



Nishan Shaman

*Tengrism, Manchu, Buryat, Evenk, Daur and Nanai Peoples –
Russia, Mongolia and China*

A long time ago, hundreds of years in the past, there was an official of the empire named Boldo Bayan. He was a rich man, gifted with many lands and huge herds of cattle. But he lived in a constant state of worry, because he had only one son and feared he would not be able to pass on the legacy of his ancestors if something happened to his son.

The boy, who was fifteen at the time loved to hunt, but he had never been able to participate in the *aba*. This was a hunting expedition in which the hunters formed a wide circle and then moved towards the centre, thus herding their prey in a smaller and smaller ring. In this way, they hunted a large number of prey. But these hunts had very strict rules which, if not respected, could violate serious taboos.

The fact is that the youngster asked for his father's permission to take part in a hunt, *aba*, and the father, even with all his reservations and fears, had no choice but to give his consent. However, during the hunt, the young man must have broken some taboo, given that he suddenly became ill and died.

Years passed by, and the parents dedicated themselves to following the *buyan's* customs, which included many acts of generosity, sharing part of their wealth with the needy and restoring sacred places. And such was their kindness that the goddess Umai wanted to bless them with a new son. This was when Boldo Bayan was already fifty years old. They named the child Heregdei.

Of course, after the tragedy they had endured after the death of their first son, Heregdei grew up in an overprotective environment. He was not allowed to do anything that might endanger his integrity. So, when he was 15, he felt the time had come to demand that the reins be loosened a little. Like his brother, he also liked hunting –in fact, he was extremely skilled with a bow. And, also like his brother, he suddenly wanted to take part in an *aba* hunt.

‘Your brother died in an *aba* hunt, answered Boldo Bayan with a anxious heart.

‘I know it well, father’, answered Heregdei, ‘but I cannot spend my life locked up in the house for fear that something might happen to me. What kind of life would that be, father? Understand me, please. After all, we all have to die one day.’

Boldo Bayan understood that he could not deny a life to his son. On the other hand, it would be better for him to learn to fend for himself while he was still young rather than reach an age when he no longer knew how to deal with different life situations.

‘You can go’, said the man finally, bowing his head in anguish.

So he entrusted two of his most faithful servants, Ahalji and Bahalji, with the custody of the teenager while he was on the drive.

The next day, they armed themselves with weapons and set up a wagon with provisions, prepared the horses, hunting dogs and falcons, and set off for the mountains.

Finally, Heregdei was able to fulfil his dream. The party circled a mountain and began to climb its slopes, hunting down all the prey that came within range as they closed the ring. Heregdei stood out from the rest of hunters as each of his arrows unfailingly hit the targets.

But, suddenly, the boy felt sick. Ahalji and Bahalji, deeply worried, took him back to the camp. Once there, the teenager felt that he was dying and, before he could utter a last message to his parents, he closed his eyes and breathed his last.

Moans were great in the hunting camp. Nobody could believe what had happened, that this second son of Boldo Bayan had died in the circumstances similar to his brother, twenty-five years later.

Ahalji was sent with ten horsemen to break the news to the boy's parents while the rest of the group prepared and transported the corpse with due care. But Ahalji could not give the news to Boldo Bayan when he arrived. He knelt before his master, broke down in tears, and was unable to articulate a single word.

But there was no need, for Boldo Bayan did not need words spoken by mouth when the tears spoke for themselves. With his eyes misty, but still calm and collected, Boldo Bayan gave the necessary orders for the arrival of his son's body:

'Bring sheep, goats and cows, slaughter them and prepare food for the funeral feast.'

But, when the food was ready and the long tables and benches had been prepared, a commotion was heard in the front yard of the house. An old hunchback had arrived shouting as if his life depended on it, demanding to see the imperial official.

Boldo Bayan ordered him to be fed, but the old man went straight to Heregdei's body and, crying, said to the rich official:

'Why don't you do something to bring back your son, Heregdei?' he asked, as if reproaching him. 'Why haven't you summonsed a shaman to bring him back to life?'

Boldo Bayan, surprised by the old man's questions, replied:

'What more could I want than to recover my son's soul! But the three shamans that we have in the region are charlatans who make a living by deceiving the unwary.'

And suddenly he stopped, as if struck by an intuition.

'Do you know a shaman', he asked the old man, 'who is capable of bringing back the soul of my son?'

'There is a shamaness on the banks of the Nishinai River, not far from here', the hunchback replied. 'Her name is Teteke, but they call

her Nishan Shaman, and she is capable of bringing the dead back to life. In fact, she could resurrect ten Heregdeis, if necessary. But hurry up! Do not waste your time!

And, just as suddenly as he had arrived, the old man walked out the door without taking a bite from the tables, then climbed on a five-coloured cloud which carried him straight up to the sky.

‘Certainly, he must be a *tenger*, a god!’ Boldo Bayan exclaimed when he saw him disappear into the clouds.

And, without wasting a second, Boldo prostrated himself on the spot where the *tenger* had left the earth and then mounted his horse, immediately galloping off until he reached the Nishinai River.

He had been in that village on the river before, but he had never been told that there was such a famous shamaness living among its inhabitants.

Upon arrival he addressed the first person he encountered, a young woman hanging clothes next to a house.

‘Sister’, Boldo Bayan addressed her, ‘could you tell me where I can find Nishan Shaman?’

The girl smiled and, pointing to the other side of the river, replied:

‘She lives on the western bank of the river.’

Boldo Bayan hurried to the other side of the river where he found a humble hut with an old woman sitting by the door, smoking a pipe. He thought she must be the shamaness, so, dismounting, he went to her, knelt at her feet and said:

‘Elder sister, are you Nishan Shaman?’

The old woman gave a slight smile, as if amused, and said:

‘You have been misled. Nishan Shaman lives on the eastern bank of the river.’

Confused, Boldo Bayan rose to his feet, thanked the old woman, and mounted his horse again, immediately returning to where he had come from. He went back to the house of the young woman who was

hanging clothes. He thought she must now be inside, since he no longer saw her. He dismounted, went to the door of the house and asked permission to enter. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness inside, he saw a gray-haired woman sitting, smoking a pipe and without a word, he knelt before her.

‘Elder sister ...’

‘I’m not the shamaness’, the old woman interrupted him without further consideration. ‘They’re kidding you, sir. My daughter-in-law is the shamaness’, she added, pointing to the young woman who was previously hanging clothes.

Totally confused, Boldo Bayan rose again and knelt in front of the young woman.

‘Elder sister, someone has told me about you and your good work with the spiritual arts’, said the rich official, for whom, in the circumstances, making a fool of himself was no longer important. ‘My fifteen-year-old son suddenly passed away yesterday. Could you please tell me the reason for his death?’

Nishan Shaman reached out and took a small bag, from which she extracted the *shagai*, the sheep anklebones with which the shamans do their oracular consultations. Throwing them on the ground, she took a stool and her shaman drum and, sitting next to the *shagai*, began to drum and sing. The spirits soon entered her and, looking at the arrangement of the bones, she said:

‘Listen! Listen well and, if what I say is not true, tell me. You had a son when you were 25, but an evil spirit took him from you when, at the age of fifteen, he was hunting. He fell ill and died. Then, when you reached the age of 50, you had another son, who you named Heregdei. When he was fifteen years old, he also wanted to participate in a hunt. But he excelled so well with the bow that he caught the attention of Erleg Khan, lord of the underworld, who sent one of his spirits to snatch his soul.’

After a brief silence, she continued:

‘In your house you have a dog, born the same day as your son, and you have a three-year-old rooster’, and in a commanding tone she added, ‘If what I said is so, say “It is so!”’

‘It is so!’ Boldo Bayan answered astonished. ‘It is all as you say. You are an amazing shamaness.’

And, throwing himself at her feet, he said:

‘Please, elder sister, bring our son back to life! If you do, I’ll give you half of all the gold, silver, silks and livestock that I own. Say ‘yes’ and I’ll order my men to bring all your ritual tools to my house.’

And Nishan Shaman said ‘yes’.

‘I’ll go to the underworld and bring back your son’s soul.’

Boldo Bayan’s men arrived with a wagon and loaded all of the shamaness’s instruments, offering her a horse for the journey. Once in the house of the rich imperial official, they arranged everything following the instructions of the young woman. The *ongones* –the wood carvings or pieces of leather that house the shamaness’ helping spirits– were deposited in the *hoimor*, the sacred place, and Boldo Bayan prostrated himself three times before them. Then he invited the young shamaness to lunch, and summoned the three shamans of the region to assist Nishan Shaman. But when the young woman began the ritual and started to beat the drum, the three false shamans were unable to keep up with the rhythm that she was setting. Stopping, she looked at Boldo Bayan and said:

‘I won’t be able to go to the underworld if they can’t keep up with my rhythm. Bring me Nari Fiyanggo from my village. He’ll follow my rhythm perfectly.’

Boldo went for him and brought him immediately. Then, Nishan Shaman put on her shamaness dress and cap, decorated with nine birds, and began drumming again, this time perfectly accompanied by Nari Fiyanggo.

After a few minutes, the spirits entered her body and her face changed, and soon after she could be heard hissing and appeared to speak through her teeth. The spirits then demanded that the fifteen-

year-old dog and the three-year-old rooster be tied next to her, and Boldo Bayan had their orders followed. Finally, already in trance, Nari Fiyanggo took the drum from her and placed Nishan Shaman on the ground, to later accompany her with the drum during her trip to the other world.

Nishan Shaman rose into the air surrounded by her helpers, the *ongon* spirits, and flew away from her body without looking back, until she came to a river. There she saw an old man in a boat. As the old man carried her to the other side of the river, Nishan Shaman asked him:

‘Did someone cross the river yesterday?’

‘The only one who came this way was Mongoldai Nagts’, said the ferryman, ‘who carried Heregdei’s soul with him, to deliver it to Erleg Khan himself, lord of the underworld.’

Mongoldai Nagts is the guardian of the gates to the underworld, servant of Erleg Khan, so that everything coincided with what the *shagai* had indicated through the spirits.

A short time later she reached the Dolbor River. On the opposite bank the door to the underworld opened. But there was no boatman there, so Nishan stood on her drum and, with the help of the spirits, moved to the opposite bank.

On the way to Erleg Khan’s abode, she encountered *kut* spirits. They are evil spirits, though easy to deceive. They were trying to block her way. But Nishan Shaman dismissed them by offering them some of the food from Heregdei’s funeral feast.

Then she came to the abode of Mongoldai Nagts. Any other shaman would have been anguished to face the guardian of the underworld, but that was not the case with Nishan Shaman. Taking hold of her drum, she sang a shamanic song until Mongoldai came out.

‘What are you doing here, yowling that awful song?’ he asked her. ‘What brings you here, Nishan Shaman?’

Yes, he knew her, and he knew that she was a formidable opponent.

‘Why did you take that boy?’ she answered. ‘Don’t you think he’s too young to take his life and deprive him of a hopeful future?’

‘I took him because Erleg Khan ordered it. He wanted to test him, seeing that he shot very well with the bow. He passed an arrow through the hole of a coin, which we had put on a high pole, and then he fought with our wrestling champions, and defeated them. So Erleg Khan has grown fond of him and adopted him as a son.’

And, with a proud smile, he added:

‘You won’t be able to take him.’

But the comment did not, in any way, discourage Nishan Shaman.

‘So, it wasn’t your fault. Yes, maybe you’re a good person. Anyway, I’ll try to get Heregdei back with me.’

The young shamaness continued on her way until she reached the abode of Erleg Khan, which was an impenetrable fortress. She looked for a clearing of trees in a nearby forest, sat on the ground, picked up her drum and began to sing one of her shamanic songs again, invoking all land animals and all birds to come to her aid.

Suddenly the sun’s rays disappeared from the forest clearing and the sky darkened. It was Garuda, a gigantic bird, king of all birds. He landed in the clearing and was asked by Nishan Shaman to enter Erleg Khan's fortress and bring out Heregdei.

The immense bird soared back into the sky and passed over the walls of Erleg Khan's fortress. From above, he saw Heregdei playing with other boys with gold and silver *shagai*. Suddenly, he fell down from the clouds and caught him with his mighty claws, once again soaring to the heights towards the forest.

The boys who were playing with Heregdei fled in terror, shouting, to alert Erleg Khan to what had happened. He, furious, summoned Mongoldai Nagts.

‘You better not have had anything to do with this!’ Erleg Khan said when he arrived. ‘Otherwise, you’ll regret it.’

‘It must have been Nishan Shaman’, Mongoldai replied in fear. ‘No other shaman would have been able to do it.’

‘Then go after her!’ Erleg Khan bellowed. ‘What are you waiting for?’

Meanwhile, Garuda had already left Heregdei's soul in the clearing in the forest, and Nishan Shaman had transformed him into a tiny pebble and put it in one of her ears. Wasting no more time, she thanked Garuda and set off on the road back. However, Mongoldai Nagts soon caught up with her.

‘My dear elder sister, I’d like to talk to you for a moment’, the underworld guardian said to her in a conciliatory tone, remembering her words ‘maybe you are a good person’, which had touched his heart.

‘There are things that aren’t right, and you know it’, he continued, adopting a sober attitude. ‘It is not good to kidnap boys using your shamanic powers. You cannot take something so valuable without leaving something else in return, without paying a price ... don't you think?’

‘I can give you an entire funeral feast, so you can enjoy it by yourself’, Nishan Shaman said without losing her poise.

‘That is not enough’, Mongoldai replied. ‘Erleg Khan will skin me if I didn’t get him a good compensation for the boy. Like I told you, he has taken a fancy to him, and some food is not going to be enough to make up for his loss.’

‘Do you want a dog and a rooster?’ the young shamaness then asked.

Mongoldai was silent, reflecting.

‘Well ...’ said the guardian, ‘My lord has no hunting dogs, neither does he have a rooster to crow when the night is over.’

So Nishan Shaman found a loophole to seize the occasion.

‘I’ll give them to you,’ she said, adding, ‘but only if you promise me that you will extend the boy’s life.’

‘Well’, Mongoldai agreed, ‘I’ll add twenty years to his life.’

'It is not enough', Nishan replied. 'He was still a stripling when you took him away.'

'I'll add thirty years to his life.'

'It is not enough. He still hadn't settled down when you took him away.'

'I'll add forty years to his life.'

'It's not enough. He hadn't yet received any honour when you took him away.'

'I'll add fifty years to his life.'

'It's not enough. He wasn't wise when you took him away then.'

'I'll add sixty years to his life.'

'It's not enough. He still hadn't shot the arrow like a real man when you took him away.'

'I'll add seventy years to his life.'

'It's not enough. He hadn't learned the art of craftsmanship when you took him away.'

'I'll add eighty years to his life.'

'It's not enough. He hadn't understood the affairs of his age when you took him away.'

'Well, I'll add ninety years to his life, but I won't give him any more years. He'll not suffer from diseases until he is sixty years old, and he'll have nine children. He'll be able to piss standing up and shit squatting down all his life.'

'Done!', Nishan Shaman said. 'That sounds good to me.'

And, handing over the dog and the rooster, she added:

'You can call the rooster by saying "Ashi, ashi", and the dog by saying "Ceo, ceo".'

And she left in a hurry without even saying goodbye.

Mongoldai wanted to test what Nishan had told him.

‘Ashi, ashi! Ceo, ceo!’

But the rooster and the dog ran after the shamaness. He ran after them and barely caught up with them.

‘Elder sister, why are you making fun of me?’ said the guardian, exhausted, nearly out of breath. ‘When I call the animals they run away from me. My lord isn’t going to be happy with me, and that’s not only going to cause problems for me, but also for you.’

Nishan laughed at her mischief.

‘You’re right. I’ve had enough fun already! You should call the rooster by saying “Gu, gu”, and the dog “Eri, eri”.’

Mongoldai put these words to the test, and this time the animals came to him, so he turned and started back toward Erleg Khan’s fortress. The dog was wagging his tail, feeling released from his old body.

Nishan Shaman continued her return journey until, suddenly, she found her deceased husband, who was on the side of the road, heating a cauldron full of oil with a fire made of sorghum stalks. He looked furious.

‘My fickle Nishan, I was waiting for you’, he said, meeting her in the middle of the road. ‘How is it that you snatch others from the clutches of death and haven’t brought me, your dear husband, back to life, the one who took care of you since you were a girl?’

And, cutting the sarcasm, he added:

‘Either you return me to the world of the living or I’ll throw you into the cauldron of boiling oil right now!’

‘Dear husband, listen to me well, listen carefully!’, said Nishan Shaman, undaunted by him. ‘Open your ears and don’t miss a single word. I can’t bring you back to life now, because your body has long since rotted away. Muscles and tendons each lie on their side, and the flesh has come loose from your bones. How do you want me to resurrect you?’

'What's more," she added, "be satisfied that I'm taking care of your mother. Let me pass!'

Her husband gritted his teeth in anger and shouted:

'Damn Nishan, listen! While I was with you, you despised me, you said that I was mean and closed your eyes to me. You know well inside that what I say is true. You've always behaved according to your whims and, if you take care of my mother now, it's undoubtedly on a whim. Decide once and for all if you're going to enter the cauldron by yourself or I'll throw you into it!'

And Nishan, red with anger, replied:

'Listen, dear husband! When you left, what did you leave me? You left nothing, except a mother in poverty. I was only twelve years old. According to the customs of our people, I could have made my own life and forgotten about her. But no, I felt sorry for her and stayed by her side, taking care of her as if I was her daughter.'

'But I'm seeing that death has taught you nothing', Nishan continued, as her husband was about to pounce on her, 'so you'd better go to that place where everyone is like you.'

And, raising her hands to heaven, Nishan Shaman invoked the spirits:

'Great crane that flies over the forests, snatch my husband with your claws and throw him in Ela Guren, so that he'll not incarnate again in this world, but in another where everyone is as mean as he is.'

A shadow fell over them and, suddenly, two claws snatched the husband and he soared to the sky, and she never heard from him again.

Nishan Shaman continued on her way with a heavy heart, saddened by what happened, but sure of the wisdom of her decision. Soon after, as if in a whisper, she began to sing:

Without a husband I shall live happily.

Without a man I can be blissful.

Among mother's relatives I will have a good life.

Years will pass and I shall live cheerfully.

I can live happily without children.

I can have love without taking care of a family.

Enjoying my youth, I will live without worries.

She hastened her pace to reach the world of the living as soon as possible but, suddenly, she came across a very high tower surrounded by colourful clouds. At the gate huge gold-armoured guards brandished iron clubs.

‘What is this?’ Nishan asked the guards.

‘It is the abode of Umai, the goddess who makes the leaves of the trees unfold and their roots spread under the ground’, said one of the guards.

‘It’s the mother goddess’, said the other, ‘who breathes life into the souls of all beings at the moment of birth.’

‘And could I come in to pay my respects to the goddess Umai?’ Nishan asked.

‘Sure!’, the guards said, feeling there was nothing to fear from her.

The air in the tower was shrouded in coloured haze, a mist that seemed to come from the censers carried by two beautifully attired women stationed at the doors of Umai’s chambers.

‘Aren’t you Nishan Shaman’, one of them asked, ‘the one who lives by the Nishinai River, in the land of the living?’

‘Yes, that’s me’, Nishan replied. ‘But who are you? I don’t recognise you.’

‘I was the wife of Nari Fiyanggo. I died of smallpox two years ago. We were neighbors!’

‘Sure!’ Nishan exclaimed, recognising her at last. ‘How could I forget you?’

They ushered Nishan into a huge chamber. In the centre was a white-haired old woman, and around her were thousands of assistants

caring for thousands of babies. These were the souls of those who had yet to be born.

Nishan addressed the old goddess, knelt before her, and prostrated herself nine times.

‘Who are you that has dared to come to such a dangerous place?’ Umai asked her.

‘In the world of the living I’m known as Nishan Shaman’, she said. ‘I’m going back to my world, but I didn’t want to leave here without first greeting the divine grandmother.’

‘How could I forget about you?’ Umai wondered in surprise. ‘When it was time for you to be born, you didn’t want to leave, so I put the shaman’s cap on your head and gave you the drum. And the fact is that I wanted you to come back here, so that I could teach you the consequences of doing right or wrong, so that you can teach this in the world of the living. Go for a ride with my maid. She’ll show you everything.’

A woman led her out of the tower and showed her the Great Willow of the World, which unites the three worlds. It was full of leaves and flowers of five colours. Then she took her to another place where there were all kinds of animals, birds, fish, insects and many other kinds of creatures.

‘This is where we give life to all living beings’, the maid said.

Then the woman took her to visit Ela Guren from above, the place where the most wicked went before reincarnating in a world where everyone was like them. Nishan didn’t like what she saw there and she felt sad for her husband, but she knew that was the way it had to be.

‘Those who do not change their evil ways and do so much harm to others have to learn to change course, and they can only do so by suffering the evil deeds of others like them’, she thought to herself.

She was then taken to a court-like place, which was where Erleg Khan determined the fate of souls, based on their past actions in the land of the living.

After being shown all these things, the maid took her back to the goddess Umai.

‘Now you know how things are’, the goddess told her. ‘Go and tell everyone about it.’

After receiving her blessings, Nishan Shaman continued on her way until she reached the Dolbor River, where, once again, she climbed on her drum and flew across the waters that separated her from the land of the living.

Nari Fiyanggo, who was still beating the drum, noticed that Nishan had returned, so, putting his drum aside, approached her and sprinkled water on her face.

Still in a trance, Nishan Shaman recounted what had happened.

‘Listen everyone, listen Boldo Bayan, what I have to say! Garuda snatched your son from the fortress of Erleg Khan, who had taken him as his adopted son. Garuda brought Heregdei to me and I hid him like a tiny pebble in my ear. Now I’ll return him to his body. I made a deal with Mongoldai Nagts according to which your son will have ninety years added to his life and he’ll have nine children. In exchange, Mongoldai has taken the dog and the rooster to give them to Erleg Khan as compensation for the loss of Heregdei.

‘I was also in the tower of the goddess Umai, and I prayed to her for Heregdei, your son. The divine grandmother made them show me the consequences of good and bad actions in life, and I saw what happens to those who persist in doing evil. I felt sad for them because their destiny is very hard until they learn to walk the path of kindness.’

Even in a trance, she said nothing about her husband. Something deep within her prevented it because she felt that her mother-in-law would have suffered horribly on learning of her son’s fate.

When she fell silent, Nari Fiyanggo passed a juniper sprig over her, and Nishan Shaman finally woke up.

With her shamaness fan, Nishan Shaman fanned Heregdei's soul back into his body and suddenly the boy stirred and, and on getting up, asked for water.

‘I’ve slept for a long time’, the boy said after taking a few sips from a bowl. ‘I’ve had many dreams.’

Then they told him that they were not dreams, but that Nishan Shaman had brought him back from the underworld. Upon learning everything, he knelt before the shamaness and thanked her for what she had done.

‘You’re truly an impressive shaman’, said the father, Boldo Bayan, with tears in his eyes when he saw his son alive again.

He took the cloak off his shoulders and placed it on Nishan Shaman’s shoulders, and then offered her wine in a crystal goblet.

Finally, he ordered that all his gold, silver, silks, and flocks be divided into two parts, and ensured that one of them be given to Nishan Shaman.

‘And now, let’s celebrate my son’s return to life!’, exclaimed the rich imperial official, full of joy.

And they all ate and drank wine until they got drunk. □

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Comments

This is a story that is widely spread across southern Siberia, Mongolia, and northern China, among the Mongol and Tungus peoples, and it is rooted in a deep oral tradition. I explain this because its first written expression seems to have appeared at the beginning of the 20th Century. It was not translated into English until 1969, and was not published in this language until 1977 (Yen, 1980).

For this adaptation of a tale of Tengrism, which is the Mongolian shamanism –and Siberian shamanism in general–, I have taken, as a basis, the version of Sarangerel Odigon (1963-2006), an important Buryat shamaness and founder of Golomt Tuv, the Mongolian shamans

association. Odigon's version has the peculiarity of combining features of the Manchu and Daur versions with which Odigon sought to capture the Mongolian flavour of the story.

However, I thought it was better not to include the final section of Odigon's version, in which the mother-in-law takes revenge for what Nishan Shaman did to her son and concocts a trap for Nishan together with the emperor himself. In the end, Nishan Shaman suffers little less than an eternal punishment.

Not by chance, this ending of the tale does not appear in other versions (Nowak and Durrant, 1977). This has led me to suspect that, perhaps, they were sections which were added later in order to, in some way, 'deactivate' the feminine power expressed by Nishan Shaman, following the transition of Manchu society from matrilineal to patrilineal filiation, as proposed by Lévi-Strauss (1969, p. 449).

Durrant (1979) also points to the fact that this final section appears to be a later addition to support patriarchy, which takes a severe battering in this story. Note that, in addition to the episode in which she dispatches her abusive deceased husband, Nishan Shaman is, at all times, in a superior position to the men, even making fun of them. She makes the rich official kneel in front of two other women when he is looking for her and another man, Nari Fiyanggo, serves as his assistant in the ritual. She also snatches Heregdei from nothing less than the underworld Lord Erleg Khan's own home. Then she humiliates the guardian of the gates of the underworld, Mongoldai Nagts, when he tries to stop her from returning to the land of the living. Furthermore, the young shamaness pays a visit to a Goddess of Fertility before returning in triumph with Heregdei. Hence, Durrant ends by indicating that there is a deep cultural contradiction in that tragic ending for the shamaness, which, almost certainly, had to be added later, when patriarchy finally prevailed.

Durrant (1979) also highlights the fact that, with his knowledge of the patriarchal Manchu culture, the episode of Nishan Shaman with her late husband is 'the most abrasive violation of Manchu social norms' (p. 344). He also notes that, among the Manchu, the vast majority of shamans were, and are, women. In fact, there is strong evidence that

during the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.E.), shamanism was a female function.

Therefore, although the story is told in a clear patriarchal setting –in fact, Durrant (1979) places the Manchu version of this story in the 17th Century– it is quite possible that it has its ancestral origins in a markedly matriarchal oral tradition. In this sense, it would reflect a matrilineal past that has long disappeared, as suggested by Lévi-Strauss. This is especially due to the loss of cultural identity in the face of the Chinese push.

As for the story itself, it ultimately describes a *dolbor* ritual of recovering a soul from the underworld in order to bring it back to physical life. This ritual is still practiced today, according to Odigon (2012). However, only very experienced shamans can perform it as, in Tengrism, they say that the process is fraught with risks, including the loss of the shaman's own soul.

From this approach, shamanism could be seen as a mediation (Yen, 1980), since ‘is a self-curing process of imposing order over chaos and a means of restoring equilibrium between the individual or group and the environment’ (Yen, 1980, pp. 88-89).

But, also note the communal character of the spiritual journeys of this kind of shamanism –essentially feminine, as we have seen–, unlike the spiritual journeys typical of the mysticism of other traditions. According to the psychologist, theologian and Tibetologist Fokke Sierksma,

A shaman is someone who passes through a spiritual crisis, in which a vision determines his vocations, thereby acquiring the ability to control conditions of trance and ecstasy. He or she makes conscious use of this for the benefit of the community, travelling trance to the upper or the under world, accompanied by spirit healers, there to convey requests to gods or spirits or to force them, sometimes in a very aggressive manner, to adopt a milder attitude towards mankind. Thus the shaman is a conductor of souls, healer, miracle worker and sometimes also a priest, but he differs essentially from the priest and other religious functionaries through his technique of ecstasy. (Sierksma, 1966, p. 71; quoted by Durrant, 1979, p. 338)

And Durrant adds next:

The shaman must also be differentiated from other religious figures who engage in celestial wanderings solely for their own religious edification. For, as Sierksma rightly emphasizes, the shaman is part of a religious community who acts on that community's behalf. (1979, pp. 338-339)

However, the social role of Mongolian shamanism does not end here, insofar as it is also closely linked to storytelling. In this sense, as indicated by Odigon (2012), shamans and bards play a similar role as preservers of ancestral traditions.

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 11a: Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 6c: Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.

Principle 8b: Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.

Principle 8c: Ensure that information of vital importance to human health and environmental protection, including genetic information, remains available in the public domain.

Principle 11b: Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.

Principle 11c: Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

Principle 12b: Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.

