

The Last Shaman — Religious Transformation among Circumpolar Indigenous Peoples from an Anthropological Perspective

Rui Lao

*International Curriculum Center of RDFZ, Beijing, China
lorie7788xyz@outlook.com*

Abstract. Traditional religions have often faced decline when meeting outside forces. Their loss, however, happens in different ways. For the Ewenki people, shamanism weakened mainly because of political control and modernization. Government policies forced them to settle down and turned their sacred rituals into cultural performances. For the Sami, the decline was not caused by modernization but by religious intrusion. During Christianization, their sacred drums were destroyed and their shamans were punished, severing the link between ritual and faith. In both cases, outside power—whether political or religious—disrupted the natural life of these ancient cultures. While most of the cultures disappeared, few remain among small indigenous groups located in remote areas. Once contact was made, change and loss became almost inevitable. This essay introduced the fading of shamanic culture in two nomadic minority cultures from the circumpolar region separately.

Keywords: Shamanism, Cultural decline, Modernization

1. Introduction

Ewenki is recognized as a nomadic hunting and reindeer herding minority group in Northeast China—Heilongjiang Province and Inner Mongolia. Historically, Ewenki culture was rooted in shamanism, characterized by close ties with nature [1]. However, it has experienced significant transformations in their religious and cultural practices under the force of modernization.

“Shamanism” is a word originated from the Ewenki language, defining as someone who becomes frantic and mad, which, in Chinese, has the same connotation as the word “wizard”. Central to Ewenki religion, Shamanism is a system of belief which a designated individual, the shaman, acts as a mediator between the human world and the spirit world [2]. Through rituals such as drumming, chanting, and entering trance states, the shaman could communicate with ancestral spirits, forest gods, and animal souls [1]. As time went on, the function of Shaman increased significantly, including healing, weather divination, spiritual protection, and guiding through major life events including birth, illness, and death [3]. It played a vital role in maintaining harmony between the community and the natural environment.

The Sami people live in the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Like the Ewenki, they have long depended on reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting, and their old beliefs

were closely connected to nature. In Sami tradition, the noaidi (shaman) was an important person who used drumming, singing, and rituals to speak with spirits and maintain balance between people and the natural world [4]. During the seventeenth century, Christian missionaries and local governments banned these practices. Many shamans were accused of witchcraft, their drums were destroyed, and Sami religion was almost lost [4]. Even so, parts of the old faith survived in songs, stories, and art. The joik, a special Sami way of singing, kept the link with the spirit world alive [5]. Today, Sami people are recovering their traditions and seeing shamanism as both culture and belief. Modern Sami scholars stress a “pan-Sami” view, which connects Sami communities across the Arctic and values their shared history [5]. In this way, Sami culture continues to show its resilience and its deep respect for nature.

2. The last Ewenki Shaman

The modern era has brought both challenges and adaptations to their traditional way of life. In 1957, following government policy directives, 1/4 of the Ewenki hunters were preliminarily settled in Eerguna city. 8 years after, all the Ewenkies moved along the banks of the Aoluguya river in the northern part of Eerguna, where all hunters achieved seasonal settlement. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Aoluguya Ewenki began to settle in Qiqian Township and later in Aoluguya Township. At that time, traditional shamanic traditions still continued, practiced by 5 Shamans: three men and two women. However, during the Cultural Revolution, all Shamanic activities were halted. Their ritual clothes and tools were confiscated by the government. By the mid-1980s, these activities had completely disappeared. After the last shaman Niula passed away from illness on July 10, 1997 at the age of 85, there was no one left to continue the shamanic activities [6].

Nevertheless, rather than disappearing, shamanic culture has undergone a transformation. As Wang Xinyu notes in *From Hunting Culture to Reindeer Culture*, Ewenki shamans today no longer serve primarily as intermediaries for hunting success or spirit protection but increasingly act as cultural representatives. As shamanism became less connected to religious worship in daily life, it started to change. Instead of being seen as something holy and illusional on the outside, it became more about personal spiritual meaning on the inside. This is now sometimes called the “hunter’s law” [1].

While contemporary narratives often portray shamanism among the Ewenki people as a symbolic or cultural artifact, field interviews suggest a far more complex and enduring belief system. At the Aoluguya Tourist Center, for instance, shamanic practices have been largely transformed into staged performances intended for cultural tourism. Costumes are stylized, rituals dramatized, and sacred traditions condensed into visual spectacles deviating from what the costume originally looks like. As Hugo—the great-grandson of the last recognized shaman—remarked, “Because of political reasons, real shamans no longer exist.” This sentiment echoes the broader institutional framing of shamanism as a non-functional relic of the past.

However, our fieldwork reveals that these narratives only stands in a surface level. According to interviews with elder members of the Ewenki community who holds a deep belief in Shaman’s magic, Shamanism continues to hold spiritual significance regardless of the touristic presentation. An elderly hunter recalled a moment when the weather suddenly changed following the death of the last shaman, describing the phenomenon as a display of supernatural power. These existing experiences supports that shamanism is not merely a stage performance, but sacred ideas about the universe that are passed down through generations.

Furthermore, the spiritual symbolism of traditional elements, such as metal ornaments shaped like forest animals and the branching antler on the shaman’s headdress continues to be worshipped

and respected. These objects are not perceived as aesthetic decorations, but rather as supernatural worlds.

Although the shaman's role has been modified as cultural education and heritage display due to modernization, the emotional and spiritual resonance of shamanism persists. The tension between these two interpretations highlights the conflict between cultural preservation and religious continuity. While cultural project sponsored by local institutions may emphasize shamanism's folkloric aspects, the spiritual and ritual aspect it represents remains active in the private life of Ewenki elders. In this way, shamanism continues to function not only as a symbol of identity but also as a lived spiritual framework.

3. The Sami Shamanism

The Sami people of northern Scandinavia have a long and complex history with shamanism. Historically, the shaman—often known as a *noaidi*—was central to Sami society, serving as healer, diviner, and mediator between the human and spirit worlds. The ritual drum, or *runebomme*, was the most important instrument of this practice. According to seventeenth-century court records, the drum was painted with sacred symbols of gods, animals, and celestial bodies. Shamans would strike it rhythmically, using the movement of a small metal or wooden pointer to receive answers from the spirit world. The drum was also used to summon winds, predict the weather, and guide hunting success. Contrary to popular stereotypes, there is little evidence that Sami shamans regularly entered deep trance states or traveled to other worlds. As Rune Blix Hagen argues, the association of Sami shamanism with dramatic visions may have been shaped more by missionaries' imagination than by indigenous practice [4].

The seventeenth century was also the time when shamanism faced its most direct persecution. Sami shamans were put on trial for witchcraft in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Drums were confiscated and destroyed, and many Sami men were executed. The court documents reveal how Christian authorities interpreted shamanic practices through demonology, portraying them as the devil's work. This period marked a deep rupture in the continuity of Sami religion, replacing indigenous rituals with Christian frameworks [4].

Despite this suppression, Sami shamanism never completely disappeared. The memory of shamans and their symbols remained embedded in oral traditions, folklore, and material culture. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these traditions reappeared in new and hybrid forms. Sami symbols and practices now appear widely in popular culture. Disney's *Frozen 2* presents the fictional Northuldra people, modeled after the Sami, as guardians of elemental spirits. The film *Klaus* includes Sami characters who are portrayed as keepers of kindness and magic. In the television series *Midnight Sun*, a Sami shaman figure is used to solve a crime mystery. Even on the Eurovision stage, artists such as KEiiNO and Elin Kåven have performed songs that blend modern pop with *joik*, the traditional Sami form of singing. As Anne Kalvig has argued, these representations show how Sami spirituality is linked to ecological concerns and identity politics in a global context [7].

At the same time, Sami shamanism has entered the sphere of global spirituality. Workshops, tourism, and New Age events often use Sami drums, songs, and ceremonies as symbols of "indigenous wisdom." This process has been described by Trude Fonneland and Siv Ellen Kraft as the rise of "indigenous spirituality," a hybrid form that mixes local traditions with global New Age ideas. While some of these practices are commercialized, for many Sami people they also serve as a way to strengthen identity and connect with ancestral heritage. In this way, shamanism remains not only a cultural performance but also a living resource for belonging and spirituality [8].

4. Comparative study: Ewenki and Sami Shamanism

When compared, both cases demonstrate how shamanism shifts from a daily religious system into a symbol of cultural identity. The Ewenki and the Sami experienced external suppression—through government policies in China and witchcraft trials in Scandinavia—that aimed to erase indigenous spirituality. Both later saw shamanism reappear in performance contexts, whether through tourism in Inner Mongolia or through global media and music in northern Europe. However, there are also differences. The Ewenki transformation is relatively recent and closely tied to political campaigns of the twentieth century, whereas the Sami case reflects a longer history of conflict with Christian authorities. In contrast to the Ewenki people, who still believe in the magic and spirit of shamanism in their daily lives, there is little evidence that ordinary Sami continue to treat shamanism as a personal spiritual belief. The Ewenki shaman is remembered today mostly through family memory and staged heritage, while the Sami shaman has been reimagined within global cultural industries and New Age spirituality. In other words, the Ewenki case put more emphasis on loss and memory, while the Sami case highlights hybridization and innovation.

Thus, instead of seeing shamanism as a “disappearing religion,” it is more reasonable to define shamanism as a flexible cultural resource. Both Ewenki and Sami traditions continue to be a source of spiritual and emotional support, though for most of the time they are performed on tourist stages or popular media platforms nowadays. Shamanism persists as both symbol and practice, linking indigenous peoples to their past while giving them tools to navigate modern challenges of identity, ecology, and globalization.

5. Conclusion

Ewenki and Sami are two representatives of ways in which cultural traditions faded over time. For Ewenki, political forces such as state control and modernization policies suppresses shamanic practices. These practices were finally obliged to fade into symbolic performance. In contrast, the Sami faced a totally different kind of force: ritual and religious suppression through Christianization and witch trials. These suppressions transformed their faith into cultural memory rather than active worship. In both cases, we see how external pressures can weaken indigenous religions while still leaving traces of spiritual identity within culture expression. As Hermawan and Muhlas [9] explain, the conflict between these two faiths, especially visible in the Israel–Palestine context, reveals how religion is often intermingled with political and social factors rather than purely theological disputes. However, by emphasizing shared values of peace and coexistence, interfaith dialogue between Muslim and Jewish leaders has demonstrated potential to transform conflict into respect and understanding. Therefore, whether in Indigenous traditions or major world religions, political and ritual disruptions remain central challenges to preserving spiritual harmony.

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