## Leon and Maria in the Altai By Bill Pfeiffer Originally printed in the journal Sacred Fire

We were high in the Altai Mountains of Siberia. The late summer darkness had just settled around our small campfire. The gentle gurgle and whoosh of the clearest river I'd ever seen could be heard in the background. Leon urged me, as he had so many other times, to pay attention to the fire. "The spirits of life and death are dancing there. They say all kinds of important things. When a burning branch or log changes position, there is a message. Listen and see."

Leon Secatero, 62, headman of the Canoncito band of Navajo, is no ordinary medicine man. In fact, he does not even use that term to describe himself. "Spiritual leader" is more to his liking, but all his friends and admirers acknowledge his healing powers and ability to commune with non-ordinary reality in a way that benefits the larger community. I was one of several translators between him and our Altai hosts.

We were part of a cultural exchange group sponsored by the Sacred Earth Network, an environmental non-profit dedicated to bringing together elders and shamans from Native Siberian and Native American tribes to share their traditions and, in the process, find mutual solidarity and support.

Most of us had been packed together in impossibly uncomfortable vehicles for a week. We had traveled all over the countryside visiting sacred sites, eating much and sleeping little—a deadly combination. I was swimming in fatigue. Looking at Leon you would not know he had slept less than I. This was our last opportunity to share on a deeper level before parting the next day, so everyone dug in to retrieve his or her extra psychic reserves.

A young Altai woman, Rollanda, came forward to ask Leon's advice on marital problems. She was ready to leave her alcoholic, philandering husband but did not know how. Although her husband had not been violent towards her, she was afraid of some kind of retaliation against her and her young son. She was visibly troubled and physically ill with a series of minor ailments.

Temporarily leaving the fire, we went inside a tent and Leon alternately spoke and sang gently to her. He was working simultaneously on the emotional, spiritual and mental levels. I noticed that she became more hopeful and energized as the session continued. He did not argue with her fears but outmaneuvered them by infusing in her a powerful sense of her ancestral lineage and how that is connected to a bigger, deeper web of relations stretching into the future. He just knew –and conveyed that knowing – that her son would grow up strong. She was going to live for a long time and help her people. She would pass this healing ceremony on to her tribe but she needed to develop strength and patience. He also told her that the solution to her problems with her husband would reveal itself. Leon confided in me later that he could see that her husband was already "fooling around." It was just a matter of time before he would leave.

Exiting into the blackness we could see Maria sitting by the fire. She is an exceptional shaman or *xahm* in the Altai language, coming to her occupation in a classic Siberian way. When Leon asked her how she had found her path, she said she either had to yield to her destiny, become seriously ill, or maybe even die. Plagued by continued illness until the age of 32, she met the renowned Altai shaman, Aleksei Kalkin. He said to her, "Your illness is a special sign. The coming times will be very difficult for the people of the Altai. Many will need your help as a healer. The more you help, the stronger you will become."

I was listening to this exchange since Chagat, a brilliant young Altai linguist, was translating. I decided the best strategy to deal with my fatigue was to be a "fly on the wall." Maybe I could even catch a little nap. Instead, as the fire danced, I perked up. This was not a usual conversation with lots of word slinging but almost a ritual with an unspoken protocol. Maria asked Leon how his work began.

Leon spoke half-jokingly about his amazing life. "I was working at Social Security. I had it all. The house was paid for. Steady money coming in with a retirement package. Then a bunch of tribal warriors and elders came to my office. They literally dragged me away, and told me it was time to work for my people. When I said no, they took me to a hogan and did not give me food or drink for four days. Finally I relented. I remembered that I was trained for my new job when I was young."

A log moved in the fire and an owl hooted. Leon became more serious. He talked for a long time about some of the events of the past week and the importance of our meeting at this crucial time in history. He summed up by saying: "It is no accident we are together. All the indigenous prophecies talk about a time when the five-fingered ones would be so caught in the illusion of separation that they would forget their Original Instructions. This forgetting has caused terrible suffering for everyone and everything. Now those who can remember what it was like to live on this Earth in a good way can make a clearing through the brush for the others to follow. It's all written in the petroglyphs. You are lucky to have so many on your cliff sides but you must protect them. They are a living language that can light the way ahead."

Maria looked up at the stars. She made a gesture, thanking the spirits above. "Leon, thank you for coming all this way. My star guides showed me you were coming. Maybe you know about the Ukok Princess? She was buried on the Ukok plateau, at the southern edge of the Altai Mountains, right at the border of Mongolia, about 2500 years ago. She was a shaman and warrior, buried with six of her horses. She also communicated with the stars. In 1994 a team of Russian archeologists found her perfectly preserved body in a tomb underneath the permafrost. She started coming to me in my dreams. I had to go visit her in Novosibirsk (a large Siberian city north of the Altai). She was in a vacuum chamber but her incredible tattoos were starting to wear off. More importantly, the spirits of the buried are sensitive. They need to be respected and left alone. The Princess told me, 'It is of crucial importance that I get reburied because I am losing my power and my power is part of the power of the Altai. You must figure out how to get me back.' I've done ceremony, prayed, talked to hundreds of people and collected thousands of signatures for the Princess's reburial but so far she is still in her metal and glass tomb.

Maria described the situation with the Princess for over an hour. She was calmly and powerfully upset. "Those of us still communicating with the Spirits and who love this land like our children need to stay connected. The monster called Progress is devouring the Earth. So far the Altai has not succumbed, but with the Princess not in her rightful place our defenses are weak."

She paused and looked at Arzhan, her younger friend and colleague. They travel to villages all over the Altai bringing the old ceremonies back to a people only ten years free of the Soviet straightjacket. Arzhan is an extremely talented *kaichi*, a kind of throat singing musical shaman. He looked back to see if she would continue. She did not. A temporary melancholy hung in the air.

So Arzhan began to play his topshur (a violin-sized string instrument) and I could hear his voice vibrating in different frequencies that rebounded soulfully from the trees. I slipped into that dreamtime space that overcomes me often in that mysterious, powerful land called Siberia. I was riding my horse along the Altai steppe. Galloping away I heard a twangy, otherworldly high-pitched sound in the distance. It was Maria back at the fire playing the Jew's harp. The rhythm of the stars kept time with the river. Looking over at Leon, I noticed both a tear and a smile.

Bill Pfeiffer organizes exchanges between traditional indigenous peoples, particularly those living in North America and Siberia. See www.sacredearthnetwork.org for more information.

Note: for more information on the Ukok Princess see "A Mummy Unearthed from the Pastures of Heaven," <u>National Geographic</u> (October 1994)