

FROM DRUMS TO FRYING PANS, FROM PARTY MEMBERSHIP CARD TO “MAGIC BRANCH” *WITHE*¹: THREE GENERATIONS OF NANAI SHAMANS

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Abstract: Every radical change that Nanai experienced in the 20th century divided the young people of this indigenous minority in Russia in two groups – radicals and conservatives, sharing values of the older generation.

This way, in the period of establishing the Soviet power, radicals were members of the Young Communist League (Komsomol) who repressed shamans, whereas conservatives were those young people who became shamans but were forced to give up using shamanic drums and begun using pot lids or frying pans. During the changes in the 1960s and 1970s, the activity of radicals became more passive and not only they but also the conservatives (practitioners of shamanism and their customers) became members of the Komsomol. In the post-perestroika period, the social roles changed. Young Nanai, adherents of the revived shamanism, became radicals who practiced new forms of shamanism that they had adopted from the mass media. They maintained certain traditional elements of shamanic practices like using *withe* as a tool for measuring a healed person's 'level of energy'. Such transformations demonstrate the flexibility of shamanism and its ability to adapt to the changing ideological and cultural environment.

Key words: culture of the peoples of the North, shamanism, young generation and the cultural change

In the 20th century, the Nanai, like other peoples of Russia, experienced a series of radical political changes.² These changes were followed by cultural changes, each time caused by new rulers who tried to impose their ideology and strengthen their political position. According to a widespread approach, different sides were mobilized according to the ethnic lines, and the Nanai formed a united front which tried to resist the destructive consequences of these changes. The data presented in this article³ demonstrates that, in fact, the border between different groups lied between those who, on the one hand, supported the maintenance of the traditional lifestyle and, on the other hand, people who sought to establish the positions of the indigenous people within

the existing political, social and cultural frames. Quite a number of Nanai people, especially the young, supported these changes. The establishment of the new (post-Soviet or post-*perestroika*) ideology among the Northern peoples and culture which would correspond to that ideology took place on the initiative of the new authorities, and was often executed with the help of the locals, especially the young people. Educated to adapt to the categories of the new ideology, and being fascinated by the new concept of culture, the young generation generally distanced themselves from the older generation. The outcome of this distancing was that the cultural and ideological border between the generations remained stable for decades.

Especially remarkable are these changes in the shamanic practices that did not altogether disappear (in the Soviet period), as was the goal of the instigators of the reform, or were revived (in the post-*perestroika* period) and simply underwent changes, adapting itself to another ideology.

THE GENERATION OF SHAMANS WITH FRYING PANS INSTEAD OF SHAMANIC DRUMS

During the establishment of the Soviet power, shamanism was seen as one of the main obstacles on the road to change. One of the articles by Suslov was even entitled “Shamanism as an Obstacle in Building up Socialism” (1932). In attempts to destroy shamanism, the state did not only restrict to large-scale agitation against it but also used means of repressions. Their actions brought only relative success, altering the nature of shamanism but not wiping it out completely. The establishment of the Soviet power was accomplished with anti-shamanic repressions (or ‘cleansing’ as it was called) which slowed down during the Second World War and intensified in the years following the war. “‘Cleansed’ of shamans! Arrested! Shot!” is what the old Nanai remember. “This is what they did!” (I.B.)⁴

They organized meetings. The educated people told us that there is no need for shamans! [...] That there will be no shamans anymore! We will liquidate them! Shamans were forbidden! They told us that we had to go to the doctors not to shamans! (A.Kh.)

After the meetings they searched people’s homes, collected drums, *iangapany*,⁵ boxes where people hold *seveny*⁶ and burned these on the street. *Seveny* and *toro*⁷ were burned. (N.K.)

Almost since the beginning of the cultural changes in the North, the young generation of the indigenous people had been actively involved in the process

of eradicating shamanism. In the 1920s, special cultural institutions, the so-called cultural bases (*kultbazy*) – complex institutions, “sort of bastions of the European culture in the North” (Vakhtin 1993: 29) – were established in the Russian North. Next to their economic, medical-veterinarian and scientific importance, *kultbaza* was also intended as a place for ideological enlightenment, and was first of all targeted at indigenous youth. Having been ideologically shaped in *kultbaza* and other educational institutions, such as club houses and boarding schools, the young people actively participated in actions aimed at eradicating shamanism and making anti-religious propaganda. Fieldnotes show that indigenous youth did not only oppose to shamanism, but became its most active persecutors. Old Nanai women remember a young Ulchy⁸ woman, a judge, who struck terror into the hearts of her tribesmen, both the Ulchy and the Nanai, who tried to continue practicing shamanism (L.B.). Informant L.B., a shaman woman, also says that it were the Nanai who arrested their tribesmen.

I don't know what was the reason for these arrests [...] Why did the shamans became a threat to them? Did I, as a shaman, ask them for food? They arrested shamans! Did Russians do it? No, it were the Nanai who arrested many people. I don't know for what reasons they were arrested.

N.P. admits that the famous Nanai shaman Bogdan Onink was once arrested by his brother, the first Nanai policeman. According to Marjorie M. Balzer,

At the end of the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s hundreds of drums were burnt mainly by young enthusiast Komsomol members, who mostly were not visiting Russian revolutionaries, but natives turned themselves to Communism. (Balzer 1995: 26)

It was easier for the young Nanai to find out when their parents were going to perform a secret shamanic ceremony and catch them unaware, while they were practicing this forbidden act. According to L.R., one day when a Nanai started to secretly perform the *kasa* ritual⁹ some Nanai members of the Komsomol (Young Communist League) suddenly arrived by boat and arrested Leteke Zaksor, the shaman leading the ritual. K.M. explained that such actions were guided not by the Nanai themselves, but by the Communist Party. He added that the young Nanai who were enlisted as Komsomol members, regarded participating in such actions as prestigious. K.M. expressed his outrage:

It was regarded as an expression of patriotism then! They thought they were heroes! Here I go and perform a heroic deed! Against their own culture!

The active loyalty of the young Nanai to the new Soviet ideology and culture divided the people into two generations: the adherents of the traditional Nanai culture who held on to the ideology of shamanism and reformers of this culture. The Soviet educational policy concerning the indigenous peoples of the Russian North also contributed to this division. As early as in the 1930s, school education became to be introduced in Nanai settlements: the Nanai alphabet was invented on the basis of the Unified Northern Alphabet,¹⁰ textbooks and primer books in the Nanai language were published. School education was aimed at including all the young people of certain age. The compulsory education of children, mainly in the system of state-financed boarding schools, was a break in the tradition, separated children from their parents, and made them adopt different ideologies. While the parents not only remained devoted to traditional shamanic culture, hardly spoke Russian or did not speak it at all, their children learned Russian and atheistic ideology and began to share the values that were cultivated among all the peoples of Russia at the time. Even the people whose age differed by one or two years could have had a different mentality depending on whether they belonged among the children who had been subject to the compulsory education. Cultural demarcation between the generations was so striking that young people of nearly the same age could have identified themselves with conflicting cultural systems, the former and the new systems. According to their cultural peculiarities, they virtually could be assigned to different generations.

Cultural demarcation existed even within a single generation of young people. Nikolai Vakhtin has identified the opposing trends in the 1920s–1930s among those who were involved in life of the Northern peoples as ‘conservatives’ and those who were ‘radicals’. On the one hand there were members of the State Committee of the Russian Federation for Northern Affairs (*Goskomsever*) whose main goal was to protect the culture and lifestyle of the Northern peoples from external influence (‘conservatives’), but on the other hand there were the government and the Communist Party aspiring towards radical changes and the elimination of ethnic differences (‘radicals’) (Vakhtin 1999: 21). A similar division also occurred among the Nanai youth which were most strongly influenced by these forces. Among the young Nanai there were both radicals, who became active Komsomol members, and conservatives, who shared the worldview of the older generation (although they often had to keep it in secret).

If any of the young people fell ill with the shamanic illness, began to dream about receiving a calling to start practicing shamanism, then the person became a shaman against his or her own will. Similarly, these young people who preferred to solve their problems by participating in shamanic rituals did it

privately and in secret. A.S., being a Komsomol member at the time of repressions, remembered that his father had always told him, "Just keep it a secret!" and he did. Such young people handed shamanic requisites over to Komsomol members, but at the same time crafted new ones and took part in special rituals to inhabit these objects with spirits. These young people partly learned the new Soviet culture (they joined the Komsomol, learned to speak Russian, even adopted some elements of atheistic ideology), but at the same time maintained relative cultural unity with the previous generation. The simultaneous preservation and dissembling of shamanic practices favored the policy that shamans were arrested only when they refused to abandon their practices. If a shaman promised to give up practicing shamanism, the authorities were usually incapable of determining the veracity of the public rejection. These shamans who carried on their activity in secret managed to avoid becoming victim of repressions. It has to be noted that shamanism does not expect its adherents to publicly confess their support. Many of our informants said that they became Komsomol members as a result of repressions and publicly rejected shamanism, but at the same time they secretly prayed to their spirits during shamanic rituals.



Figure 1. *The widow of the shaman Maria Innokenteva Tumali is placing an amulet which used to belong to her dead husband around the neck of her grandson Volodia. A Russian female psychic (standing left to Volodia) was asked to carry out this ritual procedure, and she believed that this way Volodia could restore the spiritual link with the spirits of his family and strengthen his healing powers.*

Due to the need to disclose some of their external public manifestations, shamanic rituals underwent some changes. It was the time when people abandoned the major ritual shamanic processions through settlements, accompanied by visiting all the households where the shaman's patients lived; this used to be part of the offering ritual called *undi*. The ritual itself was continued and was secretly performed under the guise of ordinary pig slaughtering. While performing the rituals windows were curtained and doors locked, but people did not stop performing these. Moreover, under the repressions it was dangerous to make shamanic requisites and keep them at home (if a shaman drum was found in the house, the found drum was destroyed and the head of the household arrested). As a result it became a widespread practice to replace the objects used in rituals with household items. This is why this generation of shaman persecutors (the native people themselves), the secret shamans and their covert Komsomol congregates (who were practicing shamanism under repressions) could be called after Balzer (1995) 'shamans with frying pans'.

The drastic differentiation of the youth groups within the generation of 'shamans with frying pans' into radicals and conservatives was gradually changing into alleviating differences between them. On the one hand, these young people who were closer to the older generation were abandoning the traditions due to the increasing impact of education and changes in the environment. On the other hand, the radical behavior of the persecutors of shamanism was diminishing. One of the reasons for the latter was the spread of stories about the tragic consequences for the young Nanai who participated in the persecution of shamans. For example, there were stories about a Komsomol member who had cut down a sacrificial tree and had died a week after this incident; there was a story about another Nanai Komsomol member whose abdomen became swollen with edema after he had broken and trampled on shaman drums, and so forth. I.T. has summed up these stories as follows:

The shamans disappeared, but those who liquidated them, who worked for the cultural revolution, disappeared too. They are no longer alive, nor are their children. All of them have died!

Stories about punishment imposed on the persecutors of shamans by spirits mitigated the negative attitude towards shamans among the radical Komsomol members. Such stories forced the youth to reconsider their views, which had been inculcated in them atheistic propaganda. These Komsomol members who survived a serious illness, which they thought was a punishment imposed upon them by shamanic spirits, abandoned their Communist views and became active adherents of shamanism. These young people had to seek help from shamans in order to make a complete recovery. There was a case when a Komsomol

member suddenly fell ill after taking away a shaman's ritual objects and forcing the shaman to discontinue his practices. He returned to that shaman and said, "I had a dream. What if I die?" And the shaman replied, "How can I practice shamanism when I've made a signed statement not to practice?" (N.P.) N.P. also spoke about a Komsomol member who became ill after he had cut down a shamanic sacrificial tree.

He came to that old man [shaman] and on his knees asked the shaman to pray to free him from where he, that is, his soul, had been taken to by shamanic spirits. And he knew [that he should not have cut the tree!] During the subsequent ritual the shaman said on behalf of the spirits, "You have cut us down and therefore you will die!" They openly told him! He was begging on his knees and the shaman said, "I don't know. It was you who did it. Since your childhood, you have been told not to cut down and not to touch anything that belongs to the shaman!" When we grew up we were afraid of even walking near the places where people kneel down.

If a 'radical', a persecutor of shamans, fell ill from being punished for what he had done to shamans according to the prevailing belief and if he managed to recover (the recovery was attempted with the help of shamans), he became a shaman himself and, as N.P. said, "it was impossible to make him do it again". This means that he left the group of radicals once and for all.

THE GENERATION OF SHAMANS WITH PARTY MEMBERSHIP CARDS

Within the generation of shamans with frying pans only radicals and persecutors of shamanism had Party and Komsomol membership cards, but in the 1960s–1970s conservatives, or those who were practicing shamans and their regular customers, applied for these cards too. Vakhtin calls this generation 'the crisis generation' and wrote,

By the middle of the 1970s, an absolutely peculiar situation appeared in the North. There existed the so-called unequal language skills (*gruppovoiye poliyazychie*), which means that some members of the ethnic group had already begun to lose their native language and preferred to communicate in Russian, while others didn't know Russian well enough. (Vakhtin 1993)

This generation had already lost their traditional culture but at the same time they had not adopted the Soviet culture, the culture neutral to ethnicity. This intermediate state was characterized by a combination of the adopted Soviet culture and the traditional culture that could be observed to different degrees in various fields (Vakhtin 1993). By that time the Soviet educational policy has brought its harvest. While in the 1930s the compulsory school education was started to be introduced, by the 1970s many Nanai had already received school education: there were Nanai intellectuals, poets, writers, doctors, and teachers, some of whom were members of the Communist Party or Komsomol.

A significant underplaying of ethnic identity was typical of this generation. Young people preferred mixed marriages, which were considered prestigious. Parents who spoke both Nanai and Russian preferred to speak Russian to their children. V.H. remembers the period as follows:

I was speaking at the meeting in Kondon, “We must turn from words to deeds! Do you speak Nanai at home? Then how can our children speak it? It is taught at school but we don’t confirm it in domestic surroundings! I don’t force anybody to do it, I simply think to myself that we must stick to our culture! It is necessary for every family to have some objects of Nanai traditional culture. They broadcast in Nanai. How good it is to listen to you! How well do you speak Nanai on the radio! It is very beautiful. It is delightful to listen to! But when you put on a traditional Nanai gown people say, “Oh, how archaic you are, wearing a traditional gown!” When a woman puts on a modern dress she is considered civilized! We strove for European culture! There it all started!”

In those days, many features of traditional Nanai culture, including shamanism, were still preserved in everyday life. Shamanism existed more openly than it did before, owing to the mitigation of repressions against shamans. Also, people’s belief in shamanism was strengthened by the stories about repressed shamans and about how the people who participated in the repressions were cruelly punished by spirits. The division into conservatives/shamanists and radicals/atheists had become blurred and was no longer as contrasting as it was the case with the generation of ‘shamans with frying pans’. Conservatives/shamanists being the most active members of their society found themselves “ahead” in the field of public activity. They did not only join the Communist Party but were sometimes assigned leading positions in the party. On the other hand, the radicals/atheists had become more passive. The period of official repressions had come to an end and only those Nanai who had adopted the anti-shamanist stance and could not understand the changing political situation, continued to harass shamans on their own initiative. For example, when

they dispersed their relatives who had gathered to perform a shaman ritual and, like in old days, tried to take the exposed shamans to the local police station, then the shamans were charged but then released – the times were no longer the same. But the disturbed shamans took revenge on their persecutors and their families by any available magic means. M.V. remembers the time when she was young, when one day a shaman called Pierke was brought from Nergen.

They brought her. She is practicing shamanism... And her neighbour (Nanai), Onenko, a rather strong man, was passing by. He came in and took her to the police office. You mustn't practise shamanism! What does it matter to him? He should stay at home! And what do you think? He wanted to put her under arrest but she was released! Next month he died in Khabarovsk. That is the way it is! She had taken revenge! You mustn't badger shamans! You mustn't bother a shaman for no reason! She is practicing, let her sit and do it! Why are you bothering her? He took her and brought to the police office in Troitskoe. Such a fool! And he isn't alive! Is it good? He has no children. Then his wife died.

The radicals who had found themselves without official support neglected and denounced shamanism. Thus H., an adopted son of a shaman woman L.B., became a passive radical anti-shamanist. He dared to mock his adoptive mother when she was practicing shamanism. L.B. expressed her outrage at him:

If you don't believe in it you better be silent! [...] Now it is considered possible to trample on [shamanism] and so on! Nothing will come of people such as H! They used to bring to me a sick person, and I must practice, treat her, and H. was sitting and teasing me. He is laughing! This kind of a man he was!

The emergence of such shaman/Communists was paradoxical since the atheistic ideology which was imperative for Communists somehow had to co-exist with the shamanic ideology. Nevertheless it became a typical phenomenon. (For example, nearly half of the 16 shaman informants, with whom I happened to work during the 1980s–1990s, were Communists.) The division in this generation into radicals propagating atheism and striving for the modernization of culture and conservatives, who were still living in the world of traditional culture, did not only apply to certain social groups (and in this way differs from education) but at times crossed all the boundaries in the most unexpected way. People (including members of the Communist Party and Komsomol) who fell ill with the 'shamanic illness' became conservatives often quite unexpectedly

to themselves. The sickness forced them to return to shamanic practices in spite of the acquired ideology.

The forms of conflict between a shamanic calling and the service in the Communist Party varied from person to person, but practically every informant (even those who had not joined the party) had to choose between shamanism and Communism at some point. Young people fell ill with the shamanic illness not because shamanism was part of their worldview, but, on the contrary, in spite of their atheistic and Communist ideology that they had adopted at school. The young generation at the time denied the possibility that they would practice shamanism. Shamanic activities were not only perceived as prestigious but also as dangerous. At that time, repressions of shamans were still fresh in people's memory. Moreover, practicing shamanism isolated a person in the society, opposed him/her to the society, and reduced the chances of having a professional career. Nevertheless there were young people who, being unable to cope with their shamanic illness, became shamans. It brought them into conflict with the society. According to L.B.,

I began to beat the drum [i.e. became a shaman], because it was already impossible [to battle with the illness]! Whether I will beat it or not – in any case, I won't live! If I don't beat it, I will not live. Now I practice for everybody. If you don't like it, go home!

If a person had caught the shamanic illness before he joined the party, he or she became a shaman. And it ruled out the chance of becoming a Communist later on and thus have certain benefits which party membership would have ensured the person at the time. This is why many young people refused to become shamans even when they had realized their shamanic mission.

I ought not to have become a shaman! I was ready for the shamanic practice (I saw shaman dreams), but at that time I was such an active Communist [that I couldn't become a shaman]! [...] a Shaman woman [called] Yangoki told me, "Let me open you while I'm alive [i.e. perform an initiation rite] or else there will be no one to open you." But I was a member of the Territory Committee, a member of the Bureau of Troitskoe timber industry enterprise, and also a member of the district committee of the Communist Party. How can I become a shaman? You can't be everywhere at the same time – I need to go to the Territory Committee office and then a plenary session is convened in Troitskoe settlement and what a shaman practice it can be! I did not believe in anything then! (N.P.)

Another Communist who had not become a shaman but had been suffering from the shamanic illness replied to those who advised him to pass the initiation rite to his dying day, "No, I'm a Communist and that is it!" His mother said to him, "Let us open you." – "No, I'm a Communist".

Such mixture of the Nanai traditional culture and the Soviet culture which transgresses the borders of ethnicity and is permeated with Communist ideology occasionally led to such fantastical phenomena as, for example, a shamanic interpretation of Communism. Communists propagated atheism, vigorously rejected shamanism and constantly fought it by different means. Shamans, on their part, also regarded Communists with hostility. Repressions against shamans which were still fresh in people's memory fuelled the confrontation. At the same time, if a young Nanai first joined Komsomol or the Communist Party, or received atheistic education at school and then fell ill with the shamanic illness, he reconciled these contradictory realities and tried to conceptualize one through the other. Thus, the Nanai students who had gone to Leningrad to study at the Institute of the Peoples of the North, used to make sacrifices before the portrait of Iossif Stalin, perceiving it as a representation of a shaman spirit.

S.I. went to Leningrad to study with the other Nanai. There, in Leningrad, they made a drum to themselves. They were all competent young people... People took him to Leningrad (to study at the institute). And he practiced shamanism there. He could do *mauri* (a shamanic dance) very well. He visited his territory from Leningrad to [make spiritual journeys to his native places in the Far East]. He made *undi* (a sacrifice to shamanic spirits). A lot of people, Russians, Nanai, all these people followed him and were interested. [...] There was the picture of Stalin in the corner, perhaps made of paper; they put some vodka to it.

These informants-Communists, with whom we had a chance to talk at the end of their life, told that in their youth they had adopted the Communist ideology with an open heart and had sincerely tried to reject shamanism. However, for some of them the inevitability of their shamanic mission had become so insuperable that it had forced them to become shamans. According to N.P.,

I sincerely joined the Communist Party (CPSU)! I was a pioneer, then a Komsomol member. [...] Being a pioneer I went twice to a Young Pioneer camp twice. I had such fun there, everything was so fine! All this was developing with such enthusiasm! I was growing up in such atmosphere! I became a Komsomol member and the war broke out. All this was perceived as inspirational. Do you understand me? Sincerely! I fought

for the party. I had been in the army for 7 years; I was trained to be a Communist. But at the same time I remembered my childhood and loved my mother (a shaman woman). I saw her in my dreams. She wasn't speaking to me in my dreams; she only passed by me, dancing a shaman dance and left.

The Nanai Communists who were suffering from the shamanic illness sometimes interpreted the activities of the Communist Party in the light of shamanic spirituality. They believed that this activity had been inspired by certain Communist spirits, which are similar to shaman spirits. They were developing their career in the party using shamanic methods – that is, by way of dreams and singing in their sleep. N.P. said,

I joined the party and began to see not only shamanic matters in my dreams. I saw myself speaking at a meeting from the platform calling everybody to go fighting for Communist ideals!

Nanai Communists kept such perception of shamanism secret from the administration because a public declaration of this kind would mean serious trouble for them. The shaman woman L.B. complains that she felt the attacks of shamanic illness so severely and suddenly (it happened to her at workplace) that she was not able to keep her shamanic illness in secret.

When I got ill I fell on my back and began to cry. And I was rolling all over on the ground at my workplace, in front of the team I worked with. I was a good employee but since that moment everything was lost for me. Why did the shamans become dangerous for them? Did I ask food from them?

In this generation there were Communists who were suffering from the shamanic illness, but did not become shamans, because as a result of their aggressive anti-shamanic activities they had opposed themselves to all the shamans who could perform an initiation rite for them. L.B., the female shaman, spoke about a member of the party who was ill and was brought to her to be treated. L.B. condemned the sick person,

Such members of the party did a lot of 'cleansing' earlier! "We do not need them!" they said. They cleansed off shamans! – "All right, wait here, I'll go speak to the shaman!" I came to the shaman, spoke to him. "There is no need to practice shamanism for those people!" he says. – "They will arrest both you and me!" So we didn't do anything then. He said, "I don't heal such people, I do not touch them!" That in-law [the sick person] worked at the Executive Committee of the District Soviet of people's

deputies. He was so unhappy [because we refused to treat him]!" This Communist patient case became complicated by the fact that it was the shamanic illness and he was suffering because he had to become a shaman. "How can I tell him [a Communist!] that it would be a good thing for him to make at least a *cecku* [i.e. an image of cuckoo spirit]?" L.B. asked. "How can I say, 'Can I make your *seven* [a shaman spirit]?" So the treatment of this Communist and his initiation to shaman practices did not begin then.

There is also another rather widespread combination of Communism and shamanic practices when a Communist suffering from the shamanic illness and being forced by spirits to secretly practice shamanism received treatment from a shaman. However, after he had got better he abandoned shamanism again. C.C. said,

Our grandmother didn't believe! She was a Communist. And my father didn't believe either. But my mother and my grandfather believed. And those two were Communists. My grandmother told me that when she was young, she became ill. My grandfather made all kinds of wooden and cane *burhunchiky*¹¹ for her. She recovered, put all the *burhunchiky* in a sack and threw them away. "Go anywhere you like," she said to the *burhunchiky*. Our grandmother didn't really believe!

There were cases when a Communist used not only to turn to shamans for help but was even forced by the shaman illness to become a shaman, and yet he did not change his convictions. As soon as he managed to recover from the illness, he abandoned his shamanic practice right away and reinstated his party membership. O. E. said,

My father had been ill for three years. There was a great shaman woman Hodger and this shaman tried to treat him. She somehow took away all the bad things and then she made him do a *meury*¹². They made two little men [two puppets of spirits, who assist helpers of the shaman]. If he recovered he will take away the bad *dyaka*,¹³ and he will do it himself then. We tried it this way. And my father didn't feel his arms and legs (he was paralyzed and confined to bed) and suddenly he took the drum and started running! While being paralyzed, he started running! [...] After that his legs got better, he began working and fishing. Then we moved to Jonka, to the kolkhoz and it was just the time when they prohibited the practicing of shamanism. And he took all the metal objects (the shaman belt with metal pendants) and the drum to the club-house and he never practiced again to his dying day.

A shaman could find himself in a difficult situation when someone in his family fell ill. Sometimes a Communist addressed the shamans or bowed to the spirits himself. R.A. told

My father! But he is a Communist! He was a captain of a speedboat. My mother got ill and one evening he put on a belt and a hat. But they didn't take along *dobochi* [food for spirits]! Then he filled three glasses with water and bowed. We haven't got vodka! She became like a *goria* [a madwoman]. He bowed and everything just vanished!

However, many Nanai of this generation who were members of the Communist Party and Komsomol, refused to turn to the shamans even when their close relatives fell ill for fear that it would damage their career.

THE GENERATION OF SHAMANS WITH *WITNESSES*

One of the outcomes of the compulsory school education for indigenous children of the North, which was introduced in the 1930s, was a dramatic gap between the generation that did not receive school education and maintained the traditional world view and the generation that had adopted the atheistic and official ideology propagated at school. A distinct division between generations close in age but having little in common in terms of culture remained in the following decades and in Nanai settlements the traditional and modern culture have coexisted for a long time. The generation of those who were children in the 1930s and had been involved in compulsory school education grew old and began to die in the 1990s. With that, the world of the Nanai traditional culture began to disappear.

Among the young people of the 1990s, the interest in shamanism and native culture emerged at this period. Although being the keepers of the shamanic legacy and potentially susceptible to the shamanic illness, these young people not only knew traditional ritual practices but were often unable to speak their native language by that time. Having lost their cultural foundation, the basis of traditional shamanism, they were not in a position to continue the tradition; they could not become proper shamans. As a result, the spiritual abilities that were transmitted to this generation by the Nanai began to manifest themselves in new cultural forms, which borrowed from mass media programmes about psychics. While continuing to perceive themselves as descendants of traditional shamans, these young "neo-shamans" claim that they use energy from outer space instead of the assistant spirits. Instead of singing and dancing to the beat of the shamanic drum, they, in some cases, influence the patient by



Figure 2. Young children in an amateur folk dance group are wearing stylized Nanai traditional costumes which have nothing in common with the authentic Nanai traditional clothing which are in use in Nanai villages to this day.



Figure 3. Nanai girls performing a fragment of a “shamanic prayer”, using self-made doll figures which remind of the figures of shamanic assisting spirits. None of the informants were able to recall any shamanic ritual similar to the one performed in this picture.



Figure 4. Ekaterina Beldy posing for the picture, imitating a shamanic dance. She is not a shaman herself.



Figure 5. Marina Eltun posing for the picture, imitating a shamanic dance. She is not a shaman herself.

means of passes and use a *withe*, an instrument which indicates the condition of the patient's energy. For this type of activity, the knowledge of the Nanai language and the traditional Nanai culture becomes unnecessary. On the contrary, the old people who know the traditional culture believe that these healers who use the *withe* are not real shamans, and ironically call them 'modern shamans'. In spite of that, many young 'shamans with *withe*' believe that in their healing practice they operate with the abilities that they have inherited from their ancestors-shamans and that their healing practices represent a multiplicity in the shamanic practice.

One of the women from this generation said,

I think that if you are a shaman you are both a hypnotist and a psychic at the same time. You have extrasensory abilities and something else. You see a person's aura. [...] This all is shamanic power. The more abilities a shaman has, the stronger he is. [...] The only problem is how we call these things. The Russians and the Nanai simply call it differently. There are shamans with *sevans* among the Nanai and extrasensory individuals (with energy) among Russians.



Figure 6. Vera Chubovna Geiker with her daughter and grandson in their home. Today, items of non-Nanai culture fill the space of their home and actively impact the way she presents the Nanai culture.

CONCLUSION

Shamanism is an extremely flexible phenomenon and is able to adapt in a changing situation. It is able to find its way between the opposite ideological systems like atheism and shamanism. The stability of shamanic mythology and ritual tradition is quite relative because the concepts of the spiritual world and the methods of communicating with them are deeply individual for each shaman. These skills are created and learned through the personal experience of an individual shaman. This variability determines the high degree of flexibility of shamanism and its capacity to change relatively easily under the impact of cultural shifts. The substitution of shaman drums with pans and pot lids, the possibility of concealing one's true convictions by putting on a mask of a member of the party, and the fundamental perception about the possibility of accomplishing the same 'shamanic' tasks using very different means (as there is no fundamental difference whether the shaman uses a drum or a *withe*) – all these are manifestations of the same characteristics of shamanism. These are the various manifestations of shamanism's ability to take a large number of forms, without altering its core essence.

NOTES

- ¹ *Withe* is a shamanic requisite which is believed to indicate the condition of the patient's energy.
- ² The Nanai (*nanaittsy* in Russian) are a people inhabiting the banks of the Amur River (Khabarovsk Krai, Russia) and its subsidiaries of the Ussuri River (Primorsk krai, Russia). A small group of Nanai live in China, between the rivers Sungari and Ussuri. There are about 12,000 Nanai living in Russia. The Nanai language is part of the southern group of Manchu-Tungus languages. Shamanism was one of the main religious beliefs for the Nanai. Their main activity was fishing, and fish was also their main diet. Fish was caught mainly in summers and autumns. The Nanai were also engaged in hunting; however, for them hunting was a secondary source of livelihood.
- ³ The information used in this article was collected during my fieldwork conducted during 1980–2007 in Khabarovsk region in Russia (in villages Naichin, Daerga, Troitskoe, Lidoga, Verkhni Nergen, Dada, Hayu, Achan).
- ⁴ The initials in the text mark the names of my informants; their full names are not given for the sake of privacy.
- ⁵ *Iangapany* are shamanic belts with pendants.
- ⁶ *Seveny* are dolls representing spirits.
- ⁷ *Toro* are shamanic sacrificial trees.
- ⁸ Ulchy are a southern group of a people, who speak Manchu-Tungus languages, and are close to Nanai.
- ⁹ *Kasa* is a ritual when the spirits of the dead are seen off to the next world.
- ¹⁰ (Russian: *Edinyi severnyi alfavit*) was created in 1930 at the Institute of the Peoples of the North for the use of linguistic minorities living in the north of the Soviet Union. The alphabet consisted of 32 Latin-based letters, some of which were equipped with diacritics.
- ¹¹ *Burhunchiky* are dolls representing spirits.
- ¹² *Meury* – a shamanic dance.
- ¹³ *Dyaka* are harmful spirits.

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