

THE BEAUTY OF THE PRIMITIVE

Shamanism and the Western Imagination



ANDREI A. ZNAMENSKI

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Who is the Drummer who beats upon the earth-drum?

Who is the Drummer who makes me to dance his song?

—Hartley B. Alexander, *God's Drum and Other
Cycles from Indian Lore* (1927)

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Preface

In the summer of 1998, I was working in south-central Alaska among the Athabaskan Indians, exploring their past and present spiritual life. In addition to visiting several remote villages, my research took me farther to Anchorage, where some Athabaskans live. When my trip was nearing its end, in the downtown of this large metropolitan center, I ran across two interesting persons by chance and talked with them almost half a day. Let us call them Jim and Caroline. Both of them are deeply interested in the Native American and Siberian indigenous spiritualities that they call shamanism. In fact, our mutual interest in “tribal” religions was the spark that ignited the conversation. What intrigued me was that not only were they interested in the topic but that they also tried to live those spiritualities, selecting from them those things they could use in their own lives.

Both Jim and Caroline are Caucasians of middle-class background with northern European ancestry. Jim is a real estate agent, and Caroline works in the University of Alaska health system. They are highly educated people, voracious readers, and very tolerant of other cultures, experiences, and religions. They are also what one might call metaphysical dreamers with antimodernist sentiments, but, at the same time, they struck me as cosmopolitan people who are more open to science and the modern world than, for example, some members of mainstream religious denominations. Another attractive feature of their thinking is the way they strive for natural harmony. To them, the sacred is present in nature rather than in a force called “God” that inflicts apocalyptic horrors on those who do not follow one “true” path. Jim and Caroline shared with me the difficulties they

have experienced trying to adjust their earth-based philosophy, which they associate with so-called tribal religions, to their Judeo-Christian backgrounds. During our meeting, Jim also talked at length about how shamanic practice helped him to overcome his alcohol addiction, which eventually made him a firm enthusiast of this ancient spiritual technique. Caroline invited me to visit a local Unitarian church to take part in its shamanic drumming session and to observe how they “do things.” In turn, I shared with them what I was doing and stories about places I was visiting.

This Anchorage meeting was my first serious introduction to the growing number of Western spiritual seekers who are trying to recover what they describe as ancient, tribal spirituality (which they frequently call shamanism) to resolve modern spiritual problems. Today, shamanic practices, usually in combination with other spiritual techniques, are booming in the West. Seminars, workshops, and retreats invite people to master the basics of shamanism. There is also a large body of literature on the topic and several specialized magazines with thousands of subscribers.

The word *shaman* comes from the Tungus (Evenki) *šaman* or *xaman*, which one can roughly render as “agitated,” “excited,” or “raised.” The Evenki, one of the indigenous groups in Siberia, use this term to refer to their spiritual practitioners of both genders. In the most generic sense, the shaman is a spiritual practitioner who, in the course of a ritual session, using a drum, a rattle, hallucinogens, or other devices, enters an altered state (sometimes also called a trance) in order to establish contact with spiritual forces in the other world. The goal of this spiritual encounter is to secure the help of spiritual beings that populate this otherworldly reality to resolve a problem, cure a patient, correct a misfortune, or predict the future. Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion and the author of a book considered to be a shamanology classic, described shamanism as “archaic techniques of ecstasy” and viewed it as the earliest form of religion.¹ Although many scholars now believe that the “ecstasy” (altered state) is not a necessary attribute of shamanism, for many Western seekers, this is one of the basic pillars of this spiritual practice.

At the same time, since the eighteenth century, when the word *shaman* was introduced into Western usage, it has meant different things to various people. For example, in the eighteenth century, Russian tsars treated shamans as exotic clowns, whom they added to the throng of court jesters. The Enlightenment explorers of Siberia considered shamans to be jugglers who duped their communities and who should be exposed. If one had described the ecstatic behavior of the shaman during a ritual séance to a classical Freudian scholar sometime in the early twentieth century, the analyst might have exclaimed, “This is a psychotic!” On the other hand, if one shows the shaman in action to current Jungian scholars, they might say that this is the process of active imagination, the acquisition of one’s essence. To many members of current nature communities in Europe and North America, the

shaman is a carrier of high spiritual and ecological wisdom capable of curing Western civilization. Some spiritual seekers are convinced that shamanism is another name for Native American spirituality. Others use the word simply as a synonym for animism and paganism. For some eco-feminist writers, who believe that patriarchy ruled the world in “primal times” and that the first shamans on the earth were women, shamanism describes feminine spiritual power. Finally, many current spiritual seekers see the shaman simply as a person who stays in touch with spirits. As such, the word is used very loosely to describe people who earlier were known under such names as the “medicine” man or woman, “sorcerer,” “conjurer,” “magician,” “witch doctor,” and “spiritualist.”

Contemplating what makes shamanism so alluring to some Westerners, I began to look into the cultural and intellectual sources of this attraction. The hundreds of books published on the topic of shamanism since the 1960s alone make this an attractive area for exploration. Even before I finished my Athabaskan Indian research, I had begun to read the literature and engage people like my Anchorage acquaintances Jim and Caroline in discussions. Two other projects sustained and expanded my interest in the new topic. Work on an anthology of the Russian writings on Siberian indigenous spirituality and then on a reader of major Western writings on shamanism² helped me to place the literature on shamanism and the popular interest in this phenomenon in the context of Western intellectual and cultural history. Working on these projects, I eventually began posing for myself the following questions: how was the expression *shamanism* introduced into Western usage? How have Western perceptions of shamanism changed over time? And why had shamanism, which was the object of a very marginal interest, suddenly attracted attention in the 1960s and 1970s?

These questions have defined the genre and the format of *The Beauty of the Primitive*, which I describe as an intellectual and cultural history. This book, which treats shamanism both as a metaphor and as a living spiritual technique, discusses the evolution of Western perceptions of shamanism from the eighteenth century to the present. It is also a story about those American and European seekers who pursue archaic techniques of ecstasy as spiritual practice. My major characters are mostly Western scholars, writers, explorers, spiritual seekers, and spiritual entrepreneurs with a variety of attitudes toward shamanism. The purpose of the book is to examine these views and experiences and to reconstruct the intellectual and cultural landscapes that influenced their thinking about shamanism. Although I approach their views and experiences seriously, I do not commit myself to judgments about the truth or falsity of a particular scholarly or spiritual path.

At the same time, I do have my personal take on the topic. I do not agree that we can dissociate shamanism and spiritual life in general from their contexts, or what Eliade called the “terror of history.” Although our spiritualities

and beliefs do acquire lives of their own, they carry the stamps of our upbringing, the spirit of our time, and our culture. As much as we may desire it, we cannot escape our history. Therefore, in talking about different perceptions of shamanism and describing neo-shamanic practices, I bring to light the ways in which people shape the past and present to suit contemporary tastes. The reader will see how popular cultural trends, as well as ideological and academic agendas and the life experiences of observers, have molded the views of shamanism.

The first half of the book deals with scholarly, literary, and travelers' perceptions of shamanism before the 1960s, when shamanism did not interest anybody except ethnographers and psychologists and when the word was reserved primarily for the description of indigenous religious practices in Siberia and western North America. Much of my story in this part of the volume naturally concerns the literature on Siberia and North America. The second half of the text deals with the growing appreciation of the shamanism idiom among spiritual seekers and academics since the 1960s. Here, I also discuss the emergence of neo-shamanic practices and the current state of shamanism studies. This part of the book is focused mainly on American scholarship and American spiritual communities, not only because neo-shamanism sprang up and now shines better in the United States, but also because I am more familiar with the American cultural scene and American writings on the topic. At the same time, for comparative purposes, I also draw on materials about neo-shamanism in other Western countries. Furthermore, in my last chapter, I return to Siberia to explore the fate of the shamanism idiom in its motherland in the twentieth century.

The premise of this book is that the growing appreciation of shamanism in the West is part of increasing antimodern sentiments, which have become especially noticeable since the 1960s. These sentiments have led many to discover the beauty of non-Western and pre-Christian European traditions that lie beyond the Judeo-Christian mainstream culture and that are linked to the worlds of the spiritual and the occult. Thus, before the 1960s, when belief in such core values of Western civilization as progress, materialism, and rationalism was at its peak, the interest in non-Western cultures and their archaic techniques of ecstasy was marginal, limited at best to anthropologists and a small group of intellectuals with primitivist and esoteric sentiments. After the 1960s and to the present day, when the lure of those Western values has dimmed, the attitudes toward non-Western religions have been clearly colored with a fascination that has acquired mass proportions. The most visible examples that come to mind are the popular appeal of Buddhism and Native Americana. The 1960s represent a landmark here.³ This was a decade when many Americans and Europeans not only began to scrutinize Western civilization critically but also to reject what had earlier been considered its

essentials. To some, the very expression *the West* became a curse, associated with colonialism and excessive materialism.

Since the 1960s, in the humanities and the social sciences, the anti-modern intellectual shift similarly has led to a greater emphasis on the human, spiritual, and irrational aspects of society's life and to an increasingly reverential attitude toward non-Western "people without history."⁴ Where their earlier colleagues had looked for materialistic explanations and the influence of faceless social and economic forces, the new generation of researchers began to see the unique, the individual, and the irrational. Scholars began to more actively bring people into the picture, including groups, experiences, and cultures that had earlier been considered marginal. The increasing use of the expressions *shaman* and *shamanism* can be attributed to that shift in the intellectual climate, which has accelerated since the 1960s.

When speaking of the pursuits of the archaic techniques of ecstasy, some current Western spiritual seekers, scholars, and writers call them *neo-shamanism*. In this book, I use this word along with the conventional term *shamanism*, specifying in each particular case what time period and geographical area I am intending. When discussing neo-shamanism and related spiritual pursuits, many academics also categorize them as *New Age*. This is a broad term that describes Western seekers who oppose, supplement, or go beyond the mainstream Judeo-Christian tradition. "New Agers" stress universal world spiritual traditions, eclectically borrow from the East and the West, and frequently treat their pursuits as a form of spiritual therapy. The expression *New Age* sometimes arouses objections among Western spiritual seekers as a term that refers to a superficial and "flaky" spirituality.⁵ Although I think that there is nothing wrong with this expression, I either use this term in quotation marks or occasionally replace "New Age" with a longer but neutral synonym, "mind, body, and spirit."

I also make use of such broad terms as *spiritual seekers* and *unchurched spirituality*. Although very general, the latter expression, introduced by religion historian Robert Fuller, captures the stance of the "New Age" and modern nature movements—"spiritual but not religious."⁶ For the descriptions of such practices as neo-shamanism, sociologists also use the expressions *new religious movements* and *alternative religions*. At the same time, I want to note that many "New Age" practices have been in existence for more than thirty years and, therefore, are not new any more. Furthermore, some elements of the "New Age" intellectual perspective have already entered the Western cultural mainstream, which makes one wonder if the word *alternative* is applicable in this case.

Historian Catherine Albanese offers another useful term, "nature religions,"⁷ which might even better capture the essence of neo-shamanism. The expression *nature religions* stresses the earth-based philosophy so essential to

the many spirituality groups that grew out of Western environmentalism in the 1970s. Moreover, this term allows us to describe such practices as Celtic shamanism, Wiccan shamanism, and other pagan communities, which do not exactly fit the profile of the “New Age”; the latter tends to be eclectic, to borrow from various cultures, and to believe that spiritual knowledge can be delivered through a workshop. Although the “New Age” and modern paganism overlap, pagans more often than not seek to ground themselves in particular cultural traditions and do not strive to construct global spirituality. In neo-shamanism, this pagan trend became especially visible in the 1990s, when many seekers moved away from eclectic reliance on non-Western traditions toward particular European spiritualities. In this case, some modern shamanism practitioners differ from the “New Age” with its emphasis on global and eclectic spirituality. Because such “nature religions” as neo-shamanism are too fluid and impromptu to be called religions, I have slightly changed the Albanese term and use it in my book as *nature spiritualities*. I also use its derivatives, such as *nature community* and *nature communities*. Last but not least, it is essential to remember that neo-shamanism as well as other “New Age” and modern nature movements represent episodes in the history of Western esotericism. As historian of religion Kocku von Stuckrad reminds us, claims to perennial sacred knowledge acquired through extraordinary states of consciousness and invocations of ancient wisdom and nature philosophy are recurring themes in Western cultural history and go back to Gnostic tradition.⁸ At the same time, I urge the reader to exercise caution while reading the above-mentioned generalizations. The variety of neo-shamanic (and shamanic) practices makes them too elusive to neatly fit any rigid framework of an academic classification.

I also want to stress that I am not among those academics who look down upon modern Western shamanism as something artificial and imagined in contrast to an ideal, “real” shamanism found, say, among nineteenth-century native Siberians or Native Americans.⁹ Neither do I agree with those writers and scholars who portray Western practitioners of shamanism as spiritual colonizers who feed on indigenous spirituality. I equally disagree with those who dismiss these spiritual seekers as hopeless romantics, simply because I am not convinced that being a romantic or a dreamer is a liability. At the same time, I am not a spiritual seeker who experiments with shamanic techniques. I am a sympathetic observer, who does not believe that neo-shamanism, as fuzzy and fluid as it may be, is a spirituality of a lesser caliber than Native American beliefs, Scientology, Catholicism, evangelical Christianity, Wicca, Mormonism, or Hinduism.

Although my book is the first comprehensive attempt to set shamanism studies and neo-shamanism broadly in the context of the Western culture, I do have scholarly predecessors who have covered some aspects of this theme. First of all, I want to acknowledge the contribution of Ronald Hutton. In his

Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination (2001), he explores perceptions of Siberian shamanism in Russia and the West from the 1600s to the present time. At the same time, Hutton, a historian of modern witchcraft, is more famous for his ground-breaking *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (1999).¹⁰ Although methodologically I benefited more from the second book, I do appreciate his first one; it provides a good discussion of the historiography of Siberian shamanism, both Marxist and non-Marxist. Because Hutton covers this topic well, in my chapter on Siberia, I only briefly address historiography and instead concentrate on the attitudes of Soviet ideologists toward shamanism and on the rise of indigenous neo-shamanism in post-communist Siberia.

Another work that I want to bring to acknowledge is *Shamans through Time* (2000). This anthology, compiled by anthropologists Jeremy Narby and Francis Huxley, samples brief excerpts from scholarly and travel writings on shamanism from the sixteenth century to modern times. I recommend this text as a documentary companion to my book. I would also like to acknowledge research done by historian of religion Kocku von Stuckrad, whose *Schamanismus und Esoterik* (2003) helped me to see better the place of neo-shamanism within modern Western esotericism. I am also pleased to use this occasion to thank this colleague of mine for giving a critical read to the entire manuscript of *The Beauty of the Primitive* and for providing me with good intellectual feedback. Another debt is to *Dream Catchers* (2004) by Philip Jenkins, who has traced the American romance with Native American spirituality from early colonial days to the present. His exhaustive discussion of this topic helped me to better situate the Native American connection to modern Western shamanism.

Finally, in her *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century* (1992), literary scholar Gloria Flaherty examines Enlightenment perceptions of indigenous spiritualities in Siberia and North America.¹¹ Particularly, she argues that the fascination with the “beauty of the primitive” came into view during the age of Enlightenment. Indeed, this period gave rise to the concept of the “noble savage” and also enhanced interest in esotericism—a reaction to the excesses of rationalism. Yet, Enlightenment observers remained predominantly skeptical about non-Western nature religions, treating them as a corruption of “higher” classical religions and as natural specimens to be cataloged and classified. Furthermore, despite the obvious fascination of early nineteenth-century Romantic writers with the spiritual and the non-Western, this little altered the dominant Enlightenment skepticism toward “tribal” religions. It was only at the turn of the twentieth century that attitudes toward non-Western spirituality began to seriously change; during that time, the ideas of the Enlightenment, with its focus on modernity, materialism, and rationalism, gradually began to lose their appeal in society. Still, it was sixty more years before faith in Western civilization was shattered, and fascination with non-Western

spiritualities, the occult, and the sacred reached mass proportions and eventually entered the American and European cultural mainstream during the 1970s and the 1980s.

The general format of my project—to explore the origin of the shamanism idiom and the history of Western perceptions of shamanism—implies mining a large amount of relevant literature. This has defined the major sources I used for writing *The Beauty of the Primitive*, which are published materials: books, proceedings of shamanism practitioners' meetings, spirituality periodicals, and newspapers. Doing research for the second half of the book, which discusses neo-shamanism, I also relied on my conversations and interviews with academics who do research on shamanism and with spiritual seekers who situate their activities as shamanic. Mostly, these talks were informal conversations and discussions. At the same time, with several of them, I had long formal interviews.

Working on this book, I enjoyed the assistance of many people: scholars, spiritual seekers, editors, and friends. My first debt to acknowledge is to Cynthia Reed, an editor from Oxford University Press, who accepted this book when it was only at the proposal stage and who excused me twice for missing deadlines for the delivery of the manuscript. I am also grateful to anthropologists Douglas Sharon, David Whitley, and Johannes Wilbert for discussing with me their research on shamanism. I would like to acknowledge the help of the spiritual seekers whom I chose to quote in this book. First, my thanks go to the Society of Celtic Shamans and to its informal head, Tira Brandon-Evans. I also extend my gratitude to Eric Perry and Jack Bennett for taking me along on their shamanic journeys and to Deanna Stennett for exposing me to her spiritual therapy based on so-called core shamanism. My special thanks go to transpersonal psychologist and spiritual practitioner Jurgen Kremer, who shared with me his ideas and experiences on how to make oneself more tribal and indigenous within modern Western culture. I also thank Don Wright for involving me in his spiritual sessions centered on the use of replicas of ancient Peruvian whistling bottles and Jan van Vanysslestyne for sharing with me her experiences of bringing Siberian shamanism to North America. I am equally grateful to Wind Daughter, the medicine chief of the Bear Tribe, who generously contributed information about the late Sun Bear. During my travels to southwestern Siberia, I greatly benefited from the help of Mergen Kleshev, my indigenous host and navigator, whom I would like to thank for introducing me to several traditional and newly minted shamanism practitioners in Mountain Altai.

Another debt of gratitude goes to Alabama State University's Department of Humanities, which provided me with a two-year research leave (2002–2004). During this time, I was able to complete the first draft of this book. I would also like to thank the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress and the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan, for

granting me visiting fellowships which sustained me during those two years. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the American Philosophical Society. Although it already had sponsored my research twice in the past, I want to thank the society's fellowship committee for bestowing on me its grant for the third time, which helped me to complete the work on this manuscript.

In Japan, I especially appreciated the help and collegiality of Koichi Inoue, senior ethnologist from the Slavic Research Center. I am grateful to him not only for our long discussions of Siberian shamanism and neo-shamanism but also for introducing me to the world of *itako*, Japanese female shamans. Here in the United States, I benefited from the help of another senior colleague, Sergei Kan, who kindly shared with me his knowledge of and materials on several characters I discuss in chapters 2 and 3. I also want to thank him for constant moral support during the past few years. When the book was complete, two other close colleagues assisted me in putting the manuscript into good shape. Carolyn Pevey, a sociologist of religion, invested her time in a critical reading of several chapters of the book, which convinced me to make some useful changes in the text. Her help is greatly appreciated. My deep gratitude extends to Jackie Payne, a colleague and a friend from the Department of Humanities, Alabama State University, who edited and proofread this book. I am sure that without her editorial assistance, this text would have been less readable.

My other debts are more personal. I am grateful to my wife, Susan, who perfectly embodies the type of person of whom I write in the second half of this book and whom some scholars describe as "spiritual but not religious." Her readings and experiences brought to my attention sources and cultural outlets that helped me better to grasp the place of neo-shamanism within modern nature, goddess, and eco-feminist spiritualities. Last, but not least, with his passion for the cartoon movie *Shaman King*, my son, little Andrei, introduced me to another manifestation of the shamanism idiom in current Western culture.

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Contents

1. Enlightenment and Romantic Writers Look at Shamans, 3
 2. From Siberia to North America:
Regionalists, Anthropologists, and Exiled Ethnographers, 39
 3. Neurotics to Tribal Psychoanalysts:
Shamans through the Eyes of Psychology, 79
 4. Power Plants:
Psychedelic Culture Meets Tribal Spirituality, 121
 5. Shamanism Goes Global:
Mircea Eliade and Carlos Castaneda, 165
 6. Anthropology, Castaneda's Healing Fiction, and
Neo-shamanism Print Culture, 205
 7. Toward the Ancient Future:
Shamanism in the Modern West, 233
 8. Sources of Inspiration:
From Native Americana to European Pagan Folklore, 273
 9. Back to Siberia:
Adventures of the Metaphor in Its Motherland, 321
- Epilogue, 363
- Notes, 371
- Bibliographical Essay, 417
- Index, 425

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I

Enlightenment and Romantic Writers Look at Shamans

SHAMANS, noun, masc. plural, is the name that the inhabitants of Siberia give to impostors who perform the functions of priests, jugglers, sorcerers, and doctors.

—*Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts, et des Métiers* (1765)

Anyone who observed a genuine shaman at the peak of his ecstasy will absolutely admit that he does not deceive, at least at that moment. In reality, he is under the affect [*sic*] of his involuntary and uncontrolled intensely stimulated imagination.

—Ferdinand von Wrangel, Russian-German explorer (1841)

As I mentioned in the preface, the word *shaman* originated from the language of the Tungus (Evenki), one of the Siberian indigenous groups. Russian settlers in Siberia chose this expression and eventually began to apply it to all native spiritual healers. One may wonder why the newcomers came to prioritize this Evenki expression over other indigenous words that described spiritual practitioners. I guess this happened because, unlike other natives, the Evenki reindeer nomads resided literally all over Siberia. Russian and Western explorers encountered pockets of their communities from central Siberia to the coast of the Pacific Ocean. In addition, the Evenki pleased the eyes of explorers with their beautiful clothing and tattoos (see figure 1.1). Eventually, to European travelers, the picturesque Tungus came to symbolize the archetypical Siberian natives. This could be a reason



FIGURE 1.1. The Tungus (Evenki), whose settlements were scattered all over east-central Siberia and whose picturesque attire impressed explorers, gave shamanism its name. Johann Gottlieb Georgi, *Das eröffnete Russland, oder Sammlung von Kleidertrachten aller im Russischen Reiche wohnenden Völker* (St. Petersburg, n.p., 1774), plate “Tungus Hunter.”

that the newcomers naturally chose the Evenki *shaman* over other tribal definitions as the generic term for all Siberian spiritual practitioners.

At the same time, despite their attraction to particular elements of native crafts and lore, the first explorers, who introduced *shaman* into Western usage, were skeptical about Siberian indigenous spirituality. Driven by the Enlightenment philosophy with its rationalism and skepticism, many eighteenth-century travelers to Siberia were not fascinated with shamanism whatsoever. In line with the dominant rationalist ideas, many explorers denounced it as primitive superstition, which some of them considered a corruption of higher classical religions. The first change of sentiments among educated European observers toward the tribal archaic techniques of ecstasy coincided with the rise of Romanticism, which injected into the writings of travelers and explorers an element of attraction to both the bright and the dark “Gothic” sides of

shamanism. In this chapter, in addition to discussing Enlightenment travel writings on Siberia, we will learn about the contribution of Romantic writers and scholars, who laid the foundations of shamanism studies. Among them are such pioneers of shamanology as Orientalist Dorji Banzarov and Finnish folklore scholars and writers. Although inspired by different intellectual and cultural ideals, all of them found tribal spirituality to be attractive and worthy of recording. I will finish this chapter with a discussion of Wilhelm Radloff. One of the prominent representatives of European Romantic Orientalism, this Russian-German linguist and ethnographer pioneered shamanism studies and wrote a book that remained the major source on “classical” shamanism for Western audiences until 1900.

The Birth of the Metaphor: Eighteenth-Century Enlightenment Explorers

Since Russians were the first to use the word shaman to generalize about Siberian spiritual practitioners, some writers mistakenly assume that Russian authors introduced this expression into Western literature and scholarship. In reality, the people who brought the word shaman into Western usage and intellectual culture were the eighteenth-century Germanic explorers and scientists who visited Siberia. They used the word *schaman* to familiarize educated European and American audiences with ecstatic séances performed by native Siberian spiritual “doctors.” Many Russian accounts which mentioned shamans existed in manuscripts but remained unknown even to Russians until the late nineteenth century.¹ As a result, Russian-educated people learned about Siberian shamans from original or translated writings of Western explorers of Siberia.

The first published account that widely samples the shamans (*schaman*) from various Siberian communities is *North and East Tartary* (1692) by the Dutch explorer Nicolaas Witsen (see figure 1.2). An Amsterdam mayor, Witsen traveled to Russia in 1664 and 1665 and collected vast data on the geography, resources, and people of Siberia, the area that he and some of his contemporaries called the Tartary.²

It is also notable that the image of the Tungus shaman he reproduced in his book showed a man in a fur coat with animal claws, caught in his ecstatic dance. The caption under the picture explained that it was the shaman, the priest of the devil, which mirrored the widespread assessment of tribal spiritual practitioners before the age of Enlightenment. Before the eighteenth century, indigenous spiritual healers in Siberia and beyond were routinely demonized as servants of dark, evil forces. Although in the eighteenth century this attitude framed in Christian phraseology more or less disappeared from secular literature, it remained well represented in the writings of Western missionaries until the twentieth century.



FIGURE 1.2. “Tungus Shaman; or, The Priest of the Devil.” A drawing from *North and East Tartary* (1692) by Nicolaas Witsen. Courtesy of Tjeerd de Graaf, Nicolaas Witsen Project, Netherlands.

In addition to Witsen, German-speaking explorers were the first to disseminate, design, and shape the content of the expression *shamanism* among educated Westerners. In fact, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, several English and French texts which described Siberian indigenous beliefs preferred to render the word shaman in its original German version: *schaman*.³ Why was it not Russian but Western explorers who were the first to reflect in print on Siberian spiritual practitioners? Since the times of tsar Peter the Great, Russia, a European peripheral nation that lacked an educated cadre, sought to hire people from Europe, primarily German-speaking scientists, to survey the geography and resources of its frontier areas. These explorers traversed the Siberian wilderness, mapping tundra and taiga forest, searching for mineral resources, measuring temperatures, collecting and recording exotic specimens and antiquities. Along with minerals, plants, and animal species, the eighteenth-century explorers diligently cataloged the ways and manners of indigenous populations, including such “bizarre” superstitions as shamanism.

Daniel Messerschmidt (1685–1735) was one of the first explorers to be hired by the Russians. Like many learned people of the Enlightenment age, the explorer, a physician by profession, was a jack of all trades. During his Siberian expedition, Messerschmidt acted as a naturalist, geographer, Orientalist, and even archaeologist, examining ancient rock art. The scientist attached to himself as an assistant a Swedish army officer, Philip Johann von Strahlenberg, an educated man who was a prisoner of war exiled to Siberia. In his book published in German in 1726, Strahlenberg introduced European audiences to

a detailed image of the Siberian drum, which he observed in southwestern Siberia and which he compared with the drums of “Laplanders,” the Sámi people from northern Scandinavia. To contemporary Europeans, the latter were classic magicians and sorcerers. Incidentally, Strahlenberg was also the first to report about the hallucinogenic effects of the fly mushroom. At the same time, the way he described this plant did not say anything about its ritual use.⁴

More comprehensive information about shamanism came later, from a team of explorers who surveyed Siberia on the assignment of the Russian Academy of Sciences between 1733 and 1743. The members of the expedition, naturalists Johann Georg Gmelin and George Steller, student assistant Stepan Krasheninnikov, historian Gerhard Müller, and the expedition’s recordkeeper, Jacob Johann Lindenau, keenly observed and recorded shamanism. Lindenau, for example, even went as far as to record the texts of the Tungus (Evenki) shamanic chants in the native language with German translations. Another set of detailed records originated from a second academic expedition (1768–1774), which was sponsored by the Russian empress Catherine the Great, one of those European enlightened despots who considered herself a patron of sciences and education. In addition to its head, zoologist Peter Simon Pallas (1741–1811), the expedition included naturalist Johann Gottlieb Georgi, botanist Johann-Peter Falk, and Pallas’s Russian student assistant Vasilii Zuev. Published and republished in major European languages, the writings of the participants of these two expeditions established the basic clichés of what Westerners began to call shamanism. These explorers planted in the minds of their readers the view of shamans as either skillful deceivers, simply weird people, or, worse, easily irritated neurotics. Being scientists and collectors, these children of the Enlightenment age were naturally skeptical of indigenous spiritual “delusions.”

Georgi and Pallas articulated well this Enlightenment attitude to shamans by coloring their skepticism with dismissive and derogatory expressions. Georgi stressed that Siberian shamans “produce pranks characteristic for the insane and behave as madmen.” They “shout,” details the explorer, “twist their mouths,” and “roar, mumbling various nonsense.” All these manipulations, added the ethnographer, are usually produced in darkness and to scare spectators. On his part, describing a typical shamanic séance among the Ostiak (Khanty), Pallas repeated these words almost verbatim: a shamanic session is just “shouting” and “making noise,” during which a spiritual practitioner “mumbles nonsense.” Observing a séance performed by an Evenki shamaness, Pallas informed his readers that the woman “jumped, posed, grimaced in every way, while hiccupping, murmuring, and cuckooing and finally beginning to act as if she lost her mind.” The explorer was not of a high opinion about the moral status of the people he observed: “Usually these shamans are the most cunning people. Through skillful interpretation of their own dreams and other tall tales they achieve a respected status.”⁵ It is notable that such a contemporary dignity as the Russian empress Catherine the Great, who liked to position

herself as a well-rounded woman of letters, picked up that skeptical and dismissive attitude toward Siberian shamanism. In her play *The Siberian Shaman* (1786), she mocked tribal spiritual practices in the character of shaman Amban-Lai, who is brought by a noble family to St. Petersburg to heal their daughter. In this play, the greedy and unscrupulous swindler manipulates this family's life and fools his audiences with cheap tricks. In addition, the empress used the play to ridicule representatives of her own high society for their eager response to all things esoteric: "You are like shamans. All of you deceive yourself by following imagined rules, and then dupe those who trust you."⁶

Even those eighteenth-century observers who, like the above-mentioned German scholar Müller, a would-be father of Russian history scholarship, came to Siberia specifically to survey geography, antiquities, and the history of the area, looked down at the manifestations of indigenous spirituality. In the northern Altai, among the Shor people, whom he called Tatars and the Teleut, Müller had a chance to observe a shamanistic séance. The whole performance did not impress him: "It suffices for me to say that all of them [séances] are basically similar. Nothing miraculous happens. The shaman emits an unpleasant howling, while jumping about senselessly and beating a flat drum which has iron bells attached inside to intensify the din." Müller stressed that these shamans are miserable deceivers worthy of condemnation: "It does not take long, however, to be convinced of the futility of the farce, of the deceit by those earning their living in this way." Having finished the description of the ceremony, Müller even asked his readers to excuse him for distracting their attention from the body of his main narrative. The explorer explained this digression as his obligation as a diligent observer to record everything he saw.⁷

It is notable that Georgi, a participant in the second academic expedition, approached shamanism with similar reservations. Admitting that he had to provide the full picture of Siberian native beliefs, the explorer nevertheless stressed that he shortened his observations of shamanic "magic and conjuring tricks due to their obvious foolishness" for the fear that a detailed picture of shamanism might offend his readers.⁸

Russian naturalist Krasheninnikov, who became famous for his first complete description of the Kamchatka peninsula, found satisfaction in exposing shamans. Describing the "tricks" of the Itel'men shaman Karyml'acha, whom local natives and Russians kept in high esteem, the explorer told his readers that he had had a good laugh watching how the shaman had "slashed" his guts by cutting a seal's bladder filled with blood that he had hidden under his abdomen. He concluded his observation with a generalization that such cheap tricks would not even qualify shamans to serve as the apprentices of average European magicians or clowns. Pallas and Müller totally agreed with their Russian colleague. The first one wrote that at any European fair Siberian "pocket tricksters" would fail miserably, while the second noted that their "vulgar and miserable tricks" did not match the shows "performed by our wandering

magicians." The overall conclusion of the Enlightenment observers was that as second-rate "performers" and "clowns," Siberian spiritual practitioners were good for nothing. Moreover, Johann Gmelin suggested that in order to teach them a good lesson the government should condemn these "mediocre performers" who "cheated their fellows" to perpetual labor in silver mines.⁹

It appears, however, that Russian officials had other plans for shamans. As soon as the word about the exotic appearance of the spiritual doctors and their ecstatic drumming began to reach the imperial court, the Russian royalty sought to make Siberian "magicians" a staple part of court pageants, parades, and entertainment shows that usually sampled the variety of "curiosities" found within the borders of the empire. These types of grand shows, which Peter the Great introduced into court life, were to display the grandeur of the largest surface empire. In the papers of Peter the Great, there is an order that instructs a Siberian governor-general to find from three to four Samoed (Nentsy) shamans and to deliver them to Moscow. Since this administrator was apparently too slow in his search for tribal "magicians," in his second order the tsar sternly reminded him to take the instruction seriously and to bring the shamans to the court promptly "without any excuse." Peter the Great even threatened the official: "If you find some other excuses and do not send the shamans to Moscow, you will be fined." Eventually, in fulfillment of the emperor's order, a small group of common natives, who were not spiritual practitioners, was brought to St. Petersburg and added to the group of court jesters to amuse the tsar's guests.

It is curious that later, in 1722 and then again two years later, Peter still insisted on delivery of a group of "magicians" to his court. Now the emperor contemplated a pageant for which he needed four shamans along with several native families of "tattooed mugs," the nickname Russians used for the Tungus (Evenki), who were famous not only for their splendid clothing but also for picturesque facial tattoos. The most detailed communication was the 1724 emperor's order that instructed the Siberian governor-general to "search with eagerness notwithstanding any expenses" for shamans among various tribes and to bring them together with their "good appropriate shamanic costumes and drums." Also, the administrator was to select the best ones to ship to the court. Zealous officials herded together twenty-five native spiritual practitioners and delivered them to the Russian empire's capital.¹⁰ Empress Ann continued the tradition of court pageants that showed the ethnography and natural curiosities of the empire. For example, in 1740, she threw a mock wedding for her two court jesters. Magnificent in its grandeur, the event involved about two hundred people representing all known tribes of her empire and included people dressed in Tungus shaman costumes. Incidentally, the ritual outfits came from the ethnographic collections gathered during the first and second academic expeditions to Siberia, which were stored in the Imperial Academy of Sciences.

Like the people from the Russian court, Enlightenment explorers did not shy away from using their official credentials to manipulate with shamans as they wished. The travelers similarly ordered local administrators to “deliver” or to “ship” shamans to designated locations, which was natural for the fieldwork methods of that age. The purpose was to observe and scrutinize carefully the primitive magic in order to debunk it. For example, historian Müller widely practiced this type of ethnographic “investigation.” In 1738, upon reaching Buryat country, he found out that en route near the town of Irkutsk there lived a famous healer, Lazar Deibogorov. Müller demanded that town officials deliver the shaman to the city. After the officials brought the healer to the scholar, Müller learned that there were two more powerful shamans who, as he heard, “cut and slash themselves with knives during their performances.” So the scholar issued another order “to command them, shamans, to go to Irkutsk along with their entire shamanic devices and knives with which they cut themselves.” In his desire to dismember shamanic séances and to catch spiritual practitioners in acts of trickery, Müller ordered a Sakha shamaness to perform for him twice in the presence of specially selected witnesses, including Gmelin. After the audience was finally able to expose the spiritual practitioner, Müller forced her to sign a self-exposing testimony that stated that her spiritual work was a fraud. In this document, the shamaness confesses that, “fearing to lose her credentials,” she agreed to perform in the hope of deceiving the scientists, but she could not do this because she “was not able genuinely to cut herself without inflicting a wound.”¹¹ Very much like Müller, Pallas ordered shamans to be delivered to him in order to better scrutinize their craft (see figure 1.3). Once, when a Khakass shaman refused to be delivered to the explorer and hid away somewhere, Pallas had his ritual attire, including a robe, and a drum confiscated.¹²

Pallas traveled in the company of an eighteen-year-old research assistant named V. F. Zuev. This youth journeyed part of the route separately from his boss, visiting the Ostiak (Khanty) and Samoed (Nentsy). Zuev’s description of the shamans from these two groups heavily affected Pallas’s assessment of Siberian spiritual practitioners. Zuev noted that the shamans he met were marked by “madness” and a “sense of fear [*puzhlivost*],” qualities that he cited as two major signs of their vocation. With stunned surprise, a few times Zuev observed shamanic séances, which he saw as “passions of craze.” The youth also became a witness of the incidents of so-called arctic hysteria, when people went “crazy,” imitating all of the gestures of surrounding people, having seizures and convulsions, or attacking other persons and wrecking things. To be exact, scholars are still not sure what specifically caused this phenomenon, once widespread in the arctic area. Among possible reasons, they name vitamin deficiency, the detrimental effect of long polar nights on human minds, and the psychological consequences of colonial oppression. What is important for us here is that in Zuev’s mind shamanism, with its crazy bodily movements, and arctic hysteria merged into the same pattern of crazy behavior.



FIGURE I.3. Types of shamans from southern Siberia: a view of an Enlightenment explorer. Peter Simon Pallas, *Puteshestvie po raznym miestam Rossiiskago gosudarstva* (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaia Akademiia nauk, 1788), 3:345.

Speculating on the origin of the “insane” nature of the Siberians in general, Zuev guessed, “I do not know how we should explain this. It could be their general weakness, gullibility, or simply stupidity. To be honest, I would rather classify this behavior as some sort of illness.” Although, according to Zuev, all native Siberians suffered from the hysteria, shamans manifested this illness in its extreme: “When you irritate the shaman too much, he becomes wildly insane. He gallops, rolls on the ground, and hoots. In such moments, the shaman is also ready to hit people around him with what he holds in his hands.”¹³

Pallas not only included in his book the speculations of his assistant about the “insane” and “fearful” nature of shamans, but he also expanded them. The naturalist generalized that, based on what he “heard from the other people,” the hysterical behavior of Samoed (Nentsy), Tungus (Evenki), and Kamchadal (Itel’men) shamans “developed partially from an irritability of their bodies and excessive strain they place on their minds, and partially from surrounding climate, the specifics of their craft, and the imagination distorted by superstitions.”¹⁴ Moreover, solely relying on Zuev’s report, the scientist concluded that among the Nentsy and the Sakha the hysteria (“scare”) and “madness” reached epidemic proportions; in a state of irritation, the raging “madmen” could kill

either themselves or people who accidentally scared them. Later writers on Siberian religions repeatedly referred to Pallas's observations, adding to them their own comments until sometime at the end of the nineteenth century European writers began to routinely associate shamanism with a mental deviation. Eventually, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the link between shamanism and hysteria gradually acquired the status of an academic theory.

Dismissing shamanic practices as miserable and vulgar miracles or diagnosing them as mental ailments, several Enlightenment observers nevertheless tried to explore the origin of these "delusions." Thus, in his *History of Siberia* (1750), Müller speculated if such "perverse teaching" as shamanism sprang up naturally in various localities or originated from a single source? The scholar was inclined to trace the roots of shamanism from the classic Orient. Müller suggested that the cradle of shamanism was India, from where it gradually spread all over Asia, then to Scandinavia, and eventually to native North America. The historian also surmised that the spearheads of this phenomenon were the most ancient inhabitants of India, who had been driven from their country by the "Brahmin" latecomers. By moving out of India, the ancient ones spread themselves over vast areas of Asia, carrying with them their primal religion. While drifting northward and mixing with local people, noted the historian, the ancient Hindu people gradually degenerated, forgot the high wisdom of their ancestors, and developed what later became known as shamanism in its Siberian version with all its crude tricks, like ecstatic dances and drumming. To Müller, the fact that both contemporary northern Asian shamanism and Hindu beliefs were polytheistic pointed to the genetic "Indian connection" in shamanism. The historian also reasoned that if Buddhism had spread from India to Tibet, China, Mongolia, and even to Siberia, nothing prevented us from assuming that shamanism had spread in the same manner from the same source.¹⁵

Georgi, a contemporary fellow explorer of Siberia, who defined the shaman as the "hermit in possession of all passions," similarly searched for the sources of the ancient faith in the East. Like Müller, he was convinced that shamanism represented a degenerative version of classical "pagan faiths" of a "higher caliber," such as Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. At the same time, his generalizations on shamanism were more extensive than the ones of his Enlightenment colleagues. Thus, Georgi found it necessary to include in his four-volume description of all peoples residing in the Russian empire an essay titled "On Pagan Shamanic Order." The explorer also offered his explanation of how in their northward migration those classical faiths might have lost their noble character: "Because of wars, rebellions, population movements, wanderings, the lack of education, and the misinterpretation of tales by stupid and deceiving priestly people, this order [shamanism] was turned into disgusting idol worshipping and blind superstition."¹⁶ To Georgi, the impromptu nature of contemporary inner Asian and Siberian shamanism with its lack of

monotheism and any religious dogma was the clear proof of the “degenerative” character of the ancient faith.

Incidentally, the attempt to locate the sources of shamanism in India was not some peculiar hypothesis introduced by Georgi and Müller. Their speculations reflected a popular intellectual stance that was coming into fashion. In the age of Enlightenment, many scholars and writers, especially those who questioned the authority of the Bible and Christianity, turned to India, trying to draw from there the sources of all great religions and civilizations. Later, Romantic writers embraced and expanded this idea.

Out of India: Romantic Orientalism about the Sources of Shamanism

The desire to look for answers in the “Himalaya” became the established scholarly theory in nineteenth-century Orientalism. Commenting on this geographic preference of his Romantic contemporaries, Adolph Erman, a German explorer of Siberia, ironically wrote of an “attempt to establish a mysterious depot for everything which being elsewhere undiscoverable.”¹⁷ One of the major spearheads of this intellectual stance became Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), the late Enlightenment thinker and one of the pioneers of early Romanticism. He summarized his intellectual preferences in catchy phrases that sounded like chants: “O holy land [India], I salute to thee, thou source of all music, thou voice of the heart”; and “Behold the East—cradle of the human race, of human emotion, of all religion.”¹⁸ Friedrich Schlegel was another prominent Romantic writer and philosopher who promoted the same perception. He invested much time into studying Sanskrit and was among the first to come up with a famous theory that this language of Indian antiquity was the original proto-language shared by both Eastern and Western civilizations. Schlegel also drew historical connections from his linguistic theory. He stressed particularly that the Sanskrit-speaking Aryan nomadic tribes of Caucasian origin, who had conquered India, gave rise to classical Near Eastern, Greek, and Roman civilizations and thus laid the foundation for Western civilization. Later, to describe these Aryan forerunners, scholars and writers coined a special expression: “Indo-Europeans.”¹⁹

To my knowledge, Schlegel was among the first to trace the origin of the word shaman to Sanskrit. In his 1820s works, the philosopher indicated that shaman originated from *samaneans*, a classical antiquity expression that described Buddhist priests in ancient India. Therefore, as Schlegel stressed, *schaman* was a “pure Indian” word. Besides, he remarked, it contained “quite a philosophical sense.” In his lectures on world intellectual history, Schlegel speculated on the philosophical meaning of the expression. Draping this meaning in Hindu colors, he interpreted *schaman* as an “equability of mind” that

is “requisite to the perfect union with the God.” Furthermore, Schlegel was seriously convinced that all Siberian natives used the expression *schaman* as a generic word for their spiritual practitioners. It is possible that he drew this false impression from a superficial reading of the Müller, Georgi, or Pallas books. Moreover, Schlegel stretched out the geography of the word beyond Siberia, insisting that both the “considerable portion of the Tartar races” and northern and even central Asian natives all described their priests and magicians by the word *schaman*.²⁰

The philosopher believed that the Buddhist *samaneans*, proto-shamans, were squeezed northward as a result of their conflict with “Brachmans,” another ancient Indian “sect.” The rest of his story replicated the familiar Enlightenment hypothesis about the northward expansion of shamanism. Repeating the theories of Müller and Georgi, Schlegel argued that, in the process of migration, the “crude nations of Central Asia,” which were “sunk to the lowest degree of barbarism and superstition,” distorted classical Buddhism. The novelty the philosopher brought to this theory was the linguistic link that was to prove the Indian connection in northern Asian shamanism. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the famous historian of religions Max Müller, who similarly believed that India was the original home of civilized humanity, made this “linguistic method” a staple approach in exploring possible links among various spiritual traditions in ancient times.

Those of Schlegel’s contemporaries who worked in the same Romantic tradition and who wrote about shamanism might have differed from each other in details, but the line of reasoning was the same: shamanism is the degenerated northern version of classical Oriental beliefs. All of them took it for granted that the crude natives of northern Asia could not create a religion of their own and simply had to borrow spiritual ideas from civilizations of classic antiquity. For example, a colorful version of the Oriental connection in shamanism was offered by Polish explorer Ludwik Niemojowski. This inquisitive observer, who eagerly sought to witness Siberian shamanic sessions, insisted that “in prehistoric times” shamanism, which he called the “black faith,” flourished in the eastern and southern portions of Asia and especially in India. Unlike Schlegel and his predecessors, who never specified the particular center of shamanism in India, Niemojowski boldly pinpointed its “chief seat”—the “Attock” and “Peshawur” areas of India.²¹

Niemojowski portrayed the process of the northern “degeneration” of shamanism as a grand spiritual drama. At first, as he wrote, Brahmanism and Buddhism, which emanated “patience and gentleness,” gradually squeezed out adherents of shamanism, the faith “steeped in witchcraft and blood,” sending them northward from India to inner Asia and Siberia. Eventually, “the shamans settled in the ice-bound parts of Asia and Europe, some even, reaching the rocky shores of Scandinavia, spread around the White Sea, and the Finn races (Laplanders, Samoieds) have succumbed to their influence; others settled

in Siberia, and inoculated the wandering aborigines with their religious ideas."²² While to the high Oriental civilization on the shores of the Ganges, continued the writer, this religion appeared barbarous, the "primitive races" of northern Eurasia, who lived in a "semi-bestial state" and had no religion whatsoever, found it attractive. As crude as it could be, said Niemojowski, shamanism opened for them a small window to civilization. Unfortunately, as the writer dramatically put it, the severe conditions of the northern areas, especially in Siberia, slowed down the advance toward higher culture and froze in its "pristine rigour" and barbarity the ancient "horrible faith."

In the second half of the nineteenth century, American folklore scholar and mystic Charles Godfrey Leland (1824–1903) offered a peculiarly American version of the Oriental connection in the origin of shamanism. It is notable that, unlike contemporary American writers and scholars, who hardly used the expression shamanism at that time, Leland not only already worked with this word but also accepted the complete historical baggage ascribed to its definition. Most certainly, he absorbed these things during the years of his long schooling and traveling in Germany, whose culture and literature fascinated him very much. Like European Romantic Orientalists, Leland tended to believe that shamanism originated from one source, which certainly was the classic East, the "very ancient common source," as he once put it.²³

Based on the arbitrary genetic parallels he established between the American Indian mythology of the Eastern United States and the Old World's legends, the writer surmised that shamanism gradually spread from Central Asia to Northern Europe, and then to the Greenland "Eskimo." Later on, the "Eskimo" brought it to the "Wabanaki" Indians of Labrador, New Brunswick, and Maine. Eventually, the "Wabanaki" passed it to the Iroquois, who in their turn carried this faith to the Western tribes. Generalizing about the essence of shamanism, like Niemojowski, Leland gave credit to this primal religion in humanity's religious evolution toward progress. Particularly, Leland pointed out that shamanism was an important step toward an organized religion by taming the excesses of black magic to which people, in his view, clung in earlier times. Leland assumed that shamans created order from chaos by disowning "the darker magic of older days."²⁴

Overall, by the end of the nineteenth century, many scholars and writers more or less agreed that the Tungus word shaman originated from the ancient Sanskrit word *sramana* or Pali *samana*, which were common terms for a Buddhist monk in the sacred texts of ancient India. As I mentioned, the linguistic connections invited the relevant cultural and historical links. Although several scholars did continue to question this Indian connection, the majority took it for granted. With slight variations, this interpretation penetrated all standard dictionaries and encyclopedias, which eventually began to register it as an established usage. Thus, the early twentieth-century editions of the German *Brockhaus' Konversations-Lexikon* drew the Siberian shaman from Indian

sramana. Moreover, *Meyers großes Konversations-lexikon* (1909), which offered the same interpretation, directly referred to the authority of Max Müller and his linguistic method as the source of this interpretation.²⁵

Although *The Oxford English Dictionary* offered two alternative versions on the origin of the expression, both of them perfectly fit the assumed Oriental connection. On the one hand, the dictionary suggested that the Tungus shamans should be linked to the Sanskrit *cramana* (ascetic) or Pali *samana*. On the other hand, it is noted that the expression might have penetrated to the Tungus (Evenki) through the Mongolian language, which supposedly assimilated it from the Chinese *sha mén*. If we are to believe the dictionary, in ancient China, the latter word meant “an ordained member of a Buddhist fraternity.”²⁶ In addition, I found several exotic variations of the same presumed Oriental linguistic link in shamanism. Thus, tracing the origin of shaman to the Sanskrit *çâmas* (termination, relaxation, and rest), Russian émigré philologist A. G. Preobrazhensky explained in his dictionary of the Russian language (1951) that the expression reached Siberia from Mongolia, and he described a lower class of Buddhist priests who were involved in healing and sorcery.²⁷

As early as 1917, anthropologist Berthold Laufer clearly showed that linguistically there was little foundation to keep digging for shamanism’s Oriental connection, which was so “tenaciously upheld under the influence of the romantic movement of pan-Indianism.” Although the scholar complained that at this time the “ghost of the Indian etymology” haunted “the poor shaman in our standard dictionaries and cyclopedias,” some modern reference editions still follow this interpretation, for example, *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1985). Moreover, paying tribute to the old academic tradition, some scholars and spirituality writers still continue to generalize about the genetic Oriental link in inner and northern Asian shamanism and to trace the origin of the word shaman from the Vedic *sram* (to heat oneself), *sramana* (ascetic), or other derivatives that simultaneously bring corresponding Oriental associations. In fact, for some current esotericism writers and spiritual practitioners, this connection provides convenient “scholarly” evidence that allows them to tie shamanism to tantra or to yoga practices. Thus, California anthropologist and shamanism practitioner Larry Peters insists that the shamanic embodiment techniques spread from India to northern Asia and so did the term. Ironically, literary scholar Gloria Flaherty, the author of an interesting book, *Shamanism and the Eighteenth Century* (1992), in which she reveals perceptions of shamanism by the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment, herself fell victim to that linguistic fallacy.²⁸

The roots of the persistent desire to set the genetic motherland of shamanism in the classic Orient certainly go back to the enduring intellectual tradition of Romantic Orientalism. I am guessing that it also should be attributed to the influence of Sergei Shirokogoroff (1887–1939), one of the classic scholars of modern shamanism studies. This Paris-educated philologist from Russia, who later turned to ethnography, detected visible spiritual influences of

Tibetan Buddhism in the beliefs of southern Tungus (Evenki). Drawing on these findings, the scholar developed a thesis about southern Siberian shamanism stimulated by Buddhism. Following his intellectual predecessors, he also assumed that, in its turn, the Tibetan tradition might have borrowed the word shaman from India. At one point, Shirokogoroff came up with a special paper where he defended, in his words, “the honour of the family of *sramana* and *saman*” in shamanism studies.²⁹

Yet, unlike Enlightenment and Romantic writers, Shirokogoroff never viewed shamanism as an archaic primal religion. The scholar stressed that what he called Tungus shamanism was a religious system that was the result of a spiritual blend between Tibetan Buddhism and Siberian indigenous beliefs in medieval and early modern times. Anticipating current postmodern anthropology, Shirokogoroff preferred to generalize about shamanism as little as possible, restricting himself to Tungus ethnographic materials, and criticized those of his colleagues who dared to draw cross-cultural analogies. At the same time, I think, the scholar exaggerated the influence of Buddhism on Evenki shamanism and naturally drifted toward the Romantic linguistic method. Although Tibetan Buddhism might have stimulated the shamanism of southern Evenki groups—and, more so, Tuvan and Buryat spirituality—I doubt that such Siberian practices as mastering spirits and their calling at will were the result of Tibetan influences as Shirokogoroff tried to convince his readers.³⁰

Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and Indigenous Spirituality

The first scholar who attempted to examine shamanism on its own ground without speculating about the Oriental links was the university-educated Siberian native Dorji Banzarov (1822–1855) (see figure 1.4). Coming from the Buryat people and being schooled in Russian universities, at first in Kazan and then in St. Petersburg, he was in a unique position to provide an indigenous perspective on Siberian spirituality. While at Kazan University, Banzarov wrote a master’s thesis, “The Black Faith; or, Shamanism among the Mongols” (1846), which provided the first more or less consistent sketch of Siberian and inner Asian shamanism. The essay deals with the beliefs of two related groups, the Buryat and the Mongols. Although grounded in the Enlightenment and contemporary Romantic Orientalist scholarship, Banzarov criticized those of his predecessors who insisted that indigenous Siberian spiritual practices were a “bastardized” version of Tibetan Buddhism. Instead, he pointed to native sources of Siberian and Mongol shamanism. “A closer acquaintance with the subject,” wrote the scholar:

shows that the so-called shamanist religion, at least among the Mongols, could not have arisen from Buddhism or any other faith,



FIGURE 1.4. Dorji Banzarov (1822–1855), a native Buryat intellectual and one of the first students of shamanism. Dorzhi [Dorji] Banzarov, *Chernaia viera ili shamanstvo u mongolov*, ed. G. N. Potanin (St. Petersburg, n.p., 1891), frontispiece.

that it could have arisen by itself among the people, and that it does not consist of a few superstitions and rites based only on the charlatanism of shamans. The black faith of the Mongols arose from the same source from which were formed many ancient religious systems: the external world, nature, and the internal world, the soul of man.

Essentially, for Banzarov, the human spirit gave rise to shamanism by feeding on local landscapes.³¹

His utterances show that, rather than using the established Indian connection, Banzarov was more inspired by another line of contemporary thought—the philosophy of nature (*Naturphilosophie*). In fact, the ethnographer directly pointed to geographer Alexander von Humboldt as one of his inspirations. One of the chief proponents of this theory, Humboldt drew attention to an intimate link between organic living nature and human beings. Banzarov wrote that the German geographer understood “better than anyone the action of nature on uneducated peoples.” Banzarov was also very critical of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment observers who piled the beliefs of all northern Asian groups together in order to draw a picture of generic shamanism. About Georgi’s essay

"On Pagan Shamanic Order," which I mentioned above, Banzarov wrote that it was a regrettable attempt to construct a generalized picture of Siberian shamanism by mixing the beliefs and mythologies of Turks, Finns, Mongols, and other peoples. Anticipating the postmodern sentiment dominant in current anthropology scholarship that tries to avoid any cross-cultural generalizations, Banzarov stressed that for research purposes it was more interesting to single out the shamanism of a particular group "with those nuances and details which must have been found among each people."³² Unfortunately, in his studies of shamanism, Banzarov never went beyond his master's thesis. Torn apart by a cultural clash, feeling alienated from both Russian-educated society and his crude kin, he discontinued his ethnographic studies and eventually drank himself to death.

The Romantic age saw a visible change in the general attitude to non-Western spirituality. I would not say that the overall view of primitive religions moved to a sympathetic treatment. Still, the very intellectual stance of Romanticism, which sought to mute the reigning rationalism and obsession with science, prompted explorers and writers to pay more attention to the spiritual and the mysterious (see figure 1.5).³³ Several travel narratives which deal with native Siberians and describe indigenous shamanism give examples of such changing attitudes. A Baltic German scientist, Alexander von Bunge, who visited the Altai in southwestern Siberia in 1826 in search of plant and mineral specimens, called native shamans skillful "deceivers." At the same time, he informed his readers that, for some unknown reason, he was instinctively drawn to native rituals. Von Bunge noted that, although his formal goal was to collect information about the botany and geology of the area, he frequently made long detours to observe indigenous life and manifestations of native lore. Even when natives did not particularly welcome him, von Bunge tried to attend their gatherings to "witness a festivity," especially when he heard the "captivating sounds of a shaman drum." Not only was von Bunge drawn to native lore, but also in the course of his journey he himself became a "doctor" when word about his successful treatments of several natives spread among local indigenous communities. Moreover, following the locally established rules of the game, von Bunge did not mind accepting the gifts of furs for his healing "séances." The explorer became involved in an exchange of experiences with an Altaian shaman, who came to examine his European colleague and then performed for von Bunge a soothsaying séance using a ram's shoulder blade.³⁴

Three more contemporary Siberian travel accounts that mention shamanism illustrate the aforementioned intellectual trend. The first one belongs to explorer Frants Beliauskii (1833) and describes the Khanty and the Nentsy customs. Another one belongs to M. F. Krivoshapkin (1865), who worked as a physician in Khanty country. The third is a book by Ferdinand von Wrangel (1841), a naval commander who explored northern Pacific Rim areas of Siberia and North America and who left to us descriptions of Chukchi shamanism.³⁵



FIGURE 1.5. Romantic image of Tungus shamans. A nineteenth-century German lithograph from a Russian album. Fedor K. Pauli, *Description ethnographique des peuples de la Russie* (St. Petersburg: F. Bellizard, 1862), 72–73, plate.

All three authors pay keen attention to folklore, the sublime, and the spiritual. Essential for the intellectual culture of European Romanticism, these elements muted the skeptical Enlightenment attitudes to native spirituality.

Of these books, none better conveys the Romantic attitudes toward indigenous shamanism than Wrangel's travel notes. A Baltic-German baron in the service of the Russian empire, this explorer successfully combined the roles of governmental administrator, explorer, and ethnographer. Incidentally, in addition to his Siberian travel narrative, Wrangel, who was the chief administrator of Russian colonies in North America from 1829 to 1837, published a whole anthology of ethnographic materials on the Yupik, Tlingit, and Athabascan natives of Alaska and even on California Indians. Like von Bunge, the commander felt the similar unexplainable attraction to ecstatic shamanic rituals, which "create the scene full of horror and mystery, which has captivated me strangely every time."³⁶ Discussing his encounters with indigenous spiritual

practitioners in extreme northeastern Siberia, Wrangel noted that these shamans left on his mind “a long-continued and gloomy impression.” He also added, “The wild look, the bloodshot eyes, the labouring breast, the convulsive utterance, the seemingly involuntary distortion of the face and whole body, the streaming hair, the hollow sound of the drum, all conspired to produce the effect.” Elaborating on this “Gothic” essence of shamanism, Wrangel remarked that the “gloomy surrounding nature” of Siberia played an essential role in the development of the “mysterious aspirations” of these individuals. As in the case of Banzarov, this utterance was an obvious tribute to the popular *Naturphilosophie*.

Wrangel directly challenged the Enlightenment explorers’ assessment of shamans as impostors and clowns:

Almost all those who up to the present have expressed an opinion on the shamans represented them as ill-qualified impostors of a crude and vulgar kind, whose ecstasies are nothing more than an illusion created to take advantage of people. From the observations I made during my journeys in Siberia, I concluded that this judgment is harsh and unfounded.

He stressed that shamans were “remarkable psychological phenomena” who had nothing to do with trickery and deception. The explorer was convinced that if some native spiritual practitioners did use tricks to deceive members of their communities, they were exceptions and aberrations of the profession. “A true *schaman*,” he explained to his readers, “is not a cool and ordinary deceiver, but rather a psychological phenomenon.”³⁷

In his turn, talking about Nentsy shamans in northwestern Siberia, Beliauskii stressed that the point was not that native doctors performed sleight-of-hand magic tricks, but the respect they enjoyed in their clans. “Simple-minded folk view these raging madmen with tender emotions,” he stressed. Describing the character of the people involved in the shamanic vocation, Beliauskii, Wrangel, and Krivoshepkin all portrayed them as creative personalities, who had penetrating minds, strong wills, and ardent imaginations. Wrangel showed that many of them stayed so strongly in their beliefs that they were ready to suffer for their convictions.³⁸ At the same time, these “native geniuses,” as Beliauskii called shamans, were people of “tragic fate” because their artistic and creative talents were unavoidably wasted in the barren northern terrain.

Krivoshepkin, who not only fully shared the Romantic allegories about native geniuses but also directly copied some of them from the Beliauskii text, compared Siberian native youths who were predisposed to shamanism with the tragic characters from the Romantic poems of Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov. Krivoshepkin stressed that, not having any other outlets to channel their creativity, these spiritually charged natives attached themselves to practicing shamans, who captivated their attention with unusual behavior.

Eventually, the young native geniuses fulfilled themselves through long vigils, fasting and replicating the craft of their senior colleagues. By constantly imitating the behavior of old shamans, young apprentices developed their sensitivity to such an extreme that, when necessary, they were capable of immersing themselves quickly into the state of a “dream-like ecstasy.” To Wrangel, the most skillful candidates who perfected their contemplative skills amid the northern wilderness eventually received the status of genuine shamans and went through an initiation accompanied, as he said, by “many ceremonies, performed in the silence and darkness of night.”³⁹

The utterances of Otto Finsch, a German geographer who conducted an expedition to western Siberia in 1876, show well the changing attitudes toward indigenous cultures and spiritualities brought by Romanticism. Traversing some of the localities that had been explored by Beliaevskii and Krivoschapkin, Finsch on occasion wrote with an irony about particular native spiritual practitioners. Yet, unlike his Enlightenment predecessors, he never slid into denouncing shamanism. He concluded his notes on Siberian indigenous beliefs as follows: “This [shamanism] religion does not have anything immoral. Throughout the centuries, it nourished in the natives their good human qualities. Although some people laugh at and frown upon it, this faith deserves the respect of each educated man, the kind of respect that we should pay to all human beings.”⁴⁰

If we look into the intellectual setting for such a change to non-Western spirituality, we should start with such Romantic writers and philosophers as Herder, who was among the first to soften the rationalist attacks of Enlightenment scholars on the “superstitions” of other cultures. In fact, the entire Romanticism project was a movement toward the intellectual rehabilitation of the religious and the spiritual, which earlier Enlightenment writers wanted to dismiss as vestiges of the “dark ages.” Herder pointed to the limitations of the Enlightenment and its obsession with reason. The philosopher wanted to validate the role of imagination, emotion, and all aspects of the irrational in human knowledge. In their art, poetry, prose, and, for some, lifestyles, Romantic intellectuals drew attention to things spiritual, mysterious, and what conventional Enlightenment wisdom could consider abnormal or weird. For example, in Herder’s eyes, to believe in spirits and to experience spiritual inspiration was natural and beneficial. Acknowledging native superstitions as a religion, he argued against calling their practitioners “deceivers.” The philosopher was able to see in the “bestial” and “insane” movements of the shaman the grains of creativity akin to those expressed in the work of artists, poets, and singers.

From Herder’s viewpoint, Orpheus, a character from Greek mythology, European skalds and bards, and non-Western spiritual practitioners belonged to the same tribe because all of them were doing spiritual work. Herder pointed out to his contemporaries that classical Greeks had also been savages before

their civilization flourished. Moreover, even after they “blossomed,” they still were close to nature and, therefore, he reminded, remained “noble Greek shamans [*edle griechische Schamanen*].”⁴¹ Bringing together what Pallas, Gmelin, Müller, and other explorers wrote about Siberian religions and adding materials on American Indian and Greenlandic beliefs, the philosopher generalized about shamanism as a universal phenomenon equally characteristic of all peoples at the dawn of their histories. To Herder, the ability of shamans to reach out and captivate their audiences pointed to the “victories of imagination” so much underestimated by earlier writers and some of his contemporaries. The philosopher stressed that the very accounts of the skeptical Enlightenment observers, who always kept wondering why shamans had so much power over native minds, were good indirect proofs of the power of imagination.

Early nineteenth-century Romantic writers who followed Herder not only validated spiritual and visionary experiences but also introduced the view of surrounding nature as an organic animated entity, the stance that manifested itself in the concept of *Naturphilosophie*. Looking into this and related concepts, in his *Schamanismus und Esoterik* (2003), German religious studies scholar Kocku von Stuckrad noted that in the books of Romantic writers one can find much of what we see today in the intellectual perspective of neo-shamanism and other nature spiritualities. Thus, anticipating the holistic vision of the world, philosopher Friedrich von Schelling (1775–1854), one of the major spearheads of *Naturphilosophie*, argued that God was present in nature everywhere. Because nature was an active being of its own, it was irrelevant, wrote Schelling, what people might learn about how to change it. Therefore, to think that people could control the earth was a false assumption. Instead of forcing something on the land and extracting things from it, argued Schelling, people should better learn the ways of nature and live according to them.⁴²

Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), better known under his pen name, Novalis, came up with a similar vision of nature as sacred: “nature would not be nature if it did not have a spirit.” This early Romantic fiction writer and poet blurred the border among human beings, plants, and stones, picturing them as parts of one circle of life. As an anticipation of the currently popular spiritual biography genre, in his posthumously published novel, *Henry von Ofterdingen* (1802),⁴³ Novalis reflected on his own life, freely blending fictional travel narrative with legends and setting the whole story amid enchanted medieval landscapes. Budding poet Henry, the major character of this book, merges himself with surrounding nature and, almost in a shamanic fashion, goes through visionary experiences.⁴⁴ Henry experiences a dream in which he sees a blue flower. The shape of the flower looks like some unknown woman. The intrigued youth is eager to uncover the mystery of the blue flower. Accompanying his mother to Augsburg, where they plan to visit his grandparents, Henry sets out on a journey, which he thinks might help to unveil the mystery. En route, Henry encounters a number of people who immerse him

in the world of legends, songs, and fairytales. Ultimately, the search for the blue flower and the final destination are not so important. What is more essential is the journey itself, the way, which turns into a process of spiritual empowerment that allows Henry to transcend the ordinary. Incidentally, Novalis's "blue flower" metaphor acquired symbolic status for contemporary Romantics. The blue flower came to mean the longing for something that was far off, which one could not reach and which in fact was not meant to be reached in order to remain magical and mysterious.

Across the Atlantic, in the first decades of the nineteenth century in the United States, transcendentalism advocated a similar organic approach to nature and spirituality. This American version of Romanticism, which sprang up in New England, served as another intellectual predecessor of the present-day mind, body, and spirit culture. The first names that come to mind when one mentions transcendentalists are Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Although originally transcendentalists drew more on Puritan biblical tradition, later they assimilated many ideas of German Romanticism. For example, Goethe's and Novalis's fiction informed the style of some transcendentalist writers. As von Stuckrad pointed out, in Emerson's famous essay "Nature" (1836), one can easily see parallels with Novalis's earth philosophy, especially in the way Emerson describes the role of the poet, who is endowed with the ability to penetrate the secrets of animated reality.

In their writings, transcendentalists replaced the concept of an anthropomorphic Christian God with the idea of ever-present spirit, about which one can learn by looking into human beings and surrounding nature. Both for German Romantics and their American counterparts, the intuition was an essential tool in approaching the surrounding world. Although Emerson did not go as far as turning nature into something sacred, Thoreau, his contemporary, did. In *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), describing his beloved Walden Pond and the surrounding landscape, Thoreau literally animates nature. The writer addresses the pond as a human being, calling it a "neighbor" and "great bedfellow." *Walden*, which became an American literary classic, provided an excellent spiritual and textual blueprint for later generations of spiritual seekers.

Another element that links present-day spiritual seekers and the nineteenth-century Romantic writers is the significance that both Thoreau and Emerson attached to dreams and dreaming, which appeared to them as insights into the essence of human nature. Thoreau, for example, wrote that dreams "are touchstones of our characters" and stressed that "in dreams we see ourselves naked and acting out our real characters even more clearly than we see others awake." Celebrating intuition and imagination over pure reason, Emerson added that for the human mind the dream, which tore off the "costume of circumstance," was not only an incredibly helpful tool of self-knowledge, but also a key to the wonder of nature and the universe in its fullest and most real form. He especially

appreciated the value of dreaming during waking moments, what today we call "lucid dreaming."⁴⁵

No less important were attempts of transcendentalists to integrate Oriental symbolism into their earth-based mysticism. As far as North America is concerned, transcendentalists became the first to perform this type of intellectual syncretism, although as a spiritual practice it surfaced later when the theosophical movement sprang up in the 1870s. Like many Romantic writers, Emerson, who explored Hinduism, was fascinated with India and integrated Oriental metaphors in his poetry and prose, establishing a tradition of blending non-Western spiritual symbolism with nature-based metaphysics. Thoreau, who was enthusiastic about Buddhism, similarly embraced the dictum: light comes from the East. In addition to the Oriental wisdom, there was also a Native American connection in transcendentalism, although at that time it was not as visible as in the present-day mind, body, and spirit community. For example, Emerson noted that the natural "ignorance" of the American primitives was a blessing: the "simple mind" of the American Indian, who lived a natural life, was not tormented by such problems as original sin, predestination, or the origin of evil.

To Thoreau, who, unlike Emerson, did interact with real Indians, the natives appeared as ideal human beings endowed with the inherent skill to feel nature. In 1841, he wrote in his diary about the nature-bound essence of the Indians: "The charm of the Indian to me is that he stands free and unconstrained in Nature, is her inhabitant and not her guest, and wears her easily and gracefully. But the civilized man has the habits of the house. His house is a prison, in which he finds himself oppressed and confined, not sheltered and protected."⁴⁶ If we are to believe one of his transcendentalist friends, Thoreau's last words on his deathbed were "Indian" and "moose." Nobody knows what he actually meant, but the link between nature and the primitive seemed to be obvious.⁴⁷

Incidentally, the modern Unitarian Universalist church, which is rooted in transcendentalism and which is popular with well-rounded, "learned" Americans, is now the major mainstream denomination that actively incorporates many elements of mind, body, and spirit culture, including Native American symbolism, shamanism, and paganism. In the nineteenth century, American Shakers also sought to appropriate Native American symbolism; they insisted that they channeled some of their songs and speeches from the spirits of deceased Indians. In addition to the transcendentalist-Unitarian-Universalist line, Shakers might have also contributed to the modern American tradition of reverence for Native American spirituality, although the fascination with Native American wisdom on a grand scale is certainly a recent phenomenon that entered American life in the 1960s.⁴⁸

Among the nineteenth-century American Romantic writers who sought to appropriate indigenous symbolism for spiritual purposes, the name of Leland

stands out. I already mentioned him in relation to the Oriental connection in shamanism. To students of Native Americans, Leland, a folklore writer and mystic, is known more as a collector of Native American (primarily Passamaquoddy and Micmac) tales, which he published in his own free renderings. His major contribution in this field is *Algonquin Legends of New England* (1884), a book that saw numerous reprints. At the same time, Leland became one of the major intellectual fountainheads for the modern Wiccan community. To these people, he is famous for his *Aradia* (1899), a semifictional text that samples gypsy witchcraft folklore.⁴⁹ The writer spent a good part of his mature life in Germany, where he fell in love with all things German, including Nordic pre-Christian and medieval folklore. Incidentally, as such, he fits both the European tradition and American intellectual culture. After graduating from Princeton University in 1846, Leland studied in Heidelberg and Munich, where he picked up the ideas of German Romanticism.

Leland was convinced that the spiritual attitude to nature would become an integral part of the Americans if they appropriated the wisdom of indigenous folktales, including those that revealed shamanism, which, in his view, was humankind's first religion. Bringing the revised pieces of Native American folklore to the attention of his compatriots, Leland viewed himself as the messenger of the American Indians' ancient, earth-based wisdom. In doing this, he invoked two stereotypes of the Native American: the Indian as the carrier of timeless spiritual tradition and as the person who maintained intimate relations with nature.⁵⁰

Leland contrasted the Indians' reverence toward nature with non-natives' attitudes:

The greatest cause for a faith in magic is one which the white man talks about without feeling, and which the Indian feels without talking about it. I mean the poetry of nature, with all its quaint and beautiful superstitions. To every Algonquin a rotten log by the road, covered with moss, suggests the wild legend of the log-demon; the Indian corn and sweet flag in the swamp are descendants of beautiful spirits who still live in them. And how much of this feeling of the real poetry of nature does the white man or woman possess, who pities the poor ignorant Indian? A few second-hand scraps of Byron and Tupper, Tennyson and Longfellow, the jingle of a few rhythms and few similes, and a little second-hand supernaturalism, more "accepted" than felt, and that derived from foreign sources, does not give the white man what the Indian feels.⁵¹

Leland occasionally viewed himself not only as a messenger, but also as a practitioner of Native American wisdom. Once he suggested that, like an "Injun," he could hear the voice of the sacred world of nature. We should not separate the Indian and the witchcraft sides of Leland's personality and literary

career. Very much like some modern spiritual seeker, immersing himself into the world of American Indian tales and gypsy lore, the writer wove for himself an eclectic spiritual web that became his personal hidden world, the wonderful fairyland, where, in his words, he could “see elves and listen to the music in dropping waterfalls, and hear voices in the wind.”⁵²

Replicating the efforts of his German teachers, many of whom were working to root Germans in their national soil, Leland sought to plant the spirit of indigenous soil in the hearts of his own compatriots, which would make them truly American. Yet, unlike Germans and other Europeans, as newcomers, Americans had no indigenous soil. Therefore, like many American writers before him and after, Leland was naturally looking at Native American traditions that could provide such an anchor. In one of his essays, he encouraged his fellow Americans to pay more attention to ancient American Indian legends. Although the American Hudson River, as noted Leland, was certainly not the German Rhine River area filled with folklore antiquities, one still could see that “every hill and vale and rock and rivulet around us was once consecrated by all these sweet humanities of the old religion.” In fact, he thought that the American Indian lore might be somewhat superior to the European antiquities: “the mythology of the Middle Ages, the quaint wild *mährchen* of Scandinavia and the Teuton and the Celt, while not more attractive from an objective or dramatic point of view, are far inferior to our Algonquin Indian tales in the subtle charm of the *myth*.”⁵³

Our Early Ancestors: Finnish Ethnography and Siberian Native Spirituality

Like Leland, Finnish linguist and folklore scholar Mattias Aleksanteri [Alexander] Castren (1813–1853; figure 1.6) was concerned about introducing his people to their indigenous folklore and anchoring them in their own native soil. Likewise, he wanted to see them as ancient. As far as shamanism studies were concerned, Castren wanted to stay away from the Oriental connection in Siberian spirituality and ground it in its indigenous land. In this respect, he moved in the same direction as Banzarov. Very much like Banzarov, Castren was not blessed with a long life. Coming out of his 1840s expeditions to western Siberia with his health ruined by tuberculosis, Castren died in his forties. Despite his early death, the scholar was able to amass valuable folklore and ethnographic material that did not lose its relevance despite the work of later ethnographers.

In addition to his linguistic skills, which allowed him to procure ethnographic and folklore information that his Enlightenment predecessors missed, Castren stood out among contemporary students of Siberian cultures because of his intellectual stance. The scholar not only drew folklore and the spirituality