

# *The Circle of Life: Animism among Evenki People in Siberia*

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**Abstract:** Animism plays a vital role in Evenki's life. After analyzing the definition of animism, there is a detailed discussion about how indigenous people perceive the world, related to the terminology, and how animists recognize the spirits. The analysis is about the role of people with different identities in ritual behaviors, what methods they choose to use, and the purpose they want to achieve. The animism of Evenki is not only beneficial for the further development of the anthropogenic study but also provides an alternative way for people from other nations to form recognition of nature.

## **1. Introduction**

Animism has been widely studied by anthropologists based on the ethnography of diverse nations. Gell demonstrated that animism is a categorical method and it refers to a special approach to differentiate between what is believed to be animate and what is inanimate, based on the social context rather than biological attributes.[1] Animism can also be treated as a belief or even religion among certain ethnic groups. It does not mean that animists, people who believe in animism, have no ability to distinguish whether entities with animacy or not, but it manifests a unique relationship between believers and nature, or even the superstitious world. According to this definition, it is necessary to comprehend the context of animism among Evenki before analyzing their beliefs in detail.

Reindeer herding and hunting are combined economic activities operated by Evenki. For people living in the Amur region, northern or southern Yakutia (*Sakha*), riding reindeer is the main transporting method, while snowmobiles or other forms and horses are alternatives in some regions.[2] Reindeers are extremely important for Evenki. Moreover, they are not treated as food but as transportation or even guardians in religious aspects. Food is primarily provided by hunting, and it mainly happens in summer, but sometimes fishing is a complementary activity in autumn and winter.

Dual economic activities have a deep relationship with non-human life forms which are not limited to animals or plants but also spirits respected by Evenki. To be precise, animism is displayed in the daily life of Evenki, through collective rituals and individual practices by shamans, bards or singers, and hunters. In the following parts, there will be a discussion based on how Evenki perceived the world, how animism was displayed by different groups, and what indigenous people want to achieve from it.

## 2. The Worldview: The Exchange with The World of Spirits

### 2.1 The Explanation of Vernacular Terms

In order to understand the worldview of Evenki easily, there are some notions required to be explained briefly, which are *omi*, *musun*, *onnir*, and “play”.

Evenki believe that life forms like animals are driven by means of providing vital force (*musun*) from spirits or souls (*omi*). According to the definition of Lavrillier, individuals categorized as wild animals or domestic animals, or humans, would have *omi*, an entity in a certain quantity that could regenerate in one’s ancestry. Hence, the souls of human beings are equivalent to the spirits of other life forms. Besides, the notion of *musun* has different definitions. It is energy moved from the main spirit of nature to the amulet that could assure the prosperity of herds. Also, *musun* is contained within moving things. There are other kinds of explanations, but mainly, the meaning of *musun* is positive energy.

Except for these notions, the concept of imprint (*onnir*) represents “one of the constituent parts (i.e., material and immaterial elements) of humans and some animals”. Imprint is similar to a mark, which has effects on persons or animals contacting with it. Imprint is either positive or negative. Objects with “heavier” imprints have a possibility to harm other persons with “lighter” imprints. In addition, there is an association between imprint and “play”.

In modern society, “play” is commonly related to joy, but the notion in the context of Evenki is not that simple. Basically, there is a relationship between “play” and ritual behaviors, but they are not equivalent. “Play” only refers to those benefits to society. From the perspective of linguistics, the word meaning “play” in Evenki was built on the root of “*evi-* and *ike-*”, which was associated with “life”, such as verbs and nouns related to creating like “dance” and “sing” in Evenki. Therefore, “play” is also connected to “create”.

Additionally, “play” also has a meaning of “representation” and “imitating”. Imitation is common in many cultures. Based on Frazer’s theories about magic, representing natural phenomenon or natural life behaviors are “sympathetic magic”, which means people tend to achieve their goals of affecting or controlling nature by means of imitating.[3] There are some examples of representation by Evenki in the following parts.

In sum, the notion of *omi* refers to the spirits of animals and souls of human beings, while *musun* is a vital force beneficial for people. *Onnir* or imprint is a special mark left by animals or humans, connected with “play”, which means creation, ritual actions, and representation.

### 2.2 The Measurement of spirits

With the nomadic lifestyle, Evenki achieve food mainly by hunting. In order to achieve positive outcomes, they probably attempt to operate some “play”, like providing offerings. In certain seasons, mainly summer, there are some collective rituals held by shamans for the prosperity of the tribe. No matter what types of rituals or what kinds of goals, they share the same nature, which is exchanging and constructing a reciprocal relationship with the world of spirits.

From the view of Evenki, the world is shared by not only living humans but also other *omi*: spirits from animals (i.e., domestic and wild) and from the dead. Although it is a belief that what people take should be returned soon or later, Evenki attempt to figure out how to make more advantages properly during the exchange. Harmayon demonstrated that exchange was a kind of art that allowed people to take as much as they could and postpone the payment.[4] The basic approach is that people need to create more benefits for themselves and reduce disadvantages by cooperating or staying away from spirits, but the problem is how to judge whether these spirits are helpful or not. And the method for measurement is associated with the identity of spirits, the situation of imprint (*onnir*), and the

condition of individuals.

The identity of spirits provides a basic acknowledgment of the approach chosen by people. Some animals like domestic reindeer (*oron*) are believed to be beneficial, especially *khavek*, a specific *oron* with the meaning of “double soul” which is treated as guardians of children.[5] Based on the analysis of Willerslev and Ultugasheva, *khavek* plays the role of mediator between human and non-human, while it is the equivalence of child. Also, other domestic animals like dogs and horses have similar functions. Therefore, the spirits of domestic animals mostly are beneficial. On the contrary, ancestors’ spirits are probably harmful to people, especially children, but it is mostly related to the aspect of imprint. As mentioned above, the heavier imprint has a negative influence on people with weaker spirits or imprints. From the record of Lavrillier, people who used the raffle from ancestors with heavier *onnir* behaved worse in the hunt.

However, people with heavier spirits also have stronger power on some occasions. For instance, shamans are those with the heaviest *onnir*, and that is the reason why they can become shamans. Through “play” and sharpening talents like crafting, *onnir* will become heavier. Also, transgressing prohibition and encountering the death of relatives will increase the imprint. It does not mean the heavier the better, because someone might get sick because of losing control. Hence, it is more important to understand how to master spirits inside.

The third factor affecting the choice of methods is the condition of individuals. Mainly, it points to the difference in age. Youngsters are more vulnerable than adults. Willerslev and Ultugasheva maintained that young children are easily affected by their ancestors’ souls because of their openness of bodies. Lavrillier also demonstrated a special role in connecting the world of the dead and that of the living. Therefore, these kinds of factors are supportive for Evenki to choose approaches to deal with different situations.

After comprehending how to judge the soul, there are some new problems: who are the ones operating the “play”? What kinds of methods do they use to exchange with spirits?

### 3. Subjects, Methods, and Purposes

#### 3.1 Individuals who “play”

To answer the questions above, the first thing required to be clarified is the subject and the object during the exchange. It seems to be obvious that subjects are living beings, while objects are spirits. Lavrillier denied this view, as he believed those ritual behaviors are for the purpose of transferring “patience” to the “active agency”. In his context, patience refers to people mastered by spirits from their bodies and the world, while active agency is the opposite. Hence, subjects and objects are depended on who is dominant during and after rituals. Based on the definition of “play” mentioned above, it is obvious that in “play”, human beings master spirits. Then, what is needed to be clarified is the identity of the subjects.

It is no doubt that the subjects of ritual behaviors are significantly related to the dual economic activities of Evenki, owing to the general goal of rituals, which can simplify as gaining good luck. Therefore, there are two kinds of groups: hunters and shamans. It is obvious that they are differentiated in their jobs. Precisely, they are also characterized by their methods and purposes, which will be discussed.

#### 3.2 Methods they used and Goals they wanted to achieve

##### 3.2.1 Hunters

Hunting plays a vital role in Evenki’s life, so there are many “play” held by hunters. Mostly, these

activities are individual rather than collective, because of the characteristics of hunting. Usually, it is not enough resources for a large group of hunters at once, therefore, in real life, the group of Evenki in summer would separate and minimize for the purpose of allocating more prey per person. The separation is helpful for hunting basically, and there are some personal practices before hunting for obtaining more luck. The record of Hamayon depicted that hunters would highly focus on what they wanted to hunt during the hunting and followed some principles strictly.[6] Similar to other ethnic groups, taboos are various in Evenki's beliefs like prohibitions about words and mortification. For instance, Hunters should not mention "hunt" directly before hunting. Besides, giving offerings to figurines or rocks with art are also common activities held by Evenki.[7]

What is needed to mention is the participation of children in ritual behaviors for hunting. Due to the "open" body, children were more likely to attract the spirits of animals, so that hunters could obtain good goals. The openness of children's bodies means they are easily affected by the spirits of the dead or animals. However, no matter what activities of hunters or the involvement of children, they are associated with the same purpose of building a relationship with the world of spirits.

As mentioned in the part of a worldview, the exchange is for the purpose of reducing sacrifices and delaying negative outcomes. For hunters, private practices more or less assure them to obtain good luck during the hunt. Haymayon demonstrated that ritual behaviors are for the purpose of reducing indeterminacy during the hunt. This is one of the reasons, but there is the other goal which is for testifying to one's luck and talents. "Play" like card and dice games on the eve of hunting is an epitome of the condition of hunting, and it helped them to reinforce the belief of seizing opportunities. Generally, the purpose of private practices by hunters is for physical mobilization before the hunt and good fortune during the hunt.

### 3.2.2 Shamans

With the heaviest imprint, shamans of Evenki are able to have a deep connection with the world of spirits. They are different from hunters who provide offerings at the cost of taking, and what they offer to spirits is probably themselves. According to an ethnography of Hamayon, shamans usually construct an alliance with the daughter of the spirit offering prey, in order to gain power and preserve the reciprocal exchange with the other world. The matrimonial relationship basically is a kind of sacrifice, because it is equivalent to shamans exchanging good luck for hunters, curing, and so on with themselves. Also, shamans with this power take the risk of being truly sacrificed if they are not able to bring prosperity to the tribe.

Normally, "play" held by shamans is mostly collective because the luck they bring is not for a single person. The collective activities are also held in summer for the good fortune in the hunt. The "play" like dancing and wrestling was animalized in aspects of clothing (i.e., wearing horns and fur) and imitation of animals' behaviors. These activities are for thriving the tribe in the future and obtaining the assistance of spirits. Moreover, shamans are required to make spirits subject to them, so that they can gain power and bring benefits to the tribe. During these rituals, there are various metaphors displaying the power of shamans and affecting their efficiency. If shamans used as much as they can, the efficacy of "play" was better.

Based on the brief introduction of shamans' activities, it is obvious to recognize what shamans want to achieve is abstract compared to the goal of hunters. Haymayon described shamans as the role of preserving the permanence of partnership between humans and spirits, while they should reduce the sacrifices as much as possible. It manifests that the duty of shamans is mainly for the whole group and to assure a good future permanently, therefore, it is probably suitable to use "the preserver of exchange" to depict the shamans of Evenki.

## 4. Conclusion

Animism has a deep connection with the life of Evenki, and it associates with the economic life of Evenki and displays the attitude of Evenki toward the world. As animists, Evenki with different identities use diverse methods to achieve their goals. Hunters and shamans exchange the assistance of spirits from the natural world by different means, which manifests the religion of Evenki.

The study of animism in Evenki offers a new way of perceiving the world for people from other ethnic backgrounds. Understanding their beliefs and the principles of exchange is beneficial for people from other nations to realize the importance of preserving the balance with the natural world. With the widespread knowledge about Evenki, it is also supportive of the preservation of Evenki culture. In this paper, there is only a brief and simple discussion about the animism of Evenki, and it is necessary to study deeply the mysterious world of spirits believed by Evenki.

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