

## Heroic and Shamanic Initiations



### *Going Berserk*

In a passage that has become famous, the *Ynglingasaga* sets the comrades of Odin before us: "They went without shields, and were mad as dogs or wolves, and bit on their shields, and were as strong as bears or bulls; men they slew, and neither fire nor steel would deal with them; and this is what is called the fury of the berserker."<sup>1</sup> This mythological picture has been rightly identified as a description of real men's societies—the famous *Männerbünde* of the ancient Germanic civilization. The berserkers were, literally, the "warriors in shirts (*serkr*) of bear."<sup>2</sup> This is as much as to say that they were magically identified with the bear. In addition they could sometimes change themselves into wolves and bears. A man became a berserker as the result of an initiation that included specifically martial ordeals. So, for example, Tacitus tells us that among the Chatti the candidate cut neither his hair nor his beard until he had killed an enemy.<sup>3</sup> Among the Taifali, the youth had to bring down a boar or a wolf; among the Heruli, he had to fight unarmed.<sup>4</sup> Through these ordeals, the candidate took to himself a wild-animal mode of being; he became a dreaded warrior in the measure in which he behaved like a beast of prey. He metamorphosed himself into a superman because he succeeded in assimilating the magicoreligious force proper to the carnivora.

The *Volsunga Saga* has preserved the memory of certain ordeals typical of the initiations of berserkers. By treachery, King Siggeir obtains possession of his nine brothers-in-law, the Volsungs.

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

Chained to a beam, they are all eaten by a she-wolf, except Sigmund, who is saved by a ruse of his sister Signy. Hidden in a hut in the depths of the forest, where Signy brings him food, he awaits the hour of revenge. When her first two sons have reached the age of ten, Signy sends them to Sigmund to be tested. Sigmund finds that they are cowards, and by his advice Signy kills them. As the result of her incestuous relations with her brother, Signy has a third son, Sinfjotli. When he is nearly ten, his mother submits him to a first ordeal: she sews his shirt to his arms through the skin. Siggeir's sons, submitted to the same ordeal, had howled with pain, but Sinfjotli remains imperturbable. His mother then pulls off his shirt, tearing away the skin, and asks him if he feels anything. The boy answers that a Volsung is not troubled by such a trifle. His mother then sends him to Sigmund, who submits him to the same ordeal that Siggeir's two sons had failed to sustain: he orders him to make bread from a sack of flour in which there is a snake. When Sigmund comes home that night, he finds the bread baked and asks Sinfjotli if he did not find anything in the flour. The boy answers that he remembers having seen something, but he paid no attention to it and kneaded everything up together. After this proof of courage Sigmund takes the boy into the forest with him. One day they find two wolfskins hanging from the wall of a hut. The two sons of a king had been transformed into wolves and could only come out of the skins every tenth day. Sigmund and Sinfjotli put on the skins, but cannot get them off. They howl like wolves and understand the wolves' language. They then separate, agreeing that they will not call on each other for help unless they have to deal with more than seven men. One day Sinfjotli is summoned to help and kills all the men who had attacked Sigmund. Another time, Sinfjotli himself is attacked by eleven men, and kills them without summoning Sigmund to help him. Then Sigmund rushes at him and bites him in the throat, but not long afterward finds a way to cure the wound. Finally they return to their cabin to await the moment when they can put off their wolfskins. When the time comes, they throw the skins into the fire. With this episode, Sinfjotli's initiation is completed, and he can avenge the slaying of the Volsungs.<sup>5</sup>

The initiatory themes here are obvious: the test of courage, resistance to physical suffering, followed by magical transformation into a wolf. But the compiler of the *Volsunga Saga* was no longer aware of the original meaning of the transformation. Sigmund and Sinfjotli find the skins by chance and do not know how to put them

#### HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

off. Now transformation into a wolf—that is, the ritual donning of a wolfskin—constituted the essential moment of initiation into a men's secret society. By putting on the skin, the initiate assimilated the behavior of a wolf; in other words, he became a wild-beast warrior, irresistible and invulnerable. "Wolf" was the appellation of the members of the Indo-European military societies.

The scenario of heroic initiations has been traced in other sagas. For example, in the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*, the hero goes down into a funeral barrow which contains a precious treasure and fights successively with a ghost, with twelve berserkers, and with a bear.<sup>6</sup> In the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, Böhdvar kills a winged monster and then initiates his young protégé Höttir by giving him a piece of the monster's heart to eat.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, there is not time to dwell on the sociology, the mythology, and the rituals of the Germanic men's associations, which have been so brilliantly studied by Lily Weiser, Otto Höffler, and Georges Dumézil;<sup>8</sup> or on the other Indo-European men's societies, such, for example, as the *mairya* of the Indo-Iranians, which have formed the subject of important works by Stig Wikander and G. Widengren.<sup>9</sup> I will only mention that the behavior of the Indo-European warrior bands offers certain points of resemblance to the secret fraternities of primitive societies. In both alike, the members of the group terrorize women and noninitiates and in some sort exercise a "right of rapine," a custom which, in diluted form, is still found in the popular traditions of Europe and the Caucasus.<sup>10</sup> Rapine, and especially cattle stealing, assimilate the members of the warrior band to carnivora. In the Germanic *Wütende Heer*, or in similar ritual organizations, the barking of dogs (equals wolves) forms part of an indescribable uproar into which all sorts of strange sounds enter, for example, bells and trumpets. These sounds play an important ritual role; they help prepare for the frenzied ecstasy of the members of the group.<sup>11</sup> As we have already seen, in primitive cultures the sound of the bull-roarers is believed to be the voice of Supernatural Beings; hence it is the sign of their presence among the initiates. In the Germanic or Japanese men's secret societies the strange sounds, like the masks, attest the presence of the Ancestors, the return of the souls of the dead. The fundamental experience is provoked by the initiates' meeting with the dead, who return to earth more especially about the winter solstice. Winter is also the season when the initiates change into wolves. In other words, during the winter the members

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

of the band are able to transmute their profane condition and attain to a superhuman existence, whether by consorting with the Ancestors or by appropriating the behavior, that is the *magic*, of the carnivora.

The martial ordeal par excellence was the single combat, conducted in such a way that it finally roused the candidate to the "fury of the berserkers." For not military prowess alone was involved. A youth did not become a berserker simply through courage, physical strength, endurance, but as the result of a magico-religious experience that radically changed his mode of being. The young warrior must transmute his humanity by a fit of aggressive and terror-striking fury, which assimilated him to the raging beast of prey. He became "heated" to an extreme degree, flooded by a mysterious, nonhuman, and irresistible force that his fighting effort and vigor summoned from the utmost depths of his being. The ancient Germans called this sacred force *wut*, a term that Adam von Bremen translated by *furor*; it was a sort of demonic frenzy, which filled the warrior's adversary with terror and finally paralyzed him.<sup>12</sup> The Irish *ferg* (literally "anger"), the homeric *menos*, are almost exact equivalents of this same terrifying sacred experience peculiar to heroic combats.<sup>13</sup> J. Vendryès<sup>14</sup> and Marie-Louise Sjoestedt<sup>15</sup> have shown that certain names applied to the Hero in Old Irish refer to "ardor, excitation, turgescence." As Miss Sjoestedt writes, "The Hero is the man in fury, possessed by his own tumultuous and burning energy."<sup>16</sup>

### *Cuchulainn's Initiation*

The saga of the initiation of the young hero Cuchulainn admirably illustrates the eruption of this "tumultuous and burning energy." According to the Old Irish *Tain Bo Cualnge*, Cuchulainn, nephew of Conchobar king of Ulster, one day overheard his master, the druid Cathba, saying: "The little boy that takes arms this day shall be splendid and renowned for deeds of arms . . . but he shall be short-lived and fleeting." Cuchulainn sprang up and, asking his uncle for arms and a chariot, set off for the castle of the three sons of Necht, the worst enemies of the kingdom of Ulster. Although these heroes were supposed to be invincible, the little boy conquered them and cut off their heads. But the exploit heated him to such a degree that a witch warned the king that if precautions were not taken, the boy would kill all the warriors in Ulster. The king decided to send a troop of naked women to meet

## HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

Cuchulainn. And the text continues: "Thereupon the young women all arose and marched out . . . and they discovered their nakedness and all their shame to him. The lad hid his face from them and turned his gaze on the chariot, that he might not see the nakedness or the shame of the women. Then the lad was lifted out of the chariot. He was placed in three vats of cold water to extinguish his wrath; and the first vat into which he was put burst its staves and its hoops like the cracking of nuts around him. The next vat into which he went boiled with bubbles as big as fists therein. The third vat into which he went, some men might endure it and others might not. Then the boy's wrath (*ferg*) went down . . . and his festive garments were put on him."<sup>17</sup>

Although "fictionized," the saga of Cuchulainn constitutes an excellent document for Indo-European military initiations. As Georges Dumézil has well shown, the lad's battle with the three macNechts represents an ancient Indo-European initiatory scenario—the fight with three adversaries or with a three-headed monster.<sup>18</sup> But it is especially Cuchulainn's wrath (*ferg*), his berserker fury, that is of interest for our investigation. Dumézil<sup>19</sup> had already compared Cuchulainn's initiatory heating, and his subsequent taming by the sight of women's nakedness and cold water, with certain moments in the initiation of the Kwakiutl cannibal. For, as we have seen, the frenetic and homicidal madness of the young Kwakiutl initiate is "treated" by a woman dancing naked before him with a corpse in her arms, and especially by submerging his head in a basin of salt water. Like the heat of the cannibal, the wrath of the young warrior, which manifests itself in extreme heat, is a magico-religious experience; there is nothing profane or natural in it—it is the syndrome of gaining possession of a sacrality.

### *Symbolism of Magical Heat*

There are reasons for believing that we are here in the presence of a magicoreligious experience that is extremely archaic. For many primitives think of the magicoreligious power as "burning," and express it by terms meaning heat, burn, very hot. It is for the same reason that shamans and medicine men drink salt or highly spiced water and eat aromatic plants—they expect thus to increase their inner heat.<sup>20</sup> That this magical heat corresponds to a real experience is proved by the great resistance to cold displayed both by shamans of the Arctic and Siberia and by Himalayan ascetics. In addition, shamans are held to be "masters over fire"—for example, they

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

swallow burning coals, touch red-hot iron, walk on fire.<sup>21</sup> Similar experiences and conceptions are also documented among more civilized peoples. The Sanskrit term *tapas* finally developed the sense of ascetic effort in general, but its original meaning was extreme heat. It was by becoming heated through asceticism that Prajapati created the universe; he created it by a magic sweat, as in some North American cosmogonies. The *Dhammapada* (387) says that the Buddha is "burning," and Tantric texts assert that the awakening of the kundalini is manifested by a burning.<sup>22</sup> In modern India, the Mohammedans believe that a man in communication with God becomes "burning hot." Anyone who performs miracles is called "boiling." By extension, all kinds of people or acts involving any magico-religious power are regarded as burning.<sup>23</sup> This sacred power, which causes both the shaman's heat and the heating of the warrior, can be transformed, differentiated, given various colorings, by subsequent efforts. The Indian word *Kratu*, which had begun by denoting the "energy peculiar to the ardent warrior, specifically Indra," and then "victorious force, heroic force and ardor, courage, love of combat," and by extension power and majesty in general, finally came to mean the "force of the pious man, which enables him to follow the prescriptions of the *rita* and to attain happiness."<sup>24</sup> The "wrath" and the heat induced by a violent and excessive access of sacred power are feared by the majority of mankind. The term *shanti*, which in Sanskrit designates tranquillity, peace of soul, freedom from the passions, relief from suffering, derives from the root *sham*, which originally had the meaning of extinguishing the fire, the anger, the fever, in short the heat, provoked by demonic powers.<sup>25</sup>

We are, then, in the presence of a fundamental magico-religious experience, which is universally documented on the archaic levels of culture: access to sacrality is manifested, among other things, by a prodigious increase in heat. There is not space to dwell on this important problem and to show, for example, the intimate relation between the techniques and *mystiques* of fire—a relation shown by the close connections between smiths, shamans, and warriors.<sup>26</sup> I must add only that mastery over fire finds its expression equally in "inner heat" and in insensibility to the temperature of hot coals. From the viewpoint of the history of religion, these different accomplishments show that the human condition has been abolished and that the shaman, the smith, or the warrior participate, each on his own plane, in a higher condition. For this higher condition can

## HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

be that of a God, that of a spirit, or that of an animal. The respective initiations, though following different paths, pursue the same end—to make the novice die to the human condition and to resuscitate him to a new, a transhuman existence. Naturally, in military initiations the initiatory death is less clearly seen than in shamanic initiations, since the young warrior's principal ordeal consists precisely in vanquishing his adversary. But he emerges from the ordeal victorious only by becoming heated and attaining to the berserker fury—symptoms that express death to the human condition. He who obtains magical heat vividly demonstrates that he belongs to a superhuman world.

### *Shamanic Initiations*

We now come to shamanic initiations. To simplify the exposition, I shall use the term shaman in its most general meaning.<sup>27</sup> We shall, then, be considering not only shamanism in the strict sense, as it has developed principally in northern and central Asia and in North America, but also the various categories of medicine men and wizards who flourish in other primitive societies.

There are three ways of becoming a shaman: first, by spontaneous vocation (the "call" or "election"); second, by hereditary transmission of the shamanic profession; and, third, by personal "quest," or, more rarely, by the will of the clan. But, by whatever method he may have been designated, a shaman is recognized as such only after having received two kinds of instruction. The first is ecstatic (e.g., dreams, visions, trances); the second is traditional (e.g., shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language).<sup>28</sup> This twofold teaching, imparted by the spirits and the old master shamans, constitutes initiation. Sometimes initiation is public and includes a rich and varied ritual; this is the case, for example, among some Siberian peoples. But the lack of a ritual of this sort in no way implies the lack of an initiation; it is perfectly possible for the initiation to be performed in the candidate's dreams or ecstatic experiences.

It is primarily with the syndrome of the shaman's mystical vocation that we are concerned. In Siberia, the youth who is called to be a shaman attracts attention by his strange behavior; for example, he seeks solitude, becomes absent-minded, loves to roam in the woods or unfrequented places, has visions, and sings in his sleep.<sup>29</sup> In some instances this period of incubation is marked by quite

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

serious symptoms; among the Yakut, the young man sometimes has fits of fury and easily loses consciousness, hides in the forest, feeds on the bark of trees, throws himself into water and fire, cuts himself with knives.<sup>30</sup> The future shamans among the Tungus, as they approach maturity, go through a hysterical or hysteroid crisis, but sometimes their vocation manifests itself at an earlier age—the boy runs away into the mountains and remains there for a week or more, feeding on animals, which he tears to pieces with his teeth. He returns to the village, filthy, bloodstained, his clothes torn and his hair disordered, and it is only after ten or more days have passed that he begins to babble incoherent words.<sup>31</sup>

Even in the case of hereditary shamanism, the future shaman's election is preceded by a change in behavior. The souls of the shaman ancestors of a family choose a young man among their descendants; he becomes absent-minded and moody, delights in solitude, has prophetic visions, and sometimes undergoes attacks that make him unconscious. During these times, the Buriat believe, the young man's soul is carried away by spirits; received in the palace of the gods, it is instructed by his shaman ancestors in the secrets of the profession, the forms and names of the Gods, the worship and names of the spirits. It is only after this first initiation that the youth's soul returns and resumes control of his body.<sup>32</sup>

A man may also become a shaman following an accident or a highly unusual event—for example, among the Buriat, the Soyot, the Eskimos, after being struck by lightning, or falling from a high tree, or successfully undergoing an ordeal that can be homologized with an initiatory ordeal, as in the case of an Eskimo who spent five days in icy water without his clothes becoming wet.<sup>33</sup>

The strange behavior of future shamans has not failed to attract the attention of scholars; and from the middle of the past century several attempts have been made to explain the phenomenon of shamanism as a mental disorder.<sup>34</sup> But the problem was wrongly put. For, on the one hand, it is not true that shamans always are or always have to be neuropathics; on the other hand, those among them who had been ill *became shamans precisely because they had succeeded in becoming cured*. Very often in Siberia, when the shamanic vocation manifests itself as some form of illness or as an epileptic seizure, the initiation is equivalent to a cure. To obtain the gift of shamanizing presupposes precisely the solution of the psychic crisis brought on by the first symptoms of election or call.

But if shamanism cannot simply be identified with a psycho-



#### HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

pathological phenomenon, it is nevertheless true that the shamanic vocation often implies a crisis so deep that it sometimes borders on madness. And since the youth cannot become a shaman until he has resolved this crisis, it is clear that it plays the role of a *mystical initiation*. The disorder provoked in the future shaman by the agonizing news that he has been chosen by the gods or the spirits is by that very fact valuated as an initiatory sickness. The precariousness of life, the solitude and the suffering, that are revealed by any sickness are, in this particular case, aggravated by the symbolism of initiatory death; for accepting the supernatural election finds expression in the feeling that one has delivered oneself over to the divine or demonic powers, hence that one is destined to imminent death. We may give all these psychopathological crises of the elected the generic name of initiatory sicknesses because their syndrome very closely follows the classic ritual of initiation. The sufferings of the elected man are exactly like the tortures of initiation; just as, in puberty rites or rites for entrance into a secret society, the novice is "killed" by semidivine or demonic Beings, so the future shaman sees in dreams his own body dismembered by demons; he watches them, for example, cutting off his head and tearing out his tongue. The initiatory rituals peculiar to Siberian and central Asian shamanism include a symbolic ascent to Heaven up a tree or pole; in dream or a series of waking dreams, the sick man chosen by the Gods or spirits undertakes his celestial journey to the World Tree. I shall later give some examples of these initiatory ordeals undergone in dream or during the future shaman's period of apparent unconsciousness and madness.

But I should like even now to stress the fact that the psychopathology of the shamanic vocation is not profane; it does not belong to ordinary symptomatology. *It has an initiatory structure and signification*; in short, it reproduces a traditional mystical pattern. The total crisis of the future shaman, sometimes leading to complete disintegration of the personality and to madness, can be valuated not only as an initiatory death but also as a symbolic return to the precosmogonic Chaos, to the amorphous and indescribable state that precedes any cosmogony. Now, as we know, for archaic and traditional cultures, a symbolic return to Chaos is equivalent to preparing a new Creation.<sup>35</sup> It follows that we may interpret the psychic Chaos of the future shaman as a sign that the profane man is being "dissolved" and a new personality being prepared for birth.

## rites and symbols of initiation

### *Initiatory Ordeals of Siberian Shamans*

Let us now find out what Siberian shamans themselves have to tell about the ordeals that they undergo during their initiatory sicknesses. They all maintain that they "die" and lie inanimate for from three to seven days in their yurt or in a solitary place. During this time, they are cut up by demons or by their ancestral spirits; their bones are cleaned, the flesh scraped off, the body fluids thrown away, and the eyes torn from their sockets.<sup>36</sup> According to a Yakut informant, the spirits carry the future shaman to Hell and shut him in a house for three years. Here he undergoes his initiation; the spirits cut off his head (which they set to one side, for the novice must watch his own dismemberment with his own eyes) and hack his body to bits, which are later distributed among the spirits of various sicknesses. It is only on this condition that the future shaman will obtain the power of healing. His bones are then covered with new flesh, and in some cases he is also given new blood.<sup>37</sup> According to another Yakut informant, black "devils" cut up the future shaman's body and throw the pieces in different directions as offerings, then thrust a lance into his head and cut off his jawbone.<sup>38</sup> A Samoyed shaman told Lehtisalo that the spirits attacked him and hacked him to pieces, also cutting off his hands. For seven days and nights he lay unconscious on the ground, while his soul was in Heaven.<sup>39</sup> From a long and eventful autobiography that an Avam-Samoyed shaman confided to A. A. Popov, I will select a few significant episodes. Stricken with smallpox, the future shaman remained unconscious for three days, so nearly dead that on the third day he was almost buried. He saw himself go down to Hell, and, after many adventures, was carried to an island, in the middle of which stood a young birch tree which reached up to Heaven. It was the Tree of the Lord of the Earth, and the Lord gave him a branch of it to make himself a drum. Next he came to a mountain. Passing through an opening, he met a naked man plying the bellows at an immense fire on which was a kettle. The man caught him with a hook, cut off his head, and chopped his body to bits and put them all into the kettle. There he boiled the body for three years, and then forged him a head on an anvil. Finally he fished out the bones, which were floating in a river, put them together, and covered them with flesh. During his adventures in the Other World, the future shaman met several semidivine personages, in human or animal form, and each of them revealed doctrines to

## HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

him or taught him secrets of the healing art. When he awoke in his yurt, among his relatives, he was initiated and could begin to shamanize.<sup>40</sup>

A Tungus shaman relates that, during his initiatory sickness, his shaman ancestors pierced him with arrows until he lost consciousness and fell to the ground; then they cut off his flesh, drew out his bones, and counted them before him; if one had been missing, he could not have become a shaman.<sup>41</sup> According to the Buriat the candidate is tortured by his shaman ancestors, who strike him, cut up his body with a knife, and cook his flesh.<sup>42</sup> A Teleut woman became a shamaness after having a vision in which unknown men cut her body to pieces and boiled it in a pot.<sup>43</sup> According to the traditions of the Altaic shamans, their ancestral spirits open their bellies, eat their flesh, and drink their blood.<sup>44</sup>

These few examples are enough to show that initiatory sicknesses closely follow the fundamental pattern of all initiations: first, torture at the hands of demons or spirits, who play the role of masters of initiation; second, ritual death, experienced by the patient as a descent to Hell or an ascent to Heaven; third, resurrection to a new mode of being—the mode of “consecrated man,” that is, a man who can personally communicate with gods, demons, and spirits. The different kinds of suffering undergone by the future shaman are valued as so many religious experiences; his psychopathological crises are explained as illustrating the carrying off of his soul by demons, or its ecstatic journeys to Hell or Heaven; his physical pains are regarded as arising from the dismemberment of his body. But whatever the nature of his sufferings may be, they have a role in the making of the shaman only to the extent to which he gives them a religious significance and, by the fact, accepts them as ordeals indispensable to his mystical transfiguration. For, as we must not forget, initiatory death is always followed by a resurrection; that is, in terms of psychopathological experience, the crisis is resolved and the sickness cured. The shaman’s integration of a new personality is in large part *dependent* on his being cured.

Thus far, I have cited only Siberian examples; but the dismemberment pattern is found almost everywhere. During the initiation of the Araucanian shaman, the master makes the spectators believe that he exchanges the novice’s eyes and tongue for others and puts a stick through his abdomen.<sup>45</sup> Among the River Patwin, the candidate for the Kuksu society is supposed to have his navel pierced by a lance and an arrow from Kuksu’s own hands; he dies

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

and is resuscitated by a shaman.<sup>46</sup> Among the Sudanese of the Nuba Mountains, the first initiatory consecration is called "head," because "the novice's head is opened so that the spirit can enter."<sup>47</sup> At Malekula, the initiation of the medicine man includes, among other things, the novice's dismemberment: the master cuts off his arms, feet, and head, and then puts them back in place.<sup>48</sup> Among the Dyaks, the *manangs* say that they cut off the candidate's head, remove the brain, and wash it, thus giving him a clearer mind.<sup>49</sup> Finally, as we shall soon see, cutting up the body and exchange of viscera are essential rites in some initiations of Australian medicine men. Initiatory cutting up of shamans and medicine men would deserve a long comparative investigation; for their resemblance to the myth and ritual of Osiris, on the one hand, and the ritual dismemberment of the Hindu *meriah*, on the other, are disconcerting and have not yet been explained.<sup>50</sup>

One of the specific characteristics of shamanic initiations, aside from the candidate's dismemberment, is his reduction to the state of a skeleton. We find this motif not only in the accounts of the crises and sicknesses of those who have been chosen by the spirits to become shamans but also in the experiences of those who have acquired their shamanic powers through their own efforts, after a long and arduous quest. Thus, for example, among the Ammasilik Eskimos, the apprentice spends long hours in his snow hut, meditating. At a certain moment, he falls "dead," and remains lifeless for three days and nights; during this period an enormous polar bear devours all his flesh and reduces him to a skeleton.<sup>51</sup> It is only after this mystical experience that the apprentice receives the gift of shamanizing. The *angakuts* of the Iglulik Eskimos are able in thought to strip their bodies of flesh and blood and to contemplate their own skeletons for long periods.<sup>52</sup> I may add that visualizing one's own death at the hands of demons and final reduction to the state of a skeleton are favorite meditations in Indo-Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism.<sup>53</sup> Finally, we may note that the skeleton is quite often represented on the Siberian shaman's costume.<sup>54</sup>

We are here in the presence of a very ancient religious idea, which belongs to the hunter culture. Bone symbolizes the final root of animal life, the mold from which the flesh continually arises. It is from the bone that men and animals are reborn; for a time, they maintain themselves in an existence of the flesh; then they die, and their "life" is reduced to the essence concentrated in the skeleton, from which they will be born again.<sup>55</sup> Reduced to skeletons, the future shamans undergo the mystical death that enables

## HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

them to return to the inexhaustible fount of cosmic life. They are not born again; they are "revivified"; that is, the skeleton is brought back to life by being given new flesh.<sup>56</sup> This is a religious idea that is wholly different from the conception of the tillers of the soil; these see the earth as the ultimate source of life, hence they assimilate the human body to the seed that must be buried in the soil before it can germinate. For, as we saw, in the initiatory rituals of many agricultural peoples the neophytes are symbolically buried, or undergo reversion to the embryonic state in the womb of Mother Earth. The initiatory scenario of the Asiatic shamans does not involve a return to the earth (e.g., symbolic burial, being swallowed by a monster), but the annihilation of the flesh and hence the reduction of life to its ultimate and indestructible essence.

### *Public Rites of Shamanic Initiations*

Among the public initiation ceremonies of Siberian shamans, those of the Buriat are among the most interesting. The principal rite includes an ascent. A strong birch is set up in the yurt, with its roots on the hearth and its crown projecting through the smoke hole. This birch is called *udeshi burkhan*, "the guardian of the door," for it opens the door of Heaven to the shaman. It will always remain in his tent, serving as distinguishing mark of a shaman's residence. On the day of his consecration, the candidate climbs the birch to the top (in some traditions, he carries a sword in one hand) and, emerging through the smoke hole, shouts to summon the aid of the gods. After this, the master shaman (called "father shaman"), the apprentice, and the entire audience go in procession to a place far from the village, where, on the eve of the ceremony, a large number of birches had been set in the ground. The procession halts by a particular birch, a goat is sacrificed, and the candidate, stripped to the waist, has his head, eyes, and ears anointed with its blood, while other shamans play their drums. The father shaman now climbs a birch and cuts nine notches in the top of its trunk. The candidate then climbs it, followed by the other shamans. As they climb they all fall—or pretend to fall—into ecstasy. According to Potanin, the candidate has to climb nine birches, which, like the nine notches cut by the father shaman, symbolize the nine heavens.<sup>57</sup>

As Uno Harva has well seen, the Buriat shaman's initiation is strangely reminiscent of certain ceremonies in the Mithraic mysteries. For example, the candidate's purification by the blood of a goat resembles the *taurobolium*, the chief rite of the mysteries of

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

Mithra, and his climbing the birch suggests the Mithraic mystes' climbing a ladder with seven rungs, which, according to Celsus, represented the seven planetary heavens.<sup>58</sup> Antique Near Eastern influences can be observed almost everywhere in central Asia and Siberia, and very probably the Buriat shaman's initiatory rite should be classed among examples of such influences. But it should be noted that the symbolism of the World Tree and the rite of initiatory climbing the birch in central and northern Asia are earlier than the cultural elements brought from Mesopotamia and Iran. If the conception—which is so characteristic for central Asia and Siberia—of seven, nine, or sixteen heavens finally derives from the Babylonian idea of seven planetary heavens, the symbolism of the World Tree as *axis mundi* is not specifically Babylonian. This symbolism occurs almost everywhere, and in strata of culture where Mesopotamian influences cannot reasonably be suspected.<sup>59</sup>

What we should note in the initiatory rite of the Buriat shaman is that the candidate is believed to go to Heaven for his consecration. To ascend to Heaven by the aid of a tree or a pole is also the essential rite in the séances of the Altaic shamans.<sup>60</sup> The birch or the pole is assimilated to the tree or pillar which stands at the center of the world and which connects the three cosmic zones—earth, Heaven, and Hell. The shaman can also reach the center of the world by beating his drum. For as the Samoyed shaman's dream showed us, the body of the drum is supposed to be made from a branch taken from the cosmic tree. Listening to the sound of his drum, the shaman falls into ecstasy, in which he flies to the tree, that is, to the center of the world.<sup>61</sup> As we saw in the last chapter, the ritual climbing of a tree or pole plays an important part in the initiatory rites and religious ceremonies of many South and North American peoples; we may now add that it is peculiar especially to shamanic initiations. The initiation of the Araucanian *machi* includes the ritual climbing of a tree, or a tree trunk stripped of its bark, to a platform where the novice addresses a prayer to the God.<sup>62</sup> The Carib *pujai* undertakes his ecstatic ascent to Heaven by climbing onto a platform hung from the roof of the hut by a number of cords twisted together; as they unwind, they whirl the platform around faster and faster.<sup>63</sup>

### *Techniques of Ecstasy*

The examples just cited enable us to distinguish the essential notes of shamanic initiations and, consequently, to understand

#### HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

the significance of shamanism for the general history of religion. The shaman or the medicine man can be defined as a specialist in the sacred, that is, an individual who participates in the sacred more completely, or more truly, than other men. Whether he is chosen by Superhuman Beings or himself seeks to draw their attention and obtain their favors, the shaman is an individual who succeeds in having mystical experiences. In the sphere of shamanism in the strict sense, the mystical experience is expressed in the shaman's trance, real or feigned. The shaman is pre-eminently an ecstatic. Now on the plane of primitive religions ecstasy signifies the soul's flight to Heaven, or its wanderings about the earth, or, finally, its descent to the subterranean world, among the dead. The shaman undertakes these ecstatic journeys for four reasons: first, to meet the God of Heaven face to face and bring him an offering from the community; second, to seek the soul of a sick man, which has supposedly wandered away from his body or been carried off by demons; third, to guide the soul of a dead man to its new abode; fourth, to add to his knowledge by frequenting higher beings.<sup>64</sup>

But the body's abandonment by the soul during ecstasy is equivalent to a temporary death. The shaman is, therefore, the man who can die, and then return to life, many times. This accounts for the many ordeals and teachings required in every shamanic initiation. Through his initiation, the shaman learns not only the technique of dying and returning to life but also what he must do when his soul abandons his body—and, first of all, how to orient himself in the unknown regions which he enters during his ecstasy. He learns to explore the new planes of existence disclosed by his ecstatic experiences. He knows the road to the center of the world, the hole in the sky through which he can fly up to the highest Heaven, or the aperture in the earth through which he can descend to Hell. He is forewarned of the obstacles that he will meet on his journeys, and knows how to overcome them. In short, he knows the roads that lead to Heaven and Hell. All this he learned during his training in solitude or under the guidance of the master shamans.

Because of his ability to leave his body with impunity, the shaman can, if he so wishes, act in the manner of a spirit; e.g., he flies through the air, he becomes invisible, he perceives things at great distances, he mounts to Heaven or descends to Hell, sees souls and can capture them, and is incombustible. The exhibition of certain fakirlike accomplishments during the séances, especially the so-called fire tricks, is intended to convince the spectators that

## rites and symbols of initiation

the shaman has assimilated the mode of being of spirits. The powers of turning themselves into animals, of killing at a distance, or of foretelling the future are also among the powers of spirits; by exhibiting them, the shaman proclaims that he shares in the spirit condition. The desire to behave in the manner of a spirit signifies above all the desire to assume a superhuman condition; in short, to enjoy the freedom, the power, and the knowledge of the Supernatural Beings, whether Gods or spirits. The shaman obtains this transcendent condition by submitting to an initiatory scenario considerably more complex and dramatic than the patterns of initiation which we examined in the preceding chapters.

In summary, the important moments of a shamanic initiation are these five: first, torture and violent dismemberment of the body; second, scraping away of the flesh until the body is reduced to a skeleton; third, substitution of viscera and renewal of the blood; fourth, a period spent in Hell, during which the future shaman is taught by the souls of dead shamans and by "demons"; fifth, an ascent to Heaven to obtain consecration from the God of Heaven.

### *Initiations of Australian Medicine Men*

Now it is disconcerting to note that this peculiarly Siberian and central Asian pattern of initiation is found again, almost to the letter, in Australia. (I refer to the pattern as a whole, and not only to certain initiatory motifs that are found everywhere, such as ascent to Heaven, descent to Hell, dismemberment of the body.) The Siberian-Australian parallelism confronts the historian of religion with the problem of the possible dissemination of shamanism from a single center. But before entering upon this difficult question, we must see what is the traditional pattern of the initiation of Australian medicine men. Thanks to A. P. Elkin's book, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*,<sup>65</sup> the subject can now be set forth with reasonable clarity in brief compass.

Just as in the case of northern Asiatic or American shamanism, in Australia too one becomes a shaman in three ways: by inheriting the profession, by call or election, by personal quest. But whatever way he has taken, a candidate is not recognized as a medicine man until he has been accepted by a certain number of medicine men or been taught by some of them, and, above all, after a more or less laborious initiation. In the majority of instances, the initiation consists in an ecstatic experience, during which the candidate undergoes certain operations performed by mythical Beings, and



#### HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

undertakes ascents to Heaven or descents to the subterranean world. The initiatory ritual is also, as Elkin puts it, "a re-enactment of what has occurred in the past, generally to a cult-hero. If this is not always clear, at least Supernatural Beings, dream-time or sky Heroes, or spirits of the dead, are regarded as the operators, that is the masters of the craft."<sup>66</sup> The candidate is "killed" by one of these Supernatural Beings, who then perform certain surgical operations on the lifeless body: the spirit or the dream-time Hero "removes his 'insides'" and "substitutes new ones together with some magical substances";<sup>67</sup> cuts him open "from his neck to his groin"; removes his shoulder and thigh bones, and sometimes also his frontal bone; and "inserts magical substances before drying and putting them back."<sup>68</sup>

To cite some examples: among the Warburton Ranges tribes the postulant enters a cave and two totemic Heroes (the wildcat and the emu) kill him, open his body, remove the organs, and replace them by magical substances. They also remove the scapula and tibia and, before restoring them, stuff them with the same magical substances.<sup>69</sup> Among the Arunta, the candidate goes to sleep in front of the mouth of a cave. A spirit named Iruntarinia kills him by a lance thrust that enters his neck from behind and comes out through his mouth. The spirit then carries him into the cave, removes his viscera, and gives him new ones.<sup>70</sup> A famous medicine man of the Unmatjera tribe told Spencer and Gillen of the essential moments of his initiation. One day an old doctor "killed" him by throwing crystals at him with a spear thrower. "The old man then cut out all of his insides, intestines, liver, heart, lungs—everything in fact, and left him lying all night long on the ground. In the morning the old man came and looked at him and placed some more *atnongara* stones [i.e., small crystals] inside his body and in his arms and legs, and covered over his face with leaves. Then he sang over him until his body was all swollen up. When this was so he provided him with a complete set of new inside parts, placed a lot more *atnongara* stones in him, and patted him on the head, which caused him to jump up alive."<sup>71</sup>

R. and C. Berndt have collected valuable information regarding the making of the medicine man among the tribes of the Western Desert of South Australia. Mourned as dead, because everyone knows that he will be "cut into pieces," the postulant goes to a water hole. There two medicine men cover his eyes and throw him into the jaws of the Serpent, which swallows him. The postulant

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

remains in the Serpent's belly for an indefinite time. Finally the medicine men bring two kangaroo rats as an offering to the Serpent, whereupon the Serpent ejects the postulant, throwing him high into the air. He falls "alongside a certain rock-hole," and the medicine men set out in search of him, but he has been reduced to the size of an infant. (The initiatory theme of regression to the embryonic in the monster's belly, homologous with the maternal womb, is apparent here.) One of the medicine men takes the baby in his arms and "they fly back to the camp."

After this consecration, which is mystical because performed by a Supernatural Being, the initiation proper begins, in which the old masters play the principal role. Set in a circle of fire, the baby-postulant rapidly grows and recovers his adult size. He declares that he knows the Serpent well, that they are even friends, for he stayed in its belly for some time. Then comes a period of seclusion, during which the postulant meditates and converses with the spirits. One day the medicine men take him to the bush and smear his body with red ocher. "He is made to lie full-length on his back before fires, and is said to be a dead man. The head-doctor proceeds to break his neck and his wrists, and to dislocate the joints at the elbows, the upper thighs, the knees and ankles." The masters stuff his body with shells, and also put shells into his ears and jaws, so that the postulant will be able to hear and understand spirits, birds, and strangers. His stomach too is stuffed with shells, so that he will have a "renewed life and become invulnerable to attack by any weapon." Then he is "sung" by the medicine men, and revives. All return to the camp, where the new doctor is tested: the medicine men throw their lances at him; but because of the shells with which he is stuffed, he is not harmed.<sup>72</sup>

This example represents a highly elaborate initiation. We can recognize two principal initiatory themes in it: (1) being swallowed by a monster, and (2) bodily dismemberment—of which only the second is peculiar to the initiations of medicine men. What we really have here is two initiations, the first performed by a Supernatural Being, the second by the doctors. But although he undergoes a return to the womb, the postulant does not die in the Serpent's belly, for he is able to remember his sojourn there. The real initiatory putting to death is performed by the old doctors, and in the manner reserved for medicine men: dismemberment of the body, change of organs, introduction of magical substances.

For the initiatory operations proper always include the renewal

## HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

of the organs and viscera, the cleaning of the bones, and the insertion of magical substances—quartz crystals or pearl shell, or “spirit snakes.” Quartz is connected with the “sky world and with the rainbow”; pearl shell is similarly “connected with the rainbow serpent,” that is, in sum, still with the sky.<sup>73</sup> This sky symbolism goes along with ecstatic ascents to Heaven; for in many regions the candidate is believed to visit the sky, whether by his own power (for example, by climbing a rope) or carried by a snake. In the sky he converses with the Supernatural Beings and mythical Heroes. Other initiations involve a descent to the realm of the dead: for example, the future medicine man goes to sleep by the burying ground, or enters a cave, or is transported underground or to the bottom of a lake.<sup>74</sup> Among some tribes, the initiation also includes the novice’s being “roasted” in or at a fire.<sup>75</sup> Finally, the candidate is resuscitated by the same Supernatural Beings who had killed him, and he is now “a man of Power.”<sup>76</sup> During and after his initiation he meets with spirits, Heroes of the mythical Times, and souls of the dead—and in a certain sense they all instruct him in the secrets of the medicine man’s profession. Naturally, the training proper is concluded under the direction of the older masters.

In short, the candidate becomes a medicine man through a ritual of initiatory death, followed by a resurrection to a new and superhuman condition. But the initiatory death of the Australian medicine man, like that of the Siberian shaman, has two specific notes not found elsewhere in combination: first, a series of operations performed on the candidate’s body (opening of the abdomen, renewal of the organs, washing and drying the bones, insertion of magical substances); second, an ascent to Heaven, sometimes followed by other ecstatic journeys into the Other World. The revelations concerning the secret techniques of the medicine men are obtained in trance, in dream, or in the waking state, before, during, or after the initiatory ritual proper.

### *Asiatic Influences in Australia*

Elkin compares the initiatory pattern of the Australian medicine man to a mummification ritual documented in eastern Australia, and which seems to have been introduced by way of the Torres Strait islands, where a certain type of mummification was practiced until quite recently.<sup>77</sup> Melanesian influences on Australian culture are incontestable. But Elkin is inclined to believe that these Melanesian influences brought ideas and techniques that originally be-

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

longed to other, higher cultures. If he does not insist upon the final Egyptian origin of the ritual of mummification, he compares, and rightly, the parapsychological powers of the Australian medicine men with the feats of Indian and Tibetan yogis. For walking on fire, using the magic cord, the power of disappearing and reappearing, "fast traveling," and so on, are just as popular among Australian medicine men as they are among yogis and fakirs. "It is possible," Elkin writes, "that there is some historical connection between the Yoga and occult practices of India and Tibet and the practices and psychic powers of Aboriginal men of high degree. Hinduism spread to the East Indies. Yoga is a cult in Bali, and some of the remarkable feats of the Australian medicine men are paralleled by their fellow-professionals in Papua."<sup>78</sup>

If Elkin's conjecture should prove to be well founded, we should have, in Australia, a situation comparable to that which we have already noted in central Asia and Siberia; just as central and north Asian shamanism seems to have been profoundly affected by elements of culture coming from Mesopotamia, Iran, India, and China, so the corpus of rites, beliefs, and occult techniques of the Australian medicine men may have taken its present form primarily under Indian influence. But this is by no means to say that these two forms of shamanism—Australian and north Asian—should be regarded as the result of influences received from higher religions. Such influences have certainly modified the mystical ideologies and techniques of shamanism, but they did not *create* them.

The problem of the origin and dissemination of shamanism is certainly extremely complicated, and I cannot enter upon it here.<sup>79</sup> But I must at least mention a few of the most important points. First, it should be said that the specifically shamanic techniques and ideologies—for example, ascending to Heaven by means of a tree, or "magic flight"—are documented almost all over the world, and it seems difficult to explain them by Mesopotamian or Indian influences. Equally widespread are the beliefs concerning an *axis mundi* at the center of the universe, a point that makes possible communication between the three cosmic zones. Next, we must bear in mind that the fundamental characteristic of shamanism is ecstasy, interpreted as the soul forsaking the body. Now no one has yet shown that the ecstatic experience is the creation of a particular historical civilization or a particular cultural cycle. In all probability the ecstatic experience, in its many aspects, is coex-

#### HEROIC AND SHAMANIC INITIATIONS

istent with the human condition, in the sense that it is an integral part of what is called man's gaining consciousness of his specific mode of being in the world. Shamanism is not only a technique of ecstasy; its theology and its philosophy finally depend on the *spiritual value* that is accorded to ecstasy.

What is the meaning of all these shamanic myths of ascent to Heaven and magical flight, or of the power to become invisible and incombustible? They all express a break with the universe of daily life. The twofold purpose of this break is obvious: it is the transcendence and the freedom that are obtained, for example, through ascent, flight, invisibility, incombustibility of the body. I need hardly add that the terms transcendence and freedom are not documented on the archaic levels of culture. But the experience is there, and that is what is important. The desire for absolute freedom—that is, the desire to break the bonds that keep him tied to earth, and to free himself from his limitations—is one of man's essential nostalgias. And the break from plane to plane effected by flight or ascent similarly signifies an act of transcendence; flight proves that one has transcended the human condition, has risen above it, by transmuting it through an excess of spirituality. Indeed, all the myths, the rites, and the legends that we have just reviewed can be translated as the longing to see the human body act after the manner of a spirit, to transmute man's corporal modality into the spirit's modality.<sup>80</sup>

The history of religion shows that such a desire to behave like a spirit is a universal phenomenon; it is not confined to any particular moment in the history of humanity. In the archaic religions, the shaman and the medicine man play the role of the mystics in developed religions; hence they constitute an exemplary model for the rest of the community precisely because they have *realized* transcendence and freedom, and have, by that fact, become like spirits and other Supernatural Beings. And there is good reason to believe that the desire to resemble Supernatural Beings has tormented man from the beginning of his history.

The problem of shamanism goes beyond the sphere of our investigation, and I have had to limit myself to presenting only some aspects of this extremely complex religious phenomenon, namely, its initiatory ideology and rituals. Here again we have seen the importance of the theme of mystical death and rebirth. But we have also observed the presence of certain notes that are almost peculiar to shamanic initiation: dismemberment of the body,

## RITES AND SYMBOLS OF INITIATION

reduction to a skeleton, renewal of the internal organs; the great importance accorded to mystic ascents and to descents into the world underground; finally, the outstanding role of memory. Shamans and medicine men are men who remember their ecstatic experiences. Some shamans even claim that they can remember their previous existences.<sup>81</sup> We observe, then, a marked deepening of the experience of initiatory death and at the same time a strengthening of memory and, in general, of all the psychomental faculties. The shaman stands out by the fact that he has succeeded in integrating into consciousness a considerable number of experiences that, for the profane world, are reserved for dreams, madness, or post-mortem states. The shamans and mystics of primitive societies are considered—and rightly—to be superior beings; their magicoreligious powers also find expression in an extension of their mental capacities. Hence the shaman becomes the exemplar and model for all those who seek to acquire power. The shaman is the man who *knows* and *remembers*, that is, who understands the mysteries of life and death; in short, who shares in the spirit condition. He is not solely an ecstatic but also a contemplative, a thinker. In later civilizations the philosopher will be recruited among these beings, to whom the mysteries of existence represent a passionate interest and who are drawn, by vocation, to know the inner life.