

“Spirit-Charged” Humans in Siberia: Interrelations between the Notions of the Individual (“Spirit Charge” and “Active Imprint”) and (Ritual) Action

Alexandra Lavrillier

Abstract. This paper shows how a society imagines human individuals and their power to act upon spirits both ritually and materially. Based on the author’s fieldwork (from 1994 to 2019), it analyzes the emic concept *onnir*, which is omnipresent in the daily activities and the past and present collective/individual rituals of Siberian Evenki and Even. Each human owns a specific fluctuating “charge made of spirits” and an “active imprint” that empowers the human to act, perform rituals, develop talents, and create. Even after death, this “imprint” affects everything and everyone a human ever touched. *Onnir* defines the interrelations between the individual, the spirits of his or her own “charge,” and the spirits of the universe in an “active agent”-“patient” relationship. This paper contributes to studies of the notions of the individual, “playing” as a ritual means, the acceptance/rejection of neoshamans, neorituals, and the (ritual) agency of ordinary individuals.

Aiamamat bidavi—aiamamat evida nada! (Evenki: To live well, one must “play” well!)¹ repeat the songs of the ritual round dances: this is the explanation that the Evenki and Even (along with other Tungus) give about their collective and individual rituals, as seen in Vasilevich (1957) and the author’s fieldwork in the 1990s and 2010s.

Mostly based on fieldwork material gathered from 1994 until 2019, this paper demonstrates the interrelations between notions of the individual (here, “a spirit charge that leaves an active imprint”), action (ritual or otherwise), and “play” (e.g., to play, sing, dance, compete, perform a ritual, shamanize, draw, or decorate) through a semantic and ethnographic study of the Evenki emic concept *onnir*.

This concept is integral to the “traditional rituals” of hunting and reindeer herding. It is also present in “festivals inherited from the Soviet period” and in “revivalist rituals,” or “neorituals” as I designate them, established among the Tungus from 1992. To structure my argument, I will differentiate between four kinds of rituals:

1) “Ancient rituals” are those rituals described in the ethnographic literature or narratives of the most senior elders that no longer exist in their historical forms. This is the case, for instance, with most collective seasonal rituals where one or several shamans had a leading role (Anisimov 1952; Vasilevich 1930b, 1957; among others). The antireligious policies of the Soviet authorities strictly forbade these rituals: Soviet commissioners were

Alexandra Lavrillier, CEARC (Cultures, Environment, Arctic, Representations, Climate), UVSQ (University Paris-Saclay), 11 Bld d’Alember, 78 280 Guyancourt, France; Alexandra.lavrillier@uvsq.fr

sent into the taiga to burn shamanic items and/or confiscate them for museum collections; in the regions under study, such rituals were stopped in the 1950s (Lavriillier 2005:129).

2) Another type of Tungus ritual is what I call “festivals inherited from the Soviet period.” For example, festivals that the Soviet authorities introduced as an atheist event in which people were obliged to participate: the aim was to replace the collective shamanic rituals that the Soviets forbade. This is the case for Reindeer Herders’ Day (annually in February or March), which contains many Soviet “cultural institutions” (the concept of Hugh Jones 1997). Unexpectedly, for the Soviet government, however, the Tungus transformed this festival, step by step, into a collective ritual event: the games, conquests, and joyful moments were a means to act ritually in a manner invisible to the Soviets (Hamayon 1992b:64; Lavriillier 2005:432 et passim). The few remaining shamans secretly performed rituals for the natives at night in some households throughout the festival (see Maksimov et al. 2001 about the Evenki group under study; Forsyth [1992]2000 for Siberia; and Bulgakova 2013 concerning the Nanai). The current Tungus now consider this festival, inherited from the Soviet authorities, as a ritual event and a component of their own culture.

3) With the expression “traditional rituals,” I refer to the primary etymological root of the word “tradition” (e.g., in Latin, *trader*—“to transmit, to give to another”). It designates rituals transmitted without a break from generation to generation from ancient times (as attested in old ethnographic sources and by elders) that are still practiced. In the case of the Tungus, these are mostly individual rituals embedded in the everyday economic life of herder-hunters, fishermen, and, more rarely, villagers (very few are practiced by townspeople). These rituals include various offerings, ritual markings, the observance of the many proscriptions and prescriptions, and rituals with a shaman practiced until 2012 (the year of the death of Save-*lii Vasilev*, considered by the Tungus to be the last Tungus traditional shaman).

4) By “neorituals,” I refer to the rituals that were reestablished by Tungus intellectuals after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They are collective rituals that, after being forbidden by the Soviet authorities and abandoned from the 1950s in the regions under study, were reestablished in a new and different way at the beginning of the 1990s based on patchwork elements chosen from various pieces of ethnographic literature (such as Alekseev 1993; Mazin 1984; Vasilevich 1957; among others) and traditional knowledge collected from local elders (see also the section, To “Play” for Wellbeing, below). Also, they added some Soviet “cultural institutions” like typical propaganda decorum, official discourses, ceremonials, spectacles, contests, and the award of prizes. From this list, except for racing and a few offerings, all elements were absent

from the ancient version of these rituals. The reference to the concept of “cultural institution” (Hugh Jones 1997) is justified because the neorituals are disconnected from daily economic life. Among the groups under study, these neorituals have no relationship with any neoshamanistic movement, since, with one or two exceptions, neoshamans do not participate and are not invited (Lavriillier 1995, 2003, 2005). In the anthropological works of the 1990s, such rituals were qualified as “revivalist” or “from [a] revival movement” in some papers (Kep-tuke 1996:26; Le Berre-Semenov 2008:209–333; Vaté 2005; among others) (see Table 1).

Among some Siberian peoples like the Yakut, such rituals were led by neoshamans who combined elements from traditional shamanism, new-age movements, and newly invented collective ritual gestures. For instance, among the Sakha, the ritual *Yhyakh* (Yakut: ritual *Ysyakh*), the collective gesture of “meeting the sun,” was initiated by the neoshaman V. Kondakov, a disciple of the famous Yakut shaman Nikon (see also Hoppal 1999; Mandelstam-Balzer 1993; Zhukovskaia 2001; among others).²

Although the rituals considered in this paper fall into the four specific types, we will see that they sometimes share features and small ritual gestures. Furthermore, the delimitations that divide them from each other are not always entirely hermetic.

This ability to shift and adapt the ways of performing rituals (even without traditional shamans), associated with the absence and even rejection of neoshamans, is directly linked to the concept of *onnir*, as we will see in this article. This emic concept supposes the existence of a “charge [made of] of spirits” that leaves an “active imprint,” one that is specific to each individual and empowers them to act, to perform rituals, to develop talents, and to create. This study proposes refining the notions of “agency” and intentionality by subdividing them into what I call the “active agent,” controlling the action and the “patient” undergoing the action. By defining the interrelations between the individual, the spirits of his/her own “charge,” and the other spirits of the universe, this emic concept permits a human to consider the conditions which allow him/ her to act upon the world. This paper also questions the overwhelming focus on the shaman to the detriment of examining the ability attributed to ordinary people and animals to act ritually.

In order to develop this thesis, after the presentation of fieldwork and methods, the line of investigation will start with the first indications I had of the existence of *onnir* and its omnipresence in the life of the Tungus. The paper then examines the notion of “playing” through its relationship to wellbeing: I question its status as a substitute for ritual action and analyze what it is making present in life. The article then proceeds to demonstrate

Table 1. The four kinds of rituals among the Evenki and Even according to history and socioeconomic groups.

Year/Type of socioeconomic group	. . . until 1930–1950 (partial settlement in villages and antireligious measures)	1950–1991 (from real establishment of Soviet power to its collapse)	1992–present (from the collapse of Soviet power to present)
NOMADS	Mostly individual rituals—“Traditional rituals”		
	Collective rituals with shamans—“Ancient rituals”	Reindeer Herders’ Day—“Festival inherited from the Soviet period”	
		VILLAGERS	Reindeer Herders’ Day—“Festival inherited from the Soviet period”
			<i>Ikenipke/Bakaldyn/Eviniek</i> —“Neoritual”
		TOWNS-PEOPLE	Sometimes “Festival inherited from the Soviet period”
			<i>Ikenipke/Bakaldyn/Eviniek</i> —“Neoritual”

that multiplying the layers of representation is a means of ritual action in “neorituals,” “traditional rituals,” and “ancient rituals.” Then, we will return more specifically to “spirit charge” and “imprint” to demonstrate the interrelations between “playing” and other types of action (ritual or nonritual). I conclude with a statement about the position of the human individual in this complex whole.

Fieldwork and Methods

Since my very first experience of fieldwork in 1994, I have been investigating the traditional rituals and festivals inherited from the Soviet period and the neorituals of the Siberian Tungus and Yakut. In this paper, I use fieldwork material that I collected among the Evenki of southern Yakutia (Sakha) and the northern Amur region. I refer to specifically to this group, as I do not seek to generalize the many different groups of Evenki spread all over Siberia. The same is true with regards to the ethnographic material I gathered in 1994, 2009, and 2010 among the Even of northern Yakutia (Sakha) and southern Kamchatka. During a total of 26 expeditions, I conducted a total of 12 years of fieldwork, including more than eight years following different nomadic reindeer herding and hunting groups. During each field session (lasting from one month to a year and a half, depending on the year), I worked with approximately 50 to 250 informants (of all genders and ages) in different

villages (from two to five), nomadic camps (from one to nine), and towns (from two to five). Thus, when I write “the Evenki/Even/Tungus with whom I worked,” I refer to individuals in these camps, villages, and towns. I used classical anthropological methods (participant observation and open or semistructured interviews [audio or video recorded]). For the first three years, I worked in Russian and then in the Evenki and Even languages, which I learned mainly among the nomads. I made my own grammar and dictionary for the four main local dialects. The research from 1994 to 2005 was conducted for a monograph, as I sought to observe an entire society (as far as possible), centered on the economic and ritual relationships between humans and their natural environment. This effort resulted in a synchronic and diachronic monograph on the continuation and transformations of ritual practices from nomads to villagers and townspeople, also discussing possible changes in the perception of the natural environment and spirits (Lavrillier 2005). From 2006, my research became more focused on changes in climate and biodiversity and their consequences, with in-depth documentation of Evenki environmental knowledge (Lavrillier and Gabyshv 2017). However, the concept of *onnir* still occasionally emerged from the observations and collected interviews.

One method I used in the fieldwork really helped me to identify connections between

different practices and beliefs (notably those related to the emic concept *onnir*) I could not identify otherwise. Initially, from politeness, I wrote most of my field notes in the local languages (except confidential information, of course) so that people could read what I was writing about their culture and society. This tact helped me to not only avoid errors of interpretation but also to identify some relationships: this was thanks to the Tungus, who added information (related new case studies, stories, proscriptions, prescriptions, and the like) to my notes.

The Omnipresence of *Onnir* in the Life of the Tungus

Although it has never been identified and documented before in the ethnographic literature, throughout my research, I have continually encountered the emic concept *onnir* among the Orochen-Evenki,³ whether they be hunters, reindeer herders, villagers, or townspeople. This concept corresponds to the three following main etic notions: the individual (“active imprint” and “spirit charge”), action (ritual or otherwise), and “play” run like a thread through the Evenki and Even communities. I use “play” and “playing” framed by inverted commas to denote the fact that the vernacular terms used by the informants are built on the roots *evi-/ike-*. Most of the meanings of some words derived from these roots correspond to “playing” in English and French (e.g., to play, sing, dance, compete, perform rituals, shamanize, draw, or decorate).

Even if I forsake this translation (“play”) for these vernacular terms by the end of the paper, I must use it initially because “play” refers here to an anthropological debate developed, among others, by Roberte Hamayon (1990, 1992a, 1993, 1995, 2012), whose research is mainly focused on Eurasian (including Siberian) understandings of play/game in relation to shamanism and ritual practices. Hamayon (1995:66–70) writes:

The terminology of the game is largely used throughout the world. It designates ritual behavior patterns of shamanism or of possession (often those which carry symbolic efficiency) on the one hand, and rituals or episodes of so-called rituals of renewal or fecundity, on the other hand. . . . One wonders why these games seem so pleasing to the supernatural instances of traditional religions and so displeasing to those of salvation religions. . . . [translated from French: Why is the use of the terminology of game so recurrent in descriptions but so rare in analysis? . . . [Sometimes] the notion of play is explicitly present in relation to a ritual behavior, but its characteristic of being general and commonplace does not draw the attention of the scientist.

The anthropological study of play diverges into two directions: a less important one that tries

to show the unity of a game by classifying the functions and principles of play and another that has produced many separate case studies that consider play as highly diversified (Hamayon 2012). The topic of play was studied in the pioneering works of Huizinga ([1938]1951), who identified games as serious and constructive cultural institutions and practices, and Caillois (1958), who identified four categories of play (including “mimicry”) related to different types of societies. Lévi-Strauss (1962:44) also mentions the ritual efficiency expected from play as a marker of a “cold society” (e.g., a so-called traditional society); for example, the intensive football games among the Gahaku-Gama of New-Guinea.⁴

In Siberian and Eurasian studies, there are the works of Zhornitskaia (1966, 1978) about the ritual dimensions of movements and dances; Bazanov (1949), Beldy (1989), Krasilnikov (2004) [for the Khanty] and Sem (1991) about the educational role of play for Siberian children among the Tungus of the Amur; and Bogoraz (1904, 1949) about adult games. The latter attempted to classify games. Varlamov (2006) focused on the ritual significance of games in oral literature, while Vasilevich (1927, 1930b, 1957, 1959, 1969) and Ermolova (1996), whom we will extensively quote, study some links between children’s games and rituals. Basilov (1984, 1993) paid attention to the play aspects of some parts of rituals with shamans. I will not use these categories since I do not aim to distinguish the types of Tungus “play”: I try to understand what, in the Tungus cognition, links “play” together with the emic concept *onnir*. In her works, Hamayon (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999–2000, 2012) compares Siberian and Mongolian etymologies for the words “to play” in an anthropological context by analyzing, through a diachronic and synchronic worldwide comparison, different research about the interrelations between the forms of games/play and (shamanic) rituals.

Let us return to our argument and the *onnir* concept. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is integral to all the types of rituals identified earlier (see Introduction). Furthermore, we will see that the emic concept under discussion also refers to notions of action and talent: it is also found at the root of shamanism amongst these indigenous peoples (present or past, with or without a shaman).

The emic concept of *onnir* is at the heart of both the Evenki and Even’s definition of the power to create: it refers to the act in general and ritual power in particular. The Tungus root *o-*, whence *onnir* emanates, is linked to other derivatives meaning “to make,” “to create,” “to act,” or “to become.” The *onnir* concept also pervades the approach taken by the Tungus to a range of artisan crafts, as

well as allowing for the creativity of individuals (e.g., here “to create innovative works while still being within the framework of craft rules”).

Onnir and the Ethnographies of “Souls” and Spirits

The concept of *onnir* is completely different from other concepts famous in the ethnographic literature about the Evenki and Even, like *omi* and *musun*. Due to the many Tungus variants of the perceptions of the cycle of life and death and different “souls,” it is impossible to present one portrait. Here, I will just give a short synthesis of the most recurrent features. Beings in the categories of humans and wild and domestic animals are attributed, in equal quantity, an entity that can be reincarnated within one’s line of descent, called *omi*, and entities that are very seldom recyclable: a shadow (*hanian*, *khanian*, *hagnan* among other variants) in the literal sense,⁵ a set of “meat-bones-skin-guts” (*beien* or *ille*), and some vital force (*musun*) (among others, Anisimov 1951a:198–201, 1951b:110–116; 1958; Lavrillier 2005; Mazin 1984:25–26; Shirokogoroff 1935:52, 207 et passim; Shirokogorov [1919]2001; Vasilevich 1957, 1959:189, 1969). Some, like Anisimov (1951b:114), also mention a “soul-destiny” known as *main* among the Evenki of the Yenisei: this is associated with notions of personal happiness and fortune. Others, like Shirokogoroff (1935:126b), mention *mahin* as designating hunting luck or lucky guns among the Barguzin Evenki. Finally, Vasilevich (1957:173) noted in a region close to Yenisei (the Katanga and Stony Tunguska rivers) that *main* is the spirit that controls the upper world and distributes the vital force *musun*.

Here is another example of the complexity of Tungus ethnography due to its many regional variants. According to Mazin (1984:91–94), among the Amur Evenki (Orochen) *musun* is a vital force transmitted, at the request of a shaman, from the main spirit of the natural environment to an amulet so that people will have a large and healthy herd, as well as success in hunting. Conversely, Vasilevich (1957:173, 1975), based on material she gathered in the 1930s–1940s, documented *musun* as 1) a force possessed by “everything which moves” (river, thunder, wind, rocks, and the like); 2) a master spirit which is benevolent to people if they make offerings; 3) a force owned by certain persons talented in storytelling or the improvisation of songs; 4) the power of one’s words to become reality; 5) part of the force of the master spirit of the upper world that is instilled at a shaman’s request into a future sacred reindeer protector of a reindeer herd and people. In regions where Evenki are in contact with Yakuts, *musun* is ren-

dered as *itchin* (see below).⁶ In the same area, *musun* is associated with the soul *omi*: the term *kutu* designates both. I will not discuss the complexity of the previous ethnography about *kutu* here, but for Evenki with whom I have been working, *kutu* is like *singken*—(hunting) luck. People say *kutuchi / singkechi bike!* (“Be with/Have *kutu/singken!*”) before departing from one another.

We can note that already in the 1990s, knowledge about these souls and forces was significantly eroded; only some people with whom I worked understood *omi* as a recyclable unit that exists in a limited amount in the universe, is offered by the upper world during fetal gestation, is unstable until adulthood or during specific moments, and is recycled after death. *Hanian* is known as the shadow part of the soul. However, if explicative knowledge is rare, most Evenki and Even respect the prescriptions and prohibitions related to the cycle of life and death. I mean here the proscription related to the potential loss of “souls,” the proscription against voluntarily transforming one’s own or others’ shadows, the proscription against frightening a person sleeping or lost in his/her thoughts, and the practice of trying to prevent a baby from feeling overly strong emotions. There are also the prescriptions related to the recycling of *omi*: for example, efforts to recognize the features and behaviors of a dead person in a new-born child or awaiting a new birth after a death.

According to my fieldwork materials, the word *onnir* evokes what I term “spirit charge,” which is to say the variable number of spirits supposedly contained within human individuals and certain animals that empowers them to act and perform rituals. As it is attributed to humans (and some animals), this “spirit charge” is deemed to leave what I term an “active imprint” (referred to hereafter as an “imprint”) on beings, items, and actions. Thus, the concept of *onnir* in relation to humans refers to both the “spirit charge” and the “imprint” of this charge on the world. In contrast, in the case of most animals, it refers solely to the “spirit charge” (see an example of such an exception below in the section Who are the Spirits of *Onnir*) (Lavrillier 2012a).

It took around six to nine years of participatory observation (repeated observations of the same events, prohibitions, and proscriptions) and interviews, as well as working in native languages, to present an attempt to put together the many pieces of this concept *onnir* from the Tungus system of thought. I should stress the rareness of explanatory indigenous discourses about ancient and traditional rituals, spirits, or cosmogony among the Tungus. The reason why there is such a paucity of explanations is complex: it lies somewhere between accounts, insufficiency of knowledge, and secrecy. In the 1910s, Shirokogoroff (1935:53a,

55a, 120b–121b, 135b) admitted that he was unable to restore the history of the Tungus theory about spirits. As he stated, “it is impossible to give a complete and synchronous list of spirits.” He also recognized he could not find out details concerning the organization of the soul among the Barguzin and Nerchinsk Tungus.

Nevertheless, judging from many monographs based on materials collected before the 1950s–1970s (Anisimov 1952; Shirokogoroff 1935; Shirokogorov [1919]2001; Vasilevich 1930b, 1957; among many others), at least some Tungus, and shamans, in particular, were talkative about spirits and rituals. However, the specialists of this knowledge—the shamans—no longer exist (see Introduction). Indeed, from the 1930s to the 1950s, shamans were arrested or shot, ritual items confiscated or burned, and collective rituals forbidden (Forsyth [1992] 2000:288–290, 314; Suslov 1931). This persecution (partially) disrupted the transmission of knowledge about rituals and shamans, but it probably encouraged or reinforced the wont to hide most ritual activities and discourses (author’s field notes).

In the 1990s–2000s, I noticed during my fieldwork, as a continuous constraint, that the Evenki did not like to discuss rituals and beliefs. Tungus researchers perceived the same, including G. I. Varlamova-Keptuke (personal communication), an Evenki native speaker, and a shaman’s daughter (Keptuke 1996). This confirms the secrecy of at least a part of this knowledge. Thus, the Tungus elders (born in the 1920s–1930s) with whom I worked recounted to me that their parents forbade them to look at specific statuettes of spirits they kept enclosed in a bag installed at the *malu*, the place of honor in the tent (only the parents could take it out). Younger generations (born in the 1980s) complained that their parents did not explain to them the words to use to talk to spirits during offerings; they had to find this out through observation. All Tungus informants with whom I worked also explained that during shamans’ rituals, even the ones performed in the 2000s–2010s, most of their speech was in a secret Evenki language and the majority could not understand it. Other informants told me that they had discussions about spirits and rituals with shamans, but the latter required them to keep it secret or to share it only with some Evenki. As a researcher, I was also told some knowledge about shamans and ritual practices that I am not allowed to share. In addition, the nomads often refused to show me the contents of small bags for sacred items (*muruchun*) or to conduct me to places with ritual constructions set up in the 1940s–1950s for collective shaman rituals. Here is another example: in the 1990s, I spent months asking to see or hear a detailed account of past and present complex hunting rituals. I was unsuccessful until the older nomads were

convinced that my father was a kind of a shaman because he sent me a lucky charm (a toy in the form of a ladybird) that I hung in the tent. They then explained to me several complex hunting rituals in detail (Lavrillier 2005:272–273, 495).

Thus, it seems that the secrecy surrounding a specific part of spiritual knowledge existed long before Soviet power, but antireligious propaganda and drastic measures strengthened this secrecy. Consequently, the decline of discourses about rituals, added to the shortage and disappearance of traditional shamans (as the best knowledge holders), triggered among the Tungus an erosion in their comprehension of rituals and spirits. After more than several dozens years of communist “militant atheism,” an implicit worldview is present in the minds of nomads but mostly on an unconscious level. The understanding of *onnir* belongs to this kind of unconscious knowledge. In the 1990s, only a handful of nomads and villagers were able to explain their beliefs and cosmogony as a coherent system.

In contrast, intellectuals and other active participants in “neorituals” like to provide discourses about ritual gestures, their significance, and a cosmogony. This knowledge is often a patchwork of elements chosen from different ethnographic monographs of the 1930s–1990s (Lavrillier 2005:407–523). The same is true with the neoshamans; some of them, like the Sakha shaman Kondakov, have even written entire books about spirits. However, at least for the moment, most Tungus in the regions where I worked do not recognize neoshamans.

Economic Activities Requiring Various Kinds of Knowledge, Skills, and Talents

The combined complex economic activities of the Tungus require extensive knowledge and many skills and talents that, as we will see over the next few pages, the Tungus also relate to the concept of *onnir*. The Tungus with whom I have worked carry out different forms of reindeer herding. Thus, in areas where extensive reindeer herding (1,500–3,000 heads per herd) is conducted (among the Even of northern Yakutia (Sakha) and southern Kamchatka), it is the principal source of subsistence, since the herders regularly slaughter the reindeer for food. Transportation is provided by reindeer in all seasons (northern and southern Yakutia [Sakha], Amur region), by horse in the summer (in northern Yakutia [Sakha], Kamchatka), and by snowmobile in the winter as either the main form (in southern Kamchatka) or alternate form of transport (in southern and northern Yakutia [Sakha], Amur region). Transportation is not undertaken using motorcycles or four-wheel drive

vehicles, as in other areas of Siberian. The Evenki of southern Yakutia (Sakha) and northern Amur region practice reindeer herding with small herds (seven to 600 heads per herd), known as the “taiga,” “Orochen,” “Evenki,” or “Tungus” type (Vasilevich and Levin 1951:5). According to Ermolova (2003), the supposedly different “Evenki” and “Saian” reindeer-herding types (the latter of which is practiced by the Tozhu, Tofa, and Dukha) (Vasilevich and Levin 1951) are more similar than they are different. Both use reindeer for transportation purposes (sledding, pack carrying, and riding) and milk; however, they very rarely slaughter the reindeer (Ermolova 2003). In this type of herding, the primary source of subsistence is hunting throughout the year (wild reindeer, elks, roe deer, red deer, some migrating birds, black grouse, snow partridges, and, occasionally, bears are hunted for food, while sable is hunted for fur). Fishing provides complementary sustenance in the autumn and snowy springs, while it is the primary food during summer. This kind of reindeer herding is common among the Orochen Evenki of Yakutia (Sakha) and the Amur region (also in northern China, Dumont 2018). Among the Even fisherman of Kamchatka, salmon fishing (the predominant activity in summer), together with hunting (a major activity in the snow period), is the preeminent means of sustenance for humans and dogs. The latter also provide(d) transport during the winter along with snowmobiles (horses are used in the summer).

The Evenki of southern Yakutia (Sakha) and the northern Amur region have a dual economy and a dual logic of subsistence: the two poles in both are hunting and reindeer herding. This dual economy raises a dualism in logic. These Evenki have two very different kinds of economics that work in parallel. On the one hand, reindeer herding is based on a logic of capital. By not slaughtering reindeer, the herd can be increased: one can then further increase the reindeer stock, use them as an exchange currency for buying different things, or treat them as a “stock” of meat in case of a shortage of food game. On the other hand, these Evenki rely on hunting, which is an economy based on hazard.

Throughout the year, these Evenki must think simultaneously about these two types of economics, which influences the dualistic organization of space: to organize a yearly cycle of nomadic life, they must find good pastures for the specific season close to each encampment. Equally, the location should not be too far from places where they can acquire seasonal food or fur game. Each species of fur or food game is hunted following a rigid seasonal calendar and diverse strategies so that each species can breed successfully. Consequently, they have two categories of space for each encampment. One is called “with humans” (*beiechi*), which encompasses camps,

roads, and pastures. The other is called “faraway” (*kanuula*), which corresponds to wild space where food game lives. Each type of space has its own kind of offerings and spirits; the more powerful ones are situated in wild spaces. All nomads always think about hunting and herding in parallel, and an individual must master both herding and hunting/fishing knowledge. This dualism also determines their social organization. During the winter period, hunting requires more effort from people (because fur hunting is the main/most important source of annual income depending on the region), while the reindeer can live grouped together when being led to a good pasture in favorable snow conditions. In contrast, reindeer herding during calving in the late spring and summer requires more significant endeavors. During this period, the nomads conduct collective hunts approximately once a week. Consequently, the size of the nomadic community also varies according to the season. Herding requires more human resources in spring and summer, so the largest nomadic groups (around 15–30 persons) gather for it. In autumn and winter, the Evenki hunting method works best when conducted in small, mobile family groups (around two–five persons) (Lavrillier 2005:170–207).

Partially settled by Communist Party policy, only a few Evenki (Nikolaev 1961, 1964; Tugolukov 1975; among many others) and Even (Vitebsky 2005; among others) still lead a nomadic lifestyle (with various degrees of mobility and the integration of vehicles, depending on the group).⁷ Some communities have now recovered a high degree of mobility, very similar to the ethnographic descriptions from the Tsarist period or the beginning of the Soviet period (before traditional herding was transformed). For instance, the Evenki of the northern Amur region now have the same level of mobility as described in the ethnography of the pre-Soviet period for this geographical area (Mainov 1898; Pasvik 1883; Tugolukov 1962, Vasilevich 1930a, 1950, 1969:42–86), even though they underwent several changes between the establishment of Soviet power (due to the state reorganization of herding) (Tugolukov 1975) and its collapse (when the state farms were closed) (Lavrillier 2005:115–149).

The other Tungus now live mostly in villages, as well as in towns in small communities. However, they maintain a strong link(s) with the nomadic or hunting/herding world and its attached beliefs: some conduct occasional hunting or fishing activities, while others receive meat and fish from their nomadic/villager relatives. The consumption of such products from the nomadic world in urban and rural contexts embodies socially and spiritually important moments in life. Many villagers and townspeople maintain a practice of some knowledge, skills, and talents from

the nomadic world: occasional hunting/fishing; traditional handicrafts like sewing clothes, costumes, and items for nomads; ethnic spectacles, conquests, or festival meetings; souvenirs; or the production of ethnic knives and wall decorations. *Onnir* is considered to be engaged in all these processes (Lavrillier 2005:115–149).

“Spirit Charge” and “Active Imprint”

One of the first clues I had about this concept was that the Evenki believe that the succulence and flavor of meat vary depending on the person who has hunted the game. In the same way, the taste of domestic reindeer meat differs in accordance with the herder who slaughtered it. This differentiation depends neither on the moral standing, temperament, or personhood of the individual nor on the manner or place in which the beast was killed. It all depends on the “individual who has slaughtered the animal,” as the Evenki say without further explanation. When I asked, “If the meat is tasty and tender, does it mean that the hunter/slaughterer is a nice person?” They answered: “We do not know if he is a nice person, but his meat is always tasty—it depends on different individuals!” The fact that, as the Tungus say, “there are all sorts of individuals” means the individual who takes the life leaves an “imprint” on the meat, which in turn determines its qualities (Lavrillier 2005:115–149).

In addition, this concept of “imprint” is to be found in all domains of Tungus culture. It explains a considerable number of everyday prohibitions that affect all spheres of activity, including the numerous proscriptions against trampling on, sitting on, crossing over, or turning around some items or humans, as well as the prohibition forbidding young people from coming into contact with the belongings of elders, the deceased, or shamans. The Tungus believe that humans leave an “imprint” on all the beings and things they touch are in contact with and also on the actions they undertake. This “imprint” may act in a beneficial or harmful way and can be “active” even after the death of its former owner. For example, after the collapse of Soviet power, the old *sokhoze* was transformed into a municipal enterprise (Russian: *M.U.P.*). It allotted rifles to the nomads for the hunting season, collected them at the end of the season, and then redistributed them to the nomads at random. Thus, a nomad could never know in advance which rifle he/she would receive. Upon receiving a gun, the nomads immediately asked about the identity of the previous owner and paid attention to whether that person was alive or deceased, his/her life course, skills, if he/she had a healthy and prosperous herd or healthy children, the succulence and flavor of the meat he/she hunted or slaughtered,

and the specific powers attributed to them (if at all). If these traits of the former owner were positive, hunting with such a gun was considered a guarantee of good hunting. Conversely, if the previous owner had skinny reindeer, an ill family, was unskilled, and/or hunted or slaughtered bad meat, the nomads could refuse the rifle (despite the lack of guns at the time). This questioning aimed to identify the “spirit charge” and attached “imprint” (*onnir*) of the previous owner: “How is the *onnir* of this human?” (*On tar beie onnirichi?*—[How this human *onnir* + COM - *chi*]) (Lavrillier 2005:267–270).

The *onnir* is one of the constituent parts (i.e., material and immaterial elements) of humans and some animals: each being has its own distinctive “imprint.” Instead of using the vague terms “soul” or “body,” I prefer to refer to “constituent parts of an individual.” An individual’s “imprint” can change at the different stages of their lives depending on their age, fertility, the number of children they have, ritual practices, knowledge, skills, and practice of talents. Certain rare “imprints” are considered to be passed down from generation to generation, like those of the shaman and storyteller or that of an individual with specific skills, like healing or craftsmanship. The strength of an “imprint,” and not its quality (harmful or beneficial), is referred to as “(very) heavy *onnir*” (*urges(kun) onnirichin*; Russian: (*ochen*) *tiazhëlyi*) or “light *onnir*” (*oiumkukan onnirichin*; Russian: *lëkhkii*).

Thus, fertile women, an elder, individuals considered to be dangerous, a craftsperson skilled in the art of sewing or other crafts, a sick person, a person with a recently deceased relative, and shamans are all attributed with a “heavy spirit charge” and a strong “imprint.” All of these people are “heavy,” but their “charge” can have either beneficial or harmful effects. Note that a heavy or light *onnir* does not provide his/her owner a specific social position or a hierarchical status; it is an entirely different thing (Lavrillier 2005:267–270).

Humans’ *onnir* (as well as some animals’) leave an “imprint” on things and beings with whom they are in contact. This “imprint” affects not only meat but also the tools used for hunting and herding: it determines if a shot hits its mark or whether a net will catch a fish. It also affects the food they prepare, determining whether the bread dough will rise, and the level of comfort in the house or tent (whether the home is warm or cold and if it provides a pleasant atmosphere). The health and education of children are also thought to depend on *onnir*. Depending on the *onnir*, worn clothes will stay in good condition or rip and treated and sewn skins and furs will be flexible, soft, and warm or harsh, gritty, and hirsute. It also affects the reindeer they ride, herd, and care for—it determines whether domestic reindeer lose weight,

stay together, disperse throughout the forest, breed, or die. The same is the case with dog skills and behaviors. An “imprint” also acts upon the wounds one treats: they will recover rapidly or become infected. Finally, it influences all the ritual gestures one performs (whether they succeed or produce the desired effect) (Lavrillier 2005:267–270).

This “imprint” also acts through the intermediary of objects (previously touched by individuals) and materials. For example, the “heavy” clothes and items (like rifles, knives, clothes, cooking utensils, instruments, and bedclothes) of individuals with a very heavy *onnir*, elders, or the deceased are harmful to young people, who therefore do not wear or use them. Apart from the example above with the rifles, this explains the prohibition against using the glasses or mugs of such individuals. This “imprint” is also invisibly recorded in the ground: the Tungus believe that each individual leaves something active when passing over a piece of ground: this is strong enough to affect other humans, even after departure. For instance, the *aran* (part of the surface [previously] occupied by a tent) is believed to keep all the “imprints” of the (former) inhabitants even after their departure or death. It is forbidden to step in this space, especially if it was the *aran* of people with a “heavy imprint.” If they do so, they will get sick or die (Lavrillier 2005:267–270; field notes of the author 1990s–2010s). A nomad told me in winter 2019 that if one sits inadvertently on the small bag (*avsa*) for instruments or sewing tools of some individuals, a furuncle will obligatorily appear on the culprit’s body because of the heavy *onnir* of the bag’s owner (see another example one page below).

For the same reason, “imprints” of regular persons are often considered bothersome for a shaman, as they can “increase the load” by adding useless spirits and possibly upsetting the conversation with the shaman’s spirits. It is for this reason that, before important rituals, a shaman has to enter via the back of the tent (*malu*) and not through the front, as the main entrance will be tainted by the “imprints” of those who have already entered. Traditional shamans (even in the 2010s) required the tent to be set up, especially for the most difficult rituals, in a virgin space in the forest. This precaution limits the number of “imprints” (author’s 1990s–2000 various field notes from shamans’ children, helpers, and elders) (Lavrillier 2005:267–270).

Many years of research from 1994 to the 2000s were required to identify and understand the complex emic concept of *onnir* and gather detailed discussions on the subject (see The Omnipresence of *Onnir* in the Life of the Tungus section). One of the rare comprehensive explanations I had about *onnir* came from the daughter of

the shaman Stepan Neustroev from Iengra (southern Yakutia (Sakha)), recorded in 2000:

All Evenki have an *onnir*. It is made from both beneficial and harmful spirits inside them. The spirits can enter the body or leave it for a while. Everyone has at least one guardian spirit or helper spirit [author’s note: no specific spirit name was given] which manifests itself by a talent: singing, dancing, decorating, drawing, storytelling, writing, hunting, herding animals, caring, playing an instrument, performing rituals, etc., but everyone has to learn how to “make good use” of these spirits. But not everyone can do so. As a person ages, the *onnir* gains weight in two ways. First, knowledge and talents are accrued: this heightens the quantity and specificity of the spirits of the *onnir* and improves mastery over them. Second, if a prohibition is transgressed during life, or if a close relative dies, one or several spirits [author’s note: *ichchi*, *belbuka* in Evenki depending on the region, *aringka* in Even] can enter your body. These ancestor spirits remain attached to the places they lived on before, so when we transgress prohibitions related to their spaces (encampments, storage house, offering places, belongings, etc.), they can enter our bodies, and sometimes provoke illnesses. Also, if a shaman is/was performing a ritual for you, new spirits [author’s note: no specific spirit name was given] join your *onnir*. The *onnir*, therefore, gains in weight, becomes “heavier,” in effect, more powerful. The elders are very “heavy”; they feel an energy overflowing, which pushes them to cure people, to sing, dance, and perform rituals. Their *onnir* is very strong, and they must use it by doing such activities and thus control it. If they do not listen to this energy, they fall ill. This is why most elders perform rituals. If Evenki do not learn how to control their spirits, the spirits of the *onnir* will master them. They will devour you, so you will suffer or die. To master the spirits and enrich your *onnir*, you must use your talents and “play” (i.e., sing, dance, decorate, or complete rituals). The *onnir* of a shaman is “heavier” than those of other people. Because he/she “plays” more and better than the others but also because spirits elected him/her. He/she is always discussing, fighting, and dealing with spirits and is used to obtaining something from them: he/she is able to control all his/her spirits. This is why he/she is, in addition to being a shaman, also a master artisan in various domains. The shaman must regularly “play” (perform rituals), even if she/he is not asked to do so, for fear of losing control over the spirits of his/her *onnir* and becoming ill. Women are also very “heavy” because they give birth and practice a lot of talents and “plays”: decorating, sewing, treating skins and fur, cooking, and treating reindeer and humans. So, they master many spirits. They also have a lot of power: they are in command in the encampment and family; their *onnir* is heavier than those of most men. This is why the prohibitions against trampling on, sitting on, and crossing over [something] must be more strictly respected by women: they are stronger and potentially more dangerous.

Who are the Spirits of the *Onnir*?

In addition to the indications given above in the interview, hunters (born in the 1970s and 1980s) I interviewed from the 1990s to the 2010s spoke about “something” or “spirits” or *belemngur* (individual spirit-helpers for ordinary people or shamans within the body or close to it) that either “drive them,” “lead them,” or “help them” to find their way to hunted animals or to hunt proficiently. Shirokogoroff ([1919]2001:124) also attested to the belief that a spirit leads a hunter. In several places in the interviews, the informants do not indicate the specific name of spirits, using *ichchi* (according to my field material: “ancestor spirit”; “spirits” in general, be they of human origin or from the natural environment; “spirit of dead people and some dead animals that could not reach the world of the dead”) in its generic sense of “spirits” or the Russian word for spirits—*dukhi* (for more concerning *ichchi*, *itchi*, see the *Onnir* and the Ethnography of “Souls” and “Spirits” section).

In the 1910s, Shirokogoroff (1935:55a, 55b, 121b) underlined the difficulty of studying the notion of spirit and the lack of sharp outlines in the perception of the spirit world among the Tungus. He writes that “there is not a generic term in Tungus to say “spirits” and that “the number of spirits is always changing; they increase, and change their characters, their taste. . . . The Tungus are likely to change their . . . complex of spirits.” He adds that “the elasticity of this system permits the Tungus to give up their spirits which are not thus petrified in a fixed system of religion with its tradition, sacred books, etc.” He indicates several times the significant and changing number of spirits borrowed from neighboring peoples (e.g., Buriat, Russian, Manchu, Chinese, Udeghe). Also, as I heard from elders in the field in the 1990s–2010s, Shirokogoroff (1935:121b) writes that the “Tungus spirits cannot be classified according to the scheme of evil/good, malevolent/benevolent spirits, as is often done by authors adapting their field data” to fit the Western tendency to perceive the world as a binary opposition of good and bad. “Any spirit can be malevolent, benevolent, or neutral, which depends chiefly on the human attitude and human art of managing spirits” (Shirokogoroff 1935:121b).

The Tungus with whom I have discussed *onnir* in the 1990s–2000s do not give many names or details for these specific spirits. Still, they stress the fact the spirits are of varying types (more likely to be dangerous [like *avahyl*] or beneficial [like *belemngur*], more or less powerful, and linked to different abilities [skills, talents, and “playing”]). In 2019, during fieldwork focusing on environmental changes, an Evenki female elder unexpectedly gave me the name of one such spirit—*idy*, which

provides one with the ability to act mostly negatively (and very occasionally positively) on other people by simple thoughts. This word was spoken in a question about another village: “In this village, are there any people containing *idy*?” (*Tar pasiolkadu idychi beie bihi-u?*). The same year, during a satellite transmission about a winter installation in the nomadic community-based observatory (BRISK OBS ENV project), an Evenki herder recounted a story he heard in his childhood:

In the past, a man’s bad habit was to steal other herders’ halters for reindeer. But he died very young. When he died, he cried and shouted, “Take off these halters from me; they are strangling and choking me!” But he had nothing on him. People said that it is because “there are all sorts of domestic reindeer, among them there are also *ivichi* (*Oror nian ivichil bivkil*),” that is to say individuals with a very powerful *onnir*. “Well, among reindeer, there are *onngun* (e.g., reindeer elected by the spirits to be the protector of the herd). This is why in the past, each reindeer was attributed its own halter, packsaddle, saddle, and complete harnessing so that this reindeer’s *onnir* will not come into contact with the other reindeer’s *onnir* through these items.”⁸

However, this was the only spirit name I could collect, unlike the researchers of the 1910s–1950s. Shirokogoroff (1935:452–455), for instance, provides a list of dozens of names of Tungus spirits. Obviously, knowledge about the names of the spirits, in general, has been significantly eroded. In ethnographic literature, based on material gathered before and at the beginning of the Soviet era (Anisimov 1951a, 1951b; Gurvich 1948; Mazin 1984; Shirokogoroff 1935:122–176, 187–240; Vasilevich 1930b, 1957; among many others), one can find abundant information about different spirits: their names, relationships with them, and descriptions of rituals. However, I found no concept of *onnir*, related spirits responsible for talents and skills, or an *onnir*-like conception. The only potentially similar term I found is in Shirokogoroff (1935:440) on a list of vernacular terms (without further explanation): “*oon’i*—a special aperture under the arm in the shaman costume (for spirits).” This word could have some connection to *onnir* since, as an “aperture,” it suggests the entering of spirits into the shaman (or his/her costume). However, *onnir* relates to spirits in the bodies of all humans (not only shamans) and some animals, nor is it the name of a part of a costume but rather one for the constituent parts of individuals.

Thus, the ethnographic literature does not mention *onnir* or a similar understanding in writings about the spirits, the constituent parts of the individual (e.g., various “souls”), or personhood.

To “Play” for Wellbeing

What is behind or covered up by the interrelation between these notions of *onnir* (“spirit charge” and “imprint”) and “play”? As highlighted in the interview with the daughter of the Stepan Neustroev, “playing” and the use of talents allow a person to master the “spirit charge” and the “imprint,” which in turn provides the power to act and create.

Let us note that certain actions (hunting, fishing, herding, and crafting) are considered solely as talents, while others (singing, dancing, decorating) are identified as both talents and “play” (in the Tungus sense). We will see that “play” and the “spirit charge” are *linked to ideas of life and the ability to create*.

“To live well, one must play well” is an oft-repeated phrase among the nomadic and settled Evenki. “We ‘play’ as our ancestors to prolong the life of our youths,” say the songs of the round dances performed during collective rituals, like Reindeer Herders’ Day (*uktevun*), a “festival inherited from the Soviet period,” and the “neoritual” *ikenipke* (also called *bakaldyn*), as well as in contemporary wishing songs (see Introduction). The main justification for the reestablishment of the forgotten *ikenipke*, be it among the Tungus from villages and towns or their neighbors, the Yakut, is expressed in several recurrent sentences:

During the communist period, we neglected our spirits, we abandoned many rituals and some proscriptions, this is why we live in poor economic conditions and our social situation is so difficult, it is our spirits punishing us!

Among some Tungus regional groups, I could hear: “But how can we reconnect with spirits? We have almost no more shamans, and our community remembers almost nothing/very little about ancient rituals” (Alekseev 1993; Lavrillier 2003:183).

In the 1920s, the Evenki of the Sym River (Yenisei region, Krasnoyarsk district) underlined the same importance of “play” by defining the ritual *ikenipke* as “the most joyous moment of the year,” as it was full of “play” and promises of wellbeing (Vasilevich 1957:151). The Evenki term *ikenipke*, which Vasilevich translates as “a ritual imitating life,” has *ike-* at its root:

I- (root evk. *i-/ in-* meaning “life”) + evk. *-ken-* (meaning “to imitate something”), or *iken-* (root meaning “imitation of life,” “songs, dances, play”) + *-i-* (the suffix for linking two consonants) + *-pke* (meaning “ritual”) (Vasilevich 1957:152).

The Tungus words related to “playing” are based on the roots *ike-* and *evi-*. This association between the notions of “play” and life is also present

in other Tungus-Manchu languages. Equally, it is found in those wishing songs where the living (*indianel*, literally “those who are born,” from the root *in-* [life]) are encouraged to “play” the “playing” of the Evenki in order to ensure wellbeing (*Evenkil evinmatyn evidyemel aiamat bidavi!*) (Lavrillier and Lecomte 2002) (Lavrillier 2005:494, 2012b; Vasilevich 1957:152). How can we understand the logic of this keyphrase?

We can study the semantic meanings of these terms in Tungus-Manchu languages (Evenki, Even, Nanai, Neghidal, Ulch, Oroch, Orok, Udeghe, Solon, Manchu, and Sibe) by turning to sources and my fieldwork: this will help better understand the notions of *onnir* and “play” and their association with the idea of life. Two verbs mean “to play” in Evenki: *evi-da* or *ike-da*. While *evi-da* designates all forms of “playing,” *ike-da* more specifically denotes songs and dances, both of which are part of Tungus “playing.” In all Tungus-Manchu languages, we find a set of common meanings around these roots: *evi-* means “to play, to compete, to play like a child, to play an instrument, to perform rituals, to joke” (Tsintsius 1977:434–435). *Ike-* has the meaning “to sing” (Tsintsius 1975:301). However, it is in Evenki and Even that the derivatives of these roots have the greatest variety of meanings.

In dictionaries of the Evenki language, the derivatives of the root *ike-* are nouns, which mean either the springtime ritual, its place, or verbs that refer to actions taken during this ritual (to sing, dance, shamanize, compete, rejoice).

More precisely, the nouns mean “places for dances and competitions”; ritual *ikenipke* and the verbs “to sing the round dance songs, the song improvisation, myths, throat songs performed in a drunken state, shamanic songs; to compete; to rejoice; to shamanize in springtime.

Verbs built on the root *evi-* designate actions such as to sing, to dance, to make music, to compete in collective rituals or during regular collective celebrations, to win, to play (for children), to rejoice, or to represent.

More precisely: “to play games, to celebrate, to sing round dances, to play a musical instrument, to compete, to play games in everyday life, to be lucky, to play with toys, to rejoice, to tease, to represent something on a stage.” The nouns deriving from this root refer to the places of games or dances, people skilled in song and dance, actors, artists, or children’s toys.

With regards to animals, the derivatives are nouns associated with reproduction, such as the “mating rituals (dances and noises)” of the tetra and the squirrel. All these meanings come from Tsintsius’ (1975:301, 434) dictionary. In dictionaries, the terms used to designate the actions of shamans do

not derive from these roots. Only in a footnote does Vasilevich (1957:160) confirm that *evi-n* and *ike-n* also designate “the songs and dances of shamans” and that this meaning is the most ancient.

In contrast, the Evenki and Even with whom I worked in the field in the 1990s–2010s clearly identified a relationship between “playing” (*evi-/ike-*) and the forms of rituals, regardless of whether a shaman was present or not. In addition, my fieldwork offered other elements that allow us to better comprehend this Evenki notion of “playing.” Thus, the words derived from these roots designate objects, places, and activities.

More precisely: statuettes of spirits (which bring good fortune in hunting or act as protectors of the household);⁹ anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines; children’s toys (all called *evikan*, literally “toy”); ancient shamanic ritual sites (*evikit*, literally “a place for play”) with their ritual poles and structures; ritual gestures or activities requiring specific talents such as crafts; the decoration of clothes and objects; and the myths, legends, and tales telling or retelling stories of a prosperous life. Sometimes the codified collective consumption of alcoholic beverages is also considered “play.”

However, agents are rarely designated by derivatives of the roots *evi-/ike-*: when they are, the terms refer more to teasing, songs, dances, competitive games, and acting. They do not refer to shamanic agents. Humans are not the only ones who play, because, as we will see, nature and animals do the same. Even working televisions and radios are said to “play.” A shaman will refuse to perform rituals when these devices are turned on. They are, it is said, obstructions before his journey to other worlds and his relations with the spirits (Lavrillier 2005:493–497). Regarding the ritual uses of electronic devices around the world, see Hamayon (1997:121).

All of the activities, tools, places, and agents designated by words derived from the roots *evi-/ike-* (“to play”) also have specific terms. “To sing” is also expressed as *eghe-da*, but we can use a term specific to a particular chant. If *evi-* designates the acts of shamans, there are other terms to identify his rituals, songs, dances, and movements, as well as names for the tools he creates and animates. The Evenki with whom I worked used the verb *sama-da*, which comes from the word *saman* (the shaman), to designate the ritual acts of the shaman. In contrast, the verb *nimnga-da* denotes either the entire shamanic ritual or just the spoken or sung part relating his journey, meeting with the spirits, and what he has obtained from it (Lavrillier 2005:496). According to Tsintsius (1977:59), the shaman is designated as *saman* (often in the form *sama(n)*, more rarely *shama(n)* or *hama(n)*) in all the Tungus-Manchu languages (including Solon and Manchu).

In the ethnographic literature, several terms—*iaian*, *samaldy*, *saman*, *icherimni*, or *hiruri*—are translated as “shaman,” with the last two terms more specifically denote a “soothsayer.” Vasilevich suggests that we use the verb “to shamanize” when encountering *iaia*, which is the root of *iandy* (“to shamanize close to a campfire”) or *sevenche* (“to converse (for shamans) with auxiliary spirits”). Thus, for Mazin, *iandy* designates “the prosperity required by the shaman from the fire spirits,” while *sevenche* means “to fumigate and to make fat offerings to the fire.” According to Vasilevich, a third term, and its derived verbal forms (i.e., *saman* and *samanil-*, *samaldy-*), means “to shamanize,” but it designates more specifically the vigorous body movements involved in a ritual. In contrast, Mazin (1984:103) stresses that this verb is composed of *sa-* “to know” and the suffix *-man*, which signifies “a predisposition to act”: my informants have confirmed these semantics (Lavrillier 2005:497; Mazin 1984:103; Vasilevich 1969:244, 1959:158). This etymology linking the specialist to the idea of “knowledge” has been challenged by Hamayon (1995:69, 1999–2000:22). Lot-Falck (1977:9), the first French ethnologist to study the diverse terminologies used for “shaman” in Altaic languages, proposes a semantic comparison that highlights the recurrence of the idea a body in motion and includes the Tungus root *sam-*.¹⁰

This investigation demonstrates that the roots *evi-/ike-* are associated with life, ritual actions, objects, and also with what western societies refer to as games, artisanal or craft activities (decoration, design) and, more recently, musical, theatric, audiovisual and cinematic representation. However, it is not used to denote the shaman, who is designated by terms expressing ideas about movement or knowledge.

Is “Play” a Substitute for Ritual Action?

The relationship between play and ritual action is not peculiar to the Evenki (see above Introduction), as has been demonstrated in Hamayon’s (1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1995, 1999–2000) many works on Siberia, Mongolia, and central Asia. This association exists in several Siberian languages, notably in Yakut and Chukchi. According to Vaté (2003:298–303), the notion of play exists in the methods of apprenticeship as well as in rituals (Jeux rituels 1999–2000; Lavrillier and Vaté 2004).

The terminological examples given here demonstrate the omnipresence of the semantic and formal association in Evenki ideology between “playing” and rituals. What, for the Evenki, brings together all forms of “play” cited above, is their common core? The first common point is that the Evenki expect ritual efficiency from all “playing.” A second common point underlying all forms of

Tungus “playing,” as suggested by Hamayon for the Altaic world in general, could be the act of “representing,” “imitating,” or “symbolizing.”¹¹

Shirokogorov ([1919]2001:126) wrote that humans symbolize the actions they want to be undertaken by the spirits (for instance, they whistle for wind, or they pour water and spray themselves to summon rain). It is not *similia similibus*, as some ethnographers understand it, but a means to communicate clearly to the spirits what they want [according to the anthropological concept of “sympathetic magic,” developed notably by Frazer ([1922]1993)].

Even if it is clear that “representing” is supposed to control the surrounding world (as shown throughout this paper), I cannot use the interpretation by Taussig (1993:52) of sympathetic magic or by Willerslev (2004) of mimesis based on Yukaghir material, since our paper studies all forms of representations (and not only those related to body imitations or imitation related to hunting practices or rituals). The most important difference is that mimicry or “representing” in our field materials do not “collapse such dichotomies as Self vs. Other, nature vs. culture” or show a mimetic transfer between hunter and animal. There is also no change of identity, transformation, or intercorporality between humans and animals; there is no perception of sexual relations between hunter and animal or dehumanization during the initiation of the hunter (Willerslev 2004:639, 2007:186) (see also the section: The position of the human individual in (ritual) action).

Let us return to “play.” Hamayon shows how play, as ritual, represents, that is to say, as per Coppet (1992), “makes present”: “To represent an action is also to reproduce it symbolically so that it can truly deliver, just to simulate it. . . to encourage another to complete it.” But “what about,” she writes,

other modes of symbolic representations like discourses, sculpture, painting, etc., in these regions? A ritual wording, a ritual painting, can be efficient, it can be equal to an action. Is it, therefore, also “play”? (Hamayon 1995:88, 94 et passim; 1997:118 et passim, 1999–2000:39, 1997).

The information I gathered from the Tungus in the 1990s–2010s shows not only the link between “play” and ritual but also answers Hamayon’s question. As we will see, the Evenki consider ritual wordings and painting as “play.” We need now to look at what the various forms of “playing” are representing for the Evenki: children’s games, games, drawings and decoration, various types of storytelling, instrumental music, songs, dances, the “playing” of shamans, the “playing” of animals, and nature (*Buga* or *Bugha*). *Buga* designates the entirety of the natural bio-

physical environment, the spirits inhabiting it, and the primary spiritual entity in control of the natural environment. Let us now study how the “playing” of the Tungus in the studied area brings together the two ideas of “making present” and ritual efficiency.

What is “Playing” Making Present?

Children’s games represent every facet of adult life. Adults insist that children’s games represent only the positive side of life: a lucky hunt that features wooden reindeer, carrying boxes of used matches filled with a red mousse that represents the flesh, a healthy herd represented by many wooden reindeer of all ages and both sexes (Fig. 1), or a human birth symbolized by a cradle and dolls made of knucklebones (field notes 1990s–2010s).

A frequently repeated mantra is “what you played as a child; you become as an adult.” During periods of scarcity, children are ordered to “go, play at hunting to bring us back good luck.” For example, I observed among the Evenki during a long period of scarcity in the taiga in 1999 that children, encouraged by their parents, played out a representation of a lucky hunt by attaching small dead birds (which they had shot with slingshots) to a small reproduction (a toy) of an adult sled exactly as if they were wild reindeer. Children are often said to bring luck to hunting: seeing dreams with human babies or birth, if a baby from a hunter’s household of the hunter makes bubbles with his/her saliva or has hiccups, or a similar event (Lavrillier 2005:240, 247–248). Another fact reconfirms the past and current analogy between children’s games and rituals: the same suffix (*-kan*) is used to denote toys (*beye-kan*, human dolls), rituals (*seve-kan*, springtime ritual, and *beiu(t)-kan*, hunting ritual), and figurines of spirits (*evi-kan*). This last word is also the general word for “toy.”

The association between children’s games and rituals is sometimes more noticeable: the child becomes for the adults an attribute in shamanic ritual. In the 1920s–1950s, adults encouraged children to play at being shamans (Vasilevich 1927; author’s 1990s field notes). Nowadays, nomads do not know anything about this practice, except for very few elders. Nonetheless, during fieldwork in 2007, I saw Evenki children playing independently at being shamans (with an improvised shaman’s hat with feathers, singing, and dancing) in the nomadic tent. They were inspired by the many accounts of shamans (one of the big topics of discussion in the taiga in general) and by a narrative about their parents’ participation in a ritual with the shaman during the previous Reindeer Herders’ Day (Lavrillier 2013:253) (Fig. 2). In the context of villages (from the 1990s until today), the children



Figure 1. Evenki children playing with toys—wooden domestic reindeer, which represent nomadization, exchange, calving, mating, and the like. Each child owns such toys made by adults: they are also considered talismans or souls of future reindeer, so children must keep them in specific small bags even when they become adults. Photographed by A. Lavrillier 2006.

are asked by teachers or workers in the “house of culture” to represent shamans performing rituals during neorituals. In 2018, I was told by an elder, the son of a shaman, that such recurrent representations of shamans by children should have a beneficial effect on the life of the local Evenki. In the 1920s, according to Vasilevich (1927), during a game called *hamaldiren* (“to shamanize”), adults made child-sized costumes, drums, and other shamanic attributes, as well as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figurines (ancestors of the shaman or spirits of the natural environment) and ritual sites. Dolls made from reindeer bones and dressed in tissue represented the “children.” The child-shaman, usually aged from seven to ten years old, dressed in costume, and covered his head with a piece of fabric that fell over his eyes, just like the hats of adult shamans. Another child, pretending to be the shaman’s assistant, warmed the drum over the fire. The adults often trained all children taking part in the



Figure 2. Evenki children playing shamans. Photographed by A. Lavrillier 2007.

game (shaman, assistant, and helpers) to precisely imitate every step of the shamanic ritual (the jerky movements, the throwing of the drum beater, and even the call to auxiliary spirits). The sources are not precise about whether the children became shamans afterward, but we can assume this since each local lineage had its own shaman before the mass arrests in the 1930s–1960s (field notes 1990s–2010s).

Vasilevich (1927) described the shamanic songs that the children performed: they entirely replicated those of the adult shamans. Sometimes, a frying pan was used in place of a drum, and wooden curls represented figurines of the spirits. For the adults, the children’s shamanic rituals, which were performed in the summer and winter, had ritual efficiency (Vasilevich 1927:30–32). In this way, the adults play out a shamanic ritual through the children, one which not only represents the spirits and the pursuit of good luck but also engages with the spirits. We can recognize here multiple layers of representation: the children represent adults, and the children are themselves represented by dolls made from deer bones. Taken together, this game represents a ritual from which efficiency is expected. So, I argue that for Tungus, to represent a ritual is the same as performing it.

According to Ermolova (1996:38–41), children play a role in rituals (*shamaldiren*, among others) because they are considered to inhabit the frontier between the three worlds that make up the universe (those of the living, of the entities yet to be born and of the dead). They are also said to have special powers, such as being able to predict the future. Ermolova concludes that encouraging children to play at shaman is in itself a ritual. My own research (Lavrillier 2013) confirms that Evenki and Even consider their children to have

different ritual powers according to their age groups and the symbolic association between small children and luck in hunting. For example, until the beginning of the 2000s, a ritual with a little baby was performed among the Tungus with whom I worked to obtain good luck in hunting. While the man was away hunting, a (grand)mother sitting on the ground at the encampment held a little baby (until three-years-old) under its arms so that the ends of its legs hung down, establishing a slight contact with the legs of the (grand)mother. The latter sang:

Chulugdu! Jump on one leg! If your (grand)father kills game, we will eat it together! *Chulugdu!* Jump on one leg! (*Chulugdu, chulugdukel! Amas beiune varekin, omukonma diapdighat, chulugdukel!*)

In dictionaries (depending on the dialect), *Chulugdu* is a master-spirit in the taiga (with one eye, one leg, and one arm), a clan of blacksmith-cannibals, and a bear in some legends. In daily language, it also means “to jump on one leg” (Vasilevich 1958:528; Tsintsius 1977:413; author’s material). The Tungus explain this ritual by saying that small children have come from another world, that they are traveling in different worlds of the cosmogony, and have special relationships with spirits. They are said to be strong enough to frighten the spirits of persons who died a tragic death (*ichchil* or *belbukal* in Evenki, *Aringkal*, *Arishal* in Even depending on the region)¹² and to know many things in advance. Informants explain this ritual of *Chulugdu* as both divination and a ritual aimed at triggering luck: “Small children know everything; if the father killed game, they know it and jump for joy.” “We do this so that the father will be lucky in hunting and will kill game.” This ritual represents a discussion between the parent and the spirit of *Chulugdu* through the intermediary of the child: the parents promise to share the killed game with the spirit if the father kills it, and the child represents joy at the luck (Lavrillier 2005:238, 245–249).

The possible symbolism of the link between small children and hunting luck can be first perhaps connected to the conception of the exchange of gifts of human and animal lives between humans and spirits (or animals). Second, it is perhaps linked to the perception of the life cycle. Thus, the cycle of life and death, as transcribed by Anisimov from accounts of the Yenisei Evenki, means that, after death, some of the constituent parts of a human (placed into the body of a wild animal during travel) return from the “lower world” (of the dead) to the source of the invisible river (*engdekit*) in the “upper world” (e.g., the world of future living beings) to join the stock of “unborn souls,” thus becoming ready for the birth of new humans (Anisimov 1951a:199–202). This corresponds to a belief I noted among the Evenki I worked with:

small birds and some game transport the “souls” (the recyclable constituent part of individuals—*omi*) of future peoples. This representation was not noted by Vasilevich (1969) or Mazin (1984:25–26).

The Tungus with whom I worked attribute to animals and the natural environment (*Buga*) the ability to “play.” For instance, when they make unexpected, impetuous movements or when they train for combat before the mating season. Animals are supposed to provoke, through certain movements (one of the forms of “play”), meteorological events, or a birth within their species. For instance, in the 1990s, elders told that when domestic reindeer start to suddenly jump and run in various directions (without apparent reason) in the spring, they are encouraging the birth of calves on this day (Lavrillier 2005:504). As Tungus elders told me, it was believed that rainbows were considered to be nature’s “play” until the 1970s, and they bring prosperity. Rock paintings (still believed to be drawings made by nature spirits and/or ancient shamans, which are therefore kept secret) are regularly visited in the spring by nomads, who interpret the drawings in order to predict the future (Lavrillier 2005:36, 328, 445, 449–458, 475–504; and for Evenki of Transbaikalia, see Brandisauskas 2011:124–126). In the 1950s, the Amur Evenki and their shamans performed dances and collective rituals at the foot of rock paintings (Tugolukov 1975:42–44). The nomads identify certain animals, such as the ladybird or cuckoo, as animal-shamans. Such animals are considered to “play” and to possess an *onnir* (Lavrillier 2012a). For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s, children captured ladybirds and gave them a tiny piece of wood (representing a drum), asking: “Little shaman, ‘play’ for me to be lucky!” If the insect turned the piece of wood between its legs (e.g., beating the drum), it was considered to be shamanizing to obtain luck. Sudden movements, which Hamayon (1999–2000; among others) emphasized in relation to ritual games, are also found in the rhythms of the discotheque or the neoritual events practiced by Evenki villagers and townspeople. When gyrating to the sound of techno music, they exclaim, “These are good ‘playing,’” and confirm that the enjoyment created by this modern music has beneficial ritual efficiency (Lavrillier 2005:504). In 2019, this perception of discotheque beats as “good playing” with beneficial efficiency was spontaneously discussed by Tungus in a Whatsapp forum.

To draw or decorate is to represent reindeer herds, suns, days and nights (with black or white squares), game, and spiders (guardians of the household), where bright colors represent life and good luck in hunting. For the nomads, to represent these motifs on their clothes and belongings is equal “to acting in order to obtain what one needs

for a good life!” Moreover, in the 1990s–2000s, I often heard: “Our ancestors lived well because all of their belongings were brightly decorated with colors. Today we almost stop decorating our belongings, and we live badly!” The same idea exists among the Nanai and the Nivkh (Delaby 1998). It should be noted that a single term (*aia*) exists in Evenki for the beautiful, the good, and the fortunate (Lavrillier 2005:503).

Myths, legends, and life stories represented with words and songs the beginning of human life, the lives of heroes, obtaining good fortune, or similar aspects. The Tungus attribute ritual efficacy to myths and legends. Similarities have been demonstrated between storytelling and shamanic rituals, and between shamans and bards (Hamayon 1990:169, 179, 590–592). For example, during a bombing raid in the Second World War, an Evenki soldier and traditional narrator called for help from the spirits by reciting myths (Keptuke 1996:69). The shamanic-like ritual efficiency of recounting legends and bards is expressed by Evenki myth tellers from northern Yakutia (Lavrillier and Matic 2013). Even the characters from epic poetry “play.” Sometimes, the female or male heroes travel through the worlds of the universe “for learning all sorts of ‘play,’ for performing games” (Keptuke 1996:69–70; Vasilevich 1966:47, 205). Sometimes, “toys” (*evikar*) are offered to the hero so that he can hunt for the first age of humanity or find the original source of good luck (Vasilevich 1966:111–266). Also, frequent night palavers about lucky or amusing hunting escapades are considered by modern hunters to bring them good fortune (Brandisauskas 2018:27; Lavrillier 2005:505).

Playing music or an instrument is done solely to imitate known sounds. The Evenki have the shaman’s drum as their principal musical instrument. The elders say that the beating of the drum attracts shamanic auxiliary spirits. The drumbeats also represent the stages of a ritual journey, while the drum itself is associated with the bark or the riding reindeer of the shaman (author’s 1990s field notes from shamans and shamans’ relatives or helpers, among others; also, see Hamayon 1990). In the field in 1997, I overheard a shaman explaining to a local modern Evenki singer: “Continue to sing, to play music, ours will live well thanks to your songs. You and I are the same—we ‘play!’” Other instruments imitate animal noises: the decoy and bells have a function in everyday life (reindeer hooves attached to a salt bag are used to call the herd or are connected to a stick to guide the reindeer). Hooves that clap together represent the running herd.

The texts of songs, all of which are still considered to have ritual efficiency in 2019, are full of words derived from the roots *evi-* and *-ike* (“play”). Zelenin’s (1930a, 1930b) study in Siberia testifies to the omnipresence of a belief in the

power of words. This Tungus perception of the power of words reminds one of Austin’s (1962). According to my observations, after each wishing song, phrases meaning “And so it will be!” (*Elekkin!*, *Tyka bidighan!* or *Tedie!*) have to be said. Equally, one must not give voice to any misfortune for fear that it might occur (Lavrillier 2005, 2007, 2012b; Lavrillier and Lecomte 2002).

Shamanic “play” (“to shamanize”) represents a journey into the worlds of the universe, encounters with the spirits and obtaining something by throwing the beater used to beat the drum (among many others, Anisimov 1951a, 1952; Hamayon 1990; Mazin 1984; Shirokogoroff 1935; Vasilevich 1957; 1990s–2010s author’s field notes from shamans, shamans’ relatives or helpers). In addition, during the ritual, the shaman throws the beater on the floor, each time asking an important question about the future of the community (e.g., hunting success, healthy reindeer, and recovery of ill persons). The spirits answer positively or negatively according to the side on which the beater falls (among many others, see Anisimov 1958; Hamayon 1990; Vasilevich 1969; author’s field notes). In the past, during the collective spring ritual, *ikenipke*, shamans, and participants mimicked chasing and catching games, obtaining a herd of domestic reindeer and souls yet to be born (Vasilevich 1957). As I observed during rituals and heard from informants, shamanic songs use many metaphors: “scissors” means “girls,” and “knives” refers to “boys.” The shaman chooses his/her metaphors not according to personal choice but a specific code inherited from old shamans (Lavrillier 2005:502). This confirms Lakoff and Johnson’s (1985) approach to metaphors as a conceptual system that defines a network of relationships between things and elements of cultural perception. Hamayon (1997:119) emphasized the frequent use of metaphors when shamans addressed the spirits during rituals in Siberia and Mongolia. According to Keptuke (1996:20), the more a shaman’s phrasing is rich in metaphors, the more efficient the ritual will be, identifying the metaphors as a source of efficiency.

Thus, the above aspects show clearly that, on the one hand, all Tungus “playing” represents what society is aspiring to and how they believe it should be obtained, and, on the other, that the Tungus expect a degree of ritual efficacy from “playing” (or representations) (Lavrillier 2005).

Multiplying the Layers of Representation for Acting Ritually

In a previous work concerning the Evenki, I identified four “categories of ritual gestures” according to what they represent: spirits, offerings, what society is aspiring to, and, finally, “ritual gestures that represent rituals,” which I argued at the beginning

were recent in terms of their origin (Lavrillier 2005:437–440, *et passim*, 2007). Neorituals are mostly composed of gestures that belong to this final category. Today, neorituals constitute most of the ritual practices of the Evenki, who were settled between 1930 and 1950 and their descendants.

Evenki nomads, even if they appreciate the “playing” of “neorituals,” rarely take part in them for several reasons: neorituals differ significantly from the “traditional rituals” the nomads’ practice in the forest or tundra, neorituals are dissociated from economic activity, they are emphatic, most people are passive spectators for much of the time, and conquests are rewarded by prizes. However, nomads doubt (or are sometimes frightened by) some of the most recent new ritual gestures. In contrast, the “traditional rituals” are passed down from generation to generation; they are embedded in everyday life (like small gestures during hunting or herding process) and, they are discreet, if not “invisible” (like silently throwing a small piece of food in the mouth of the stove at the beginning of lunch or a specific gesture or silent wording during the cutting up of an animal), and everyone is active. In addition, these neorituals occur when nomads are in remote summer pastures and when it is unsafe to leave the reindeer close to the village (because of predators and the difficulty of tracking the herd without snow tracks). This is not the case for Reindeer Herders’ Day, which takes place during the snow period when the nomads are not too far from the village. Worthwhile prizes are proposed in both the “neoritual” and the “festival inherited from the Soviet period,” so prizes do not make a difference. From 2014, I noticed that in some places of southern Yakutia (Sakha), this situation is changing among young herders who nomadize very close to the village. Some young nomads are actively involved in the neorituals, spectacles, and competitions in traditional cooking or clothes.

During neorituals, several layers of representation are multiplied, as are the different modes of representing within one ritual:

- 1) traditional rites (like offering food to the fire and the river and giving ribbons of colored fabric attached to young larch trees to the natural environment), but in a more ostentatious manner than in the taiga/tundra, with a ritual performer and a large group of spectators;
- 2) staged theatrical performances of shamans or forgotten rites (like the elaborate bear ritual or offerings to a wooden pole representing the three worlds of the universe);
- 3) audio-visual materials that show rites (like shamanic séances);
- 4) events in the natural environment (like the recorded song of the cuckoo announcing the rebirth of nature after the long winter—a moment people

awaited in the past to organize this collective shamanic ritual).

I argue that, due to the past rareness and present lack of shamans for performing their collective rituals, current Evenki act ritually through staged theatrical representations of rituals and their specialists (i.e., through “representation,” “play”) that are attributed a ritual efficiency (Lavrillier 2005:417–524; Lavrillier and Vaté 2004.). For instance, some of the elders’ song-improvisations during these events in 2000 say, “Let’s shamanize all together for being well.” It should be noted that in the 1990s–2010s, children and elders are the main actors in these neorituals, just as they were in the ancient rituals performed by the child-shamans. Despite appearances, these neorituals are not simply a folkloric form of entertainment displaying ancient practices. This “playing” of the settled community is not an artificial reconstruction, as it shares the same logic as the ancient “playing” of the Tungus: they “represent for making present” in order to act ritually. The application of this logic allows for the successful contemporary adaptation of these rites.

Are All Representations “Playing?”

In sum, “playing” means representing for the Evenki. As such, is it sufficient to simply represent in order to act ritually? We have seen that all representations are attributed a ritual efficiency—they bring to life what is represented (whether that be prosperity or misfortune). However, while all “play” is representation, not all representations are necessarily considered “play.” Indeed, we have seen that through representing something negative, like a tragic destiny, it is thought that this event will come to pass in life. It is, therefore, a representation that can affect the future via ritual efficiency, but it is not “play.” Accordingly, the definition of “play” would be “the representation of what society wishes in order to achieve it.” This explains why the notion of “play” is associated with ideas of life and prosperity in Tungus languages. Thus, I argue that the notion of “play” is neither entirely a substitute for the act of representing nor a substitute for the notion of ritual action because it corresponds only to one aspect. It is certainly not a replacement for the concept of “action” in general.

The Interrelations between “Play” and Other Types of (Ritual) Actions and the Individual (“Spirit Charge” and “Imprint”)

We have just seen that games and other forms of representation are only a part of the entirety of

ritual actions. What are the other means to act ritually (be it in a positive or negative manner)? As shown in my research on the concept of *onnir* (the “spirit charge” and the “imprint”), humans and some animals are assumed (still in 2020) to act via simple thoughts and nonintentional automated responses (which are controlled by the spirits of the *onnir*) without any recourse to representation (Lavrillier 2012a). *Onnir* is made up of various spirits. The difficulty, according to the Tungus, is to learn to manage the spirits, amongst other things, by “playing” or representing (which can be done either by shamans or ordinary people). As we saw at the beginning of this article, to “play” or to practice one’s own talents allows one to enrich and control the “spirit charge” and the “active imprint” to have a beneficial impact on life. However, it remains the case that *onnir* is still a spirit charge, both helpful and harmful, that gives the ability to act materially or ritually for prosperity or misfortune. Thus, the notion of “spirit charge” surpasses that of “play,” even if these two notions are closely linked to action and the power to create. Contrary to the notion of “play,” *onnir* refers to all actions, whether they be (to Western eyes) ritual or not, beneficial, or harmful (Table 2).

Let us now have a look at the other types of actions. We have seen that the “spirit charge” offers talents, some of which are also considered “play.” What are these talents, which of them are not “play,” and how does this clarify the notion of action? These talents concern everyday subsistence activities (e.g., hunting, herding, and fishing) and knowledge (e.g., about the landscape, flora, fauna, and education). All talents are considered to come from particular spirits, although informants do not give the names or details of these spirits (perhaps with the exception of the *belemgnur* spirit and hunting, as previously discussed). It seems that these talents, which refer to notions of action and knowledge, are not considered “play” because they are not representations; instead, they act directly upon life.

The Position of the Human Individual in (Ritual) Action: Between “Acting Agent” and “Patient”

We have seen that *onnir* is a concept that defines the specificity of individuals, as it is particular to each human and some animal beings and develops throughout their lives. However, the Tungus concepts of “spirit charge” and “imprint” are only partly equivalent to similar notions that anthropologists have studied in other societies. The *mana* of Melanesians or the *naualaku* of North American Kwakwaka’wakw (Kwakiutl) were respectively analyzed by Mauss (1991:101–115, 340–345) and

Boas. However, the Tungus *onnir* defines the individual (both human and some animal) as an “agent” (ritual or otherwise), in reference to the Gell’s (1998) concept of “agency,” and not as a person (Latin: *persona*),¹³ since the Tungus “spirit charge” is not determined either by birth date, astrology (like among the Nahuas or Tzotzil of Mexico [Descola 2005:298]), name (as among the Kwakwaka’wakw and Tlingit [Mauss 1991:340–344]), social position (like with the notion of *mana*, *naualaku* [Mauss 1991:340–345]) or the *kamo* of the Kanak of New Caledonia [Leenhardt 1947]), kinship (as with the Kwakwaka’wakw and the Samo of Burkina Fasso [Héritier 1977; Mauss 1991:345]), or the moral standing or personality of the “agent” (as in Ancient Greece and Rome and India [Mauss 1991:348–355]).

What are the criteria according to which *onnir* defines an individual as an “agent”? Let us now try to understand how the notion of “play” and the concept of *onnir* define ideas of agency and action. To this end, we will analyze the notions of “play,” “talents,” “spirit charge,” and “active imprint” through the prism of action, its modalities, its agents, and their intentionality. I will use “patient” here in a linguistic and philosophical sense: “A noun or noun phrase identifying one that is acted upon or undergoes an action”¹⁴ (Table 2).

“Plays” are modalities that act in a deferred way (i.e., they are not immediate) through representation to the benefit of society. The agents are humans, some animals (domestic and wild) (see Lavrillier 2012a), and some elements of the natural environment. Intentionality is attributed.

Consequently, regarding the discussion on representing, two hypotheses, which are not mutually exclusive, fit my materials. First, as advanced by Shirokogoroff (1935), representing is a way to communicate clearly to the spirits of what society wants. Second, my hypothesis is that representing generates a separate time-space/an interstice between reality and the desired reality, where a human or the natural environment can create during this deferred time. It could be understood as a special space for the individual to step in with the aim of switching from the position of “patient” to that of “active agent.” This could explain why the superposition of layers of representations is seen as more efficient: it makes this interstice for creation between reality and a future desired reality bigger. From another point of view, Huizinga (1938) referred to a fictive world created by games but with importance for social organization and culture.

Those *talents* that are not also considered “play” are modalities of action which act directly upon life for society’s prosperity. As a result, “play” and talents are two notions that

Table 2. The *onnir* scheme: (ritual) actions, modalities, effects, and human/spirits-agent/patient positions.

Emic concept	Action	Modalities, specific notions	Prosperity/Misfortune	Acting on life	Who is acting	Position of individual
ONNIR (Spirit charge and active imprint)	RITUAL ACTION	Representing “play” (including play talents)*	Prosperity	Deferred	Individual	Active agent
		Representing	Misfortune	Deferred	Spirits of <i>onnir</i>	Patient
		Gesture*	Prosperity	Deferred	Individual	Active agent
		Simple intentional thoughts	Misfortune/Prosperity	Deferred	Individual	Active agent
		Simple nonintentional thoughts	Misfortune/Prosperity	Deferred	Spirits of <i>onnir</i>	Patient
		Simple contact “Active imprint”	Misfortune	Deferred	Spirits of <i>onnir</i>	If patient
	Prosperity		Individual		If active agent	
	MATERIAL ACTION	Talents (other than “play”)*	Prosperity	Directly	Individual	Active agent
		Knowledge (fauna, flora, Education)*	Prosperity	Directly	Individual	Active agent

*Indicates the activities to practice in order to improve the mastery of the spirits of one’s own *onnir*.

conceptualize an intentional action performed for the wellbeing of society.

In contrast, the notions of “*spirit charge*” and “*imprint*” characterize the “agent” and refer to actions both beneficial and harmful. Intentionality is not always attributed to the agents. The “*spirit charge*” allows an individual to act both directly (through talents) and in a deferred manner (through “play” and nonintentional ritual acts). The “*spirit charge*” acts through simple contact with humans and animals, items, and places; with humans, it does so via “imprint.” The concept of “*spirit charge*” is particularly interesting for anthropology in so far as it refines the notion of “agent” by subdividing it. Indeed, it shows a worldview focused on the relationships between “agents” that are thought of as sometimes mastering the action, which I refer to as “acting agent,” and “patients” that sometimes undergo the action or are acted upon by the action. In effect, the “*spirit charge*” designates the spirits contained in each human and some animals, all of which live in a universe inhabited by many other spirits.

These spirits are *Buga* (as still considered in 2020), the spiritual entity managing the natural environment, spirits of the natural elements, the spirits of fires, the spirits of natural or inhabited places (including some ancestors’ spirits), the master spirits of animals (wild and domestic), the spirits of each animal individual, and the spirits of the taiga; *Bar-aliak*, the spirits giving luck for hunting; *Tangara/Seveki*, the spirit of the upper world, spirits contained in items (knives, needles, axes, rifles, instruments, kitchen utensils, and harnesses); and the spirits of the *onnir* of other peoples (author’s fieldwork material, Lavrillier 2005).¹⁵

If an individual controls the spirits of his/her *onnir*, the distribution of roles is as follows: the individual masters the spirits of his/her *onnir*, and then, mutually strengthened, they deal with the other spirits that inhabit the universe according to the will of the individual. Here, the latter occupies the position of “acting agent” with an intent supported by the spirit of his/her *onnir*. In contrast, when an individual does not master his/her *onnir*’s spirits, he/she is in the position of “patient”

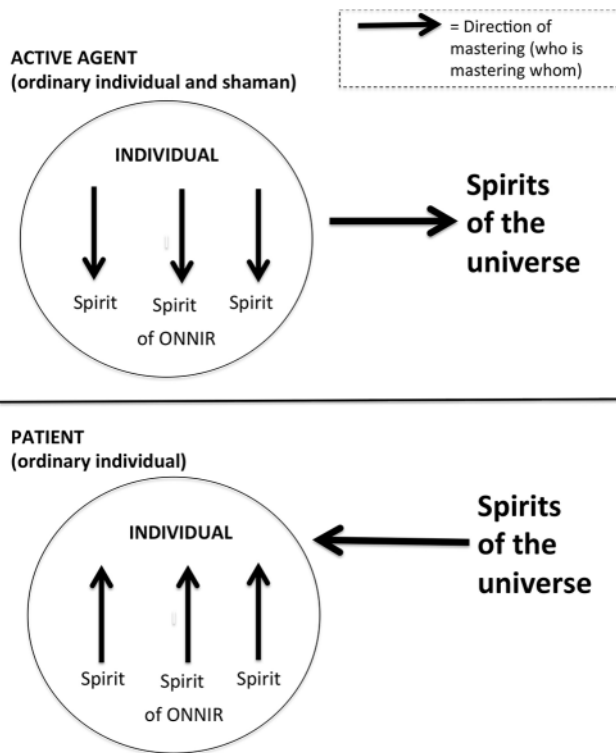


Figure 3. Relations of active agent/patient between the individual, the spirits of his/her *onnir*, and the spirits of the universe.

undergoing the actions of both his/her *onnir*'s spirits and the other spirits of the universe. His/her acts are thought to be nonintentional since they are commanded by the spirits.

The notion of “spirit charge” definitely expresses an “acting agent”-“patient” relationship between individuals, their *onnir*'s spirits, and the other spirits of the universe (Table 2 and Fig. 3).

Let us now study the repartition of the roles of “acting agents” and “patients” among humans and spirits in the case of “play.” In other words, does the individual “play” with the spirits, against the spirits, or play the spirits? In our semantic study of the Tungus notion of “play,” we saw that verbs from the root “play” are more often used without an object designating a person, and sometimes without any object at all. The individual does not play “with” somebody/something: he/she “plays” something or simply “plays.” As a result, Tungus “play” does not designate a playful relationship with the spirits. Actually, the derivatives of the root “to play/play” mostly refer to actions, their location, or tools, but practically never to partners in “play.” Therefore, in the case of “play,” there is a focus on the action itself and not on the agents or their position of “acting agent” or “patient.” For example, the root of “play” (*evi-/ike-*)

can designate the action of the shaman (one says “he plays”), but cannot designate the shaman himself (he is never called “the player”). The expression “to play with spirits” in the anthropological studies of play in Tungus societies seems to correspond less with the Evenki and Even systems of thought than a western notion of play, focused on ideas of playfulness or competitiveness, which imply the existence of a partner. Furthermore, in Tungus phraseology, human-spirit relationships are expressed by verbs meaning “to master, to manage, to deal, to obtain, to give, to refuse, to sham”: we do not find “to play with the spirits.” As shown by the present study, in the case of “play,” the humans are obtaining and maintaining their position in the role of “acting agent” by enriching and empowering their *onnir* through “playing.”

Conclusion

While the emic concept of *onnir* defines an “acting agent”-“patient” relationship between individuals, their “spirit charge,” and the spirits of the universe, the notion of “play” does not refer to a relation but a modality of action. Indeed, it is through the practice of “play” that an individual learns how to control his/her spirits and can move from the position of “patient” to that of “acting agent” or intentional agent.

Is it, therefore, not the case that there has been an *overestimation of the institutionalization or professionalization of the role of the shaman* in anthropological research on shamanism? In other words, perhaps there has been an overwhelming focus on the shaman and other ritual specialists to the detriment of examining the ability attributed to ordinary people and animals to act ritually (about the ritual efficiency attributed to animals, see Lavrillier 2012a).

This study suggests that a society can conceptualize agents in the domain of rituals alongside agents in everyday life since the “spirit charge” defines an individual’s capacity to act ritually and to perform a daily routine. At the same time, the concept maintains a clear distinction between, on the one hand, ordinary actions (i.e., talents) and ritual actions (i.e., “the plays,” nonintentional ritual actions) and, on the other, between intentional (“acting agent”) and nonintentional acts (“patient”). I refer here to the anthropological debates about the articulation of “ritual” and “action” demonstrated by Bell (2009:69–93) and about the concepts of “agency” and “intentionality” (Gell 1998 and Descola 2005; among others). Therefore, this analysis of an emic concept (*onnir*) reveals the existence of fundamental notions that constitute a complex whole at the heart of both Tungus shamanism and action in general.

One can note throughout this paper significant differences in ethnographies about the Tungus. The difficulty of comparing one's own material with previous ethnography is that the regions under study were isolated for a long time and have seldom been examined comparatively (like the Yenisei regions, for instance). In addition, the Evenki are scattered in small groups all over Siberia and northern China, moving thousands of kilometers in recent centuries: it is thus very difficult to find earlier ethnographic monographs on this specific group with which to compare notes. For instance, one of the closest studies is the work of Shirokogoroff (1919:124, 129–147; 1935:51–58, 120–151, 226–230, et passim; 1935), based mainly on his own ethnography gathered in 1912–1917 among the Tungus of the Transbaikalia, Barguzin, and Nerchinsk regions in Russia (relatively close to our regions) and also the Tungus and Manchu of Manchuria. He gives a list of different types of spirits and constituent parts of the “soul” for all the Manchu-Tungus peoples he studied, but most of them are too specific to groups influenced by Buddhism, like the *burkan* spirits (among the Buriats, a group neighboring some Evenki communities that are highly influenced by Buddhism). What he describes is entirely different from *onnir*.

From the 1990s, I have been reading the rich ethnography of the Tungus, but I have not found works where the Tungus describe “souls” (or constituent parts of the individual) in terms similar to that of *onnir*, for example, as a set of spirits potentially beneficial or benevolent that can be mastered by the practice of skills, talents, and playing and giving the power to (ritually) act. I also did not find Tungus ethnography describing, as in our case, human-spirit relationships as relations between ordinary individuals, the spirits of an individual, and external spirits (Fig. 3).

One of the differences is that in the ethnographic literature, most spirits are supposed to be external to or distant from the individual's body. For instance, while in my fieldwork, the spirits guiding the hunter to the game are within or close to the hunters' bodies; for Shirokogoroff, it is the spirits of the taiga (e.g., external spirits) who lead the hunter (Shirokogoroff [1919]2001:121b). Even the *arenki* he cites as the “soul” of a deceased person that did not reach the world of the dead and is thus supposed to be external (Shirokogoroff [1919]2001:130). In the case of *onnir*, the *aren(g)ki* are said to be likely to enter a human body, thus making the “spirit charge” heavier and more (beneficially or harmfully) powerful. There is also a difference in the way the spirits enter the body. Shirokogoroff (1935:188) writes that many proscscriptions have no relation to the spirits, while in my fieldwork, they are seen as one of the main reasons for spirits to enter or become attached to a body.

For Shirokogoroff (1919:121–127, 1939:189a–190a), the only spirits he mentions entering the body of a human are those that provoke illnesses or enter the bodies of shamans. Ethnographies of the Tungus (Anisimov, Vasilevich, Gurvich, Mazin already quoted, among many others) see human individuals as initially empty/void of spirits (having only the constituent parts of “soul”) as if an individual is initially isolated from the world of the spirits. In contrast, in my ethnography of *onnir*, an individual is initially a receptacle of spirits that will receive other spirits throughout their life. This point reminds us of the rich ethnography performed by Tatiana Bulgakova (2016:141, 307, 2018), which focuses on human and animal bodies as receptacles for spirits (about which I heard only in 2016). There is a common core with the Nanai concept of *oni*, a Nanai word that designates a spiritual (imaginary) receptacle into which the shaman installs the formerly lost soul of a treated patient. In Bulgakova's ethnography, both humans and animals can act ritually through simple thoughts, without any items or gestures.

On the questions of *human-spirit relations and who is mastering whom*, as most ethnography on Tungus attests (among others the ones quoted in this paper), Shirokogoroff (1935:124) identifies spirits controlling humans during hunting and the spirits of ancestors (beneficial or harmful), but they are outside the individual's body. He considers the shaman as the only human able to master and control the spirits, including the one present in his body (Shirokogoroff 1935:126, 160a, 163b, 207a). In our case, everyone is potentially able to master the spirits, including the ones inside one's own body. Nevertheless, while Shirokogoroff (1935:187) does not recognize the ability of ordinary people to completely master the spirits, he still writes, “spirits are so numerous near Tungus families that everyone must know at least the simplest methods of managing spirits and avoiding their harmful activity.”

Shirokogoroff (1935:142, 162a, 187a, 189–190, 202a–208, 226) writes about the relationships between humans and spirits, that spirits understand human speech, change their taste, get accustomed to new food and drink, and react to changes in the weather: my fieldwork also attests to this. However, he notes that the management of spirits is based on sacrifice, the installation of spirits in a place, sham, seduction, prayer, negotiation, frightening, and shamanic rituals. He also argues that the spirit-human relationship is based on domination, where either the spirits or the shaman can be the master. However, in the case of *onnir*, ordinary people and some animals can master the spirits by practicing daily tasks and talents.

This study shows the importance of focusing not only on the notion of the person but also that

Table 3. “Soul,” individual, and person of humans and animals.

	Soul(s)	Individual	Person
Elements	<i>Omi</i> (recyclable entity) <i>Hanian</i> (shadow) <i>Beien</i> (body)	<i>Onnir</i> (spirit charge and active imprint) = [ritual] power to act <i>Musun</i> (life force) <i>Sinken/Kutu</i> (luck)	Name, socioeconomic position/role, personality, astrology, moral standing, etc.
Distribution	Equally distributed between each human and members of some animal species	Unequally distributed/developed among humans and some animals	Unequally distributed/developed among humans and a few animals

of the individual, and the necessity of distinguishing between the two for both humans and animals (see also Lavrillier 2012a). Thus, “person” (originally meaning “mask” or “social role”) is strictly attached to humans and/or animals possessing a proper name, a social role/position, and a personality, a moral position in Mauss’s (1991:303–362) studies. This position is also shared by Simonova (2018), but this definition is not adopted by several circumpolar anthropological works. For instance, for Willerslev (2004, 2007), the possession of “souls” and the fact that animals are considered “animate” is enough among the Yukaghir to perceive animals as “persons” (*this author’s expression*), but these animals do not have either personal names or a social position. From another point of view, Ingold (1986:247) writes that the northern hunters do not consider an animal to be a “unique individual” or a “person”: they are seen through their species (master-spirit). In contrast, Willerslev (2004:634) argues that, for the Yukaghir, animals do “not simply derive their personhood from their master-spirit, but that both are persons in their own right.” Among the Tungus, the hunters also insist that both the animal individual and its master-spirit (in addition to other spirits) decide if the animal will be killed by the hunter (Lavrillier 2005:224, 232–238, 273–276). Similarly, we have seen from the ethnographic examples in this paper that the Tungus see humans and animals as “different individuals” determined by their own *onnir*—criteria of differentiation that is distinct from the one of their persons. Some domestic or wild animals can be considered as a person by the Tungus: they have personal names, a function/role in the human or animal society, or described personalities (Lavrillier 2012a).

Thus, the concept *onnir* highlights the importance to differentiate, among humans and animals, the notions of “individual” (e.g., variable power to [ritually] act, and relationships with spirits), “soul” (e.g., constituent parts distributed in equal quantity to each being of a specific human or animal species), and “person” in terms of socioeconomic and hierarchical positions, personality. Our

analysis shows that ritual power can be independent of the notion of person (Table 3).

There are two possible hypothesis for such a big difference between the ethnographies of the 1910–1980s and my ethnography of the 1990s–2010s regarding the implications of *onnir* for the perception of human-spirit relations and the power of ordinary peoples to master the spirits: 1) Ethnographers were dazzled by the overwhelming interest in shamans, who were at the center of interest in Europe for centuries after the discovery of these ritual specialists and practices (Hamayon 1990): the ritual power attributed to ordinary individuals was consequently underestimated or not given a sufficient amount of attention; 2) In Tungus societies themselves, the perception of the ability of ordinary peoples has been changing over recent decades due to the antireligious measures against shamanism and the decline of shamans. Thus, ordinary Tungus could perhaps progressively imagine themselves to be more powerful individuals. If so, however, why do most Tungus still not accept the neoshamans already active in other parts of Siberia (Buriatia, Tuva, Yakutia [Sakha])? Most Tungus I have interviewed say that they do not recognize these neoshamans as shamans and that “all Tungus are shamans somehow.” Perhaps the answer could be between these two possibilities.

To conclude, the emic concept *onnir* allows the “spirit-charged” human to be able to consider the conditions, which allows him or her to be an “active agent” who acts upon the world.

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Endnotes

1. All terms in italics are in the Evenki language, except when specified otherwise.
2. For an overview of Siberian history and anthropological research, see Vitebsky and Alekseyev (2015).
3. Their self-designation, *orochon/orach* (which comes from the ethnonym Orochen used in ethnographic literature), means, according to my Evenki and Even informants, “reindeer peoples,” from the word *oron*—“domestic reindeer.” This ethnonym is attested from the 17th century in the Amur and Okhotsk regions and is not always related to reindeer herders (Du Halde 1735:37; Stepanov 1959:196). Georgi was the first to introduce this term into Russian literature, while Orlov (1857:165–166) was the first to identify the group in greater depth (Vasilevich 1969:11–12). Mazin (1984) devoted his work to this group. There is a debate in the Tungus ethnography about the etymology of this ethnonym: some recognize the origin of the word from *oron*—“domestic reindeer”—while others do not, such as Maak (1859:165), who translates the term as “the inhabitants of the Oro River.” About the other Evenki ethnonyms such as Orochen, Murchen, Evenki, Khamnigan, and 13 others, see Lavrillier (2005:50–68), Patkanov (1906), Sirina (2012:43–57), and Vasilevich (1963, 1969). The Evenki (37,843,000 in Russia and 30,875 in the People’s Republic of China) and the Even (22,383 in Russia) speak Tungus-Manchu languages (Census of the Russian Federation 2010). In China, among the official category of the “Evenki ethnic minority,” there are around 300 reindeer herders left, while the other groups are farmers or people who practice the Mongol type of pastoralism. The official Chinese category of “Orqen ethnic minority” corresponds to a horse-herding group of hunters (Dumont 2018).
4. In contrast to “hot societies” (like current industrial societies), for whom games have lost their ritual meaning (Lévi-Strauss 1962:44).
5. According to Anisimov (1951b:111, 116) among the Yenisei Evenki, a *khanian* becomes an *omi* after the death of a person; a *khanian* is simultaneously 1) a shadow, 2) a “soul-shadow,” and 3) a spirit of ancestors and is the means through which the ancestor can incarnate into descendants.
6. Several sources consider the term *ichchi* to come from the Yakut language meaning “spirit” in a generic sense (as an example, *uot ichchite* in Yakut means “spirit of fire”), but Anisimov (1950:39) noted among the Yenisei Evenki the same term he identified as coming from the Tungus: *i-* “life” + COM – *chi*, meaning “what/who is owning life.”
7. For an overview of the history of the Tungus in Russia and China, see Lavrillier et al. (2018).
8. About the sacred domestic reindeer *onngun*, see Shirokogoroff (1935:197) and Vasilevich (1957).
9. About the role of the statuette among the Tungus, see Kubanova (1992).
10. On Evenki shamanic terminology, Vasilevich (1957:152–153, footnote 156) gives the names of costume elements, the details of the cut, and the terms and uses of their attributes. For the names of shamanic rituals, see Vasilevich (1969:244–245). Mazin (1984:113–200) also analyses and comments on costumes and the attributes of Evenki-Orochon shamans. In French, see also the rich works of Delaby (1976, 1978, 1980, 1998) and Hamayon (1990).
11. In this paper, the word “representation” is exclusively used with the meaning “to represent” or “to make a representation of something,” and not with the meaning “perception” (“having/perceiving/believing a representation of something”), like, for instance, in the anthropological expression “collective representation,” which refers to elements of the emic worldview, cosmogony, and so on.
12. The spirit *arenki* (*orinki*) is mentioned by Shirokogoroff (1935:138 et passim) among the Evenki groups of Kumarchen, Birarchen, and the Tungus of the Amur as “a spirit from the soul which did not reach the lower world after the death.” More recently, Brandisauskas (2018) writes: “the Evenki of the Zabaikal region experience the contemporary taiga as full of angry and bad beings (*arenki* singular; *arenkil* plural); spirits who are seen as very dangerous.” Ulturgasheva (2017; among others) has an extensive study showing how Russian prisoners from the local Gulag entered the category of Even malevolent spirits, *arinkael*.
13. See Mauss (1991:303–362) for the notion of person and Lévi-Strauss ([1962]1990:206–259) for the proper name, a function of which is to classify the individual in the realm of a social group.
14. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/patient> <accessed 15/02/2016>.
15. About master-spirits, see also Shirokogoroff (1935:126), among many others.

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