion he threw her into a sack made from a dog's bladder, and on the third occasion, when seven deaths came after him, he managed to lure them into three boxes and locked them inside (Zhukova et al. 1989b: 19-21).

The Yukaghir shamans in the legends appear to be ingenuous, quick, and ruthless. The shaman is merciless and for the good of his clansmen or his own good, he can sacrifice people: for instance a girl, his own children, and on one occasion he "eats up" his relatives. He is rancorous and capricious (Zhukova et al. 1989b: 21–24, 27). The shaman as a rule is lonely, but some are described as having a family. However, a shaman-father does not bring happiness to his family. Often, for his own sake, he sacrifices his children to his adversary, as described in "The Tale about the Stone Maiden" (Jochelson 2005a: 228–231) and "The Raven's Eggs" (Zhukova et al. 1989a: 48–49). When traveling, fighting, or competing the shaman is often not at home. In one of the legends an *alme* returned home disguised as a bird. "When he transformed into a human being, his wife and children were joyous. But the shaman told his wife: 'Don't be joyous; I will not live for long.' When they got up next morning, he was lying there dead" (Jochelson 2005a: 170–173). The negative role of the father-shaman is shown in the story where a girl becomes a shamaness. In the Odul texts the shaman is portrayed normally as a man and shamanesses appear very rarely in the earlier texts (Jochelson 2005a: 189, 230). This unusual event had negative consequences for her female siblings and demonstrates the misfortune of shamanic ancestry, especially for girls (Jochelson 2005a: 228, 236). In the Odul folklore the female shaman is opposed because of her close association with the shaman-father and is indeed destructive for the female characters.

Jochelson noted the polarity between female and male in the Odul culture: "Typical for the primitive groups of the Yukaghirs is the opposition between men and women as two independent entities. This is noticeable in games, where women and men are always rivals, in language where women tend to pronounce some sounds differently from men, in the importance women pay to their maternal kinship line and men to the paternal, and in the socialization between genders that created separate activities for each group" (1898: 259). At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century the Odul social

group still socialized mostly based on age and gender. During summer gatherings and festivities that marked the start of a new annual cycle, men “would organize military alliances against their rivals. ... Women and girls would also join into friendship unions and exchange presents” (Jochelson 2005b: 188). These gender distinctions still remain: contemporary Odul men appeal to the Master of the Earth, whereas women appeal to the Earth Mother. These gender distinctions are also visible in clothing decoration (Zhukova 2012: 178).

A positive image of the girl-shaman, who had a drum, is described in “The Story about a Foul-Mouthed Boy” (Jochelson 2005a: 188–189). In the story a girl shamanized and turned her good-for-nothing younger brother into the Venus Star. The foul-mouthed boy is presented in the story as a character who violated the social norms and hunting traditions. The text has a semantic link between the daughter and her deceased father. In order to save her mother and herself from death by starvation, the girl-shaman goes moose hunting, having taken her deceased father’s skis, bows and arrows, and his walking stick.

The later legends about shamans resemble fairy tales (*skazki*) and contain humorous references, which were not present in the texts of the older period. This, for instance, is apparent in the humorous inclusion of Christian imagery. In one legend a healing shaman, after finishing his healing ritual, decides to go to Satan and see his sauna (*bania*) that “even devils fear.” After seeing it with his own eyes, he stops being a shaman, closes a passage through which he used to go to the land of the dead, and converts to Christianity (Zhukova and Chernetsova 1994: 42–43). Many of the Forest Yukaghirs’ stories and legends about the shamans with time have transformed into fairy tales.

Through this corpus of shamanic texts of the Yukaghirs and recordings of rituals and later retellings of the legends, stories and tales, it becomes clear that in the past the shamanic activity, now lost, and the role of the shaman and his functions regulated many aspects of life in the Odul society.

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Notes

1. A reviewer suggested that a fourth function of a shaman should be considered—to attack one’s enemies. Although I agree with the reviewer in principle, in this particular article I analyze only available folklore texts that do not contain information on this specific function. There is no information on this function in Jochelson’s works either.

2. I was not able to find a description of these practices in the texts available.

3. This tale was recorded by Jochelson from N. Samsonov (Nelbosh) in 1896.

4. A storage platform or dwelling.

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