Chapter Three

Rock art and the material culture of Siberian and Central Asian shamanism

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INTRODUCTION

In Siberia and Central Asia – the 'homelands' of shamanism – there is no ancient tradition of written language, and consequently no direct descriptive data on the lifestyle and belief systems of the prehistoric population. Valuable insights can be however gained from the comparison of rock art images with ethnographic material, which indicate that a shamanic world-view was fundamental for the complex symbolism of the Siberians. Indeed, some of the rock art panels can be understood solely in the context of shamanic ideas.

In this chapter I would like to focus on two chronologically separated rock art motifs: first historical petroglyphs, which probably date to the last two or three centuries, and second their probable ancient prototypes – images that have been claimed to date from the Bronze Age and even earlier periods. I shall then compare images of both periods with the distinctive coats worn by shamans, and with their various accoutrements and ethnographically recorded items of squipment such as so-called spirit-containers.

SHAMANIC COSTUME AND ITS ICONOGRAPHY IN ROCK ART

In some of the Asian and American cultures with shamanic belief systems we find no special ritual costume worn by the shamans, but among those who had such apparel it is clear that these marvellous coats were always in some way embodiments of a shamanic world-view. The cosmological iconography of these jackets – with pendants, breastplates and other attached details – often depicts the tripartite division of the universe, and these associations may be reinforced by the materials chosen for the coats' component parts, for example the hides of reindeer, elk or bear. The shaman's costume was also invested with several additional layers of meaning and complex symbolism.

One example of this is the depiction of skeletons on the breast-piece or on the back as a prominent feature of Siberian shamanic coats (Ivanov 1954). They may be explained as representing the bones of the wearer's shaman-ancestor, serving as the shaman's shield, protection and armour, and as the guarantee of his *or* her survival (Alexeev 1975: 152). Another interpretation of these skeletal costume elements explains them as representations of a shaman brought back to life after the dismemberment that occurs during the initiation process: the depicted bones thus refer to the wearer's own skeleton.

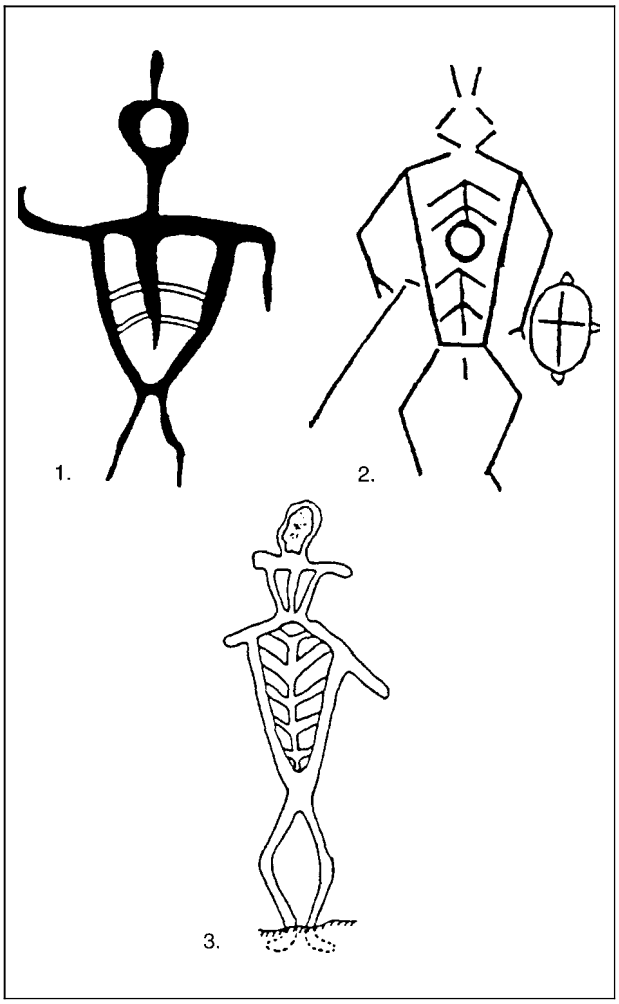

Figure 3.1 Rock art anthropomorphs in the 'X-ray style'. 1. Aya Bay, Lake Baikal (after Okladnikov 1974);2. Mount Ukir (after Khoroshih, cited in Mikhailov 1987);3. Bolshaja Kada (after Okladnikov and Martinov 1972);

The same concept may be traced in Siberian rock art anthropomorphs in the so-called 'X-ray style', representing a shamanic perspective on an intermediate condition berween death and revival (see Devlet 2000). Figure 3.1 shows examples from the Lake Baikal region, Mount Ukir and Bolshaja Kada.

In the rock art of relatively recent periods it is possible to identify images of shamans, depicted as engaged in their ritual activities. Being quite schematic in form, these figures are nonetheless dynamic. Some of the anthropomorphs shown in these images are wearing fringed coats and are engaged in a shamanic performance with a drum. A range of such images from the historical period in the Altai region are shown in Figures 3.2 and 3.3 (see also Ivanov 1954; Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaja 1972; Kyzlasov and Leontiev 1980; Martinov 1985; Kubarev 1988; Okladnikova 1989). Such images are known in the rock art of different regions, and in addition they are found pecked or engraved on stone plaques recovered from barrows. Those shown with extended arms resemble the anthropomorphic figures which in time replaced the cross-handles on drums of the kind shown in their hands (see below, p. 49).

Bands of lines hanging from the hands and arms are common details of such anthropomorphs, and sometimes a similar fringe is shown in the form of lines or triangular marks on the profile of the figure's back. Similar fringes may be seen on the coats of recent Siberian shamans. The fringe of a shaman's coat is an important element, which marks his or her ornithomorphic nature (i.e. the ability to transform into a bird or to gain its abilities such as the capacity for flight). By means of the latter, the shaman is able to penetrate into the upper sphere of the universe and make contact with divine powers. This ornithomorphic essence appears to have been the most ancient characteristic of the shamanic coat, and by extension its fringe was the most crucial symbolic element in its decoration. It may be suggested that the textile fringe represented and replaced the natural feathers of a bird's wings, an effect reinforced by the attachment of real feathers, tied so as to hang loose from the elbows and shoulders of the coat. According to ethnological records, for some of the Siberian peoples the fringe along the bottom of the coat symbolised a connection with the underworld, and was intended to represent snakes; in some cases bears' paws were also attached to the hem.

A common belief throughout Siberia is that in the mythical, timeless period 'before' the remembered time of human beings (a concept somewhat akin to the so-called Dreamtime of Australian aborigines) there were no distinctions in form or essence between people, animals and birds. Shamans could cross these boundaries of time and space to change their essence and appearance, and it is this idea that is reflected by the symbolism of the shamanic coat.

At the Niukzha rock art site in the Olekma River basin, the idea of shamanic flight is graphically depicted (Figure *3.4;* Okladnikov and Mazin 1976). Here we see the shaman, represented with a drum and hammer, and a very clearly depicted jacket with fringes that spread out around him as he moves, flying among the stars and other celestial bodies. The exaggerated details of the fringe attached to the bottom and sleeves of the shaman's coat stand here for the above-mentioned ability to fly, and as a symbol for the shaman's role as a mediator between the celestial and terrestrial parts of the universe. The rock art images thus confirm the very ancient roots not only of these garments, but also of the complex cosmological symbolism that they represent.

Among the anthropomorphic personages depicted in the pre-Bronze and Bronze Age rock art from the Altai region, Tuva and Mongolia, there are frontal images of male and female figures wearing long, fringed coats with bands hanging down from the hands, arms, and sometimes from the sides, chest and hem (for examples see Novgorodova 1984; Okladnikova 1990; Kubarev 1988; Kubarev and Jacobson 1996; Jacobson 1997). Most of these figures are shown with raised hands, suggesting that they are 'praying, perhaps appealing to celestial realms or supernatural powers; others are shown with extended hands, as if they are flying. This, in combination with the

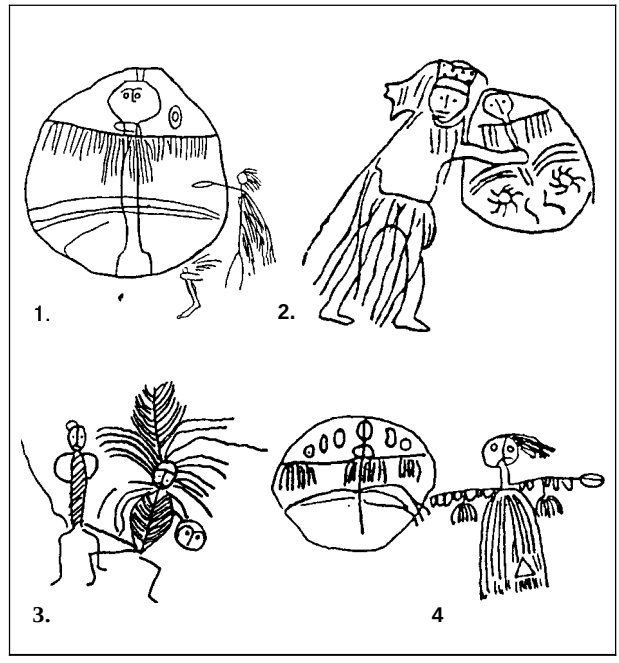

Figure 3.2 Rock art images of shamans from the Altai region. 1. Karakol (after Martinov 1985); 2. Altai (after Gurkin, cited in Ivanov 1954); 3–4. Shalkoby (after Okladnikova 1989).

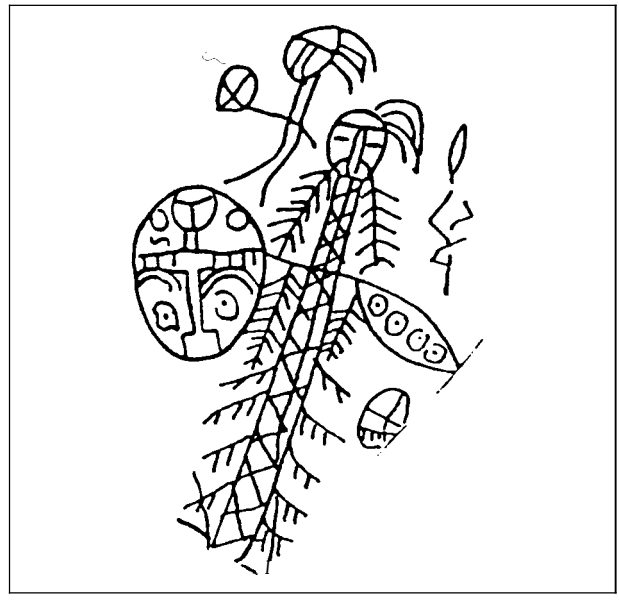

Figure ***3.3*** Fine line engraving of a shaman on a stone plaque from the Altai. (after Grichan 1987).

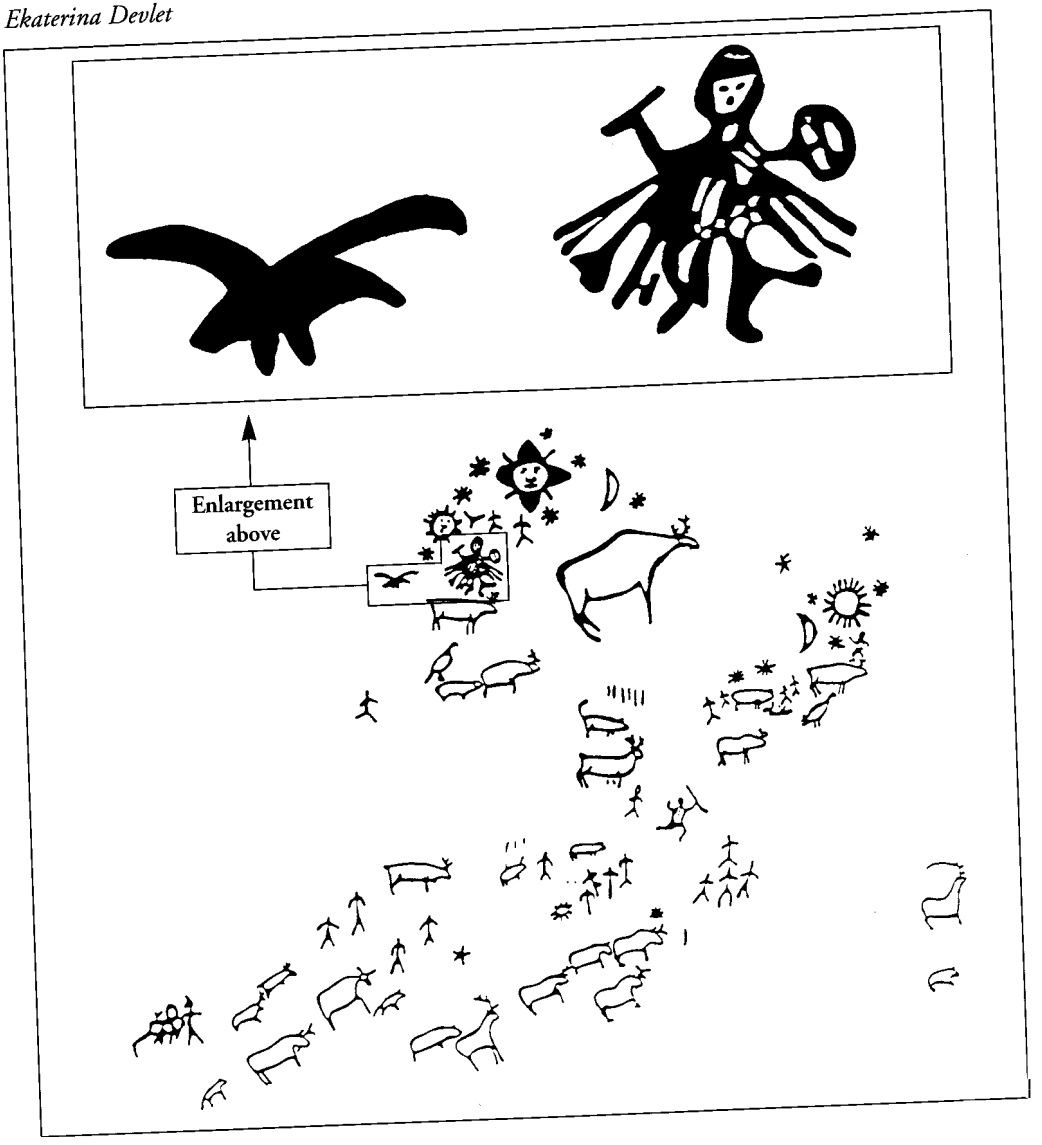

***Figure** 3.4* The Niukzha rock art panel, Olekma River basin: a shaman is flying among the celestial bodies (after Okladnikov and Mazin 1976).

complicated treatment of the clothes suggests that these images represent individuals engaged in ritual practices and accordingly attired in their ritual garments.

Female images are usually shown with more complicated clothing, including a more prominent skirt-like element. Fringes may be depicted on both sides of the torso, as well as at the sides, breast and hem of the clothing. The evident differences between the male and female representations in the rock art may be connected with the co-existence of male and female shamans and persons involved in shamanic activity that is abundantly documented among some of the Siberian peoples in the ethnographic records of more recent periods.

THE SHAMANIC DRUM

We have seen how the rock art includes references to those elements of a shaman's equipment and attributes associated with his or her role as mediator between different spheres of the universe. However, in addition to the coat there are many other relevant objects with a complex symbolic dimension that are also depicted in the art. As is well known, the different Siberian peoples frequently used drums as an essential component of their ritual activities. These drums varied in their form, and alongside those with a predominantly circular shape in certain regions one may also find drums with an ovoid construction (Prokofieva 1961). This pattern is repeated in the drums shown in the rock art, on engraved plaques, and depicted on various other ritual items: they are shown as both circular and oval in form, and vary from very simple designs to quite detailed and elaborately decorated examples (Figs 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.6 show a selection of drum images of varying complexity from rock art sites on the Middle Yenisei and Middle Lena rivers; Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaja 1972; Kyzlasov and Leontiev 1980; Grichan 1987; Okladnikova 1989; Bokovenko 1996; Miklashevich 1998). In the Altai region, images depicted on historical shamanic drums demonstrate a striking similarity with what is shown on the rock engravings. Images were painted on a drum-skin and served as symbols and repositories of secret knowledge. Some of the paintings on existing drums are almost exact duplicates of the images on the rocks (Figure 3.6; Ivanov 1954). The stability of these images, perhaps reinforced by a causal relationship between the art and the decoration of drums in historic periods, indicates the importance and ancient roots of the concepts that lay behind these designs.

The drum may be seen in Siberia as one of the essential shamanic attributes, of crucial assistance in attaining an altered state of consciousness. In addition, it served as a shaman's mode of transportation for visits to other spheres of the universe, as another form of armour and protection, and as a model of the universe itself. It also embodied the ancestral owner of the drum and the shaman him- or herself. Some Siberian people perceived a drum as having once been a female being, later transformed through its possession by a new 'owner', the shaman. The latter received the drum by undergoing a ceremonial marriage with the

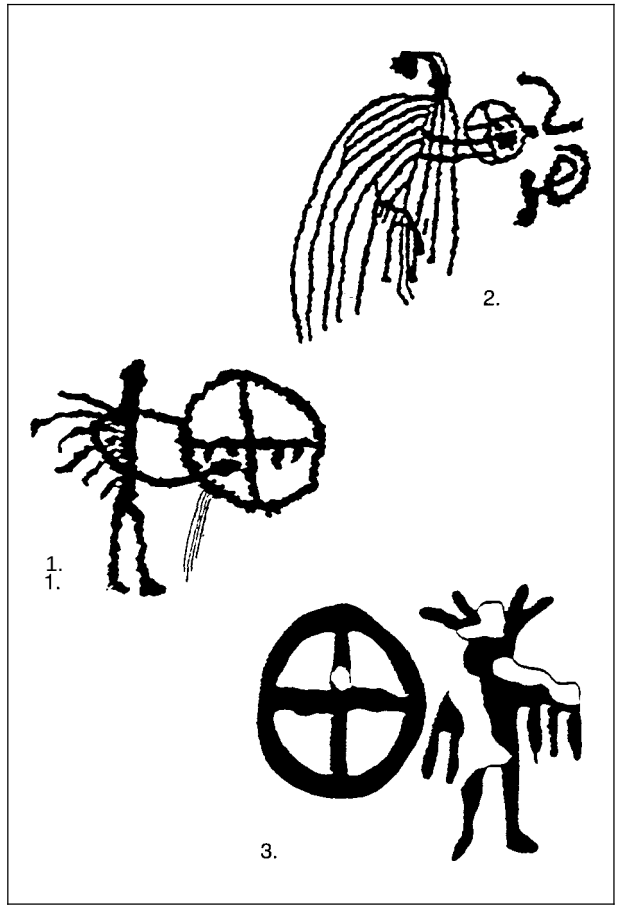

Figure 3.5 Rock art images of shamans. 1. Oglakhty, Middle Yenisei River (after Miklashevich 1998); 2 Middle Yenisei River (after Kyzlasov and Leontiev 1980); 3. Mokhsogolokh-Khaja, Middle Lena River (after Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaja 1972).

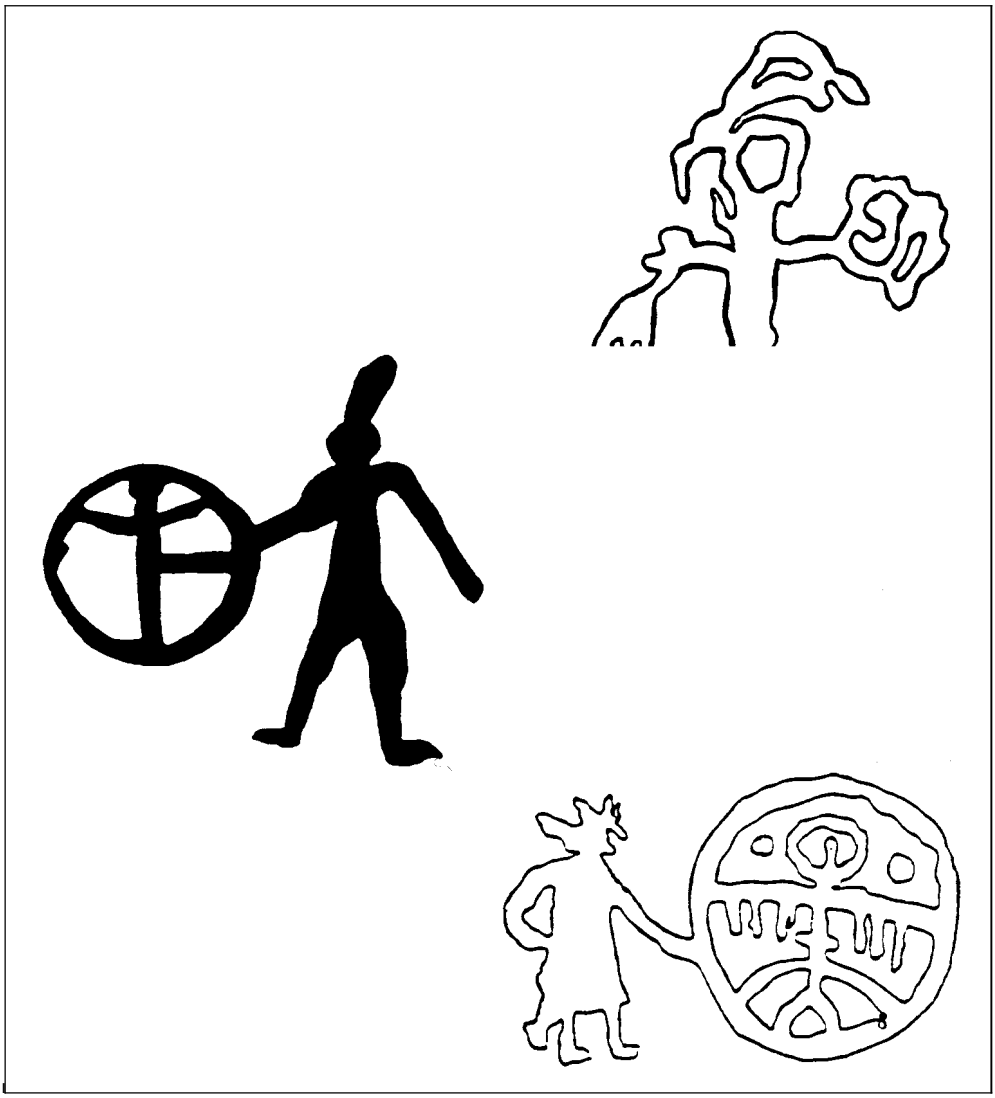

Figure 3.6 Paintings on shamans' drums (after Ivanov 1954).

being that it had once been: this ritual confirmed the drum as a living entity, and it was following this act that images were created on it. The painting of the drum-skin with different motifs was thus the final action in the process of drum creation (Lvova ***et al.*** 1988: 168–71). The drum and drumstick together thereafter became personal attributes of the shaman, gaining the ability to change the essence of things and to transform themselves into anything that the shaman might need in the course of his or her activities. These needs might arise during a journey to another world, or during a struggle with the shaman's enemies.

Some of the imagery used on drums can be explained through reference to the ethnological sources, and from there it is possible to extrapolate to the images depicted in the rock art; from this material it is in turn possible to suggest that similar petroglyphs and paintings may also have been sacral images (Ivanov 1954). In the rock art one can see several interesting variants of

drums, in some of which the contours of the drum itself enclose an anthropomorphic figure with extended arms from which apparently hang suspensions of some kind (Fig 3.2). In their real prototypes, schematic anthropomorphic figures with extended arms and hands sometimes replaced the cross-handle by which the drum was held (Funk 1995). These anthropomorphs could also be decorated with features referring, as before, to various shamanic functions. Examples of this include pendants that hung from the cross-handles, which resemble the fringes along the sleeves and sides of the shamanic coat. In some examples of rock art images, and drum-skin paintings depicting shamans holding such drums with anthropomorphic cross-handles, there is a striking similarity between the anthropomorphs, as if they are duplicates of one another. It may be that this symbolises the isomorphic nature of the shaman and the drum. Some Siberian natives (for example, the aboriginal inhabitants of the southern Altai) believed in complete identification between a shaman and his or her drum: the destruction of the drum was equivalent to the shaman's death (Lvova *et al.* 1988: 170–1).

According to the shamanic belief systems of Siberia and central Asia, spirits and souls were considered as material objects. The rules and customs that regulated communication with these spirits contained a number of restrictions that may be explained by the perception of their material nature. Relationships between the world of spirits and the world of human beings were in many ways conventional. Siberian aboriginal people sometimes constructed physical representations of a dead shaman if his or her soul began to worry their living relatives (Ivanov 1979). Known as *chalu*, these objects frequently took the form of a small drum with an anthropomorphic figure in the centre. The hands were formed by a string with suspended conical metal pendants or bands. The same function could also be served by anthropomorphic images of shaman-ancestors attached to a piece of fabric cut into vertical bands. There are further cases from the Siberian ethnographies in which these anthropomorphic representations of shamanic spirits were completely replaced by simple rectangular pieces of fabric, again cut into coloured bands: these items had the same function and meaning as the figurines. Feathers were frequently attached to such bands, symbolizing the shaman's ability to fly. For example, according to explanations recorded by Ivanov among the people of the Altai, a piece of fabric with thirteen dark blue bands and a birds tail attached to it represented 'a winged woman-shaman' (Ivanov 1979: 164). The same source notes that fabrics with bands could designate both male and female shamans, in addition to 'celestial maidens, the winged spirits of hunters, those spirits possessing the ability to interfere with terrestrial life, and those capable of flight' (Ivanov 1979: 164).

The exact timing of the drum's appearance as a shamanic attribute is still a matter of discussion. Researchers have established that shamans could once perform their offices with the help of a bow. From the evidence of a rock art panel at Yelanka on the Middle Lena River, it is possible to suggest that these two shamanic attributes originally co-existed, as alongside anthropomorphic figures in jackets with ovoid and circular drums a figure with a bow is also depicted (Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaja 1972: Figure 119). Anthropomorphic figures holding bows on the rock art panel at Oglakhty on the Middle Yenisei may also be interpreted as shamans or proto-shamans (Devlet 1966: Fig. *24*). We can suggest that this dynamic pair of figures may be engaged in some sort of shamanic activity because of their head-gear – one wears a hat topped with two horns and from the other emerge four rays.

The Siberian ethnological sources make it clear that many other items could replace the drum for use in shamanic rituals. During the period when shamanic activity was suppressed by rhe state it was actively dangerous to keep drums in the house, and at this time practising shamans used frying-pans as drums (Balser 1995). Ethnologists have recorded how, depending on circumstances, different tools could take on the qualities of shamanic equipment and be

used instead of the drum. For example, during burial ceremonies an axe could be used in the rituals for a dead man while a tool for digging up roots was used in the services for a dead woman. After the ceremonies were over, these items were placed in a special location near a birch tree; there are records of many such objects being visible there at any one time, despite which they were never taken by anyone (Lvova *et al.* 1988: 193).

Drum-sticks are also depicted in the rock art. They may be quite schematic, but in some cases it is possible to recognise types known from existing examples in the ethnological collections – usually a curved stick or a stick with three points.

SHAMANIC HEAD-GEAR

Head-gear was a particularly important element of a shaman's garments, and often decorated with horns or antlers, and with bird feathers or other ornithomorphic features. The complex symbolism of the antlers resembles that of the shaman's jacket and attached details. As we have seen, some details of the coat symbolised the bones of the wearer's ancestor, which protected the shaman in the course of his or her activities. In the same way, the antlers also represented a link with a shaman-ancestor, it is thought through their resemblance to a plant's roots in the context of a metaphorical 'family tree'. According to information recorded among the Nanai people, a great shaman was buried in a special head-dress with antlers which were taken from the head-gear that he used for shamanizing. The antlers were tied by a rope to a pole erected on the surface of the grave. The Nanai believed that after some time the antlers left the grave and moved themselves to their new owner (Smoliak 1991: 231).

When they were placed on shamanic head-gear, antlers lost their animal nature and gained a new, symbolic meaning. This operated at several levels, as the antlers also represented the number of helping spirits that the shaman could command, each tine of the antlers being a container for a single spirit (Smoliak 1991: 227–33). Again, in this context the antlers were perceived as the roots of a mythical tree, with different aspects of the shaman's power represented by, or 'growing on', its branches.

In the Altai, shamans who wore bands decorated with feathers and shells were called 'birds' (Lvova *et al.* 1988: 175). The inhabitants of the Lower Amur also put real antlers or iron copies of them on their ritual head-gear, but they were often finished off with a bird figure. As in the case of the shamanic jacket, the most important elements were artistically enhanced, and it is these features that were the most long-lived, surviving predominantly unchanged over the centuries as a conscious link with ancient traditions.

Shamanic head-gear furnished with rays or horns is also recognizable in the rock art. Recent engravings of rayed head-gear from the historical period can be paralleled with similar carvings from Neolithic and Bronze Age panels from the Upper and Lower Lena, Aldan, Olekma, and Angara rivers' basin (Figure 3.7; Ivanov 1954; Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaja 1972; Okladnikov 1977; Sunshugashev 1990). Schematic, anthropomorphic figures with rays on their heads are a particular feature of Siberian and Central Asian rock art (see Rozwadowski, this volume). Their bodies may be curvilinear, and some of them are missing legs or hands, but they are always depicted with rays either on the head or even replacing it. The differential treatment of these figures in relation to others on the rock surface strengthens the impression that they represent some supernatural being, and in this context we should recall the use of hallucinogens and other mind-altering substances in shamanic practices.

The highly decorated jacket and other items of equipment formed the material manifestations of a shaman's special status. In tandem with the ethnological records, the presence of these or similar items in excavated contexts or in rock art depictions lends support

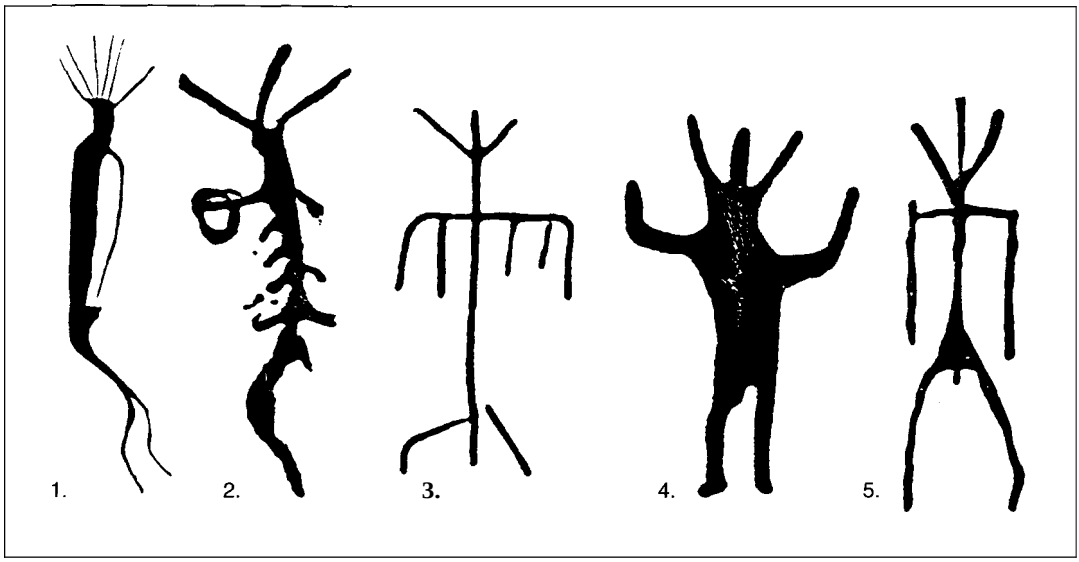

Figure 3.7 Rock art anthropomorphs in head-gear with rays. 1. Painting from Shishkino, Upper Lena River (after Okladnikov 1977); 2. Lake Maloye, Middle Yenisei River (after Sunchugashev 1990); 3. Chasovnya, Middle Lena River (after Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaja 1972); 4. Kozlovo, Upper Lena River (after Okladnikov 1977); 5. Suruktakh-Khaya, Yakutia (after Ivanov 1954).

to the interpretation of the image or buried person as a shaman, or at least as someone who had been involved in ritual activity.

In addition to the above-mentioned items, other grave-goods such as zoomorphic and anthropomorphic amulets, certain bones of fish and birds, and assemblages of small sticks have also been interpreted as items of shamanic equipment. Some of the better-preserved Neolithic and Bronze Age burials have even enabled reconstructions to be made of early shamanic clothing (Figure **3.8** shows one such woman's grave from Ust'-Uda; Okladnikov 1955: Fig. 175). The reconstructions made from archaeological evidence accord well with the material gathered by later ethnographers.

There is little consensus in the debate as to when shamanic practices first appeared in Siberia. The crucial problem has always been the limitations of our data, and in this context it may be seen that rock art motifs provide a unique opportunity for tracing the early roots of shamanic concepts. Nevertheless, there are clearly difficulties in interpreting which images are 'shamanic' and which are not.

As the native Asian peoples became more culturally assimilated, the sacral motifs lost their symbolism. The formerly sacred images and associated material culture moved to the profane sphere, and were incorporated into daily life as objects of everyday use. The penetration into Siberia of new religious beliefs gradually transformed most of these sacred features, which had once been the property of a very restricted number of owners, into items of common knowledge.

On the decorated domestic utensils of the Siberian peoples in historical times one can find images which have their roots in the ancient, traditional beliefs, and which retain the characteristic features of sacral motifs. On tobacco containers made from birch bark, for example, one can recognise shamans amongst figures from more recent traditions. Figure 3.9 shows three Yakut examples, which contain a variety of elements that clearly demonstrate the

***Figure** 3.8* Burial from Ust'-Uda and a reconstruction of the ritual coat of a female shaman (after Okladnikov 1955).

co-existence of traditional shamanic beliefs alongside the new Christian teachings. These containers were made during the period when the latter were gaining more and more followers. In the upper example a sick person is shown lying in bed, with a cross on the shelf above. In addition to the Christian protection afforded by the cross, a shaman is also trying to help the ill person by means of a ritual which he performs in the opposite corner near a table with sacred bowls. **A** similar scene takes place in the middle example, and on the third, lower tobacco container we see a two-headed bird that was a recognized form of helping spirit for Yakut

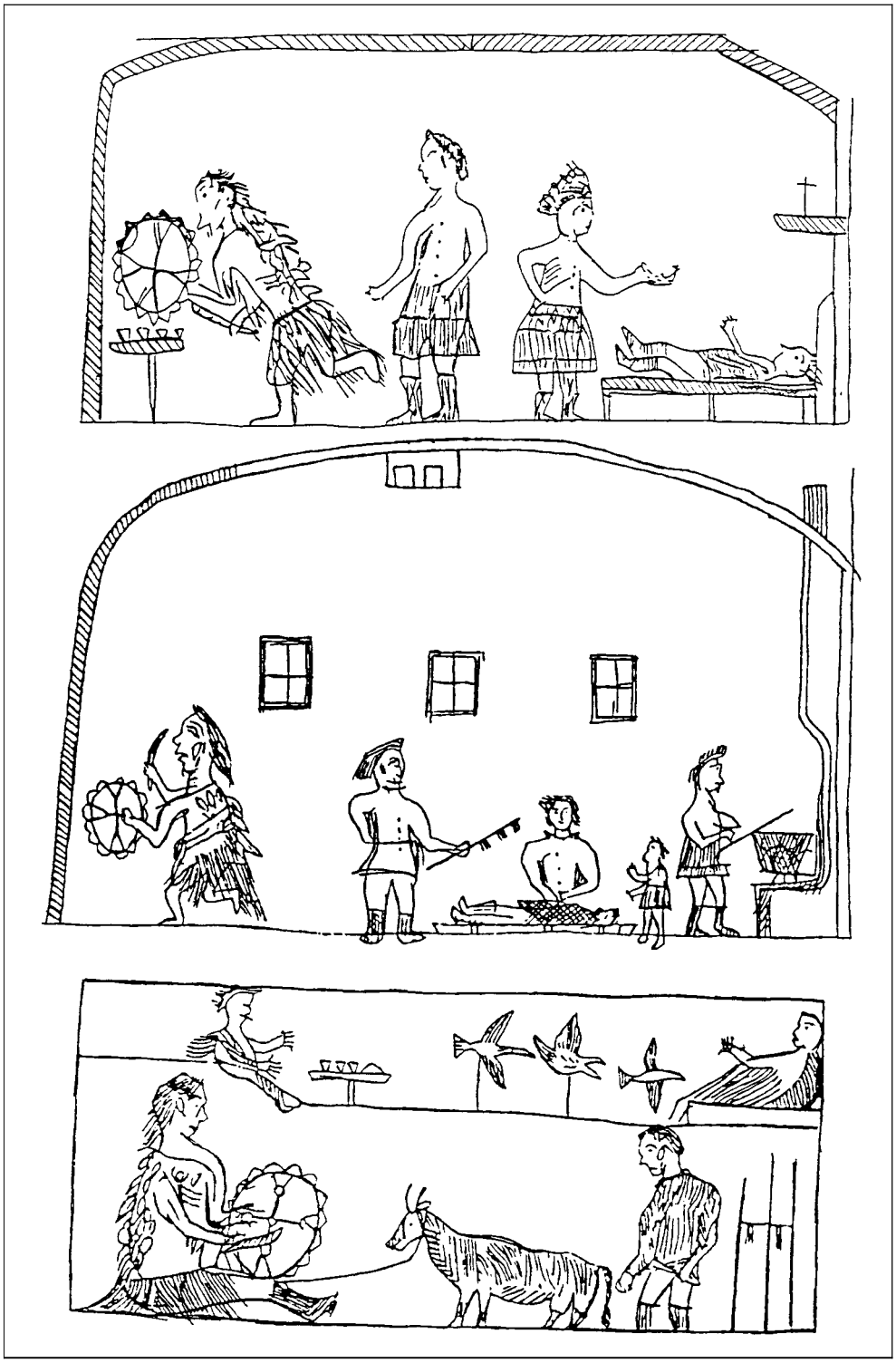

Figure 3.9 Shamans depicted on Yakut birch-bark tobacco containers (after Ivanov 1954).

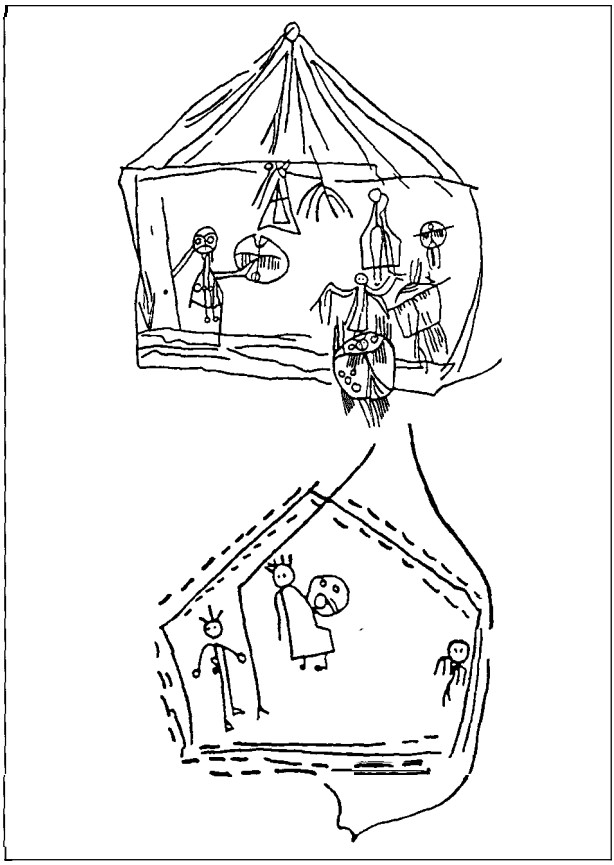

Figure 3.10 Shamanizing in a yurt. Rock art panels from the historical period, Shalkoby, Altai (after Okladnikova 1989).

shamans (Ivanov 1954). The ethnological sources show clearly how new saints were incorporated into the pantheons of the native Siberian peoples (Basilov 1998). People appealed to them for help, and even asked priests to pray for their intervention for good luck (Smoliak 1991). The composition of the images on the Yakut tobacco containers resembles that of some rock art panels with recent engravings from the Altai, which depict shamanic rituals in a ***yurt,*** the traditional dwelling of the nomads (Figure 3.10 shows *two* examples from Shalkoby; Okladnikova 1989).

Through the centuries the iconography of shamanic images retained its important basic features. **As** the technology of armour, tools and other items improved, cultic and ritual practice remained conservative and preserved its ancient roots. Until very recent times, only a very few members of the community were competent in the performance of these rites. Their symbolic frame of reference was passed on from generation to generation, and was retained in the material culture of sacral objects, equipment and images.

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