

MYTH OF ZUNUG KHAIRKHAN: SHAMANIC INITIATION AND INDIVIDUATION

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Abstract

The Mongolian myth of Zunug Khairkhan is about the shamanic initiation to become a shaman—individuation—after undergoing the archaic ordeals. The myth makes the abstruse experiences of the shamanic rituals a bit visible and comprehensible. The extraordinary details furnished in the myth shows the shaman's ecstatic travels, the visions of the rituals that he is subjected to and the experience of dying to become the living dead. It is by facing the ordeals that the shaman learns what is fatal to health and about its cure, and by dying he has the profound knowledge of life. A simple and humble attempt is made herein to interpret the esoteric process of shamanic ordination.

Myth

The myth of Zunug Khairkhan, the Senile Holy Mountain, is as follows—

Near Tengis River (Sea River), there are nine graves called Nine Blocks of the Sea. These graves are worshipped as shrine of a spirit. In graves, shamans bury the most difficult and strangest things and hold them down with help of locals.

Zunug

Khairkhan, a shaman, was curious to know what was inside the graves. So he dug open the nine graves and there he found some mysterious objects like an antelope without neck, a drop of the blood lake, dead human body, the earth spirits such as evil spirits and water-nymph. Zunug Khairkhan, worshipped the spirit of the nine graves. He kept some of those things and sanctified them.

Zunug Khairkhan had a flying horse which could reach wherever he wanted to travel. No one knew where he used to travel riding that horse. Eventually, his wife became suspicious and worried about his escapades.

One day he came back home with a three year old naked child. He found the child alive beneath the Nine Blocks of the Sea. He instructed his wife to feed the child on antelope's blood and never give cattle's milk. The wife obeyed him and fed the child antelope's blood for over a month but again one day Khairkhan rode away to some place. This made her angry and jealous; and she suspected him of marital infidelity. So, out of revenge, she fed the child with cattle's milk that killed it. If the child would have survived and was allowed to grow up, then it would have become a water-nymph. When Khairkhan came back home, his wife heard the sound of the saddle cloth blowing. She stepped out from home and at the very sight of the wings of the flying horse she cut them off. Since that time, Zunug Khairkhan could not go anywhere, near or far.

One time, some cannibals caught him and tried to cut off his head but their sword became blunt. Even after many attempts they failed. Then, they tried to shoot him with a flint gun. But the bullets could not take him down and instead got stuck in his belt and spilled on the ground. Khairkhan mocked them by saying, "Take away your bullets".

In their final attempt, they piled woods up to the sky and tied Khairkhan with it in order to burn him down. After midnight, when the cannibals came back to put out the fire, to their amazement, Khairkhan was still alive, his moustache was frozen, he put his hands inside the sleeves because they were stiff and numb with cold and was found sitting surrounded by embers. Again, he teased them to set him ablaze one more time.

Then he told man-eaters, “You cannot defeat me, now it is my turn”. Khairkhan was clever; he asked all of them to ride on a log of wood to float on Tengis River while waving their hands and assured them that they will find Paradise. He had the man-eaters drown in the waterfall of Tengis River.

Zunug Khairkhan desperately tried to fly for two days but he could not and said, “My pelvic bone became bronze, I drank ocean water, and ate meat and now I cannot fly. So kill me now. Wrap my head by yellow dog’s omentum, strike me with pants of a woman who gave birth three times.” As soon as the rituals were performed, he died.

Hypothetical Interpretation

The myth begins at the shrine of the shamanic spirit. Shamanic shrine-graves is a sacred-potent place of transformation. Under the divine providence of the Sky God, the nine graves could be the “nine sons” (Eliade, 1989, p. 116) of the heavenly-father shaman. Zunug Khairkhan visits the shrine because he has received the call so he must know his ancestors and the “mythology and genealogy of the clan” (Eliade, 1989, p. 13), and must consecrate a place for himself—an altar—where he should enshrine the holy relics of the previous shamans. The spirit of the shaman through the medium of the objects for veneration should come home, be embodied within and manifest *via* Zunug Khairkhan.

Next step in maturing as a shaman is to be bestowed with the gift of praying and prophesying, be in possessing of power to go into ecstatic trance, travel to the realms wherein he could complete his initiation and obtain wisdom and experience in magical journeys to the parallel worlds. Thus, Zunug Khairkhan has a drum, which is the shaman’s flying horse (Eliade, 1989, p. 173 & p. 233).

The worrying wife, even imaging infidelity on the part of Zunug Khairkhan, is a sign that as a shaman her spouse is not able to attend to the matrimonial relationship and the family life.

As a partial fulfillment of the process of initiation, Zunug Khairkhan must undergo symbolic nurturance for three years. Zunug Khairkhan as a child becomes the descendent of the spirit of the shaman of the nine graves. As a child, Zunug Khairkhan is naked to the extremities of life, needs to foster new ego-development and await his death to emerge matured in archaic spirituality. In this regard, Zunug Khairkhan’s wife serves the function of his *Anima Socialis*.

The shaman as a child in need of initiation and nurturance is to be fed with the blood of the antelope because it is one of the shamanic relics unearthed from the nine graves. As an integral part of the initiation, Zunug Khairkhan “must even drink the blood of the sacrificed animal” (Eliade, 1989, p. 121). By the blood of the antelope it is to be believed that Zunug Khairkhan would grow to embody the nature of the creature: get accustomed to living a solitary life in the ecstatic wild to complete his initiation; knowing the ways of the nature; remain naked and pure, unadulterated by the influences of all kinds of the human society; learn sublimity of things; develop in receiving and heeding to intuitions within and those concerning the environment where one operates; growing in inner strength; awakening in spirituality; journeying gracefully from this familiar world to the unseen and the unknown worlds; be knowledgeable about the mysteries of birth, rejuvenation, death and rebirth; learn the archaic art to facilitate humans by calming their passions, curing their souls, healing their distress, accompanying the dying and blessing all with reverence for the spirits.

The shaman as a child is not to be fed with the milk of the cattle lest he shall become domesticated and homely.

Having received such a ritualistic spirit nurturance for a substantial amount of time—a month-- Zunug Khairkhan travels one more time, assumingly with more experience, before ending his formative period as a child.

The child must now die in order to grow furthermore. Zunug Khairkhan’s *Anima Socialis* feeds the child-shaman with the milk of the cattle, killing his herd instinct, putting an end to the lower developmental stage in his conscious individuation process: the water-nymph.

The advent of adulthood is marked by killing the childhood-ego and cutting the wings of the flying horse, meaning that the days of wandering outside and beyond is over, and Zunug Khairkhan now should remain on a firm ground to undertake a perilous journey into his own self to become a consummate shaman.

Until now Zunug Khairkhan is strengthened in prayers and ecstatic journeys; now he needs to become strong in the body to take in spiritual experiences and ordeals of an archaic order.

Zunug Khairkhan is subjected to all those spirits—the cannibals—that consume the body. Just like the devils that “keep the candidate’s soul until he has learned all of their wisdom” (Eliade, 1989, p. 38), similarly the cannibals keep Zunug Khairkhan.

Being brought up in the blood and not the milk, Zunug Khairkhan must now face what can shed the blood, cause pain and even lead to a mortal to death: Zunug Khairkhan undergoes the experience of cutting, fear of losing one’s head, injuries by weapons, getting burnt, freezing to the point of fatality, and such sufferings which he must live through to help other in his ministry because they too could face the same and help in prolonging the lifespan. Anything that can eat up man is tasted by Zunug Khairkhan and put away by him in his shamanic ordeals.

As the rituals are dramatized in the myth, Zunug Khairkhan is not defeated by things which could endanger anyone’s health and existence. With a sense of and the primordial image of longevity and immortality—the Paradise—Zunug Khairkhan overcomes death by drowning the cannibals in the waters of life.

The act of killing the cannibals in the inner ritual is yet another stage in the ecstatic trance for the initiation to come to fullness wherein Zunug Khairkhan uses his drum, the log of wood like the “canoe” (Eliade, 1989, 254) to “sink” (Eliade, 1989, 254), “going down for good” (Eliade, 1989, 293) to enter the submarine-subterranean realms to know the depths and to rise to the higher regions of the sky.

In the last part of his ritual which is public, having gone through both the chapters of the shamanic initiations, namely strengthening in prayers and trance, and the ritual experience of strengthening the body by encountering death, “being dead for two day” (Eliade, 1989, p. 55), and suffered the sufferings of the common folk in everyday life, Zunug Khairkhan needs to—fly—return back from the spirit-world to re-live as the undead. The various ways in which Zunug Khairkhan displayed his shamanic potentials, his ritualistic death comes as a blessing with the gift of healing—yellow dog’s omentum—creating his identity—the head—as a healer with intuitions and visions, as “one becomes what one display” (Eliade, 1989, p. 179), and established his relationship with the other worlds. In the olden Mongolian burial rite, “the dog was always buried with his master, together with the horse” (Boa, 1994, p. 181). For Zunug Khairkhan, the horse and the dog are just as important symbolically and practically, in life and in death. The three years old child, with death, now walks out of the womb of the unconscious equipped with the power of purified experiences as the tools of the trade—striking with the woman’s pants who has given birth three times—to take on the life’s course with fecundity to bless life. Zunug Khairkhan is the shamanic *scificium* who dies and is born again.

References

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Acknowledgment: The research scholar wishes to acknowledge the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), New Delhi, for sponsoring this doctoral research.