

ORIGIN OF THE WORD SHAMAN

By BERTHOLD LAUFER

I N *Chinese Clay Figures* (p. 198) the writer had occasion to discuss briefly the history of our word shaman, and to refer at the close of his naturally succinct note to the new theory of J. Németh, according to which the term should be an ancient constituent of the Turkish-Tungusian languages. The latter reference was an addition inserted in the proofs at the moment when Mr. Németh's article reached me (summer 1914), but since then it has been possible to scrutinize his theory at close range, with the result that it can be confirmed and even be supported with new data and arguments. As ethnologists may be expected to take an interest in the history of a term which has become part and parcel of anthropological nomenclature, and the origin of which has given rise to numerous discussions and speculations, a brief examination of the case might not be unwelcome to the readers of the *Anthropologist*.

There could never be a serious doubt of the real source from which the word shaman is derived. We received it from the Russians: it was the Russian (chiefly Cossack) explorers and conquerors of eastern Siberia in the second half of the seventeenth century, who heard and recorded the term among Tungusian tribes. It was first brought to Europe by the Hollander, E. Ysbrants Ides, and by Adam Brand, who from 1692 to 1695 accompanied a Russian embassy sent by Peter the Great to China. Some examples from the former's *Driejaarige Reize naar China*, first published at Amsterdam, 1698 (again 1704 and 1710), may be cited:

Eenige dagen reizens van hier, is de groote steenachtige waterval, Schamanskoi, of Toverval geheten, om dat aldaar een beroemde Schamam, of Tungusche duiveldienaar woont (p. 34).

Eenige mylen van hier opwaarts wonen veele Tunguzers, waar onder ook hun beroemde Schaman, of Duivelskonstenaar (p. 35; follows a lengthy description of the shaman and his costume).

Zy [the Tunguz] weeten van geen andere Priesteren, dan hunne Schamannen, of Duivelbanners (p. 39).

It is thus shown that our "shaman" had its origin in the Tungusian languages, in all of which the word indeed is known as *šaman* or *saman*, and with several other variations to be noted hereafter. It would be reasonable to regard the term as of native origin, for it is not likely that the name of a religious institution and function so characteristic of all the tribes of northern Asia should be borrowed from an outside quarter. Nevertheless it was possible that at a time when little was known about Siberian shamanism, and when rigid philological principles were not yet established, the theory could be advanced that Tungusian *šaman* or *saman* were to be derived from Chinese *šaman*, itself a transcription of *Deli samana*.

the *çramana* among the crude tribes of Central Asia transformed themselves from hermits into shamans. I believe that Banzarov had in mind Friedrich von Schlegel (1772–1829), romantic poet and Sanskrit scholar, who published in Heidelberg, 1808, an essay under the title *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier, ein Beitrag zur Begründung der Alterthumskunde*.¹ This is the only one of his works in which such a statement might be supposed to occur; but on a cursory perusal of this book I am unable to trace it. The idea itself being romantic, there would be no reason to wonder that it took its root in the Romantic School. At all events it was alive in the first part of the nineteenth century. The French sinologue J.-P. Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832) became a champion of this theory.² An ingenious scholar of the type of J. Klaproth³ was capable of saying, “Les peuples tartares ont sans doute reçu le mot *chaman* de l’Inde avec le bouddhisme, car il est indien d’origine, et signifie un homme qui a vaincu toutes ses passions.” In 1857 Max Müller⁴ of Oxford wrote,

Shamanism found its way from India to Siberia *viâ* Tibet, China, and Mongolia. Rules on the formation of magic figures, on the treatment of diseases by charms, on the worship of evil spirits, on the acquisition of the supernatural powers, on charms, incantations, and other branches of Shaman witchcraft, are found in the Tanjur, or the second part of the Tibetan canon, and in some of the late Tantras of the Nepalese collection.

Needless to add that the magical writings of the Tanjur are unknown to the shamans of Siberia and have nothing to do with Siberian shamanism. Still less is it intelligible how Müller could say that “the only trace of the influence of Buddhism among the Chudic races, the Finn, Lapp, etc., is found in the name of their priests and sorcerers, the shamans.” The word shaman is foreign to any Finno-Ugrian language; it found its way into Finnish (*shamani*) and Hungarian as a scientific term only, in the same

¹ An English translation was edited in London, 1889, in *F. v. Schlegel's Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works*.

² *Recherches sur les langues tartares* (Paris, 1820), p. 133, and *Observations sur la doctrine samanéenne et la triade suprême* (Paris, 1831).

³ *Mémoires relatifs à l'Asie* (Paris, 1828), vol. III, p. 67.

⁴ *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. I, pp. 233–234.

manner as into the Indo-European languages. A. H. Sayce¹ has the following:

In shamanism, so called from the Shaman or Siberian sorcerer, who is himself but a transformed *çramana*, or Buddhist missionary priest, we rise to a higher conception of religion.

These superstitions were tenaciously upheld under the influence of the romantic movement of pan-Indianism, which held the minds of scholars enthralled in the first part of the nineteenth century, and the germs of which are not yet entirely exterminated.

True it is that the Sanskrit word *çramaṇa* with the Prākṛit form *samaṇa* has become widely known outside of the pale of India. It reached the ears of the Greek writers on India, who described the Buddhist monastics under such names as Sarmanes, Sarmanai, or Samanaioi. The first of these names was recorded by Megasthenes,² though the single text of Strabo from which all the existing codices have been copied offers the erroneous transcription Garmanes.³ The word has also passed into early Arabic records for the designation of the Indian and Bactrian Buddhists (for instance, in Masūdi, Gurdezi, and Abu'l Faradj) in the form *samaniyya*, while in later literature the form *šaman* was adopted.⁴ In Firdausī's *Shāhnāme*, completed in A.D. 1010, we find *šaman* in the sense of a worshipper of idols, and this Persian word likewise is traced to Sanskrit *çramaṇa* and its congeners.⁵ Again, it bears no relation to "our" or the

¹ *Introduction to the Science of Language*, vol. II, p. 293.

² Strabo xv, 1, 59.

³ The texts in question are easily accessible in J. W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as described in Classical Literature*, pp. 65, 168, 170. See further C. Lassen, "De nominibus quibus a veteribus appellantur Indorum philosophi," in *Rhein. Museum für Philol.*, vol. I, 1833, pp. 178-180, and *Indische Alterthumskunde*, vol. II, p. 700; E. Burnouf, *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien*, p. 245; T. Watters, *Essays on the Chinese Language*, p. 403; S. Lévi, *Journal asiatique* (1911), I, p. 445.

⁴ Geza Kuun, *Keleti Szemle*, vol. IV, 1903, p. 133; G. Ferrand, *Textes géographiques arabes relatifs à l'Extrême-Orient*, vol. I, p. 131. The Mohammedan writers were perfectly conscious of the fact that the term hailed from India and denoted the Buddhists of India and China. See particularly D. Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus* (St. Petersburg, 1856), vol. I, pp. 165, 214, 217, etc. As far as I know, the shamanistic religion of Siberian tribes is not mentioned by any early Arabic or Persian author.

⁵ P. Horn in *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie*, vol. I, pt. 2, p. 7; K. Vullers (*Lexicon persico-latinum*, vol. I, p. 466) renders the term by *idololatra* and *idolum*.

Siberian shaman, but evidently refers to Indian Buddhists, for these šamans say, "Our religion is one of peace and quiet, and fighting and slaying is prohibited, as well as all kinds of shedding of blood."¹ Finally the Indian word has been traced in the newly discovered Indo-European language styled Tokharian in the form *šamāne*; and this induced A. Meillet to formulate the opinion that the Tokharian form (not a Prākṛit form of Sanskrit *śramaṇa*) would account for the Tungus word *šaman*.² With all respect due to the scholarship of this eminent philologist it must be admitted, however, that there is a far cry from Tokharian to Tungusian, that there is no evidence for any contact of these two groups, and that the Tungus notion of a shaman is radically different from the conception of a Buddhist monk. If two words in geographically remote languages are physically alike or similar, but fundamentally diverse in meaning, it is safe to assume that the face resemblance is purely accidental.

Indeed this theory was brilliantly antagonized as early as 1842 by W. Schott; and H. Yule,³ accepting his verdict, reached the conclusion, "Whether the Tungus word is in any way connected with this or adopted from it [that is, the Sanskrit-Pāli term], is a doubtful question." Schott has devoted no less than three studies to this problem,⁴ in which he endeavored to dissociate *šaman* from *samaṇa*. His arguments are briefly as follows: the Chinese strictly discriminate between Manchu *saman* (shaman) and Sanskrit *śramaṇa*, and never confound a shaman and a Buddhist monk, the two having totally diverse functions; a direct or indirect connection of Tungusian tribes with India is unproved; Buddhist missionaries never advanced into regions inhabited by Tungus;⁵

¹ Compare the quotation in H. Yule, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 820.

² A. Meillet, "Le Tokharien," *Indogermanisches Jahrbuch* (Strassburg, 1914), vol. 1, p. 19.

³ *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 820.

⁴ "Über den Doppelsinn des Wortes Schamane und über den tungusischen Schamanen-Cultus am Hofe der Mandju-Kaiser," *Abhandlungen Berliner Akademie*, 1842, pp. 1-8; "Wohin gehört das Wort Schamane?" in his *Altäische Studien*, no. 3, *ibid.*, 1867, pp. 138-141; and "Das Wort Schamane," in *Erman's Archiv für wissenschaftliche Kunde von Russland*, vol. XXIII, 1865, pp. 207-210.

⁵ As emphasized in my article "Burkhan," *Journal American Oriental Society* (1917), pp. 390-395, there is no trace of Buddhism in the religion of the Tungusian peoples on the Amur.

it would be strange if they should have borrowed the only word in their language for the designation of their national priests; the forms of shamanism are uniform in a vast territory extending from Lappland to the Bering Sea and far beyond into America; Vasilyev's hypothesis that shamanism should be a caricature of ancient Buddhist sorcery and jugglery and have been brought into existence by such influences is a mere phantom; the outward resemblance of the words *saman* and *samaņa* is purely fortuitous. Schött's etymological explanations of the word from Samoyed are not convincing, but his remark that Tungusian *sam* possibly is anciently related to Turkish *kam* testifies to great foresight and ingenuity; and this thesis, as will be seen, can now really be proved. Also Ch. de Harlez¹ joined the ranks of the adversaries of the Indian hypothesis, reiterating in the main Schott's arguments. In Russia, it had been severely criticized as far back as 1846 by Dordji Banzarov, a Buryat and an excellent Mongol scholar.² Nevertheless in Russian dictionaries also the nightmare of the *çramaņa* is perpetuated.³ As it happens, twilight reveries appeal more to the multitude than plain reason and continue to live even if abandoned by the thinking minority; it is not always the best and fittest that survives. The ghost of the Indian *çramaņa* still haunts the poor shaman in our standard dictionaries and cyclopaedias (see Webster, Nouveau Larousse, and Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*; Schaff-Herzog *Religious Encyclopaedia*, vol. x, p. 385; Funk and Wagnalls' Dictionary offers even a "Persian-Hindustani shaman, pagan"!).⁴ It is a relief, therefore, to read in the new Oxford Dictionary,

The Persian *shemen*, idol, idol temple, sometimes cited as the source, is unconnected. Evidence seems to be wanting for the plausible suggestion that the Mongolian word is an adoption of Chinese *sha men*, an ordained member of a Buddhist fraternity.

Eliminating "plausible" and substituting "Tungusian" for

¹ *La Religion nationale des Tartares orientaux* (Bruxelles, 1887), p. 28.

² His works were collected and edited by Potanin in 1891 under the title *Černaya v'ara ili šamanstvo u Mongolov i drugiya stal'i* ("The Black Faith or Shamanism among the Mongols and Other Articles"). Regarding the word shaman see p. 34.

³ For instance, in Gor'aev, *Sravnitelny etimologičeski slovar' russkago yazyka*, p. 418.

⁴ Even in the 7th edition of O. Peschel's *Völkerkunde* (p. 274) the *çramaņa* still holds sway.

"Mongolian," this statement marks a progress in lexicographical literature. So there is hope that our great-grandchildren will perhaps be treated to a correct definition in the dictionaries of the following century.

The Hungarian scholar J. Németh¹ has attacked the problem in the right spirit, and solved it by means of a concisely philological

after Grube's *Goldisches Wörterverzeichnis*, several other forms of the word have become known. De la Brunière¹ recorded it in 1846 among the Golde as *tsama* or *tsamo*. I heard only *s'ama* from the Golde, in the same manner as Shimkevič,² but in view of the existence of several Golde dialects such a form may be regarded as possible. A. Rudnev³ noted from a Manchu, who was still conversant with his mother tongue, the following: *sáma*, *sáman*, *sámq* (nasalized *a*), and *sāmān*.

The Gilyak style the shaman *čam* (*čšam*). This certainly is a loan-word received from Tungusian,⁴ but it is not necessary to assume that the change of the initial *š* or *s* into the palatal explosive surd is due to the Gilyak; for this alternation is common within Tungusian, so that a Tungusian *čam* borrowed by the Gilyak may be presupposed for some Tungusian dialect spoken in the neighborhood of the Gilyak. Compare the following examples: Manchu *nesuken* and *nečin* (equal)—Jučen *nušin*; Manchu *ničuxe* (pearl)—Old Jučen *inšuko* or *inšuxa*, modern Jučen *ninčuxe*; or *vice versá*, Jučen *ančun* (gold)—Manchu *aisin*.

It has been said that the word *šaman* is found only in the eastern part of Siberia and in Manchuria. There is, however, one well-authenticated instance on record to the effect that it was known also in northwestern Siberia. In the earliest account that we have of the Irtysh-Ostyak, written in 1715 by G. Novitski, their priests were styled *šamančik*.⁵ In view of the early date of this record we cannot well assume that this is a loan-word received through intercourse with the Russians. Whether the term still exists I co-existent in the most ancient days of China. The supposition on which the conclusion is based is now no longer valid: the word for the male shaman is in fact identical throughout from the Turkish to the Tungusian and Gilyak tribes.

¹ In H. E. M. James, *The Long White Mountain or a Journey in Manchuria* (London, 1888), pp. 433, 434.

² *Materialy dl'a izučeniya šamanstva u Goldov*, p. 8.

³ *Novyia dannyia po živoi mandžurskoj r'üči i šamanstvu* (*New Data on the Live Manchu Speech and Shamanism*), p. 9.

⁴ There is no doubt that the shamanism of the Gilyak is derived from and a weak echo of that of the neighboring Amur tribes. There are but a few shamans among the Gilyak, and shamanizing is rarely practised by them (see for the present L. von Schrenck, *Reisen und Forschungen im Amur-Lande*, vol. III, p. 752).

⁵ B. Munkácsi, *Keleti Szemle*, vol. IV, 1903, p. 88.

am unable to say from the sources at my disposal. S. Patkanow¹ gives for the shamans of the Ostyak only the name *tonx-ort*.²

The Turkish word *kam* is of ancient date.³ It is attested (and this is its earliest occurrence) in the Chinese Annals of the T'ang dynasty (618-906), where it is said with respect to the Kirgiz⁴ that they designate their sorcerers or shamans (Chinese *wu*) with the word *kam* 呼巫爲甘. The last character now reads *kan*, but was anciently possessed of a final labial nasal, which is still preserved in the dialects of southern China. Chinese *wu* is a very ancient term for the native medicine-men.⁵ The word *kam*, further, is found in Uigur⁶ and in the *Codex cumanicus* of 1303.⁷ It is also used by the Persian historian Rashid-eddīn (1247-1318) in 1302, with reference to the shamans of the Mongols.⁸ The existence of the Tungusian word *šaman* can now be traced to the

alternation of *k* and *x* is well known.¹ likewise *x*, *h*, and *s* alternate

this relation is to be explained is beyond our present knowledge. The type *kam*—*sam* is possibly preserved in Mongol in a somewhat disguised form. According to the phonetic law established by Németh, the Mongol initial corresponding to Turkish *k* and Tungusian *s* should be *ts*, *č*. Thus we get at Mongol *tsam*, *čam*, that means a dance, and at present refers in particular to the religious pantomimic dance-performances of the Lamas in which, as is well known, many ancient shamanistic notions and rites of pre-Buddhistic times have survived. The same word in the same sense is encountered in Tibetan as *č'am* or *ts'am* (written *ač'am*), and it would be justifiable to regard the Mongol as a loan-word adopted from Tibetan;¹ but considering the fact that the Tibetan word is isolated (that is, not found in any other Indo-Chinese language), it is likewise permissible to stamp the Tibetan as a Mongol loan. For the rest, I give with all reserve this theory of a possible connection of Mongol *tsam* with Turkish-Tungusian *kam*—*sam* (religious dancer).

At any rate it is obvious that the word *šaman* has now legitimately secured an absolute and irrevocable decree of divorce from its pseudo-mate *gramaņa*, *samaņa*, or *ša-men*, and that this mismatched couple cannot live together any longer. Tungusian *saman*, *šaman*, *xaman*, etc., Mongol *šaman*, Turkish *kam* and *xam*, are close and inseparable allies grown and nourished on the soil of northern Asia,—live witnesses for the great antiquity of the shamanistic form of religion.

FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY,
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

¹ In a forthcoming study on *Loan-Words in Tibetan*, where an almost complete list of Mongol loan-words occurring in Tibetan is given, the writer has set forth the difficulties in recognizing the mutual loan-words of the two languages. Mongol and Tibetan have a certain number of words in common, partially due to a prehistoric contact, partially due to a lively intellectual interchange in historical periods; and it is not always possible to decide in each and every case which side is the recipient, and which the borrower.