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CHAPTER 9

Repression of Shamans and Shamanism in Khabarovsk Krai. 1920s to the early 1950s

Tatiana Bulgakova & Olle Sundström

Shamanism is and will be an obstacle to socialist construction. The struggle against shamanism cannot and must not be conducted in isolation from the general construction. The struggle against shamanism is a part of the socialist construction itself.

Innokentii M. Suslov (1931: 128)

In the 10th congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1921, it was decided that the indigenous peoples of the North should be assisted, by the Party, to take the leap from a “primitive,” “pre-class” society to a socialist one. The economic, political, and cultural level of the indigenous societies was to be raised through the implementation of Soviet administration, law, and economics as well as through the development of schools, newspapers, and other cultural institutions. Not least, the spreading of modern medicine and information about the importance of hygiene was seen as imperative for improving living conditions in the Soviet North (Eidlitz Kuoljok 1985: 34–35; Slezkine 1994: 143–144). The aim of Soviet policies concerning the indigenous peoples of the North was to combat poverty and backwardness and what the communists saw as unjust social and economic relations in the traditional indigenous societies. The old society was to be replaced by a new and better one. As M. M. Balzer (2011: 45) puts it, in this revolutionary atmosphere shamans “as quintessential symbols of tradition and conservatism, became a focus of repression.” Together with the liquidation of economic exploitation, poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, poor hygiene, disease, patriarchy, and the abuse of women and children, shamanism should also be ousted. But how was this struggle against shamanism enacted in practice? How, and in what sense, did it turn into repression of so-called shamans and shamanism?¹

¹ The concepts “shaman” and “shamanism” are in this context Russian or Soviet concepts. “Shaman” and “shamanism” were (and still are, to a large extent) used to designate certain, in many respects different—but also, of course, in other ways similar—ritual functionaries. The world-views they acted within among the indigenous peoples of the

The official methods of combatting shamans and shamanism included propaganda, enlightenment, and modernisation in the form of anti-religious and pro-materialist agitation, schools, and the sending out of medical doctors and midwives to the northern fringes of the Union.² In addition, legal restrictions with the aim of marginalising the influence of purported shamans and some of their activities were established in the 1920s. There are, however, also examples of, and above all many narratives about, arrests and even executions of shamans in the 1930s. This has led some scholars to conclude that shamans, just like, for example, Russian Orthodox priests, were violently purged in the socialist reconstruction of the indigenous societies. For instance, P. Vitebsky claims that the Soviet communists

started to “civilize” the native peoples by building them permanent wooden villages and providing basic schooling and medical facilities, introducing State bureaucracy and teaching them Communist values. At the same time they imprisoned or killed their spiritual support, the shamans. (Vitebsky 2005: 35)³

On Nanai shamans, S. V. Bereznitskiy writes:

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Eurasian North also varied. It is important to be reminded about this particularly when speaking about the ritual functionaries among the indigenous peoples touched upon in this chapter because the very term *shaman* is borrowed into the Western academic vocabulary from the Manchu-Tungus languages, to which most indigenous languages in Khabarovsk krai belong. Thus, a Nanai *saman* was considered a “shaman” in the Soviet discourse under study (just as a *tadebya* among the Nenets was labelled a “shaman” in this discourse). The “shaman” in the Soviet mind should not, however, be confused with the *saman* in the traditional Nanai. The conceptions of a “shaman” among advocates of the Soviet ideology were very different from the conceptions of a *saman* among proponents of a traditional Nanai world-view. For a more exhaustive discussion on the concepts of “shaman” and “shamanism” in the Soviet and Russian context, see Sundström 2012; and Leete 2015.

² The most well-organized project for implementing socialism and further modernisation among the peoples of the Soviet North was the culture bases, run by *Komitet Severa*. On the culture bases and *Komitet Severa*, see Chapter 8 by Tolouze, Vallikivi & Leete in this volume.

³ In a popular science book, Vitebsky (1995: 136–137) claims that shamans “were often sentenced to exile and sometimes dropped out of helicopters and challenged to fly.” He also retells a story of a KGB officer in a remote Siberian area, who had the habit of visiting known shamans while pretending to be sick. The officer lured the shamans to a secluded place and shot them, taking their drums back home as trophies. These stories have the character of legends, and the author does not give any references as to their origins.

Nanai shamans, like other shamans of the indigenous peoples of the Lower Amur, were called the enemies of the people, and many of them were executed during the repressions in the 1930s. An entire era of Nanai spiritual life and Nanai world-view was liquidated together with them. (Berezniiskiy 2003: 215, *our translation*)

The Sakha scholar P. N. Il'yakhov-Khamsa (1995: 22) also contends that “mass arrests” of shamans took place and that Evenk shamans were arrested and shot without inquiry or trial, accused of being “deceivers of the people.” He exemplifies the purge of shamans with Konstantin I. Chirkov, who was disfranchised (Ru. *lishenets*) and arrested in February 1932, charged with being a kulak. Chirkov was accused of many things: of having traded with and helped the White Guard during the Civil War; of pursuing systematic anti-Soviet agitation against collectivisation and the fur companies; of using his position as shaman to influence the ignorant people; of spreading counter-revolutionary rumours about the imminent downfall of Soviet rule; and of persuading youngsters not to join the Komsomol. His livestock and hunting rifle were confiscated in the arrest. A troika from the security service sentenced him, according to the notorious paragraph 58-10 in the penal code, to six months of incarceration in the penitentiary of Yakutsk (Il'yakhov-Khamsa 1995: 22–23). Chirkov was released after four months because of the time he had served in prison before the trial (Vasil'eva 2000: 61).

Even if there are claims in previous research that shamans were subjected to “mass arrests” and executed after summary trials, and even if several concrete examples of both arrests and executions can be presented, there is still a lack of substantial evidence to estimate the scale of the repression of shamans. Therefore, it is still difficult to assess the character of the Soviet struggle against shamanism.

In this chapter, we will investigate how this rather complex struggle was carried out in the Soviet North in the 1920s up until the 1950s, with special focus on the Nanai and Ulchi⁴ shamans in what is today Khabarovsk krai in the Soviet Far East. We shall try to shed light on the situation using, together with previous research, the data that Tatiana Bulgakova has collected during her field work among the Nanai from the late 1980s to the present,⁵ as well as

⁴ The Nanai and the Ulchi (or Ulch) are two of the main indigenous peoples inhabiting the Lower Amur region. Together with the Udege, Negidal, Oroch, and Orochi, they belong to the southern branch of the Manchu-Tungus language group. The Nanai today constitute some 12,000 individuals and the Ulchi just over 3,000. They are closely related linguistically and culturally—traditionally subsisting on hunting and fishing.

⁵ For a complete list of Bulgakova's informants, see Bulgakova 2013: 239.

the material that Olle Sundström⁶ has obtained from the State archives in Khabarovsk and Nikolaevsk-on-Amur (2010–2012).

The 1920s. The Beginning of Sovietisation

As related above, Evenk shaman Konstantin Chirkov was accused of lining his own pockets by collaborating with the Whites during the Civil War. Even if putative shamans in the 1930s, in sweeping statements by the communists, were held to be reactionary elements that resisted socialist reconstructions, it is difficult to say whether this was the actual case with shamans or indigenous spiritual leaders in general. There are several examples of so-called shamans who in the 1920s both assisted the Red Army during the Civil War and who took leading positions in the new Soviet local administration. The Soviet North was vast, and conditions most likely varied between the different parts of the area. There is, for instance, evidence that the persecution of shamans was quite severe in Yakutia already during the Civil War. N. D. Vasil'eva (2000: 27–28) concludes that in the first years of the 1920s shamanic ritual objects were forcefully confiscated and destroyed, and shamans were “subjected to political discrimination and morally discredited.” Some shamans were also brought to public court trials. But there is no evidence of such severe punishments, such as executions, that Orthodox priests were subjected to at the time (see Pospelovsky 1988: 1–18; Corley [ed.] 1996: 14).

In the initial period of its formation, the Soviet regime strove to engage the indigenous peoples themselves in the construction of socialism and in the political struggle against the old society. Before the repression of shamans and shamanism began, not only some representatives of the indigenous population, but also some shamans were actively involved in the governing bodies. Those who had had leading positions among the indigenous groups before the Revolution were often elected as leaders in the newly invented native clan councils (Ru. *rodovyye sovety*), which were supposed to rule and judge partly according to local indigenous custom. For example, V. G. Bogoraz-Tan (1932: 142–143) described three shamans who became the leaders of the native council in the Chukchi village of Uelen. In some Yakut villages, shamans actively assisted the Red Army in establishing Soviet power and in suppressing counter-revolutionary actions (Vasil'eva 2000: 29). The

⁶ Sundström's research in Khabarovsk krai was made possible by a grant from the Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskapsrådet*) for the project “Repression of ‘shamans’ in the Soviet North from the late 1920s through the 1950s: an archival study,” as well as a travel grant from the Swedish Institute (*Svenska institutet*).

Yakut shaman Spiridon G. Gerasimov was elected in the 1920s as a member of the local council and the local Revolutionary Committee and as assessor of the village law court. In 1925–1930 he was recruited as a guide for a Red Army squad that was sent from Irkutsk to eliminate the remnants of bandit leaders in the Anabar and Bulun districts. Afterwards, Spiridon was granted honorary awards by the Red Army for his military prowess (Bravina & Illarionov 2008: 16).

There is also reason to believe that Party members at times turned to shamans for help. At all events, the Yakut provincial committee of the Bolshevik Party, in its plenary meeting on 27 May 1924, found it necessary to prohibit members of the Party and the Komsomol from consulting shamans for their needs (Il'yakhov-Khamsa 1995: 11).

The support of the new system consisted not only of material assistance and participation in military activities, but also by means of rituals. For example, among the Nanai the establishment of Soviet power in the beginning of the 1920s coincided with the time when a certain spirit, *Kheri mapa*, obtained great popularity. Nanai shamans are reported to have believed that the Revolution was undertaken according to the will of *Kheri mapa* and that the Red Army was triumphing over the Whites because of the supplication that Nanai partisans, on the Red side, directed towards the spirit (Koz'minskiy 1927: 49).

Perhaps these shamans, in collaborating with the communists, put their hopes in the revolutionaries and saw their chance to turn against the former Russian tsarist regime, with its Orthodox Church, that in its own way had combatted shamanism and traditionalism among Siberian natives. If so, these hopes were initially fulfilled, at least partially. The Soviet League of the Militant Atheists (Ru. *Soyuz voinstvuyushchikh bezbozhnikov*)—a voluntary organization with close ties to the Communist Party founded in 1925 with the purpose of propagating atheism and combatting religion (Peris 1998: 44–45)—concluded in 1929 that shamanism, and the indigenous, non-Christian, religions in general, had gained strength after the Revolution and the Civil War (Kosokov 1930: 4). The same was reported by *Komitet Severa* (Suslov 1931: 129).

L. P. Potapov (1991: 163) even presents a statistical survey conducted in 26 villages in the Altai-Sayan region in 1924 that, at least in this particular area, confirms the strengthening or renaissance of shamanism. The survey showed, among other things, that 45 out of the 71 confirmed shamans had started practicing their art less than 5 years earlier, and only 11 of them had been practicing shamans for more than 10 years. Only 14 of them were 50

years or older, while 30 of them were under the age of 35. Even if Potapov could not say how reliable the results of the survey were, he confirmed the tendencies from his own experiences during his fieldwork in the region from 1926 to 1932 that shamanism became more popular during the years after the Revolution, not least among young people.

One important reason for the upsurge of shamanism after the Revolution was probably that the antireligious measures in the beginning were directed towards the liquidation of mainly Russian Orthodox Christianity. Persecutions in northern areas in the beginning of the 1920s therefore first and foremost fell upon Orthodox missionaries and priests, as well as on those members of the indigenous peoples who were Christians. Because most northern indigenous peoples were officially and nominally Christians by the time of the Revolution (Balzer 2011: 39), the first anti-church measures had consequences also for them. In fact, regarding the Nanai in Khabarovsk krai, only 675 persons (13.5% of the entire Nanai population) considered themselves “heathens” according to the 1897 census (Patkanov 1906: 17). Y. V. Argutsyaeva confirmed that by 1916 the Christianisation of the Nanai was almost complete and that there were already several Nanai catechists and priests (Argutsyaeva 2009). Many of Bulgakova’s Nanai informants remembered that their grandparents went to church services, studied in parish schools, and used to have orthodox icons—items that, during the time of Soviet persecution, they had to hide away in the attic. Witnesses to the eradication of the church buildings recalled that the icons were removed, chopped into pieces, and burned and that the church bells were taken away to Khabarovsk, the main city along the Amur River.

The chapels had been one of the few Russian infrastructures on the northern frontier as the regime reached out to the perimeter of the empire to spread literacy, education, Russian culture, and Christianity. When the priests and other servants of the church were forced to withdraw, the new regime took over this infrastructure during the second half of the 1920s. Former church buildings were oftentimes transformed into Soviet schools or “clubs,” where meetings, concerts, and theatre plays dedicated to the new ideology and system were held. So-called Red tents or yurts (Ru. *Krasnye Chummy/Yurty*)—mobile units of the culture bases (see Chapter 8 in this volume)—turned former chapels into their headquarters. This was, for example, the case with the chapels in the Nanai villages of Nizhnye Khalby and Kondon (Putintseva 2010: 17, 56, 268). In Troytskiy, another Nanai village, the former chapel, turned into a school, was still standing until it burned down in the 1950s—an event that some Nanais interpreted as a sign that (the

Christian) God took it away (informants Olga Yegorovna and Kseniya Ivanovna).

Because the Orthodox Church, with the help of state authorities, earlier had persecuted shamans and shamanism (banning rituals and drums, destroying sacred places, and incarcerating shamans), the Bolshevik attack on the church made it possible for the indigenous religions to be practiced more openly and to gain ground in the 1920s (Potapov 1991: 91–92, 219–220). Andrei Znamenski concludes:

At first, communists and their sympathizers rarely crusaded against shamanism, preferring mainstream Christianity as a target for their attacks. In such a climate, practicing shamanists felt relaxed. Moreover, many earlier indigenous converts to Orthodox Christianity found it possible to return to their polytheistic spirituality. (Znamenski 2007: 328)

That the early anti-religious campaigns targeted mainly the Orthodox Church also meant that the measures that were elaborated to combat religion were designed after the structure of that church (and other institutionalized religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism). T. M. Mikhaylov (1979: 148) suggests that these measures did not apply in the case of shamanism because it had no organizations to infiltrate or dissolve, no temples to close or eradicate, no literature to censor or ban, and no set calendar of services to interfere with. C. Humphrey (1983: 416–417), who like Mikhaylov writes about the Buryat, adds that shamanism's lack of hierarchical structure, dogmatism, and strict ethical demands on its practitioners made it less of a competitor to the new communist regime, and thus initially less important to combat. As suggested by Balzer (2011: 39), yet another reason for the return to shamanic practices in the beginning of the Soviet era could have been that the turmoil and confusion—as well as famine—caused by the Revolution and the Civil War led to an increased demand on shamans:

Individual and community catharsis occurred in troubled times through séances, intense emotional dramas, usually involving trance (of the shaman and sometimes others) with poetic chants, drumming, dancing, and group participation. (Balzer 2011: 40)

Balzer's remark is important because it suggests that the shamanism of the 1920s was perhaps not so much a "renaissance"—in the sense of an upsurge of lingering ancient ideas and ritual practices—as it was a response to a particular historical and social situation.

The 1930s. Cultural Revolution and Collectivization

The hopes that the various indigenous communities in the North could administrate and rule themselves both according to their own manners and customs as well as according to the Soviet system came to a close by the end of the 1920s, partly, it seems, because shamans and shamanism in some cases had gotten the upper hand among the natives. From the Soviet point of view, the problem with shamanism was both social and ideological—that it helped sustain the old social structures and that it was “superstitious.” I. M. Suslov, an ethnographer specializing in shamanism among the Evenks and vice-chairman of the *Komitet Severa*—and thus one of the leading ideologues regarding the policy on the peoples of the North around 1930—argued that the recent resurgence of shamanism was a consequence of the will of the “indigenous kulaks” and “clan aristocracies” to safeguard their own authority and economic power, which they felt were threatened after the Revolution. Therefore they supported the shamans, whom they saw as the guardians of tradition (Suslov 1931: 129–130).

There are also concrete examples of so-called shamans taking control over the governing of an area in opposition to the new Soviet rule. In the Karaga district of Kamchatka, a certain Savva, allegedly a shaman and leader of an indigenous Itelmen organization with several shamans, managed to stay in unofficial control of the people during the entire 1920s, despite the fact that Soviet administrative rule was established in the area already in 1923. He repudiated Soviet schools, Russian food and clothes, and the new bathhouses, claiming that they were detrimental to the people. However, in 1930–1931 Savva was ousted by the new executive committee in the Karaga district when the Koryak National Okrug was formed (Stebnitskiy 2000: 159).

Among communists, it was agreed that shamanism was “superstitious” and anti-scientific, and thus did not belong in a future socialist or communist society. To what degree it was also “religious” or a “religion” was a slightly different matter. In his address at the plenary meeting of the Yakut provincial committee of the Bolshevik Party in May 1924, a certain I. Vinokurov contended that “the basis of the origin of shamanism is found in primitive animism, i.e. the attribution of spirits to the forces of nature” and that “in its subsequent development shamanism encountered Christianity and did not develop into a religious system.” Therefore, according to Vinokurov, shamanism in general is a “cult” that has degenerated and taken the forms of “quackery” or “sorcery” (Ru. *znakharstvo*). In accordance with the directives of the central Soviet policy on the authorities’ “relation to religious and other

cults,” the presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Yakut ASSR decided in November 1924:

1. to consider shamanism a particularly harmful phenomenon that hampers the cultural-national awakening as well as the political development of the peoples in the Yakut ASSR;
2. that the struggle against shamanism should be carried out by means of enlightenment, agitation and propaganda;
3. that certain shamanic activities should fall within the penal code and that shamans should be prosecuted for those activities; and
4. to suggest to the NKVD of the Yakut ASSR and the health authorities that they initiate a plan for prohibiting medicaments and medical treatments that are not approved by medical science (see Il'yakhov-Khamsa 1995: 10–12).

The decisions of the committee were, in essence, a campaign against quackery, even if they also contained important aspects of what was conceptualized by the communists as raising the “cultural,” “national” (in the sense “ethnic”), and “political” level of awareness among the natives. But it was not a campaign against shamanism as a “religion.”

Around the turn of the 1930s, the rhetoric against shamans and shamanism changed towards categorizing them together with other religious functionaries and religions. In the original constitution of 1918, “monks and spiritual servants of churches and religious cults” (Ru. *monakhi i dukhovnye sluzhiteli tserkvey i religioznykh kul'tov*) had been disfranchised and prohibited from being elected to decision-making bodies (Ru. *sovety*).⁷ Because shamans were not generally viewed as the equivalents of monks and priests—and because shamanism was not generally considered a *religious* cult—they were generally not denied these civic rights in the early 1920s and could, apparently, be elected to local councils. However, in November 1926, prior to the re-elections to local councils in the Soviet North, an instruction from the Central Committee was issued. In that instruction, the “servants of religious cults” were expressly specified as “monks, novices, deacons, psalmers, mullahs, rabbis, lamas, shamans, pastors [...] and all those who fulfil similar

⁷ Konstitutsiya (Osnovnoy Zakon) Rossiyskoy Sotsialisticheskoy Federativnoy Sovetskoy Respubliki (prinyata 5 Vserossiyskim S'ezdom Sovetov v zasedanii ot 10 iyulya 1918 g.; http://constitution.garant.ru/history/ussr-rsfsr/1918/chapter/13/#block_4600; accessed on 14 September 2016.

functions.” Shamans were thus, together with their family members, denied the right to vote or be elected (Pospelovsky 1987: 137). The disfranchised were also locked out from participation in kolkhozes and cooperatives, were not allocated hunting or fishing grounds, nor land for farming, and their belongings were expropriated. Their children were not allowed to enter boarding schools or higher education (Il'yakhov-Khamsa 1995: 19).

With the launching of the Cultural Revolution by the Stalin regime in the spring of 1928, the class struggle was intensified and all “exploiters” were to be liquidated. In the crucial 6th plenary meeting of the *Komitet Severa* in March 1929, the committee was severely criticized by high-ranking Party officials for not having used a class perspective in their work among the indigenous peoples of the North. The gist of the critique was that the committee had not been able to identify “exploiters” because it regarded northern indigenous communities as “primitive communists” lacking social classes. This had impeded socialist reconstruction in the North. In his concluding speech at the meeting, the chairman of the *Komitet Severa*, Petr Smidovich, admitted that the committee had not implemented serious class struggle. But he reassured that now, when the Soviet governmental and administrative bodies were in place, the work with improving the position of women and disfranchising kulaks and shamans—the latter now being seen as the equivalent of priests—among the natives would be strengthened (Slezkine 1994: 191–192, 226–227).

As a response to the demands from the Party, ethnographers engaged in the League of the Militant Atheists and the *Komitet Severa* started emphasizing that shamanism should be treated as religion. In a pamphlet issued by the League’s publishing house *Bezbozhnik* [‘the Atheist’] in 1930, I. Kosokov argued against those who denied that shamanism was a religion:

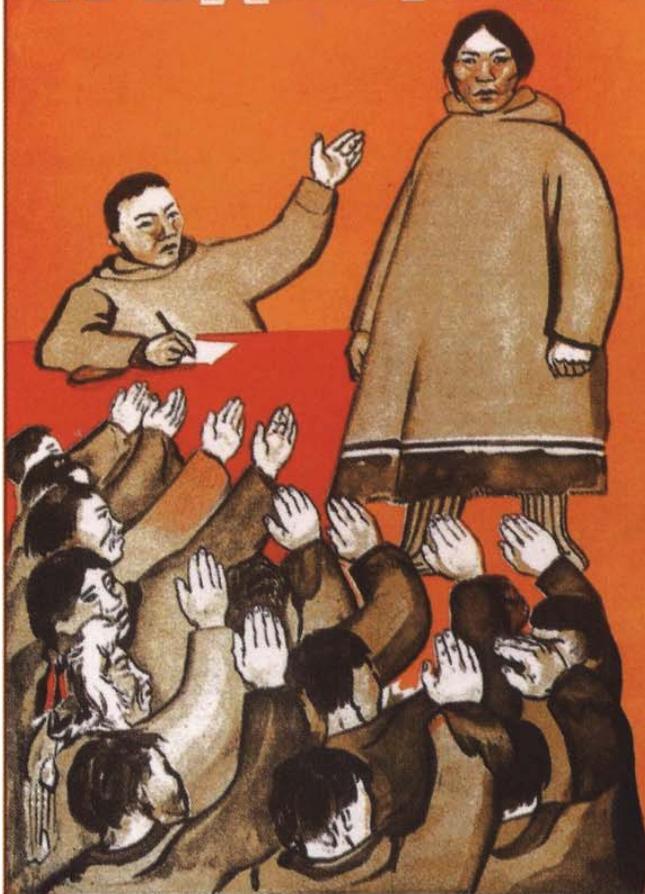
In our days, to deny shamanism the character of religion, means denying the necessity of a resolute struggle against shamanism, which serves as a major obstacle to the construction of socialism among the most backward peoples of the Soviet Union, and which serves as a direct instrument for the kulaks in their exploitation of the working masses among the indigenous peoples of Siberia. (Kosokov 1930: 6, *our translation*)

Illustration 14 (next page): ‘Elect workers to the indigenous council. Don’t let the shaman and the kulak in.’ Soviet propaganda poster by Georgiy Khoroshevskiy, 1931.

ВЫБИРАЙ

**В ТУЗЕМНЫЙ
ТРУДАЩИХСЯ**

СОВЕТ



**НЕ
ПУСКАЙ
ШАМАНА
И КУЛАКА**



Bogoraz-Tan, a prominent member of the *Komitet Severa*, also emphasized the importance of including the struggle against shamanism in the general fight against religion:

For the native class-elite and for their ideological spokesmen now comes the time of liquidation. [---] Now neither the shaman nor the priest has a place in the socialist society, and they will both perish entirely. [---] Provided that the struggle against the shaman can and should be linked to the struggle against the kulaks, the struggle against the shamanic religion, i.e. against shamanic animism, must be tightly linked to the struggle against Orthodoxy.

[---]

Icons must constantly be placed on par with indigenous idols, priestly rituals with shamanic rituals, and Christ himself, his death and resurrection placed on par with [...] the mysteries of the bear cult, which in the same way includes the death and resurrection of the powerful animal—god. (Bogoraz-Tan 1932: 157, *our translation*)

As seen above, the concept of “shaman” was tied to the most intimidating catchword of the time, *kulak*, sometimes conflated in the accusation *kulak-shaman*. Even if shamans were not themselves rich and wealthy, they were perceived as the ideological supporters of the kulaks and thus in essence “exploiters.” In a telling formulation in a document from the Yamal-Nenets Party Committee, the category “kulak” is defined as “big reindeer-owners, former heirs of the fishing industry, princes, elders and shamans” (*Sud'by narodov Ob'-Irtys'nskogo Severa* 1994: 242).

Even if the idea of shamanism as “religion” or “religious” was not new—it had existed before the Revolution as well⁸—the new emphasis on shamanism as the indigenous religion of the northern peoples, instead of as mere “superstition” and “quackery,” meant two important changes in the Soviet attitude towards it. First it made the so-called struggle against shamanism a part of the general struggle against religion. Second it meant that shamanism was seen as a whole system of ideas and practices that people lived within and according to. Thus, it could not be overcome by merely confiscating drums and prohibiting rituals and certain healing practices.

⁸ Opinions on the question of whether shamanism was a religion or not diverged also among nineteenth-century ethnographers and Orthodox missionaries; for examples, see Znamenski 2003: 43–130.

In a 1931 publication addressed to Party workers, anti-religious activists, indigenous students, and others who were involved in the reconstruction of the indigenous cultures and societies in the North, I. M. Suslov criticized the measures that had, up until then, been taken towards shamans. He described trying to coerce shamans to cease their activities by forcing them to hand over their drums and other ritual regalia as absurd, shallow, and counter-productive because these measures had only forced the shamans underground and caused opposition among the natives towards the reconstructions. Suslov also quoted a resolution of the 12th Party congress (in 1923) where such methods were condemned:

Deliberately brutal methods, [and] insults to objects of belief and cult, instead of a serious analysis and explanation, does not hasten the liberation of the working masses from religious prejudices, but obstructs it.

To yield to “spontaneity” could easily lead to “exaggerations” (Ru. *peregiby*), Suslov argued. Instead, what he was proposing was intensified education, enlightenment, and the creation of indigenous cadres of atheist propagandists who could agitate for the materialist world-view. Particular emphasis should be laid on the engagement of indigenous women and youngsters—the women because they were the most oppressed among the indigenous peoples and the young because they were the future and also the easiest to (re-)educate (Suslov 1931: 128 ff.). At the institutes for higher learning, founded in the 1920s to foster an intelligentsia of the indigenous peoples of the North—the Institute for the Peoples of the North in Leningrad, and the institutes of technology for indigenous peoples in Irkutsk, Khabarovsk, and Tomsk—cells of the League of Militant Atheists should be created. All education at these institutes should be imbued with an anti-religious, and particularly anti-shamanic, content, as Suslov suggested: “Not one single student should be allowed to finish these institutions of learning without having received the necessary atheistic tempering” (Suslov 1931: 138, 147–148).

Bogoraz-Tan, in an article in *Komitet Severa*’s journal *Sovetskiy Sever* [‘The Soviet North’], thought it important to distinguish between the “religious ideology” and the “religious organization.” Among the peoples of the North, the religious ideology was animism, and the religious organization was shamanism. He found that the measures Suslov suggested were proper for the fight against shamanism because religious organizations are always counter-revolutionary and an impediment to development and progress. But in order to combat animism, a total reconstruction of the communities in the North would be necessary—the local social structures must be demolished

and the traditional means of production must be replaced by new ones. What Bogoraz-Tan was suggesting was in essence the industrialisation of the North as a means to come to terms with the indigenous religion (Bogoraz-Tan 1932: 144, 148).

The Fight against Shamanism in Khabarovsk Krai

Kosokov's, Suslov's, and Bogoraz-Tan's articles were published in the organs of the most important actors concerning the policy toward shamanism of the time, *Komitet Severa* and the League of the Militant Atheists. Together with a few other similar texts, they constitute the closest we get to an official blueprint for the Soviet struggle against shamanism. In these articles, the analysis was made, the conclusions were drawn, and the guidelines were set (for a further discussion on these articles, see Sundström 2007: 146–164). But how was this plan carried out in practice in the Khabarovsk krai? What happened on the ground in indigenous villages and settlements?

It is not very easy to paint a coherent picture of what happened, but a few general traits can be discerned. T. V. Mel'nikova (2006: 73, 76) has suggested four phases in the repression of shamanism during the Soviet era in what is present-day Khabarovsk krai:

1. In the first phase, from the middle of the 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s, shamans were disfranchised together with, for example, Orthodox priests. This meant that they were not allowed to vote or to be elected to local councils, should not be members of the newly founded kolkhozes, and were sometimes exiled from the region where they lived.
2. During the second phase, taking place in the middle of the 1930s, shamanic equipment and ritual attributes were forcibly confiscated and destroyed, and many members of kolkhozes were expelled after being accused of practicing shamanism.
3. The third phase, at the end of the 1930s, was a time characterised by arrests. However, Mel'nikova notes that, so far, no mass arrests of shamans during this period have been confirmed in research.
4. The last phase stretches from the end of the Second World War until the downfall of the Soviet Union. Mel'nikova argues that, on paper, the ban on shamanic activities remained unchanged between 1945 and the 1980s, but that the observance of the ban gradually decreased. In the 1960s, there were still occasional instances of administrative measures taken against

shamans, but from the 1970s onwards the struggle against shamanism was reduced to mere formal atheist propaganda.

This approximate periodisation can, at least partly, be confirmed by our sources.

Disfranchisement of Shamans

Already in 1926 there is evidence of people being disfranchised on the grounds that they were shamans. But the process of disfranchisement seems to have been conducted at a varying pace in different villages during the following years up until 1934.

Judging from the documents in which shamans are listed with names and ages, the average age of a shaman being denied her or his civic rights in Khabarovsk krai was between 48 and 49 years (the youngest being 32 years old and the oldest 72).⁹ In Mel'nikova's (2006: 73) account of disfranchised shamans in the Ulchsky-Negidalsky district in 1932, approximately the same age distribution is shown. One conclusion to be drawn from this information is that disfranchised shamans belonged to the middle aged and fairly old segment of the population, rather than the younger generation born after the turn of the century. It is interesting to note that among the named shamans there are as many women as men. This is not in accordance with previous suggestions in research that it was mainly male shamans that were subjected to repressive measures in the Soviet North (Balzer 1999: 94). For this reason, perhaps there are other explanations to the observed "feminisation" of Siberian shamanism in the twentieth century, as Znamenski (2007: 344) has indicated. Znamenski has identified the same process of feminisation of similar ritual practices in both Japan and Korea in connection with modernisation during the same time period. Moreover, whether male or female shamans among a certain ethnic group were targeted was, most likely, also dependent on whether the high profile ritual functionaries (the "shamans") were male or female among that particular group. Among the Tungus-speaking peoples in Khabarovsk krai, both men and women could be shamans, whereas among, for example, the Samoyedic-speaking peoples on the far northern tundras, so-called shamans were almost exclusively men.

One of the shamans recorded in the archives was the 69-year-old Podi (or Podya) Tumali, who, together with his wife Mariya, was disfranchised in 1926

⁹ GAKhK, f. 1213, op. 1, d. 106, l. 84; GAKhK, f. 1213, op. 1, d. 106, l. 144; GAKhK, f. 1817, op.1, d. 39, l. 29; GAKhK, f. r3372, op. 1, no. 1, l. 4, 103; MANAR, f. 303, op. 1, d. 53, l. 12.

by the local council in the village of Mongol in the Ulchsky district. Even though the couple were denied their civic rights, they apparently continued to take part in the work at the kolkhoz, and from 1933 there are reports of them both working diligently (fishing) for the kolkhoz and not agitating against or opposing the socialist reconstruction.¹⁰ These reports imply that Podi Tumali had support among at least some members of the kolkhoz. However, it seems that the younger generation among the indigenous peoples sided with the Soviet order and turned against the shamans and the traditionalists. In some cases, children of shamans tried to persuade their parents, verbally or with forcible means, to abandon shamanism because they were ashamed. For example, Podi Tumali's son, Pavel, told Mel'nikova in 1992 how he had taken his father's shamanic belt—a part of an Amur shaman's equipment almost as essential as the drum—and thrown it in the river with the words: "Don't disgrace us!" (Mel'nikova 2006: 74–76).

There are other examples that disfranchised shamans had the support of many of their fellow natives. In documents from the regional committee of the Communist Party in the Lower Amur region, as well as from the executive committee in the Ulchsky district in 1935 and 1936, it is stated that 38 shamans were disfranchised in the entire district. But almost all of these 38 were still members of kolkhozes. In 1934, one village council even petitioned that their shamans should be rehabilitated on the grounds that they were "good people," did not perform any "hostile work" against the kolkhoz, and were *udarniki* ('shockworkers,' i.e. exemplary and unusually productive workers). Without waiting for the decision of the district executive committee, the village council had arbitrarily torn up the list of the disfranchised and rehabilitated them. The regional Party committee was very concerned about this because they found that the shamans and kulaks that were still members of kolkhozes used their influence to sabotage the reconstruction work. Therefore, they claimed, production quotas of fish and fur (the main products of these kolkhozes) were not fulfilled, and the emancipation of women was impeded. In general though, the committee noted that the average health conditions among the indigenous peoples had improved considerably since 1929, when the first medical centres (Ru. *medpunkty*) were established in the district—the number of healthy Ulchi¹¹ had, according to their

¹⁰ GAKhK, f. r3372, op. 1, no. 1, l. 122, 123, 124, 126.

¹¹ According to the regional Party committee, there were 1,786 Ulchi living in the Ulchsky district in 1936.

information, risen from 53 per cent in 1932 to 75 per cent in 1935. The conclusion was that this was because the monopoly of shamans and “quacks” on health care had been broken and that the natives now instead mostly turned to medical doctors. But the committee still complained that the active fight against shamans was too weak. The judicial authorities in the district did not fulfil their duties in combatting “vestiges of the past” and the influence of shamans, and no Ulchi shaman had ever been brought to court. One Party delegate contended that the attorney’s office did not even know about shamans, and therefore was incapable of bringing them to justice.¹²

The diaries of Aleksandra P. Putintseva give on-the-spot accounts of the struggle against shamanism in the Nanai villages of the Nizhne-Tambovsk district between 1929 and 1932 (see Putintseva 2010; Sundström 2011). Putintseva, a Russian woman in her late twenties, was the head of a Red yurt with the mission to bring healthcare and enlightenment to the indigenous peoples in the area. In concrete terms, the work consisted of carrying out vaccination programs and teaching basic personal hygiene, reading, writing, arithmetic, etc. But it also consisted of teaching the new Soviet ideology, ethics, and law—particularly regarding the rights of women and children in what seems to have been a strongly patriarchal and gerontocratic Nanai society. In Putintseva’s lectures, wall magazines, theatre plays, and individual conversations with the villagers, she agitated against what she saw as the patriarchalism and superstitions of the traditional Nanai way of life. The topics of the study groups that she, together with the Red yurt’s *politprosvet-chik* [‘political educator’], conducted are telling examples of the essence of the yurt’s work: “On the rearing of children (why one should not give [corporal] punishment to children),” “The rights of women according to Soviet law,” “On women’s diseases,” “First aid to infants,” “Tending toddlers,” “Masturbation among children and how to come to terms with it,” “Eczema,” “Medical self-treatment,” “On clean air and the role of sunlight,” and “Organizing a kolkhoz.”

As the chair of the election committee for the elections to one of the village councils, Putintseva sorted out the kulaks and shamans that were to be prohibited from voting and from being elected. For example, out of 15 disfranchised for the elections in the village Kondon, with some 300 inhabitants, 3 were defined as shamans (Putintseva 2010: 109). But still the “clan elite” supported the disfranchised shamans, she reported. During a meeting, one member of the village council, Luka Samar (noted as the “brother of a

¹² GAKhK, f. 1213, op. 1, no. 120, l. 76–172.

shaman” by Putintseva), expressed that he did not think that shamans could be blamed for anything. It was the people who sought their help, and if no one would consult them, they would not shamanise at all. In that sense, they were just like the Russian doctors (Putintseva 2010: 49, 268). Others complained about the doctor, or the “Russian Devil” as they called him, saying that he was no better than a shaman—neither of them could help the newborn babies who died (during one winter seven infants died in one of the villages) (Putintseva 2010: 95–96).

Some of the disfranchised shamans petitioned in writing to be given back their civic rights if they gave up shamanism, and they handed over their drums and other shamanic equipment to the village council.¹³ If they kept away from shamanism for three years, they would be rehabilitated. This was, for example, the case with the shamans Bali Digor and Bargina Kile. However, another shaman asked Putintseva to tear up his submitted petition because he had been sick ever since he had quit shamanising and therefore needed to pick up his ritual practice again (Putintseva 2010: 101–103, 112, 175, 210). This shaman’s request can be explained by the notion among the Nanai that a shaman could not turn away from her or his helping spirits by choice. If not attended to properly by the shaman, the spirits would take revenge, which could lead to sickness and eventually the death of the shaman. According to Bulgakova’s informants, this was the fate of several Nanai shamans during the Soviet anti-shamanic campaign (see further Bulgakova 2013: 213).

Makar, yet another Nanai shaman, had stopped shamanising in the village where the Red yurt was present, but he had apparently continued practicing his art in another village. One man confronted Putintseva and asked her why she did not arrest Makar when she knew that he was still an active shaman (Putintseva 2010: 42, 48). This example shows that at least some Nanai expected that Putintseva and the Red yurt could arrest shamans in 1930. But this was obviously not something Putintseva saw as a possibility. In the local law courts that she arranged—mostly for didactic purposes to teach the natives the new judicial system under Soviet rule—no one was prosecuted for shamanic activities. Only one shaman, Aleksandr M. Digor, was put on trial. However, he was not charged for practicing shamanism, but for exchanging his grown up daughters for a second wife. For this offence he was sentenced to 8 months of forced labour (Putintseva 2010: 194).

¹³ In other instances, the equipment could be handed over to the executive committee of the district, see Mel’nikova 2006: 73.

In one of her final reports on the doings of the Red yurt, Putintseva noted that the shamans and “class enemies” constantly tried to obstruct the yurt’s work by “stirring enmity among nationalities,” depicting all the Soviet enlightenment measures and reforms as Russification, and continually trying to protect the Nanai traditions. She concluded, however, that if the influence of the shamans among the Nanai was evident when the yurt arrived, the shamans’ authority was drastically diminishing. After some successful cures by the medical doctor, the Nanai had started believing in Russian medicine, and the Nanai themselves were beginning to write anti-shamanic slogans on the wall magazines (Putintseva 2010: 269). Soviet ethnographers of the 1930s reported the same decline of the Nanai religion and that the natives were turning away from their shamans. These scholars attributed this decline to Soviet modernisation and the atheist enlightenment (or propaganda, if you will). Thus, one V. Lidin enthusiastically reported that in the home of a Nanai hunter, where he had expected to see the hunter’s *sevens* (three dimensional images of guardian spirits in wood or skin), instead a radio hung. In newspaper style, D. K. Zelenin wrote that “shamans and quacks have forever been banished; their place has been taken by Soviet teachers, doctors and paramedics, who have come from the midst of the indigenous working population” (Zelenin 1938: 38, 46).

Confiscation and Destruction of Shamanic Equipment

Besides notes on disfranchised shamans handing over their drums and other equipment in order to be rehabilitated, there are only occasional reports in the archives on the confiscation and destruction of ritual objects connected to shamanism in the 1930s in Khabarovsk krai, and only a few of these objects ended up in museum collections (cf. Mel’nikova 2006: 74). However, in the oral history of the Nanai and Ulchi, collected from the 1980s and onwards, there are plenty of memories of these events. The campaigns directed towards the material manifestations of shamanism seem to have affected most villages in the area. Bulgakova’s informants remember well how the Komsomol organized raids, going from house to house in the villages collecting shamanic equipment—drums, belts (with bells), *sevens*, shamans’ robes, *mios* (a *mio* is a particular kind of cloth with names of deities written on it), etc. According to informant Konstantin M. Bel’dy (b. 1930), the Komsomol gathered once in the Ulchi village of Ukhta on the order of the regional Party committee of the Ulchsky district. The crowd searched through every attic for *sevens*, and they even collected *sevens* from the tombs of deceased shamans. Then they continued to the next villages of Nizhnyy Gavan and



Illustration 15 (this spread): Images of *sevens*, kept at the museum in the village Troytskiy,



Khabarovsk krai. Photos: Tatiana Bulgakova.

Bogorodskoe. Afterwards, the expropriated *sevens* were publicly burned in a large bonfire (much the same way icons had been burned in the campaigns against Christianity). Another informant recalled a similar event taking place in the village of Dzhuen where not only *sevens*, but also shamanic drums and belts, were expropriated, leaving only the small metal images of *sevens* that hung around people's necks. In the Nanai village of Naykhin, *toros* (wooden poles with carved images of spirits) were set on fire, and in Dokiada a *saola* was destroyed by anti-shamanic zealots. A *saola* is a clay vessel in which the helping spirits of a deceased shaman are believed to be contained. To this particular *saola*, Nanai from all over the region used to come and sacrifice pigs. The informant Aleksandr S. Khodzher (1914–2000) asserted that it was the executive committee of the Nanaysky district that had instigated the eradication of the object (see further Bulgakova 2013: 195–197; cf. Mel'nikova 2006: 76).



Illustration 16: A *saola* of the Zaksor clan, supposed to contain the helping spirits of a female shaman, who died in the 1950s. In front of the *saola* are offerings of vodka and candy. Daerga village, Khabarovsk krai, 1994. Photo: Tatiana Bulgakova.

In Dzhari, another Nanai village, a similar *saola* was destroyed. However, the spirits residing in this *saola* did not go away because of that, according to the village shamans. Therefore a new *saola* was made for the spirits, but was kept secret from the anti-shamanic activists. Judging from the interviews Bulgakova made with Nanai informants—preserving either their own recollections of the 1930s or stories from their parents’ generation—it was common practice to secretly restore or exchange expropriated or destroyed religious objects, as well as to hide away the religious items that were left. In that way shamanism continued to be practiced, in private or concealed from those who combatted religion—just as the 12th Party congress in 1923 and Suslov in 1931 had warned. People hid *sevens*, *mios*, and robes in their homes (sometimes even burying them in the garden), and they exchanged the banned drums for ordinary pot lids (cf. Smoljak [1991] 1998: 227; for similar practices among other Siberian peoples, see Balzer 1995: 26). “If you happened to have a drum,” informant Ivan T. Bel’dy (1916–2001) said, “you would be arrested.” Therefore, “people practiced shamanism at night, clanging the pot lids” (Bulgakova 2013: 196–197).

Arrests of Shamans

Ivan T. Bel’dy testified that practicing shamanism could result in being arrested. As we have seen above, this was seen as a possibility already during the first half of the 1930s, both among members of indigenous peoples and among Party officials. However, these assertions were made together with complaints that no one was actually arrested or brought to trial.

In December 1936, article 135 on disfranchisement of certain citizens was changed in the new Soviet constitution on the suggestion of Stalin himself. The new article read that every Soviet citizen that had reached the age of 18 had the right to vote and be elected “irrespective of racial or national belonging, sex, creed, social background, economic situation and former activities.”¹⁴ The only ones exempt from voting rights were convicted criminals and the mentally ill. This meant that all “servants of religious cults,” including shamans, were rehabilitated (see Vasil’eva 2000: 49–50). The change in the constitution seems to have led to growing activity by shamans in some places. From Dadi, in the Nanaysky district, it was, for example, reported in 1937 that two years earlier there was only one active shaman in the village. Since the new constitution, the authorities now counted nine active shamans, and

¹⁴ See http://constitution.garant.ru/history/ussr-rfsfr/1936/red_1936/3958676/chapter/11/; access date 9 November 2016.

neither the village council nor the kolkhoz management conducted any anti-shamanic work.¹⁵

The alleviation of administrative and legal measures against shamans coincided with the beginning of the Great Terror. According to some of Mel'nikova's informants, threats to arrest shamans increased in 1937 and 1938, and shamans' ritual equipment was expropriated not only by Kom-somol crowds, but by the police (Mel'nikova 2006: 74). One of Bulgakova's informants, the shaman Lingdze I. Bel'dy (1912–1999), stated that shamans were arrested *en masse* and that many of them disappeared: "Shamans were arrested, taken away, and quite a few of them were reported missing." Ivan T. Bel'dy claimed that there was a decree sent out to local authorities that a certain number of shamans should be arrested: "They assaulted shamans; they used to call it a troika. They purged shamans. Arrested them! Shot them! [---] Many shamans were imprisoned." His own grandfather, a known shaman, was among those taken into custody. However, the grandfather was released almost at once because the prison in Khabarovsk was overcrowded with incarcerated people (being tortured). The grandfather himself had also indicated that personnel from Moscow were present, and if they had not been there he would have been detained (see further Bulgakova 2013: 198–202).

The plan for arresting a certain number of shamans led to arbitrariness, according to Ivan Bel'dy. A troika could note down anyone as a "shaman," and this gave free scope for private vendettas.

In 1937 there was a troika working in each village. They did whatever they wanted. They could take down that a person was a shaman and a vermin, and that was it. After them came people from the NKVD, took [the accused] away and that was it. Shot them! (Ivan T. Bel'dy)

In fact, Ivan Bel'dy suspected that local authorities hesitated to arrest actual shamans, and instead picked out other persons to fulfil the stipulated quotas. The reason for this hesitance could have been a fear among local officials of some sort of revenge from shamans, their spirits, or their families. Ivan Bel'dy explained the arrest and killing of the only shaman he could name that was caught during these years—the elderly Sangila from the village Dzhari¹⁶—with the fact that Sangila had no sons and daughters who could avenge him

¹⁵ GAKhK, f. R-353, op. 1, d. 386, l. 39, 40.

¹⁶ "They came and took him [Sangila], and they did not even put him in prison. They shot him somewhere" (Ivan T. Bel'dy).

(Bulgakova 2013: 198–202). It should be mentioned that we have not found any evidence in other sources on Sangila’s arrest and disappearance.

All in all, Bulgakova received information from her informants about four Nanai shamans being arrested. The only one of these four that there are any details on is Bogdan Londonovich Onenko from the village of Naykhin. At the age of 65, he was arrested on 12 September 1937, sentenced by a decision of a troika of the NKVD to capital punishment, and shot on 22 November the same year. In the published files on his case, it is not mentioned that he was a shaman—his occupation is recorded as “fisherman” (*Khotelos’ by vsekh poimennenno nazvat’* 2 1999: 176). But he was sentenced in accordance with the paragraph 58-10, which criminalized counter-revolutionary activity and agitation, among other things by “exploiting religious and national prejudices among the masses.” From her informants Bulgakova, has been able to obtain details on the events leading to Bogdan Onenko’s arrest. What happened was that several of the shaman’s patients, who had been cured, had not delivered the sacrificial animals (roosters or pigs) that the *sevens* demanded in return for the cure. The reason why his clients did not live up to their obligations—which was very well known to them—was allegedly that they had been influenced by the new Soviet propaganda that told them that shamanism and sacrifices were all superstition. After this, Onenko fell badly ill, something that he explained as the revenge of the *sevens* who had not received their rightful share. According to the shamanic world-view within which Onenko was acting, he had two choices, either releasing his clients’ “souls” (*panian*) from the safe abode where he, as a result of the preceding healing rituals, kept them—and thus jeopardizing their lives—or collecting the sacrificial animals himself. For presumably altruistic reasons he chose the second option and went to his former patients’ homes and took their pigs to sacrifice to the *sevens*. For this, he was accused of stealing according to Soviet law (see further, Bulgakova 2013: 183–192). Yet another aspect of Bogdan Onenko’s story is that he is supposed to have been arrested by the Nanai policeman Anton P. Bel’dy, who was a member of another, competing, shamanic family (Anton Bel’dy’s mother Dekhe Kile was a famous shaman and later his brother Nikolay and his two sisters Maria and Toyo also became shamans).

It is difficult to say for what reason Bogdan Onenko was arrested and shot. Was it because he practiced shamanism, an activity not tolerated by the Soviet authorities? Or was his crime the quite civil offence of stealing from his fellow citizens? Or could it be that he was framed by members of another shamanic family, which saw their chance to eliminate a competitor in the

turmoil of the Great Terror? Perhaps it was all these circumstances taken together that led to his death. In any event, Onenko was posthumously rehabilitated by the attorney's office of Khabarovsk krai on 18 July 1989. Thus, eventually, the authorities considered his sentence to be unjust.

Despite the above-mentioned instances of arrested shamans, some of Bulgakova's informants denied altogether that shamans were arrested. Sofia S. Bel'dy from Naykhin—the very same village where Bogdan Onenko lived—did not know of any stories about arrests of shamans: “There were no repressions. Did they imprison anyone? No!” Nikolay Ch. Bel'dy of the village Bolan, admitted that there was a lot of anti-shamanic propaganda and that shamanic objects were expropriated. But shamans were always active, albeit in secret, and “nobody was arrested.” The Nanai author Konstantin M. Bel'dy, who recalled well the expropriation campaigns of religious objects, contended that “not too many people suffered during the repression.” There are even a couple of examples of Nanai shamans—for instance the above-mentioned Dekhe Kile—who received official permissions on paper to continue practicing shamanism because they had helped cure someone in an authoritative position. Thus, there are very different, and somewhat contradictory, recollections of the events of these days among the Nanai (Bulgakova 2013: 198, 202–203).

Accusations of being a shaman or having shamanic descent also appeared among Nanai in decision-making bodies within the Communist Party. One example of this is the rather complicated struggle between the Party officials Bogdan Khodzher and Pavel Kile in 1935–1937. At the time, Khodzher was the chairman of the executive committee of the Bolshevik Party in the Nanaysky district. Based on the documents from the Communist Party, Mel'nikova (2004) has described how Khodzher and Kile were both charging each other with conducting anti-Soviet work. One important ingredient in these mutual allegations was the opponent's connection with shamanism, something that possibly can be explained by the fact that Khodzher and Kile belonged to two rivalling clans and two rivalling lineages of shamans. The affair ended in the arrest and execution of Khodzher on 26 August 1937. At the same time, he was dismissed as the chairman of the executive committee and excluded from the Party. The accusations towards him were many, but among them he was supposed to have conducted “clan-enmity” between the two clans and intimidated the Nanai population in his capacity as the representative of a prominent shaman lineage—and as chairman of the executive committee nobody dared to criticize him. He was also said to have

concealed and protected shamans, stating that there were only 6 active shamans in the district, while others in the committee knew of 130 (or 71 according to another Party member). After Khodzher's arrest, the affair also led to a reckoning within the Bolshevik Party in the Nanaysky district where other Party members' connections with Khodzher and shamanism—or what in the protocols was called the *Khodzherishchina*¹⁷—were to be exposed.¹⁸

In July 1938, Pavel Kile was also arrested for counter-revolutionary activities and sentenced to five years in a labour camp (Mel'nikova 2004: 133). Kile had earlier claimed that Khodzher only fought against those shamans who were hostile to him, and at the same time secretly supported other shamans who were loyal to him. In his written defence to that complaint, Khodzher pointed out that since 1932 the Party had started rehabilitating the shamans who had not practiced exploitation in recent years and who diligently worked and did not resist the socialist construction. A lot of the shamans worked for the kolkhozes and were *udarniki*, and there were only a few bad shamans left (Mel'nikova 2004: 111). Some of Bulgakova's informants still remembered Bogdan Khodzher as a "great shaman" and a keeper of the family's *saola*, even though he had to practice shamanism in secret because of his position in the Party's executive committee.

It is worth noting that, from what we know, the struggle against shamanism in Khabarovsk krai was to a large extent carried out on the ground by the indigenous peoples themselves. It was indigenous members of the Komsomol who performed the raids against peoples' homes, took the religious objects, and burned them. Several of Bulgakova's informants testified that it was considered an "expression of patriotism" and heroism at the time to combat their own traditional religious culture. It was the young generation, educated in the Soviet system in which they had received "atheistic tempering" and become animated by the new ideology, that was at the forefront of combating shamanism. Thus, a divide between the generations erupted. This development was all in accordance with the blueprint for the struggle against shamanism outlined by *Komitet Severa*, The League of the Militant Atheists, and the Bolshevik Party.

¹⁷ *Khodzherishchina* can approximately be translated the 'Khodzherist inclination' and can be compared to another concept, the *Yezhovshchina*, which in the 1950s became the popular name of the most intense purges during the Great Terror. This concept was construed after the name of the head of the NKVD between 1936 and 1938, Nikolay P. Yezhov. Eventually Yezhov himself became a victim of the purges and was executed on 4 February 1940.

¹⁸ GAKhK P-399, op. 1, d. 368, l. 202–203; GAKhK P-399, op. 1, d. 369, l. 50–52.

A Lingering Ban on Shamanism

As has been mentioned, people in authoritative positions complained in the beginning of the 1930s that the efforts to liquidate shamanism in Khabarovsk krai were too feeble, or even non-existent, and that shamanism continued to be practiced among the indigenous peoples in the region. At a meeting with the district committee of the Bolshevik Party of the Nanaysky district in June 1937, the same complaints were made. The executive committee reported that no anti-religious work had been carried out during the preceding years. It was claimed that “hostile elements” were increasingly utilizing religion in order to strengthen their influence on the “backward” portion of the population, and because there was no branch of the League of the Militant Atheists in the district there was no actual resistance against “the hostile actions of Baptists, shamans, etc.” Therefore the executive committee urged all Party organizations to give priority to anti-religious work, to commission new agitators to conduct conversations and lectures on anti-religious issues, and to reinforce anti-religious propaganda through mass media and atheistic literature. Above all, the “correct interpretation” of paragraph 124 in the Soviet constitution—which guaranteed the citizens’ freedom of conscience and “the freedom to exercise religious cults as well as the freedom to [spread] anti-religious propaganda”¹⁹—should be disseminated because it had been misinterpreted by the masses. No religious gatherings and rituals that contradicted Soviet law were from now on to be allowed. The meeting ended with the decision that the executive committee should consider a plan for anti-religious actions by the Komsomol.²⁰

Material on the struggle against shamanism in Khabarovsk krai during the Great Terror and the Second World War is scarce. Therefore, we cannot say anything for certain about what happened to shamans and shamanism during these years. But it is likely that the fight against shamanism was not a prioritized concern either in this region or in other parts of the Soviet North during these chaotic years—despite the above-mentioned ambitions of the Bolsheviks on the eve of the Great Terror. Vasil’eva, who has studied the repression of shamans in the Yakut ASSR, finds the same calls for a strengthening of anti-religious and anti-shamanic work in 1937. But in reality the fight against shamanism in Yakutia slacked off in the last years of the 1930s, according to Vasil’eva, for mainly two reasons. First, shamanism had

¹⁹ See http://constitution.garant.ru/history/ussr-rsfsr/1936/red_1936/3958676/chapter/10/#block_1010; access date 14 November 2016.

²⁰ GAKhK op. 1, d. 368, l. 150.

in fact diminished and was at the time practiced mostly by the elderly and in hiding. Second, during the Great Terror the “enemy of the people” was not first and foremost identified as an “exploiter” but rather as a “spy,” a category in which “shamans with their ‘otherworldly relations’ could not fit in” (Vasil’eva 2000: 50–51).

It is also well known that the harsh attitude of the Stalin regime towards religion and religiosity in general was mitigated during the war. The government sought the support of first and foremost the Orthodox Church in creating national unity in the defence of the country. In 1941, the League of the Militant Atheists was dissolved and Stalin ordered a halt to the anti-religious campaigns. This led to a certain religious revival in the country; churches were reopened and religion was increasingly manifested in public. To some extent, this also seems to have been the case with the indigenous religions of the peoples in some parts of the North (Corley [ed.] 1996: 130–131; cf. Balzer 1993: 236).

One thing the regime did during the war was to found two new councils to handle the affairs of religious associations, one for the affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (in 1943) and one for the affairs of other “religious cults” (in 1944). The basic duties of these councils were to register religious associations and buildings for worship, collect information on the organizations, and surveil and control their doings, as well as to see to it that the relations between the religious associations and Soviet authorities were correct. The constitution guaranteed freedom of conscience and religious worship, while the ruling Communist Party had on its (by then long-term) agenda to liquidate religion. As M. B. Serdyuk (2011: 100) points out, this made the work of the councils rather ambiguous. On the one hand they should protect the religious associations’ constitutional rights; on the other they should take measures to prevent the growth of the same associations.

Among the assignments of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Khabarovsk krai was to gather information on and control shamanism. Judging from the reports and letters of the head of the council (between 1948 and 1952), B. M. Grebennikov, this was not an easy task because the area of inspection was so vast and shamanism existed only in the countryside. What is more, shamanism seemed so disorganized and incomprehensible to the administrators in Khabarovsk—it was not even possible to predict when and where shamanic rituals would be performed.²¹

²¹ The following account is based on the documents from the Council of the Affairs of Religious Cults in Khabarovsk krai found in GAKhK, f. 1359, op. 3, no. 3–6.

In his reports, already from the beginning of his term of office in 1948, Grebennikov voiced the same complaints that were common among Soviet administrators in the 1930s—that nothing, or at least too little, was done to combat shamanism, and shamans were acting quite openly. He even claimed that shamans had become more active, both in the Amur area and in Kamchatka and Chukotka, which were also part of Grebennikov's jurisdiction. Local authorities obviously knew about all of these shamans, but still allowed them to perform their rituals.

In order to get a full picture of the situation in the region, Grebennikov had consulted a certain comrade Khodzher,²² himself a Nanai and instructor of the organizing department of the executive committee in Khabarovsk krai. Khodzher, who knew the people and the language, was sent out to the villages in the Nanaysky and Komsomolsky districts in 1948 to survey the activities of shamans. Later he would report that there were shamans in several of the villages and because no one prohibited shamanism the population remained tolerant of them. He reported that most of the time the Nanai laughed at the shamans and did not believe in their "sorcery" (Ru. *koldovstvo*), but the elderly continued to consult them when they needed a cure for some illness. During his round trip, Khodzher talked to the shamans and tried to convince them to cease their trade by informing them that shamanism was now prohibited. Many of them agreed to this and promised to destroy their drums, belts, costumes, and masks. All of the local authorities had also been instructed to prohibit shamanism and to take legal proceedings against those shamans who continued their practice. There were, of course, cases when shamans declined to give up their craft. Grebennikov reported that when the administrators of the Komsomolsky district had requested seven shamans to quit, threatening them with a special fine, four of them had willingly paid the imposed 500 roubles.²³

A year later Grebennikov himself visited the Nanai settlement Gvasyugi, where there was a shaman by the name of Kimonno. The chairman of the village council had declared that Kimonno was a capable hunter and fisherman who worked well for the kolkhoz. But the shaman now and again performed rituals if someone asked him to. Grebennikov and the chairman sent for Kimonno and persuaded him to give up shamanism. The latter promised

²² Not to be confused with the above mentioned Bogdan L. Khodzher.

²³ The law that was used in this case was probably paragraph 123 in the penal code, which prohibited "deceitful acts with the purpose of rousing superstition among the masses for one's own benefit." The penalty for breaking this law was one year in labour camp or a fine of 500 roubles.

to do that, saying that it was better to go to the medical doctor if one was ill. Then he fetched his drum, drumstick, bells, costume, and different fineries, and “ceremonially destroyed everything” in front of Grebennikov’s and the chairman’s eyes. However, this was only one shaman out of many, and Grebennikov suspected that the chairman of the village council protected and concealed several other shamans in the area.

In a letter to the secretary of the regional committee of the Bolshevik Party in Khabarovsk krai in May 1949, Grebennikov complained about the lack of measures taken against shamans (as well as Baptists and members of other sects), and he noted that because “shamanism is not recognized as a religion at all, at present no one struggles against this evil, nor takes any steps to stop [the shamans’] activities.” But paradoxically, in some places indulgence was shown towards shamans with reference to paragraph 124 in the constitution and the “freedom to practice religious cults.” What people did not understand, according to Grebennikov, was that the constitutional freedom of religion only pertained to registered religious associations, and not to shamanism, because shamanism could not be registered. In another letter he gave a vivid example of this indulgence with the story of Pavel Gekker, a Nanai hunter who had visited Grebennikov a few weeks earlier. In April 1949 a shaman (by the name of Onenko), dressed up in full regalia, had come to Gekker’s village Koyminskiy, in the Ulchsky district, to conduct a ritual in broad daylight. After the ritual, which had attracted a large crowd of both old and young, the shaman demanded that the people sacrifice meat, fish, vodka, clothes, and money to the “spirit of fishing and hunting.” A police officer who was present had arrested Onenko and brought him to the main police station in the district centre Bogorodskoe. But the chief of police had scolded the police officer and immediately released the shaman claiming that “religion is allowed according to the constitution.”

Grebennikov gave further examples of what he regarded as the overindulgent attitude among officials towards shamans. In one village in the Ulchsky district, the shaman Angina Enako was openly shamanising. But instead of arresting and prosecuting her for deceiving the people and spreading superstition, the local officers of the secret service (MGB at the time) had merely confiscated her drum. Then they had suggested to the chairmen of the village council and the local kolkhoz that they should see to it that she was given medical and material aid. Thus, Grebennikov concluded that, in effect, they suggested that a shaman was to be given maintenance by the kolkhoz.

There were other instances when members of the Party and the Komso-mol took active part in shamanic rituals and sacrificial ceremonies.

Grebennikov related a ritual performed in Dzhari that gathered around 30 participants, among them several Party members, including the head of the kolkhoz. During the ritual a pig and 18 chickens were slaughtered, all at the expense of the kolkhoz, and because of the heavy drinking many workers could not attend work for several days afterwards.

To come to terms with shamanism, Grebennikov suggested to his superior in Moscow, the head of the central Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults Ivan V. Polyanskiy, that a letter be sent out to all executive committees of the region in districts where shamans were to be found. In this letter, the executive committees were recommended to disrupt the activities of shamans and to commission the police and the village councils to take the “most severe measures” (Ru. *samye zhestokie mery*) against shamans, for example expropriating and destroying shamanic objects and prosecuting particularly hostile shamans for deceiving the people and for fooling superstitious individuals.

Even though Polyanskiy agreed that the practicing of shamanism was illegal *per se* (because shamanism could not be registered as a religious association), he recommended that Grebennikov not send out the letter to local authorities. Instead, he suggested that administrative and legal measures should be taken against shamans only when they were caught in the very act of violating Soviet law. Polyanskiy did not give any explicit explanation as to why he considered the letter to be inappropriate, so we can only speculate. But perhaps he did not want to instigate a “witch hunt” or the kind of “terror” that had characterised the end of the 1930s. Since Polyanskiy himself had been an official of the secret service from 1921 until he took office in the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in 1947, he was likely to have known all too well the possible consequences of such campaigns.

Conclusion

That shamanism was repressed by the Communist Party and the authorities in Khabarovsk krai is quite obvious. It was the official policy of the Party and the state that shamanism should be liquidated by means of anti-shamanic propaganda (slandering what the authorities saw as the superstition that was the foundation of shamanism), education (instilling a materialist, scientific, and Marxist world-outlook among the indigenous peoples), modern medicine (making ineffective shamanic healing practices obsolete), and legislation (disfranchising and thus marginalising shamans, as well as prohibiting certain ritual practices deemed as quackery and fraud). Local authorities and

local communist activists—often of indigenous descent—at times also carried through campaigns in which they confiscated shamanic ritual objects by force. Even if this last method was not officially sanctioned by the legislation or the leading ideologues behind the Soviet struggle against shamanism, there is nothing to suggest that the authorities took action against or punished such measures, although they were sometimes condemned as “exaggerations.” Rather, the instances of outright mocking and more or less violent outbursts against shamans appear to be logical consequences of the stigmatisation of shamans that the official anti-shamanic propaganda and legislation brought about.

In the beginning of the Great Terror, the legislation aimed at marginalising shamans was somewhat eased, and together with other categories of disfranchised citizens shamans were given back their civic rights in 1936. There are also some reports that anti-shamanic (and generally anti-religious) work was slackening by the end of the 1930s. But the information on the fate of shamans during the Great Terror is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, authorities complained—as they indeed had done already in the beginning of the decade, and would be doing a decade later—that nothing or too little was done to fight shamanism and that shamans escaped punishment. On the other, there are testimonies in the oral history of the indigenous peoples that shamans were arrested *en masse* and summarily killed. All testimonies from informants do not agree, however. Some claim that several shamans were arrested, but immediately released. Others contend that non-shamans were pointed out as shamans and then arrested, or that the communists often threatened to arrest shamans and participants of shamanic rituals, but that they did not fulfil their threats. There are even those who deny altogether that shamans were arrested, let alone shot.

It has not been possible, as of yet, to find support in the archival records for the claim that shamans in general were arrested (or executed), and there is no evidence of any special operation against shamans nor of any general plan to fill arrest quotas with shamans. This may, of course, be due to a lack of sources. We have not been able to obtain permission to look into this matter in the archives of the NKVD (FSB). Upon Sundström’s request, the answer has been that no such information or documents are available in the archive of the security service. Nor has it been possible to find such information in the state archives of the area.²⁴ From what we have seen of the documentation of indigenous persons arrested or executed during the years of the

²⁴ This according to letters sent to Sundström from the archive of the Federal Security

Great Terror, “shaman” is not among the accusation points. The confirmed shaman Bogdan L. Onenko, shot in 1937, was not listed as a “shaman” in the records; he was recorded as a “fisherman.” That Ivan T. Bel'dy (and perhaps others) interpreted the many arrests, combined with accusations of the practice of shamanism, as an official plan might be due to the fact that “shaman” was one of the main stigmas of the time. Thus it could have functioned, on the local level, in the same way as the accusation “enemy of the people.” As such, the accusation “shaman” could have been used to discredit and betray competitors and personal enemies—and perhaps to help fulfil the lethal quotas of the terror (cf. Leete 2015: 101–102). This seems to have been the case even among Nanai representatives in the highest ranks of the Communist Party, as evidenced by the purges of Bogdan Khodzher and Pavel Kile. There are even some indications that superiors from Moscow released shamans when locals had arrested them, just as the head of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Moscow in 1950 did not recommend a campaign to take general legal actions towards shamans as was suggested by his local subordinate in Khabarovsk krai.

Balzer concludes, regarding the Soviet repression of shamans in the entire Soviet North, that:

The full scope of this repression is unlikely to be known, even with open archives, for some shamans were charged with other offences when their true “crime” was the practice of shamanism. (Balzer 2011: 44)

If it is the case that many shamans were arrested and executed without inquiry or trial, state archives would, for obvious reasons, not get us far. The somewhat contradictory versions of the arrests of shamans, in the oral history of the local population, should also make us wary of drawing too far-reaching conclusions. A lack of substantial historical evidence could lead to myth-making that fits the circumstances of the present rather than reflecting actual past events. It is far from certain that shamans were particularly targeted or represented among the victims of the terror in Khabarovsk krai, even if there are some examples of arrests. From the available evidence, the execution of shamans does not seem to have been a conspicuous method in the struggle against shamanism in this region. It is clear that shamanism was practiced through the entire period studied in this chapter, and indeed it continued to

Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) and the State Archive of the Amur Oblast of 14 May 2010 and 8 June 2010, respectively, as well as Sundström's searches in archives (GAKhK and MANAR).

be practiced by some individuals in Khabarovsk krai through the whole Soviet period, even if the number of both shamans and their clients gradually diminished. The same ambivalence regarding how to combat shamans with legal and administrative means was voiced by officials in both the beginning and the end of the 1930s, as well as around 1950.

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