

REFLECTIONS ON THE FIGHT AGAINST THE IMAGE OF SHAMANISM



Sundström, Olle 2007. *Kampen mot "schamanismen": Sovjetisk religionspolitik gentemot inhemska religioner i Sibirien och norra Ryssland*. Studier av inter-religiösa relationer 40. Uppsala: Universitetsstryckeriet. [The Struggle against "Shamanism": Soviet Religious Policy towards the Indigenous Religions of Siberia and Northern Russia.] 221 pp. In Swedish.

In his book, Olle Sundström explores the Soviet decades-long attempts to silence "shamanism". Sundström uses quotation marks in writing about this topic and argues that in Soviet sources the term "shaman" is taken out of its initial context and applied specifically as a negative category according to Marxist-Leninist worldview. Thus, this book is dedicated less to the analysis of Siberian indigenes' real life transformations

and rather concentrates on the treatment of shamanism in Soviet ideology and religious policy. According to Sundström, the Soviets first created an image of the indigenous religious enemy and then executed a sophisticated strategy for demolishing their opponents, supposedly threatening the whole Soviet system at grass-roots level.

The monograph starts with extensive overviews of Marxism-Leninism, its approaches to religion and different periods of Soviet anti-religious policy. This context-building helps us to recall the main arguments of Marxist and Russian Communist classical authors and to understand the way that these ideas finally shaped Soviet political applications among the northern peoples.

The last and most important chapter is dedicated to the analysis of religious politics in Siberia and Russian North, concentrating predominantly on the early Soviet period (the 1920s and 30s). The author aims to provide readers with a really comprehensive frame for reflections, and his study also depicts a few features of shamanic revival, contextualised by post-Soviet developments.

Sundström's intention is to investigate ideological sources, the application and results of the Soviet religious politics in the case of indigenous groups of the northern areas of European Russia, Siberia and the Far East. In order to achieve his goal, Sundström explores the published sources and research of Soviet and Russian scholars as well as their international colleagues.

In the analysis of Marxist discourse, Sundström points out some meaningful controversies between the ideas of Marx and Lenin. As Sundström argues, Russian modifications of Marxist philosophy of religion had some specific and severe consequences for the northern peoples of Russia. Whereas Marx and Engels saw religion as a protest against human misery, Lenin interpreted religion as a hegemony over souls. Sundström also stresses that Marx's philosophical determinism was replaced by Lenin's activism.

So it becomes clear that Soviet approach to religion was shaped as rather hostile and aggressive.

Sundström points out that in the 1920s, the northern peoples and their shamans underwent a relatively peaceful period and shamanism's social position even strengthened. But during the following decade, shamans became considered exploiters of the working population of the northern peoples. Although a few anti-shamanic regulations were adopted already during the 1920s, in general this argument is clear and adequate. Consequently, shamans became repressed in the 1930s.

Repressions against shamans were ideologically prepared and followed by social campaigns meant to renegotiate the shaman's image. In popular and scholarly literature shamans became depicted as violent, cheating and profit-seeking representatives of the old capitalist system. Sundström considers evidence about shamans' misdeeds concerning their fellow northerners and the Communist regime, as well as official descriptions of struggle against shamans, "fragmentary and anecdotal". It is certainly complicated to compose a complete factual overview of the Communist-shamanic conflict in the Soviet Union.

Anyhow, I am not sure that the public image of shamans of that period can be categorised simply as anecdotal. It is true that during the 1930s even images of whole ethnic groups became extremely pejorative in the Soviet Union. The most famous of these is the Chukchi case. Beginning 1930, the Chukchi became the notorious heroes of Soviet anecdotes, being depicted as the most backward in literature and feature films. But if one reads papers from the 1920s, it appears that the Chukchi were then described as the most advanced people among the northern minorities, and relatively well off (developing trading business exclusively with the Americans, buying ships from Alaska, longing for American education, enjoying jazz). Definitely, beginning the 1930s, it was decided to introduce a totally different public image of the Chukchi in particular, and the same was basically done about all northern minorities.

Yet, it was not simply a mockery; this new image was carefully calculated. If people live well and shamans are smart and useful, there is no need for intervention. The new image of ridiculous northerners and particularly shamans prepared and supported reforms and repressions among the indigenous inhabitants of the North.

Sundström defines the public and official image of a shaman in early Soviet context as "a leading person among the peoples of the North who resisted the socialist reconstruction by referring to his or her indigenous worldview, ritualising this resistance in accordance with that worldview" (p. 199). So, according to Sundström, the Soviet ideologists produced an alleged causal relationship between the northern indigenous religion and people's resistance against the Soviet regime. But it is not clear whether it was an almost pure ideological invention or this image resembled the social reality of the period to a certain degree.

Ideologically unbiased researchers of later periods and indigenous sources from our fieldwork strongly support the concept of a prominent presence of religious issues in indigenous northerners' conflicts with administrators and party officials throughout the 1930s. It is worth considering that accents of pressure were different from the actual

effects of anti-shamanic campaigns. To illustrate with an example: when shamanism was abolished publicly, it went underground. Official ideology regarded shamanism merely as a superficial anti-communist ideology and actual reasons for contradictions were economic and power relationships. But indigenous people considered shamanism real and kept it going even if it was publicly dismissed.

My calculated impression is that there was a definite connection between religion, resistance and repressions. It can be admitted that, in general, the Soviet propaganda is adequate in this respect. But in more specific cases, ideologically accurate accusations in shamanism were often applied as formal arguments in repressing indigenous people.

Sundström reveals how the Soviet anti-religious policy was later changed periodically but remained basically the same. Changes in its implementation were simply tactical, depending on various political and social factors but also on the individual approaches of the current Communist Party leaders. The 1930s was a period of especially harsh measures, aimed at liquidating religion completely. Basically, the authorities managed to make religion (including shamanism) disappear from the public sphere.

In conclusion, one can easily recognise that the structure of the monograph is clear and logical. The main emphasis is laid on the analysis of the developments in the 1920s–30s and these are really decisive decades in the recent history of Russian northern indigenous minorities. Characteristically, the destiny of “shamanism” reflects these major changes in a distinguished way. The author has succeeded in providing a systematically conceptualised and creatively accomplished study of Siberian native peoples lives during the past hundred years.

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