

Chapter 1

Shamanisms and Dreams

As a field of study, shamanism continues to inspire vigorous debate concerning its parameters. There are those who argue that the terms “shaman” and “shamanism” do not properly apply to the phenomena of possession or spirit mediumship and should be limited to the religious complexes of Siberia and related cultures.¹ However, in this book I follow the lead of scholars who work with a comparative and analytic use of the terminology related to shamanic studies.² As I have used it, “shamanism” is a convenient label for a variable constellation of religious beliefs and practices grounded in an animistic worldview that ascribes intentionality and the capacity for communication to a vast range of phenomena. In addition, shamanism is focused on mechanisms believed to enable persons to mediate power and protection for the benefit of a particular group,³ although techniques for accessing power do not always include states of ecstatic trance, and those who “shamanize” may or may not do so in the capacity of a specialist.

I accept Michel Perrin’s analysis that a shamanic belief-system functions according to three basic characteristics: first, the belief in the double nature of persons and their environment—the person consisting of body and separable soul or souls, the external environment consisting of “this” world of materiality and the “other” world of spirit; second, the belief in the shaman’s ability to communicate intentionally with the spirit world; and third, the relationship between the shaman and the community, meaning that the shaman acts in response to social demand.⁴ To expand on Perrin’s threefold analysis, I also accept the following ideas drawn from the work of Vladimir Basilov. Shamanism implies a worldview that regards the universe and all its parts as interconnected and imbued with spirit forces that can interact with human beings in positive or negative ways. Human beings, therefore, have no innate superiority over nature and participate in the complex interactions of the universe in the same way as all other

beings. The cosmos consists of various levels or dimensions of existence other than the visible world of humans—dimensions that are permeable and accessible by humans. Ordinary people can unintentionally access these other places or states of existence, but the intentional work of a shaman requires the assistance of spirit forces.⁵ Within these broad parameters, small-scale tribal communities around the world engage in distinctive methods through which they meet their particular needs regarding the protection or restoration of life force, of property, and of personal, social, economic, and environmental well-being. In this working definition, then, shamanism refers both to elements of specific indigenous religions analyzed by scholars in the field as well as to a belief system that appears cross-culturally, though not uniformly.⁶

The processes of dreaming and dream interpretation are vital components of the religious practices and beliefs of many societies; however, in themselves, dream and religion alike manifest a particular approach to the world and to human existence. In this chapter, my aim is to draw the reader's attention to those aspects of a shamanic worldview that support and validate the world of dream as an arena of human activity, both ordinary and extraordinary, and to show that they are present in the Tibetan context.

THE WORLD AS BEING

Peter Furst says, "In general shamanism expresses a philosophy of life that holds all beings—human, animal, or plant—to be qualitatively equivalent: all phenomena of nature, including human beings, plants, animals, rocks, rain, thunder, lightning, stars and planets, and even tools, are animate, imbued with a life essence or soul or, in the case of human beings, more than one soul. . . . The origin of life is held to lie in transformation. . . ." ⁷ This describes what Furst calls an "ecological belief system." It is an approach to being and beings that resonates throughout the folk culture of the Tibetan region until today.⁸ The sacred mountains and lakes of Tibet are powerful beings who are kin to its people from primordial times.⁹ Indeed, in Tibetan traditional history, the dominion of Buddhism over their world is portrayed in the image of the land itself as a great demoness captured and pinned by twelve "limb-binding" temples.¹⁰

The multiplicity of being manifests in shamanic cultures around the world where there is a shared belief in various types and classes of spirits or nonhuman beings who interact with humans. *Lha*, the Tibetan word for such spirits, has wide-ranging connotations. *Lha*

can refer broadly to benevolent sky gods, the gods of ancient Buddhist cosmology, the spirits associated with a particular locality, nature spirits, and the ghosts of certain people, as well as to the deities, enlightened and unenlightened, who are the focus of tantric Buddhist practice.¹¹ The different kinds of *lha* are classified in a number of ways. According to one analysis, three classes of spirits are related, respectively, to the three cosmic zones. The benevolent gods (*lha*) occupy the upper world of sky or heaven, mountain spirits (the *nyen* and *tsen*; Tib. *gnyan* and *btsan*) and the “earth-lords” or “soil-owners” (the *sadak*; Tib. *sa bdag*) dwell in the middle zone of earth, and the water-serpent spirits (*lu*; Tib. *klu*) make their homes in the lower realms under the earth and in the depths of lakes and rivers. Most of these spirits are thought to be easily angered or disturbed by human activity, the result of which is disease and misfortune. The water spirits who appear as snakes are said to send leprosy when angered; others are thought responsible for plague or cancer. Commensurate with such a worldview, popular religious activity is primarily defensive and centered around propitiating those spirits who are powerful and temperamental, and who can be vindictive in their dealings with humans.¹²

Bellezza notes that one of the most important functions of the present-day spirit-mediums (*lha-pa*) of Upper Tibet is their specialized ability to restore harmony between humans and their living environment, thereby pacifying and healing the diseases that result from disharmony. The following excerpt from a Bön text attributed to the eighth century lists the kinds of activities that can elicit the anger of the *yul-lha*, the protector deities of the locality. It reveals the anxieties inherent in all human activity that disturbs or impinges on the natural world.

(iv) Listen to my speech . . . In the event that we did upset you let us be peacefully reconciled. We reconcile you by offerings of jewels and incense.

If we screamed on the mountaintops,
and irrigated with water channels and reservoirs,
and excavated at your mighty springs,
and accidentally lit big fires on mountains,
and killed your mighty deer and hunted your wild
ungulates . . .

[If we] molested the mighty *yul-lha*, rendered them
unconscious, upset them, startled them, made them ill,
and injured them, whatever transpired; we offer . . . these
offerings of various kinds of herbs and medicines.

(v) . . . If you are angry may you be pacified. If you are quarrelsome, we will reconcile the contention . . . May all your grudges be pacified. May all our infectious diseases and ailments be pacified. May your hatred and malice be pacified . . .¹³

In Tibetan folk religion, the most easily angered spirits are the *sadak*, “masters of the earth,” “lords of the soil,” who are disturbed especially by such invasive activities as building, digging, or any form of pollution of the earth. Religious acts of constructing stupas or temples were thought no less immune to the anger of the spirit owners of a place than secular activities of house building, hunting, or irrigating the fields. Concern with the vagaries of the spirit world is also expressed in Buddhist rituals, which commonly include the propitiation and domination of the local deities. The offering of *torma* (Tib. *gtorma*—a ritual cake broken and scattered about for spirit beings to enjoy) is intended to pacify the local gods. It is presented in some rituals with pleasing words such as:

I offer this torma of a nectar-ocean
To the lords of place and soil.
Please accept it, and without malice
Be my good and steadfast friends.¹⁴

Other liturgies evoke a much stronger sense of control and command. “The entire assemblage of obstructors consisting of gods and so forth who stay on the grounds of the great maṇḍala listen! . . . [B]e content with these tormas and go each to your own place. If you do not depart, with the vajra of the knowledge of the wrathful ones, blazing as fire (your) heads will be shattered into a hundred pieces, no doubt about it!”¹⁵ Every step of practical or religious life could potentially anger the local deities and bring about misfortune or illness. Therefore, the ability to pacify or control the local spirits would be an important aspect of religious activity, one that is linked in many forms of shamanism with the ability to work with dreams.

In contemporary Tibetan life, the primal anxieties related to the interaction between humans and the spirit inhabitants of the environment can still be observed. Sudhir Kakar relates the story of a young monk from the diaspora Tibetan community of Dharamsala, India, who fell on the hillside, bruising his face and cutting his palms and elbows. He washed off the blood in a stream where a couple of Westerners were also washing clothes and dishes. The next day, his face swelled so grotesquely that he could not perform his duties in the

monastery. Upon consulting a lama specialist, he was told that it was a spirit attack from the angered *lu* deity of the stream. As a remedy, the monk was advised to take offerings to the stream, apologize, and request forgiveness. The swelling soon receded, and life returned to normal. In response to the question of why the *lu* did not attack the Westerners, the monk had several answers. First, they were washing clothes, which results in external dirt—blood is internal impurity and much more polluting to the *lu*. Second, their personal energy and fortune (*lung-ta*; Tib. *rlung rta*) may have been higher than the monk's; finally, they probably did not believe in the *lu*, and knowing this the *lu* did not waste time in attacking them, but turned on the one who feared him.¹⁶ This last explanation might bring to mind Lévy-Bruhl's analysis of so-called primitive mentality, according to which the conceptualizations or "collective representations" that constitute the worldview of a group follow their own laws, and reflect a social reality that is not expected to apply to outsiders.¹⁷ However, for the purposes of this book, it is more important to note that such an explanation implies the understanding that reality is a function of the particular view that one holds. It underscores the notion that the world arises and interacts with a person according to how it is perceived and appropriated. This principle can be recognized in the Tibetan method of working with dream—once the dream perceptions are appropriated as dream and not as the reality they appear to be, they become subject to the control of the dreamer. The relationship between communication with deities and control over dream perceptions is found in both shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism but, as will be discussed later, a soteriological framework effectively separates the Buddhist from the shamanic approach.

Allied with the belief in a plurality of spirits inhabiting and enlivening the world is the shamanic view that the human body is inhabited and animated by one or more souls or aspects of soul—a word that encompasses a wide range of indigenous concepts regarding the various dimensions of personhood.¹⁸ "Soul" in Tibet's folk culture is captured in the concept of *la* (Tib. *bla*). The *la* has left the body when someone falls unconscious, is extremely ill, or suffers a severe fright. The permanent separation of the *la* from the body signifies death. The *la* has shape and mobility, and although it is intimately associated with the life force of a person, it can also dwell outside the body in any aspect of the environment, such as trees, rocks, lakes, or animals.¹⁹ Samten Karmay cites the following passage from a ritual text, in which the shamanic idea of a "soul" that wanders about separate from the body is integrated with the Buddhist body/mind analysis of a person. "If one practices magic what does one kill,

the body or the 'mind'? The body is made of matter. Even if it is killed, it does not die. As for the 'mind,' it is empty and therefore there is nothing to kill. Neither the body nor the 'mind' is killed. It is the *bla*, which wanders like a sheep without a shepherd that must be summoned."²⁰ As this passage indicates, the landscape of soul journeys is a dangerous one; during its wanderings the soul can be seized by a demon or spirit of some kind, in which case a complicated ceremony to recover it is required.²¹ Although Tibetan rituals of ransoming the soul are found in Buddhist texts, the basic principle and elements of the ritual can easily be recognized in shamanic practices of soul recovery.

In the Tibetan folk tradition, the idea of multiple souls, common in shamanic systems, is reflected in the belief that a person has five protective spirits (*gowé lha*; Tib. *'go ba'i lha*) that come to be associated with the child at birth and that reside in different parts of the body. Among them are the life force deity at the heart, the "man's god" or protector of men in the right armpit, the "woman's god" or protector of women in the left armpit, the "enemy god" at the right shoulder, and the deity who presides over the locality on the crown of the head.²² These spirits are regarded as internal aspects of a person's life force or soul, but at the same time they are propitiated externally as separate beings. The ambiguity supports the shamanic belief that personhood is a pervasive principle of existence. In other words, just as the various spirit energies that populate the external environment are regarded as discrete persons, so too the internal dimensions of a human being, the various souls, can be perceived as substantial "beings" who possess agency to act in different ways and fulfill different functions.²³

ANIMATE AND INANIMATE BEINGS

In shamanism, the souls of humans and the spirits associated with natural phenomena are interrelated, but the exact nature of that relationship is not easy to determine. The label "animistic" is commonly applied to cultures that engage in a particular way with their environment—as persons interacting with persons. Although this does not mean that animistic societies are ignorant of the difference between animate and inanimate, neither are these categories regarded as complete opposites. For example, studies of Ob Ugrian groups like the Daur Mongols indicate the use of different verbs to distinguish between things "with a soul" and things "without a soul."²⁴ Yet, there is also the belief that the shadow soul, which resides in people and animals, is, paradoxically, also present in things "without a soul."²⁵ What constitutes the animate, then, is somewhat more complex than

might be understood from the stereotypical notion imposed on animistic cultures that “everything is alive.” This position is elaborated by Nurit Bird-David, whose study of the Nayaka, a south Indian hunter-gatherer community, resulted in her reevaluation of animism and a more nuanced understanding of this complex worldview.²⁶ She emphasizes the prominence of kinship in the Nayaka definition of “person” as “one whom we share with” and concludes that for the Nayaka, personhood is not a given characteristic of inanimate things but an expression of relationship. “As and when and because they engage in and maintain relationships with other beings, they constitute them as kinds of persons: they make them ‘relatives’ by sharing with them and thus make them persons.”²⁷

A similar dynamic appears in Caroline Humphrey’s study of Daur Mongol shamanism. She relates a story in which a man who had recently moved to a barren, stony place thought that the single beautiful tree growing there was worthy of worship. The author notes that this tree was not outstanding in any magical way, nor did it contain a spirit; however, *subsequent* to being brought into a relationship and ritually worshipped as a sacred tree, it was regarded as having an indwelling spirit.²⁸ Jean-Guy Goulet’s work on the North American Dene Tha also substantiates this constitutive aspect of animistic societies. He writes of the self-validating nature of the Dene Tha reality, in which the various elements “elaborate each other in a back-and-forth process.”²⁹

In the Tibetan context, Bellezza also notes a strong sense of kinship with the indigenous mountain and lake deities; and in titles like “grandfather,” “mother,” “elder brother,” and “elder sister” he sees the vestiges of a genealogical relationship.³⁰ The strength of this link with the gods and the essential mutual support between the people and the spirit powers of the landscape—the way in which they “elaborate each other”—is brought out in a Bön supplication to Targo, the deity associated with the sacred snow mountain range of the same name in northern Tibet: “We fulfill the wishes of the lions, tigers, leopards, iron [colored] wolves, black bears, boars, *mi-dred*, soaring winged creatures, and wild yaks, and your entire manifested entourage. If there is no one to offer to the gods how can the magical power of the gods come forth? If humans do not have vigilant deities, who will be the supporter of humans?”³¹

Such examples highlight two important characteristics of a shamanic worldview: one, that relationship signifies communication, which takes place between persons; the other, that certain realities are constituted, not given. In the Mongolian case cited above, the reality of the tree-spirit emerges through the relationship between man and

tree, through the intention of the ritual and the action of worship. In the Tibetan text, the power of the gods manifests through their relationship to humans. People and their environment are perceived as belonging to an ecological whole in which relationship between “persons” is the dominant mode of existence. The creative transformation that is at the heart of shamanic ritual and dream work is dependent on this view of the organic nature of being and beings. The transformation of human to animal, or from ordinary tree to sacred tree, is not merely the process of one thing becoming another, but an unceasing unfolding that is the very nature of existence. As rain unfolds into the trees and trees into the wood and the sacrificial animal into the fire and the chants of the shaman into the smoke and the sky, so the ritual or the dream unfolds into reality.

The relationship between human beings and their environment reveals worlds within worlds, where the inner realm of the soul appears in the guise of the external world and vice versa. In Tibetan folk religion, a lake, stone, or tree can be the dwelling place of the soul and equally the dwelling place of a deity; the protector god of the locality has his seat on a mountain, but also on the crown of one’s head. The “man’s god” dwelling in the body is worshipped externally in a pile of stones on the roof of the house, and, likewise, the “woman’s god” is worshipped in the central pillar of the house.³² From this perspective, macrocosm and microcosm form a single continuum folding in upon itself; the traditional Tibetan house ladder made of a single notched tree trunk connecting the floors from top to bottom is, in the same moment, the primordial pillar of the sky that connects the sky to earth.³³ Similarly, waking reality and dream reality are recognizably distinct, yet they enfold one another. Dependent on the characteristics of his world, the shaman is able to fulfill his role and manipulate the diverse realities of his universe for himself and his audience.

CONTRACTS AND NEGOTIATION

The replaying of original promises, negotiations, and agreements is as integral to shamanic methods of establishing harmony and dealing with the needs of the various beings of the universe as the spells and incantations that bind the spirits. In his chants, a Nepali shaman recounts the original negotiations with animals that establish the contract between humans and chickens as the sacrificial animal for the ritual, along with the well-known characteristics of chickens. The song petitions the elephant, horse, buffalo, cow, goat, sheep, and pig, all of whom refuse to “go in place of man.” It concludes:

"[I]f man will grant our sacred promise, then we will go,"
 said the old cock, the old hen.
 "So, just what is your sacred promise?" he asked.

The old cock and hen request that until midday they be rightfully allowed to stay in the corner by the door, to defecate on clean floors, to upset filled pots, to peck around the hearth, and scratch for food.

"[U]ntil midday is our promised time,
 for all this, in place of man,
 for untimely deaths, untimely crises,
 with our blood we will satisfy the Time of Death, the
 Messenger of Death, . . .³⁴

Apart from the etiology expressed in the song, I wish to draw attention to the consensual, contractual nature of the relationship between the various beings of the world; here, mankind does not hold a place of natural authority. All participants have an equal voice.

The theme of permission and consensus between humans and other beings appears in many cultures as an important aspect of shamanic activity.³⁵ Vilmos Diószegi's description of a ceremony among the Soyots of Siberia in which a staff is prepared for a new shaman further demonstrates this idea. The old shaman first selects the birch tree from which the staff is to be cut and asks the consent of the birch to be made into the staff. After the staff is carved, its consent to serve the shaman must also be obtained.

White birch-staff: be my horse, be my friend!
 Again the shaman gave the answer: [on behalf of the staff]
 I agree.³⁶

Another kind of pact is described in a Nepali story of the mythical battle between the first shaman and nine witch sisters, whereby the shaman spares the life of the last evil witch in return for her agreement to obey his commandments when he performs the witch-removing rituals.³⁷ The roles are clearly defined as the witch pleads for her life:

I will cause illness, you will cure it,
 you will receive wealth, you will receive grain,
 I will apply reversed knowledge,
 you will apply straightened spells,
 I will obey your assigned times and assigned cures,

I will put frogs and turtles into victims,
 you will cure them . . .
 throughout the world, I'll cause illness,
 you'll cure it, don't kill me.³⁸

The emphasis on negotiation and consensus further implies that in a shamanic worldview all parties have a role to play and, indeed, *must* be allowed to play their part. A Daur elder puts it succinctly: "The fact is: all the things in the world and the people exist in their own way. We cannot and must not win over everything, but we must fight. Fighting is balancing. *Shurkuls* [devils] were never killed. You don't get the idea? If a shaman could completely get rid of *shurkul*, everything would lose balance. *Shurkul* has to be there."³⁹ Harmony is achieved through the public agreement or contractual arrangements between all participants, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, good and evil. But harmony and balance cannot be achieved or maintained without effort. Shamanizing and dreaming alike are manifestations of the ongoing struggle for equilibrium.

JOINING HEAVEN AND EARTH

In his wide-ranging study on shamanism, Mircea Eliade emphasized the role of the mountain in central and north Asian cultures as a cosmic link between the planes of earth and sky, human world and spirit world.⁴⁰ Heissig notes that in Mongolian religion, the reverence for sacred mountains was so great that in ordinary speech the name of the mountain was taboo, and euphemisms such as "the beautiful," "the holy," or "the high" were used.⁴¹ The mountain summit, enveloped by sky, also serves as the throne or seat of mighty beings, as well as the place from where great shamans or ancestor kings descend, bringing their protection to the people.

The following Mongolian myth describes the origin and descent of such protectors and their relationship to the deities of the mountain. A son petitions his father to become a protector for all creatures because he has developed such great occult abilities.⁴² The father agrees, but only if he, the father, is buried in the right place and worshipped. The son takes his father's body to the Red Cliff Mountain and worships him with offerings of tea, water, and milk-wine brandy. The spirit of the dead father allies with the nature spirits who are the "masters of the place" and grows more and more powerful, capable of creating hail, lightning bolts, and all kinds of terrible phenomena. In the same way, the mother's spirit also becomes extremely strong and

feared by the people. Protection comes about when the spirits of the dead parents possess a man and a woman who are to become the first shamans. In their ecstatic state, they travel to the burial place on the Red Cliff Mountain, where they find drums and headdresses made of the feathers of the Yellow Bird; finally, they descend from the mountain, beating their drums and coming to the aid of the people.

In this shaman origin story, apart from the role of the mountain as a place of power, there are two themes common to many shamanisms: the recognition that the power to protect is inseparable from the power to destroy, and the idea that creative energy is generated by worship—that passionate attention to an object articulated in ritual. Through worship, trees and groves become beings of power; through worship, the spirits of the dead grow great.

In Tibetan culture, a similar reverence for mountains is observed, and the legends of the divine origin of their first king reiterate the theme of the descent of protectors from a special mountain. Tibetan mountain-gods are related to a category of warrior gods that hark back to the beginnings of Tibetan military and political strength. According to Tucci, "The attire and the mounts of these gods indicate unmistakably the pastoral and warlike nature of the corresponding social strata; . . . they wear armour, often a copper helmet or a felt hat (*phying zhwa*), with bird feathers on the hat and a mirror in their hand. This latter of course belongs among the essential items of equipment of the shaman."⁴³ The enduring bond between a particular group or village and their mountain protector is expressed by Thubten Norbu, the eldest brother of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who remembers how the sight of Kyeri, "this majestic glacier mountain, which was the throne of our protective deity Kye, always made our hearts beat higher."⁴⁴ In his description of the worship of the deity, he recounts that "[o]n a small hill not far from [the village of] Tengster there was a labtse, that is to say, a heap of stones dedicated to the protective deity of the village. . . . Here you offered up white quartz, coins, turquoises and corals, and prayed for rain, or for sun, or for a good harvest, or for protection from bad weather."⁴⁵ The villagers' worship of Kye reflects the popular and very likely pre-Buddhist cult practice focused on the propitiation of local protector deities, the *yul-lha* (god of the locality), for the sake of personal and community well-being. The worship of these local gods should not be confused with Buddhist (or Bön) traditions of circumambulating great pilgrimage mountains, like Mount Kailash; nevertheless, many similarities and overlapping elements suggest that the popular reverence for mountain deities was a principal vehicle through which Buddhism bound itself to the indigenous layer of Tibetan religion.⁴⁶

The earliest version of the legends of Tibet's first king dates to the fourteenth century,⁴⁷ but elements of the story are found in songs from the eighth and ninth centuries that refer to the descent of a divine being from the sky onto the sacred protective mountain of the Yarlung Valley tribe.⁴⁸ This was King Nyatri Tsenpo,⁴⁹ who descended from the summit of Mount Yar-lha-sham-po to be greeted by twelve tribal chieftains or sages. They acclaimed him as their king and gave him his name, "Neck-Enthroned Mighty One," by hoisting him onto a palanquin supported on their necks.⁵⁰ In some versions of the narrative, the mountain is represented as a ladder—a tree trunk with seven or nine notches cut into it, each notch representing a level of the heaven worlds.⁵¹ According to legend, the first king and his six descendants, known as the "Seven Heavenly Thrones," returned each night to their divine home in the sky.⁵² Upon death, they were said to have returned permanently to the heavens, having no need for earthly tombs.⁵³ Their travel to the heaven worlds was by means of the *mu* rope or "sky-cord" attached to the crown of the head. This is the Tibetan version of the primordial connecting rope or ladder between earth and heaven common to many shamanic myths.⁵⁴ A Mongolian source of the same legend states: "When it was time to transmigrate, they dissolved upwards, starting from the feet, and, by the road of light called Rope-of-Holiness which came out of their head, they left by becoming a rainbow in the sky. Their corpse was thus made an *onggon* (saint, ancestor and burial mound) in the country of the gods."⁵⁵ Mortality finally came to the kings of Tibet when the sixth successor after Nyatri Tsenpo, brandishing his sword in battle, accidentally severed his *mu* rope—another example, like the relationship between waking and dream, where material and immaterial intersect without losing their individual properties. Thereafter, the kings were buried in earthly tombs.⁵⁶

The ancient *mu* rope signifying the connection between earth and heaven maintains its presence in numerous Tibetan folk and religious practices. The rainbow-colored wings attached to the headdress of spirit-mediums (*lha-pa*) represent, according to Bellezza's practitioner interviewees, the link between the medium and the possessing deities, as well as the belief that after death, superior spirit-mediums dwell in the palaces of the mountain gods.⁵⁷ In popular rituals of birth and marriage the primordial bond between heaven and earth is expressed in the form of a multicolored string attached to the crown of the head.⁵⁸ And the rainbow path of the early kings who had no need of mortal tombs finds an echo in the Tibetan Buddhist belief that certain meditation practices result in the utter dissolution of the physical body at death into a body of light (*'ja'lus*). As Tucci notes, "The connection between heaven and earth is a primeval article of faith for the Tibetan."⁵⁹

The image of a rope that joins the worlds features also in the beliefs of the Tungus, who tie a rope between trees to represent the path of the spirits as well as communication between humans and spirits.⁶⁰ Similarly, the Buryats in their initiation ceremonies tie colored ribbons between trees to symbolize the rainbow road of the spirits.⁶¹ The ribbons stretch from the top of the tree that emerges from the smoke-hole of the yurt to a birch tree outside. According to legend, their ancient shamans were said to be powerful enough to walk on those ribbons—it was called “walking on the rainbow.”⁶² A contemporary Mongolian shamaness suggests that the relationship between the shaman’s use of dream and the rainbow path of the spirits is hinted at in the Mongolian word for rainbow (*solongo*), similar to the word for shaman power dreams (*soolong*).⁶³

In sum, traditional Tibetan culture shares many aspects of a worldview common to other shamanic religious complexes. There are also similarities between the religious implements and practices of Tibetan ritual practitioners and those of related central and north Asian cultures;⁶⁴ however, I have foregone discussion of these features in favor of emphasizing the correspondences in underlying attitudes. The world and human life is a network of relations and interactions among a great variety of persons, seen and unseen. Similarly, in microcosm, individuals function as a dynamic interplay of persons or “souls.” Worship is both a mode of communication and a vehicle of creation. Through ritual, the world is consulted, hidden correspondences emerge, and deities are born; reality is created and transformed. Ritual is the process by which a person defines, empowers, and engages with the various beings and realities of the universe. Finally, in the imagery of mountains, connecting ropes of light, and the rainbow path between heaven and earth, Tibetans, like other shamanic cultures, access their primeval origins, ascend to the realm of the gods, offer themselves as vehicles for the descent of the gods, and pay homage to the ancestors who bind generation to generation and death to life. I have dwelt on these characteristics of a shamanic worldview in order to provide the necessary context and support for the following section on the shamanic use of dream—as a mode of communication, as a journey to other worlds, as creating reality, as revealing knowledge, and as bestowing power.

SLEEP AND DREAM AS SHAMANIC ACTIVITY

The nature and role of dream in traditional cultures, especially among Arctic and Central Asian peoples, has remained largely in the shadow of the more dramatic and overt elements of their shamanic practice and ritual. The darkened séances, ecstatic dancing, singing, drumming,

and trances in which the shaman speaks with the voices of the visiting spirits or enacts a journey to another world, like the sacred implements of the shaman, or songs, myths, and stories, are outward manifestations of the shamanic complex that a researcher can hope to elucidate with some confidence of accuracy. However, I propose that it is in the ethereal domain of personal dreams and subjective visions that the nature of the shamanic healer is forged. From that place where, in the words of Jean-Guy Goulet, "the scope for empirical investigation is nil,"⁶⁵ the shaman reemerges into public life with the power to confirm the cosmos and draw the community into a dynamic of protection, of healing, and of destruction of opposing forces. Dreaming, in its widest sense, is the very foundation of shamanic activity. For many cultures, spiritual power is inextricably linked with a capacity for working with nonordinary states of consciousness that are closely related to sleep and dream.

Although researchers in the field have, for the most part, rejected Mircea Eliade's narrow definition of shamanism that focuses on "techniques of ecstasy," scholars continue to regard the presence and use of altered states of mind, actual or simulated, as a crucial component in defining shamanism. According to Geoffrey Samuel's broad statement on the subject, shamanism is "[t]he regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means of which specialist practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of reality alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience."⁶⁶ In a shamanic context, however, what exactly are alternate states of consciousness? Anna-Leena Siikala explores this question in a study that compares shamanic forms of trance to specific features of altered states of consciousness. She defines shamanic trance states as "forms of behaviour deviating from what is normal in the wakeful state and possessing a specific cultural significance, typical features being an altered grasp of reality and the self-concept, with the intensity of change ranging from slight modifications to a complete loss of consciousness."⁶⁷

With regard to the range of deviation from the waking state, Brian Inglis argues that the states of ecstasy, trance, and possession commonly associated with shamanism are part of a larger complex of mental states. He proposes that at one end of this continuum is possession, a condition where the person's normal self seems completely displaced; at the opposite end is sleep, a state of unconsciousness; and, in between, there is a range of conditions "in which consciousness is maintained, but the subliminal mind makes itself felt."⁶⁸ Inglis's suggestion is supported by the language of shamanic cultures that connect sleep and dream to ecstatic states of possession, waking vi-

sions, and various hallucinations, as well as the visions or mental panorama induced in both the shaman and the audience through songs and chants. In her study of a North American Dene community, Marie-Françoise Guédon notes that the same linguistic terms are used to designate dreams, spontaneous apparitions, and visions arising through voluntary trance states.⁶⁹ This is not to say that a dreaming person is necessarily in a shamanic trance or that the Dene do not differentiate between dreams and other visionary experiences, but it does resonate with the argument that trance and dream states provide a similar space-time context in which the shaman's activity can take place.

Nevertheless, a consciously induced condition of possession or trance is an extraordinary state, not experienced by everyone, whereas dreaming is reported by most, if not all, people. Indeed, Mihály Hoppál draws attention to a number of everyday activities that take on particular significance for shamans: sleeping, which is related to the beginning or ending of an ecstatic trance; yawning, which is related to the taking in of helping spirits; dreaming, which is related to soul travel and the acquisition of knowledge; and fasting, which is related to the preparation for trance.⁷⁰ Shamanic activity, then, makes use of the ordinary (that which is available to all) in extraordinary ways. From this perspective, anyone can be involuntarily subject to spirit possession and all people dream, but a shamanic use of these states involves a measure of intention and control over them, and is associated with the assistance and power of the spirit world. My focus here is not on the shaman's ability as a specialist within the community, but on what constitutes a shamanic use of so-called alternate states of consciousness.

The poles of the continuum outlined by Inglis come together in the association of sleep with the states of unconsciousness, or apparent unconsciousness, that are a particular feature of Siberian shamanic séances, but that appear also in other shamanic cultures. An early Christian missionary to the Lapps provided the following description of a séance: "As if he had been possessed by falling sickness (epilepsy), so there does not seem to remain any breath in him and no sign of life, but it seems as if the soul has left the body. . . . When the spirit finally returns, the body wakes up as from a deep sleep."⁷¹ In another case, a seventeenth-century Italian bishop observing a shamanic trance in Hungary wrote: "[E]yes rolling . . . countenance distorted . . . arms and legs flailing around and his entire body shaking . . . he throws himself down and remains there seemingly lifeless for three or four hours. . . ."⁷²

In the shamanic rituals observed here, at one stage the shaman appears to fall into a sleeplike state of unconsciousness. Among the Tungus, Shirokogoroff noted that it was standard procedure before a

séance for the shaman to “fall asleep.”⁷³ He interpreted this as not a real sleep, but a ritualized aspect of the shaman’s performance, recognized as such by the audience. Nevertheless, from within the Tungus tradition, it is understood that sleep can be used as a method of entering into an altered state of consciousness or alternate reality mode in which the shaman acts—the battles fought between shamans were said to take place during sleep and dream. The following story describes an encounter between two such rival shamans.

One night the shaman was hunting on the salt-marsh; sitting there, he saw in the night some glittering fire. As soon as he noticed it, he pulled out his knife. The fire descended lower. Then he remained sitting quietly. Thereafter he returned home, reported the happening and said: “So *Saηγuni* [name of another shaman] has come! Keep quiet and let me fall asleep.” Then he fell asleep and became a shaman;⁷⁴ while he was sleeping, he began to follow the aggressor-shaman and reached *Saηγuni*’s wigwam. *Saηγuni* was sitting at the entrance. He sat down and began to scold *Saηγuni*: “You see, I nearly caught you when you were asleep. You are a bad man. Why did you go in the form of fire?” *Saηγuni* was sitting silent with his head hung down. When the shaman ceased to speak, *Saηγuni* told him: “From now on I shall never do so.”⁷⁵

Although somewhat confusing, the passage above is illuminating for its use of sleep in a double context: that of shamanic sleep, powerful and magical, and that of ordinary sleep—the sleep of unconsciousness and powerlessness. The first shaman encounters his rival *Saηγuni* in the salt-marsh appearing in the form of fire. The shaman then uses the ordinary state of sleep to access his spirit power; and in a shamanic dream state, he follows *Saηγuni* and finds him dozing in front of his tent. The shaman then chastises *Saηγuni*, pointing out how easily he could have caught him in the powerless state of ordinary sleep. Yet, how are we to understand the encounter? The narrative seems to say that the shaman, hunting in the waking world, perceives some kind of fiery phenomenon that he recognizes as a rival shaman. However, in his dream state, does he travel to a dreamworld tent or a real-world tent? Is *Saηγuni* dozing in the shaman’s dreamworld, or would someone in the waking world also see him sleeping there? Such questions, however, will not lead anywhere, because the answer to the question of how the dreamworld of the shaman interacts with the waking world is not found in the categories of dreaming and waking, but in their

nature as transitional states. In accordance with a shamanic worldview, the ambiguity of the narrative expresses the idea of distinct realities that, nevertheless, are capable of taking on each other's characteristics due to the liminal qualities inherent in both dreaming *and* waking states of mind.

In shamanic systems, the functions and operations of life belong to the visible waking world; upon death, some aspect of the person joins the ancestors and the invisible spirit world. Trance, sleeping, and dreaming are states in which the invisible world with its geography and inhabitants becomes available to the senses of living people. When one is dreaming, falls sick, falls asleep, or falls into trance, it is a sign that some spirit or soul dimension has separated from the person, even while another spirit may join the person. Therefore, all forms of nonwaking conditions—unconsciousness, sleeping, dreaming, trance, and illness (which brings about lethargy, sleep, dreams, and semiconsciousness)—are associated with death and the separation of the animating spirit from the body. They are all inherently dangerous states during which the person's soul wanders about in the spirit world and from which it must take care to return to the living. When he shamanizes, the Inuit *angakkoq* reminds the spirits of the dead, "I am still of flesh and blood."⁷⁶

The shaman is not always successful, however, in his attempt to negotiate the world of dream and death. A twelfth-century Lapp chronicle recounts a story in which the shaman's soul traveling across the ocean in the form of a whale encounters his adversary in the form of sharp poles at the bottom of the ocean that cut open the stomach of the spirit whale. According to the story, this accident in the spirit world results in the shaman's death.⁷⁷ Shamanic power and activity are intimately associated with sleep and dream, which in turn are linked with the realm of spirits and death. This is not to say that sleep or dream is the same as trance, but it does emphasize that they are fluid and interrelated states, supposedly brought about by the temporary departure of the soul, and thereby related to death (the permanent loss of soul), and to the power that is associated with death and the spirit world. To sleep is to put oneself into spirit mode, so to speak. The following description of a shaman's activity during sleep comes from a "big shaman" of the Australian Worora. It speaks precisely to the relationship between sleep, dream, trance, and soul travel shared by many shamanic traditions around the world:

If a shaman speaks with the spirits of the dead, this takes place by his soul leaving him while he is asleep. . . . At sunset the shaman's soul meets somewhere the shadow of a