

Mother of Mothers: Notes About the Shamanhood Among the Southern Mansis

Leete, Art

This article consists of two parts.¹ The first part is based on the information told and written by Anna Konkova, the Mansi storyteller and writer. The second half of this article includes few interpretations on the Konda Mansis' shamanhood.

I obtained the data about Ivyr village Mother of Mothers mainly from interviews with Anna Mitrofanovna Konkova (Granny Anne), born in 1916, whom I and my friends have interviewed several times during the period from 1991 to 1996². Valuable information about her granny Okol and the other Mother of Mothers of the Ivyr village, Aprasinya is also available in the novel by Anna Konkova (Sazonov & Konkova 1990).

Granny Anne was born in the Ivyr village on the Konda River. She worked as teacher since 1937. She also had some skills of predicting destiny, obtained, obviously, from her grandmother Okol.

The Mother of Mothers was a spiritual leader of Ivyr village Mansis on the Konda River until the end of the WW II. She performed different kind of social missions – fortune-telling, healing, storytelling, leader of village women etc. The main characters about whom it was possible to get information, are Okol and Aprasinya, the Mothers of Mothers that Anna Konkova described both in her novel and in our interviews. Okol is the grandmother of Anna and Aprasinya was the Mother of Mothers before Okol in the second half of the 19th century.

The Mother of Mothers was a powerful female leader on the Ivyr village Mansis community and many of her features allow us to interpret her actions as shaman's ones. But a number of other characteristics make us realize that she was not a shaman according to strict, classical ideas about shamanism. At the same time the Mother of Mothers can be accepted as the borderline character of sha-

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² Once the conversation was carried out with Dr. Anzori Barkalaja, Esta Allas and Andrus Laansalu and once with Dr. Triinu Ojamaa. Twice I have made interviews alone.

manhood, at least partly accepted as such by the natives and also by the scientific discourse.

Anna Konkova's Notes about the Mother of Mothers of the Mansis in the Ivyr village on the Konda River

I had a granny. She lived many years, more than a hundred. She was buried only in the 1945. She was the Mother of Mothers. They chose as the Mother of Mothers a woman, who is not very young but not very old either.

Granny knew a lot of things but she didn't know anything bad. She knew good things, all good things. She could heal. She was responsible for children in the village. She thought them how to take less and to preserve more. She reared children this way. She helped the parents and was also involved in the rearing process. This was a highly serious responsibility to be the Mother of Mothers. She was our story-teller, also. She knew a lot of riddles. She was kind of wise woman, I would say: clairvoyant.

I tell you what happened during the war-time³. The village women came to visit us and some of them were confident that the Germans would arrive and take us, also. But the granny, who was then blind already and didn't get up from the bed any more, told one moment:

"Do not ever tell this by yourself and give the message to anyone talking like you: the Germans will remember us, they will pay and they would burn themselves out. The Germans will regret that they attacked our country."

This is what my granny told.

Next time another woman, Maria Maksimovna (she died last year⁴), arrived and asked (she was lisping):

"Granny! Granny! Tell me, tell me! How is my Petya? How is my Petya? Will he survive? Will he arrive? What will his life be like?"

That Petya drank, he was a Russian. He drank continuously, without a break. His wife wanted that when her husband arrives, will he drink in the same way? But my granny told:

"No, he will not drink as before. You will live well."

And so it was. Pyotr Andreyevich Kalashnikov arrived and did not start drinking again. He lived with his wife many years and died as teetotaler. You know, my granny could somehow foresee things.

³ Anne Konkova means the WW II.

⁴ This interview is made in 1991, so Maria Maksimovna died in 1990.

I tell you the following story.

I sent two brothers, my uncle and husband, the father of my children, to the front. Once I made something to eat for my children and granny at the kitchen. And she started from nothing and finished with nothing. I entered the room with the tray in my hands and she said:

“Anne, we told you that you must marry the other one that will not be killed. The other one will survive.”

I do not care! I have two kids and my husband will be killed? You know, I do not remember how I reached the edge of the table. I do not understand until nowadays what I experienced. But she knew that it is my husband who will be killed and not anybody else. And, really, that was it. My husband stayed throughout the war near Leningrad, on the Way of Life⁵. And he was killed there.

My granny was this kind of clairvoyant. Before her there was someone who taught her. That who was before my granny knew both good and bad things. She knew the bad things but I do not know these. But she knew something bad. She gave everything to my granny but my granny took only good things. She did not take bad issues. Why? Because that woman who knew both, good and evil things, afterwards, when she was supposed to die in very old age, she could until they did not take away the gable-boards from the house. She will cry. She will call Death. But Death will go away from her and laugh at her. And the Earth will not take her into her embrace, either. The Earth does not accept her. She must transmit everything to another woman. My granny took from her this and that. But granny did not take the evil.

[For to become the Mother of Mothers] it's necessary to go to the forest during the first spring thunder, to sit down and to [move up and down] with a knife. You must take a knife, cover yourself by the kerchief and sit under one tree and another and so under seven trees. So the first spring she went in the forest during the first thunder. In the second spring she must go, in the third and so until the seventh. And then the Earth... She, the Earth, is very wise. We hold that

⁵ Way of Life – way over the Lake Ladoga that was the only connecting line between Leningrad and other not conquered territories of the USSR during the Leningrad blockade in WW II between September, 1941 and March, 1945. Through this way the food and other goods (also military ammunition and weapons) were provided to the inhabitants and defenders of Leningrad. 300000 soldiers of the Red Army arrived at Leningrad through the Way of Life, also. Part of the inhabitants of Leningrad and equipment of the factories were evacuated through the Way of Life, also. The transportation was organized by tracks over the frozen lake during winters and by ships during navigation periods. (Karamzin 1972: 458-459)

the Land is very wise. Our ancestress, the Earth, is very wise. Trees are also very wise... Trees transmit to her all knowledge that they have in their big and small boughs, twigs and annual rings of growths. And afterwards she must just sit down and ask:

“How must it be?”

Then she throws the kerchief away and tells - it must be done this way.

The older woman transmitted this knowledge to my granny.

At once my daughter was preparing for an exam. Where she can run for help? She runs to granny. She wants to know, how she will pass the exam? How can she succeed? Granny sits down for a moment, covers herself with a kerchief. Then she throws it away and tells:

“Why did you come? Everything is fine, you will get “five”. You must go and revise the subject once again. You are going to get “five”.

But my granny... I had little kids and I wanted to find out, who will become who? How will be my life? And my granny said that so we should live, so would be with my daughter, so will happen to my son. This was my life and my destiny until I shall die. She was such a crone.

She sent me [to the forest] too. But I had studied physics at school, I understood everything:

“No, granny, what are you talking about? The thunder will hit the tree and kill me! No, I will not go there!”

And so I did not go, not a single time. Because I was so scared. And I did not use this kind of prediction, I did not understand this. I did not want to go, I was afraid. I was afraid and that is it. Oh, I cannot even imagine this... I do not even go to the street when there is a thunder. If there is an awful thunder, then I think that I would be killed. I cannot even think of running to the forest. But she ran. Everywhere the heaven was falling down, everything is beating, thunder and lightning everywhere. But she went and sat under the seven trees. This is not for my character. Only a very brave woman can do this. But a coward like me...

(EA 234, Leete 1991: 67-70; Leete 1993)

She was skilled in a bloodletting. She boiled the jawbone of a pike a little bit. Then she bound it to a stick and punctured, let the blood. If there is a big fire inside the patient, high temperature, you must let the blood. But before then puncture, Granny boiled water with whisks, currant leaves and especially – fir. So, all this must be boiled she washed the patient with it. We never saw any wounds or scratches. It fixed the wounds quickly. Body recovered immediately.

She also healed by putting her hands upon. We were fishers and had a lot of opistrokhoz, the liver was frequently ill. My Granny healed by putting upon her hot palms and by fish oil.

(EA 234, Leete 1991: 71)

Women lived under the leadership of my Granny, the Mother of Mothers. Women were united through her. The head of the village told her that this and that must be done. Only Granny negotiated with him, only she had the right to do this.

(EA 234, Leete 1991: 74)

[The customary laws were transmitted] by fairy-tales and... But what we had the Mother of Mothers for? She taught young mothers and this was then handed over to their daughters. Fathers taught their sons. Everybody tried to preserve rather than take out of the forest.

(EA 234, Leete 1991: 86)

Pol Votne Yonkyp – the month when you must pick up the lingonberries. We had the strict rule: only from the 1st of September. The people had an unofficial contest. Everybody was whipped out from the village. Oooh! The young and the old went to their lingonberries' pinewoods. Every time I was with my granny, she did not enter the pinewoods with footwear. She took her footwear off on the trail and said:

“Into this pinewoods you must go barefoot.”

(EA 234, Leete 1992: 200)

Aprasinya saved many inhabitants of the Ivyr village. They called her now the Mother of Mothers, the mother of everybody in the village. The Mother of Mothers took powerfully under her supervision every woman in the village. All the important problems of women were discussed with Aprasinya.

(Sazonov & Konkova 1990: 81)

After finishing her housework, the Mother of Mothers walked through the village and went to young wives, when their husbands were not home. She checked carefully the house of the young couple and noticed everything: dirty and ragged bed, unwashed dishes with a dry fish scale and fish bones, chewed bones left in the corner and ragged clothes on the wooden hook. She scolded the lazy and negligent wives. She slapped in the face a sleepy young wife who had a crying dirty baby in a cradle.

(Sazonov & Konkova 1990: 155)

Aprasinya, the Mother of Mothers, the powerful, strict, fearless Aprasinya, who achieved the magical secrets of the green forest...

(Sazonov & Konkova 1990: 163)

Notes About the Shamanhood Among the Southern Mansis

Russian scholar of literature Vyacheslav Ogryzko writes about the Ivyr village Mansis that, beginning from the end of the 16th century, they did not have any shamans (Ogryzko 1998:301). But Ogryzko takes this statement obviously from Anna Konkova's novel (Sazonov & Konkova 1990: 21) and thus relies too uncritically in the statement on a fictional character⁶. I will discuss briefly this question about the existence of the shamans among the Southern Mansis.

The functions of the Mother of Mothers included healing, fortune telling, knowing of local folklore, guarding the social rules, teaching of the Ivyr village children and being the leader of the village women's community.

When we interpret shamanism in a broad sense, it is possible to define the role of Mother of Mothers of the Ivyr village as a shaman's role. According to Mihály Hoppál's categorization, it is possible that "the shaman's most significant characteristic is the ability to journey into other worlds and to engage in ecstatic communication" (Hoppál 2000: 7). In connection with the Mother of Mothers, it is not clear about the shaman's journey but Anne's descriptions show that the skills of ecstatic communication existed among the Southern Mansis.

Another important characteristic of shamanism "is that shamans always offer their power and skill to the service of some social mission" (Hoppál 2000:10). This information also fits in the case with the Mother of Mothers. She was the knower of fortunes and the spiritual leader (for women of the village) that are two roles from six possible ones, listed by Dr. Hoppál (2000: 10).

"Classical" feature of the shamanism is also that the neophyte must go to the forest (or another remote area) to obtain the knowledge during the initiation. But we can find only a few features of the "classical" complex of shamanism among the Ivyr villagers.

So, the Mother of Mothers of the Ivyr village among Southern Mansis exemplifies a borderline phenomenon of "classical" shamanism. But if we take shaman-

⁶ "We, the people of the Konda River, don't have shamans," told Miron and started to smoke a pipe. "Probably, they left if the priests cut down and burnt our gods" (Sazonov & Konkova 1990: 21). Compare: "Okol, as Aprasinya, is the shamaness, too, but a different one" (Sazonov & Konkova 1990: 189).

ism as “complex and diverse phenomenon” (Walker 2001: 36), or as something that only reflects the anthropologist’s viewpoint (see Narby 1998) we do not even face any problems with definition or categorization here. The Mother of Mothers fulfilled some of the most essential criteria of a shaman.

One particular problem I want to discuss here is the idea that emerges in connection with the Mother of Mothers, Okol. Namely the moment in the Granny Anne’s description when Okol predicts that Anne’s husband will die at war. This means that there is an idea about certain connection between remote subjects. It seems to be a very interesting shamanistic idea. I can give a number of parallels to this kind of spiritual connection.

For example, in 1996, the Forest Nenets Yuri Vella dedicated one reindeer from his herd to the President of Russian Federation. The situation got intriguing when Boris Yeltsin felt ill. Yuri Vella told about this:

“If President fell ill very seriously, we sacrificed the first offspring of the President’s reindeer to our gods and we prayed for President’s health. After some time the President started to regain his health. This can be just a coincidence. But our worldview is constructed so that if this kind of coincidences happen, we will to believe in this even more” (Novikova 1999: 19)

Yuri Vella explained the spiritual connection between the reindeer and the President of Russia in the following way:

“At one moment I thought, I dreamed, that between President and the reindeer there must be this kind of contact. I wanted that this connection had an impact on President. The reindeer has a positive impact on people. But if President cannot protect my pastures, my land, then I must kill my reindeer. The first one whom I kill will be the President’s reindeer. Because in this situation the President does not have a right to this reindeer. But I hope that this will not happen and our lands will be ours. If everything goes well, quite soon the President’s reindeer will have offspring and the President will then have three reindeer” (Novikova 1999: 19).

Similar ideas about this sort of remote spiritual connection can be found among the Nanay. According to researcher Tatyana Bulgakova, Nanay shamans had certain opinions about the influence of shamanic actions to people who may not be involved in performance of the shaman:

“As far as both Gara, who had just returned from Moscow, and Maria Petrovna, who had not yet travelled anywhere, were alive, the latter discussed Gara’s trip in this way: “Gara took her drum to Moscow without a purpose. The master of the

drum (spirit) wants to heal, so that people would then feed it. The master of the drum thought to profit from this. But they gave him neither work nor sacrifice!" So Maria Petrovna decided that a disappointed spirit choose a victim on his own. He chose a chief of the Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev, who died exactly during those days when Gara was in Moscow. "On the way back," continues Maria Petrovna, "it was the same. It was the travel in vain with no work and no gain. So in Daerge (where Gara lived) he chose the old man Innokenty as a victim. After Gara came, Innokenty died." According to Chapaka's opinion, shamanic spirits could leave their masters alone only if they would be successful in turning their trips into big rituals and in involving in it all the onlookers" (Bulgakova 2001: 18).

The third example could be the information about the uprising of the Khanty and Nenets peoples against the Soviets during the 1930s known as Kazym War. According to available data, participants of the uprising had quite strange political slogan. During the Kazym War the natives declared: "We conquer Beryozovo and Moscow will capitulate by itself!" (Leete 1996: 400) This information can be a result of an official Soviet propaganda against the indigenous groups. Purpose of this slogan could be to show that the natives were underdeveloped and they were not able to estimate the real situation in the big politics. But this could also be a real idea of the indigenous groups that they may have kind of spiritual influence on Moscow.

All these three examples demonstrate that indigenous people with shamanistic worldview can take very seriously this remote spiritual contact between subjects. When we look at these stories one by one those seem really wear but in comparative perspective they become more truthful. And this is also the case with Okol, the Mother of Mothers of the Ivyr village. She felt real connection with familiar peoples in remote territories and could follow their fortune.

In conclusion to this short paper I would note that the phenomenon of the Mother of Mothers disappeared in the Ivyr village after World War II. The Ivyr village itself has burnt down, also. So all information about this interesting character can be found from the memories of old people and to some extent in the Anna Konkova's novel. Because of the time gap between the present time and the real phenomenon it is hard to estimate "how" shamanic was the role of the Mother of Mother in Ivyr village. Not a shaman in a strict classical sense but very impressive spiritual character, anyway, the Mother of Mothers played an extremely important role in the Ivyr village Mansis community until World War II. But in more tolerant and contemporary scientific views, the Mother of Mothers can also be considered a

shamaness.⁷ At least, we see here several elements of “classical” shamanism (comp. Eliade 2000: 20-22). We can see that the Mother of Mothers is not a shamaness from the native point of view but she is a shamaness for the shamanistic research discourse. The case with the Mother of Mothers indicates also the important role of a female leader in the Ob-Ugrian communities.

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⁷ Even Mircea Eliade stressed (using Gondatti’s notes) that the Mansi people had female shamans (Eliade 2000: 28).

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