

Legitimization of the Shamanic Calling among the Sibe

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The article provides some data on the initiation ritual of the Manchu-speaking Sibe shamans, the so-called “Golden Ladder” ritual. The Sibe used to have two types of shamans among them: the butu and iletu shamans. To become an iletu ‘real’ shaman one had to climb the Golden Ladder, which symbolized a journey to the spirit Isanju Mama who granted them the right to heal people. The last known shaman to be initiated this way was Morniang in 1928. The authors present an interview with an eyewitness of the ritual published by Chinese scholars. The ritual texts of shamanic ceremony were published in a famous book called Saman Jarin, in which the prayer of the Golden Ladder can also be found. Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi visited the Chapchal Sibe Autonomous County where she interviewed a butu, a shaman who has not been initiated. The article discusses how the changing tradition and the lack of initiation rituals determine the function and legitimacy of the shamans in modern Sibe society.

Sinologist Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi and Turkologist and Mongolist Dávid Somfai Kara, the two authors of this article, were both students of the late Katalin Uray-Kőhalmi, who taught them Manchu and inspired them to undertake research on the Sibe people. We dedicate this article to her memory.

The Sibe people (Manchu *Sibe*, English spelling Shibe, Chinese 锡伯 *Xībo*) were probably a Jurchen-speaking tribe who lived under the rule of the Khorchin Mongols until the end of the sixteenth century. They originally lived by the Nonni (Nenjiang) and Sungari (Songhuajiang) rivers. In 1593 they were defeated by the Manchu ruler Nurhachi at the Battle of Gure. After the Khorchin submitted to Manchu rule in 1624, they dedicated the Sibe people to the Manchu (1692). The Sibe became part of the Eight Banners (Manchu *jakūn gūsa*, Chinese 八旗 *baqi*) and

they were stationed around Chichigar (Chinese 齐齐哈尔 *Qiqiha'er*). After the Manchu conquered East Turkestan (Xinjiang), Emperor Qianlong sent some Sibe to the valley of the Ile River (Yili) in 1764. Other Sibe were settled around Mukden (Shenyang) as imperial guards. Nowadays the Sibe population in China is around 190,000, but only the Sibe of Chapchal¹ (around 40,000) preserved their ethnic culture and their Manchu dialect.

The Sibe of Chapchal preserved their rich shamanic traditions, some of which were recorded in a famous book called *Saman Jarin*, at the end of the nineteenth century. This book was discovered at the end of the twentieth century and the original Manchu texts were published with a Chinese translation.² It is a treasure-house of Sibe shamanic traditions from the nineteenth century. Nowadays this book is not only a major source for Sibe intellectuals who wish to revive their shamanic traditions, but it also offers an insight for ethnologists into the nineteenth century state of Sibe shamanism.

Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi conducted six months of fieldwork among various Sibe groups of China in 2010. The present article is mainly based on the materials collected by her, while the texts quoted from *Saman Jarin* have been translated from the Manchu original by Dávid Somfai Kara.

Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi visited six provinces, notably in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where she made interviews with several religious specialists in the Chapchal Sibe Autonomous County, including Fu Shou (figs. 1, 2) from the Fucha clan (Manchu *bala*). Fu Shou is a “*butu* shaman,” which means that he did not go through a proper initiation ritual. Based on the interview with shaman Fu Shou, the authors wish to provide some data on Sibe shamanic traditions and to show how the local community legitimizes shamanic abilities. The lack

¹ Chapchal Sibe Autonomous County (Cabcal Sibe Beye-dasangga Siyan, Chinese 察布查尔锡伯自治县 *Chabucha'er Xibo Zizhixian*) was founded in 1954 on the southern side of the Ile (Yili) River close to Ghulja City.

² In the summer of 1980 two Chinese scholars, Mandurtu and Xia Zhiqian, found a manuscript book, a sort of manual for conducting shamanic rituals, during their fieldwork in Chapchal. This Sibe text was translated into Chinese by Qi Cheshan et al. 1987 and Yong Zhijian (Nara and Yong 1992). It was also published in Manchu (Jalungga and Hewenjiyun [eds] 1990), and a German translation was published by Stary (1992). For details of this important manuscript, its editions and translations, see also Pang 1994/2007 and Qi Cheshan 1997, especially 71–74.

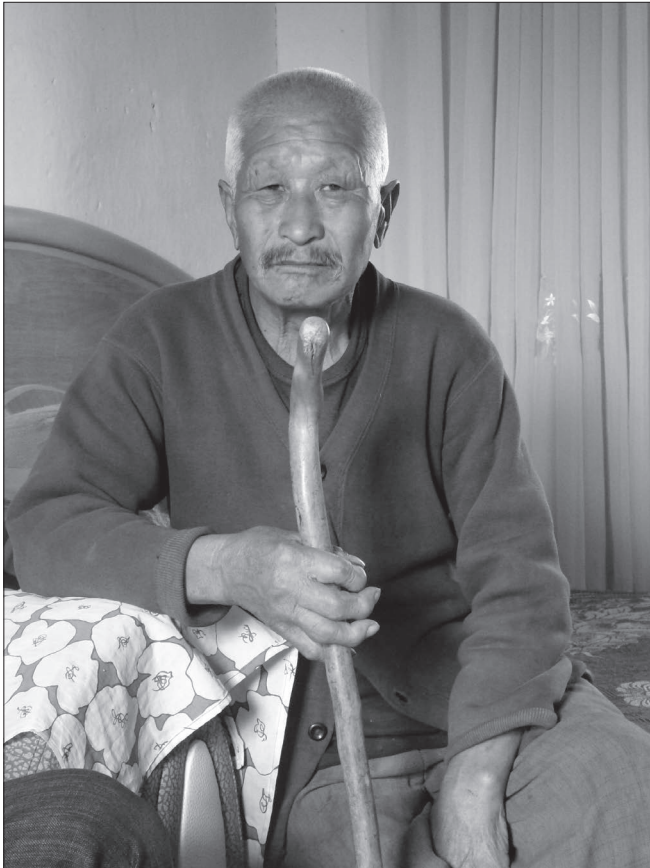


Fig. 1. Shaman Fu Shou in his house.
Photo: Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, 2010.

of the initiation ritual illustrates well the changes that have occurred in Sibe shamanic traditions in recent years.

Fu Shou lives in the fourth division (*duiči niru*)³ of Chapchal County, and he was 80 years old at the time of the interview.⁴ He was interviewed

³ The Chapchal Sibe County has eight divisions (*niru* 'arrow', compare Mongol *sumun*). These derive from the military unit of the Manchu Eight Banner military system.

⁴ The interview with Fu Shou was recorded on October 15, 2010.

in his own home by Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, who was accompanied by A Su, a correspondent of the local Sibe-language newspaper of Chapchal, and who translated Fu Shou's words from Sibe into Chinese. Fu Shou is a religious specialist in whose family shamanic ability was inherited through many generations. His grandfather, Yu shaman from the Fucha clan (*bala*), was considered to be one of the strongest shamans in Chapchal, and his shamanic garment and paraphernalia have been preserved by the family.⁵ Fu Shou was also interviewed by a Chinese scholar, Meng Huiying, as early as in 1993. Meng would have liked to see the paraphernalia kept by the family, but Fu Shou never permitted this.

According to Fu Shou, he was 15 years old when he first “encountered the spirits.” He got his shamanic ability from a spirit during a dream.⁶ The spirit appeared in the form of a woman, who taught him and has been helping him ever since. Let us cite Fu Shou's words here, as recorded by Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi:

His shamanic ancestor is a spirit . . . she is his master. She explained how to heal . . . explained to him in a dream. The shaman's road did not open for him, so he could not heal. He was initiated in the dream, but his road was not opened so he could not heal. He could not walk the shaman's path.

The “road” not opened for Fu Shou is probably the same road that the Sibe shamans undertake during the climbing of the knife-ladder which—according to the belief of the Sibe—leads to the court of Isanju Mama. In Sibe shamanic traditions the shaman's helping spirits are called *mafari wecen* (ancestor spirits). The word *wecen* or *weceku* means ‘spirit’ or ‘a sacrifice to the spirits’. During initiation, while the shaman's body is possessed by the spirits, the shaman's soul (*faiinggo*) leaves his or her body and travels to the spiritual world. It is the spirit (*wecen*) of Isanju Mama⁷ who decides whether the shaman successfully accomplishes the initiation.

⁵ On Meng Huiying's visit to Fu Shou, see Meng (2004: 62–64).

⁶ Sibe shamans legitimize their abilities through dreams and their ability to understand the meaning of dreams. The significance of this is mentioned several times during the interview conducted by Meng Huiying (2004: 53) in Chapchal in 1993.

⁷ The name Isanju Mama probably originates from the famous Manchu shaman's name Nišan/Nisan or Isan (see Uray-Kóhalmi 1997: 86, 110–111).

The eighteen steps of the knife-ladder (*juwan jakūn karun*) were the major initiation ritual, in which the new shaman had to climb a symbolic ladder (*bilheri*). The steps symbolize the eighteen check points (*karun*) of the shaman's symbolic journey in the spirit world. The ladder is also called *cakūran* (sandalwood), a sacred wood from Buddhist mythology. Another name is *aisin wan* (Golden Ladder) which symbolizes the "Magic Tree" connecting the three layers of the World in Sibe mythology. Here follows the Golden Ladder⁸ prayer from the book of *Saman Jarin*, which describes the above-mentioned "Magic Tree" very well (Nara and Yong 1992: 72):

<i>Genggiyen senggi-de getukeleki!</i>	In pure blood you will be cleansed
<i>Šayan sile-de šataki!</i>	In white soup they should be cooked. ⁹
<i>Šaldan temen-de tengnebuki!</i>	Unharnessed ¹⁰ camel they should mount,
<i>Šayan iba-de yalubuki!</i>	The white ox they should ride
<i>Abka, na-i acan-de</i>	Where Sky and Earth meet, ¹¹
<i>Aisin wan-be ayabuki!</i>	A golden ladder you should make!
<i>Šun, biya-i siden-de</i>	Between the Sun and the Moon,
<i>Siren wan-be ilibuki!</i>	Rope-ladder let them raise!
<i>Nara hala-i boigon-ni</i>	From the Nara clan's family
<i>Muduri ani-ngge enenbe</i>	Child born in Dragon's year
<i>Aisin wan-de ayabuki!</i>	Put him on the golden ladder,
<i>Menggun wan-de mukdebuki!</i>	By the silver ladder he should ascend,
<i>Urgun sebjen-i wasibuki!</i>	With joy and happiness he should go up
<i>Yang-ni jalan-de ulabuki!</i>	And bring it back to our World.

The climbing of the knife-ladder is a legitimizing rite of the Sibe shamans (He Ling [ed.] 1995: 242). Only shamans initiated this way can become *iletu* 'real' shamans. During that initiation rite they prove that they are capable of mediating between the human and spiritual worlds

⁸ The steps of Golden Ladder consist of knife-blades that the shaman must climb during the initiation ceremony.

⁹ Chinese *cuibuo* 淬火 means 'to extinguish, to cool down'.

¹⁰ Manchu *šaldan* 'unharnessed, without a saddle', is from Mongol *šaldang* 'naked'.

¹¹ This is the place where the shamanic tree or ladder can be found.



Fig. 2. Shaman Fu Shou with his wife.
Photo: Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi, 2010.

by obtaining the blessing of Isanju Mama to be able to heal. Those shamans without this initiation are called *butu*¹² ‘assistant’ shamans.

The climbing of the knife-ladder among the Sibe was first described by N. N. Krotkov (1912), who conducted fieldwork among the Sibe and saw the ritual himself.¹³ Even though the ritual changed slightly through time, basically it remained the same. The most thorough description of the ritual was recorded by He Ling (2009), who made

¹² There were two types of shamans among the Sibe, designated by the words *iletu* and *butu* (Mongolian *iletü* ‘open’ and *bitegü* or *bütegü* ‘closed’, see Pang 1994: 61; Second Edition, Revised and Expanded: 2007: 109).

¹³ The original Russian version is in Krotkov (1912); for the German translation see Stary (1985) and for the Chinese translation see Tong (2009).

an interview with an eyewitness, He Shuangxin.¹⁴ In this interview the informant said the following about Morniang, the last shaman who performed the climbing of the knife-ladder:

Forty days before the climbing of the knife-ladder I heard that adults were talking about Morniang Mama wanted to climb it . . . I know it from my father's account that Morniang was often sick in her childhood, sometimes being sick for several months. Her character was quite masculine and introverted. [. . .] She started to learn under Pa shaman¹⁵ and soon her sickness passed away [. . .] She was learning for three years under Pa shaman. Pa shaman was an ordinary man, worked as a farmer and he had his own household. He used to teach only in the evenings using his paraphernalia. After three years, at the beginning of 1928, news spread that Morniang was preparing to climb the Ladder. Pa shaman originally wanted Morniang to climb a horizontal ladder, but she did not agree to that.¹⁶ [. . .] She wanted to have an initiation similar to that of the male shamans with no less than eighteen steps. Finally Pa shaman had to agree to set up a vertical ladder. [. . .] In forty days the news spread throughout the whole Sibe County (Banner) that there would be a ceremony in *uju-i niru* (the first division). A couple of days before the ceremony Pa shaman had personally chosen five or six healthy young men from his clan to prepare the shaman-courtyard.¹⁷ [. . .] The knife-ladder with eighteen steps was set up in the very centre of Morniang's courtyard [. . .] A deep hole was excavated on the northern side of the ladder and filled with wheat straw. Around the knife-ladder twenty wooden columns were also set up. The columns were over one-metre high and were tied by two ropes decorated by coloured ribbons and paper cuts of sitting Buddha and other human beings. [. . .] When the sun set Pa shaman ordered some young men to put candles on the columns. [. . .] Old people use to call this the "Shaman's courtyard." [. . .]

On the second day before noon all the horse and ox carts had been stopped in the *niru*, only people were on the streets. [. . .] Even the branches of the trees were full of people. Some old trees were climbed by 11–20 people. [. . .] The ladder was standing in the middle of the shaman's courtyard, so the candles could not illuminate the top of the ladder in the dark. It looked as if

¹⁴ The informant was less than ten years old at the time of the ritual (1928).

¹⁵ Pa shaman was the disciple of Elsi shaman from the Nara clan.

¹⁶ According to some traditions female shamans had to climb a horizontal ladder (He Ling 1995: 243).

¹⁷ In Sibe *saman kūwaran*.

a huge celestial tree was reaching up to the dark sky. [. . .] A goat was tied to the northern side of the knife-ladder [and] next to it was a frying pan full of oil over a fire. Soon Pa shaman appeared from the hut. [. . .] Another shaman from a different *niru* took a bottle of liquor from the table of the “Eight Immortals”¹⁸ and poured some into a glass for Pa shaman. [. . .] Pa shaman took the glass and suddenly shouted “ha” and sprayed the liquor and started to dance. The other two shamans from different *niru*-divisions joined his dance around the table of the “Eight Immortals.” They jumped to the other side of the knife-ladder with drums in their hands and fell into trance with Pa shaman. [. . .] After about half hour of ecstasy Pa shaman entered the house and came back with Morniang. [. . .] They started to fall into trance together. Pa shaman suddenly shouted “ha” again and put down his drum and grabbed his spear. He ran to the goat and stabbed its neck. The blood running out of it was poured into a crock. Morniang ran up to him and drank out the blood in one go. [. . .] After this Pa shaman took his drum and started to drum and dance with the two other shamans. Morniang turned her face from north to south and stepped to the ladder. When she reached the ladder the three shamans started to jump and shout together: “Ha, ha, ha!” Then Morniang started to climb the ladder. Every time she climbed one step further the shamans shouted: “Ha, ha, ha!” Morniang reached the top of the ladder quickly and without fear. She grabbed the highest step of the ladder and gazed into the dark facing south. After a couple of seconds Pa shaman shouted at her:

“What have you seen in the South?”

“I have seen Isanju Mama’s courtyard!” she answered.

“What have you seen in the West?”

“I have seen Burkan bakshi’s¹⁹ courtyard!”

“What have you seen in the East?”

“I have seen Ibagan’s²⁰ courtyard!”

Finally Pa shaman shouted in an even louder voice:

“Look north!”²¹

¹⁸ The Eight Immortals (Chinese 八仙 *baxian*) or the Eight Celestials are a group of legendary transcendental beings in Chinese mythology. The Eight Immortals table (Chinese 八仙桌 *baxianzhuo*) is a big square table around which eight people can sit, with two at each side 八仙桌.

¹⁹ *Burkan bakshi mafu* means Buddha the master.

²⁰ *Ibagan* is a demon that causes illness.

²¹ The Sibe believe that the dead go to the North (Qi Cheshan 1997: 81).

Then the three shamans started to dance more fiercely while Pa shaman took the filled cup again. He shouted and sprayed the liquor towards the sky and said in a loud voice:

“After climbing she should jump!”

Morniang shaman looked upward and her body fell down slowly right into the padded pit. [. . .] According to Pa shaman’s instructions she was wrapped in a quilt and four young men took her into the house. After a couple of minutes Pa shaman led her out of the house and took her in front of the people. He took the *toli* (shamanic mirror)²² from her neck and dipped it into the goat’s blood and hung it back on Morniang’s neck. Then he announced to the people: “The Morniang from *uju-i niru* was accepted as an *iletu* shaman by Isanju Mama!”²³

Morniang, who died in 1976, was the last person to be regarded as an *iletu* shaman. Fu Shou’s grandfather was also one of the *iletu* shamans, but his knowledge was not inherited completely by his grandson. Without climbing the knife-ladder he could not visit the spirit Isanju Mama to become an *iletu* shaman himself. He did not know the way to the spirits either. Let us cite again Fu Shou’s words recorded by Ildikó Gyöngyvér Sárközi:

I am not going to lie. I will not speak about things I do not know.

He only hopes that he will not be the last generation of shamans in his family. Fu Shou shaman believes that even though his children are not shamans, they will pass on shamanic ability to the next generation, just as his father passed it on to him. He wants to choose one of his grandchildren to become a shaman.

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the changes in their society and economy, among other things, influenced the religious traditions of the Sibe, but we cannot state that shamanic traditions are only “historic relics” (He Ling [ed.] 1995: 43). As we see in the case of shaman Fu Shou, although Sibe shamanic culture ceased to exist in its formal “authentic” form, still, some of its elements survive and form a part of their modern religious traditions. We can better understand the shaman’s personal

²² Shamanic mirror (*toli*) made of copper about 10 cm in diameter. The old shaman dedicates it to the disciple after initiation. It helps the shaman to make connection with the spiritual world and fight the demons (Nara and Yong 1992: 130–131).

²³ Extracts from an interview by He Ling (2009: 222–224).

and social behavior by analyzing the role of living religious traditions in narrow and wider circles of the society.

Considering these data, a substantial question arises: how do Sibe communities legitimize their shamans' activities? The Daur of Khailaar (Khölön-Buir) and Butkha (Morin-Dawaa) also lost their initiated shamans during the Cultural Revolution. But at the beginning of the twenty-first century Sechengua from Khailaar revitalized the *onimaan* initiation rite and legitimized herself as an *iletu saman* (Daur *yadgan*). Nowadays shamans of other regions and ethnic groups go through initiations with her assistance (Somfai Kara and Hoppál 2009). The Sibe *butu saman* is a person who has the shamanic ability but cannot use it fully due to the lack of initiation. Recent data suggest that some Sibe shamans have started to heal by saying that they have climbed the Golden Ladder in a dream.

Only time can tell if the Sibe initiation rite (*bilheri*) will be revitalized and that thus Sibe shamans can fully legitimize their shamanic activities. But they are in a more complicated situation since the Sibe of Chapchal are surrounded by Muslim communities (Uyghur, Kazakh) and political and religious control is much tighter in Xinjiang. The acceptance of shamanic traditions is still a long way off in this part of the country.

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