

Evenki Shamanistic Practices in Soviet Present and Ethnographic Present Perfect

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Abstract

In this article, I explore cultural effects of Soviet religious policies in aboriginal Siberia by looking at the transformation of ritual identities and practices in a group of Evenki hunters and herders between the 1920s and the 1990s. I focus on meanings of *buhadyl* ("spirits") which Evenki associate with old things and dead people. I read meanings and ritual frameworks of dealing with the *buhadyl* as sites for re-imagining Evenki identities and categories of belonging in the context of Soviet society and Soviet ethnographic gaze. In this article, I use results of my own field research in Central Siberia, as well as newly available Soviet archival materials. *Key words:* Siberia, Soviet, shamanism, identity

In her study of ritual in socialist Transylvania, Gail Kligman suggests that, despite secularizing policies of the socialist state and rapid social change brought by these policies, religious rituals "have increasingly become the organizing structures through which communities...reconstitute themselves as communities." "Ritual system," she argues, provided "the source of solidarity" as well as a "stable organizational locus of village social relations and identity in this otherwise much-transformed environment" (1988:9, 263-4). The ethnographic case that I present here confirms this observation, yet it also shows that the "ritual system" is itself hardly stable under state socialism. In this article, I explore changes in religious cultural forms brought about in the course of socialist construction.

The research that led to this article grew out of an attempt to systematize field notes which I took in the 1980s and 1990s regarding *buhadyl*—"the invisible beings" or "spirits"—which Evenki hunters and herders of Central Siberia associate with old things and dead people. In searching for complementary sources, I looked at classical ethnographies of the Evenki people, most of which are based on field studies conducted in the 1920s and 1930s, and I was struck by differences between these materials and my own. First, in the late-Soviet period the *buhadyl* came to occupy a much more central place in Evenki ritual practice, and, secondly, since the early-Soviet period they appear to have been "domesticated," as Dragadze (1993: 150) puts this in another context, or having made almost a Levi-Straussian transformation from "nature" to "culture." In contrast to the 1920s and 1930s when these "spirits" inhabited such "outer" spaces as rock formations, river rapids, and the forest "far

away," in the 1980s and 1990s they denoted "inner" locations such as the inside of tents, food, relatives, and burial grounds. The purpose of this article is threefold: to detail this contrast; to chart changes in Evenki ritual practices and identities that occurred during the Soviet period; and to theorize state socialism in the North as a site of religious cultural production.

Anthropological theories of state socialism systematically focused on such secular contexts as the "economy of shortage," politics of resource allocation and so on. The "ideological" is predominantly understood in this literature as the sphere of secular socialist symbolism or ethno-nationalism (Lane 1981; Verdery 1991; Hann 1993, 1994; Sampson 1991). The reverse also holds: in volumes of ethnographic research on religion and ritual across the extensive Soviet space there is very little attempt to theorize socialism as a context of these practices, with Humphrey (1983) and Vitebsky (1995) as exceptions which prove the rule in Siberian context. Mircea Eliade (1964), for example, identified Tungus rituals ("Tungus" is an older colonial name of the Evenki) as original forms of his archaic "ecstatic model" of a generic "shamanism"; and most of the studies of North-Siberian ritual have focused on "traditional" social contexts and traditional ethnographic topics such as kin-based social organization, pre-Soviet or pre-colonial cosmologies, and healing practices (see Shirokogoroff 1935; Michael 1963; Diószegi 1968, Diószegi and Hoppal 1978; Gurvich et al. 1992; Gurvich and Sokolova 1990). From this point of view, the socialist condition in the North is seen as the one of either "progress" of "modern" socialist ideology at the expense of the religious one (Sergeev 1955; Uvachan 1984; Gurvich and Sokolova 1991) or the systematic censorship and repressions of the indigenous religious practices by Soviet state (Balzer 1983; Forsyth 1992).

There is no question that religious practices under the Soviet state were subject to political repression. I would like to start my analysis here, however, by distinguishing the fact of religious repressions, which culminated in the area where I worked in the 1938 purge of Evenki shamans, from "repression" as a way to conceptualize power relations. The latter reifies, in my view, religious practices as things that are either destroyed or not, and it also draws a sharp boundary between "religious" and "secular," with "the Soviet" identified unambiguously on the "secular" side of this divide. Following Foucault's (1980) re-formulation of the problematic of repression as production, I approach 20th-century Evenki ritual practices and identities not as being culturally assimilated or surviving underneath the Soviet secular order despite its repressive policies, but as results of Soviet cultural construction—although they are results that are contrary to the Soviet-constructivist design. In other words, I approach Soviet *repressive* policies as *socially-constructive*, and I outline how they can be analyzed ethnographically as a "religious regime," to use Mart Bax's words (1991:9)—as power relationships that are culturally-constitutive of ritual forms and identities.

My reading here of Evenki ritual practices as components of the Russian/Soviet cultural and political fabric, and not as manifestations of "traditional" cultural types, owes much to Michael Taussig's (1987) restatement of the problematic of South American shamanism as culturally produced in the context of colonial encounter. Shamanistic healing, he argues, "develops its force from the colonially generated wildness"—it is a result of "attribution of wildness to what one could call colonizable

species, with wildness imputed to the other, objectified, then taken back as a magical substance, as it is said to be done with the fat from the bodies of Indians of the Peruvian Highlands." In trying "to tame the wildness this way, so that it can serve [colonial] order as counterimage, wildness must perforce retain its difference" (1987:127, 221, 220). Indeed, I argue here that the otherness of Evenki rituals operate within the Soviet governmentality, as both a counterimage of Soviet "civilization" (Slezkine 1994) and as a site of Soviet construction. But I also treat Evenki ritual not as a manifestation of the generic "shamanistic" matrix, but as culturally specific set of practices which should be understood in the context of Soviet religious policies.

In this article, I treat the "religious" as one modality of the "irrational"—a main subject of the Soviet surveillance and reform practices (Ssorin-Chaikov 1998). I focus on two main locations of this "irrational"/"religious" otherness in northern Soviet society. The first is the imaginary space of "ethnographic present perfect" of museums and scholarly texts, where indigenous "shamanism" is envisioned as consistent set of practices. The second is the "Soviet present" where, I argue, Evenki ritual practices proliferated by avoiding naming and narration, and by the loss of "shamanism" as a fixed signifier within ritual frameworks. With respect to both locations, I emphasize the importance of looking at Soviet ethnography not merely as a historical source but also a site of these displacements.

This article draws on field and archival research that I conducted in 1988-89 and 1993-95 among Evenki of the Podkamennaya Tunguska tributary of the Yenisei river basin. This area falls within the northern permafrost zone, yet remains to the south of the tundra/forest divide, firmly in the Sub-Arctic forest (*taiga*). I worked with reindeer herders and hunters who are employed in a collective farm which I call Katonga, and I also worked with newly available archival materials such as files on Evenki ritual experts accumulated during collectivization of the 1930s.

Buhadyl Historicized

Evenki whom I interviewed in 1988-89 and 1993-95 describe *buhadyl* (pl. *buhadyl*) as a "spirit" associated with old things and dead people. Outsiders of a given home or family run the risk of falling ill by "catching" (*diavuchadiami*) the *buhadyl* if they make their presence too obvious—for example, by greeting people upon arrival or departure. You should not say "hello" or "good-bye," and you also should not touch old things, circle around tent or house, or be seated beyond *be*—a guest side of the tent. Similarly you should not help yourself to food: it should be offered to you in such a way that it passes through the hands of your hosts. People who are most predisposed to catch the *buhadyl* are not merely guests or outsiders such as ethnographers, but also spouses, who come from other families, and particularly newly born children for whom catching the *buhadyl* can prove lethal. *Buhadyl* accumulate in people, as they grow old, and in their burial grounds, when they die. In this form the *buhadyl* are dangerous even for relatives of old people or of the dead, which makes younger Evenki relate to elders with mixed feeling of respect and fear, and leads everyone to avoid abandoned old camps and burial grounds.

The *buhadyl* serve here as markers of Evenki identity—"that is our faith; newcomers don't have them," I learned in 1989, with "newcomers" referring to the

non-native residents of Katonga. Avoidance of the *buhadyl*, and the relational dynamics of social categories such as "Evenki," "relatives," "youth" and so on expressed in the practice of this avoidance, constructs a ritual space which, in the words of Victor Turner, is "in and out of secular social structure," revealing, "however fleetingly, some recognition...of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and that has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (1969:97).

Yet the centrality of the *buhadyl* for "the" faith of Katonga Evenki, in addition to these spirits' domestic and age-based meanings, are relatively new phenomena. In earlier ethnographies, the *buhadyl* figure as relatively marginal among other spirits. They are footnoted rather than discussed at length, and they have a very different meaning. Ethnographer and Soviet reformer Suslov, who worked in Katonga area in 1926, reports *buhadyl* as a name for "master of a hill," "master of a rock," and "master of foundation of a hill" (respectively, *uru mukunin*, *ekma mukunin*, and *ngoko mukunin*): "It inhabits rocks and mountain ridges. The curved line of rainbow is attributed to the *buhady*. The *buhady* appears in the form of a copper pipe with holes in it."¹ Anisimov suggests a similar association of the *buhadyl* and rock formations (1958:29), adding elsewhere that they also inhabit the forest, and even appear in the image of the wild reindeer or moose (cited in Vasilevich 1969: 230-2, see also Anisimov 1951).

Glafira Vasilevich translates *buhady* as "relating to a place," from *buha* ("world"),² which is a concept that, unlike the *buhady* itself, is central in the Evenki cosmologies. In line with the tenets of the Soviet Marxist school, Vasilevich uncovers in the meaning of *buha* "pre-shamanistic" and "shamanistic" layers of what she calls "successive stages" of "development" of Evenki cosmologies (1972:29). She argues that the basic meaning of *buha* had two components—first, "locality," "surrounding area," "earth"; and, second, "climate," "weather," "sky." This basic meaning was elaborated in Evenki culture to signify, on the one hand, "earth," "lower" or "nether" world and, on the other hand, "the upper world." With the modifiers "below" (*khargi*) and "above" (*ugi*), the *buha* also signified "the master of the lower world" (*khargi buha*) and "the master of the upper world" (*uge buha*). The introduction of Orthodox Christianity among the Evenki led to the further elaboration of *buha* as "paradise," "god," "icon," and, at the same time, as "hell," "devil" and "evil" (1969:232, 1963:48-9, 1972:34-5).

In the light of these meanings of the *buha*, the difference between the meanings of the *buhadyl* in classical ethnographies and in contemporary interpretations of Katonga Evenki appears sharp, almost symmetrical—the classic one relating to the "world," the mountains and the forest, and the more contemporary one to tents, food, and burial grounds. This contrast is particularly visible in the Evenki narratives of travel between the "upper" and "lower" worlds. Here is an example of such a narrative, which Vasilevich recorded in 1935 in Katonga area:

A man starts downwards. He found an opening and descended. There he found people, and a yurt [tent], and he went in. There was a man, two children, and two women. The man who arrived sat down between the two women. He scarcely set down when the flame in the campfire crackled. "What is the fire crackling for?" said the man. Afterward when the newcomer

touched one of the woman, she fell ill. "It was when the fire crackled, that I fell ill. Call the shaman." They called for a shaman. The shaman came and shamanized, but could not affect the cure. They sent for the great shaman, and he came and began to shamanize. He found the illness—it came from above. He cast it out and sent it away. The man turned away, found the opening, and came back to earth. The woman got well. (Vasilevich 1963:55)

In such stories, people who travel to the "other side" are frequently invisible to the locals of the other *buha* (see *ibid.*:53-6). This invisibility and illness, caused by the visit, parallels the harm of the *buhadyl* in the "new" sense of the word; "the invisible" (*nevidimye*) is one way to render the word *buhadyl* in Russian; and there are also similarities in healing. Vasilevich cites *sevenche*, one of the Evenki words for "shamanizing," "healing," as derived from *seven*, a "plate for melting fat" (1969:236). Such a plate was used for healing the effects of the *buhadyl* in the "new" sense of the word. For example, in the summer of 1989, a woman in a forest camp where I stayed got ill and claimed that she caught the *buhadyl* of a recently deceased man. Her husband, a son of the dead man, put some fire coals on the plate, spit some margarine over them and circled the smoke around the woman. He described this circling using the Evenki word *samadiami*; from which, as he and his camp companions told me, *saman*, or *shaman*, is the person who makes such a circle, or a person who sets some fat to smoke over the fire coals.

These similarities paradoxically highlight an important contrast. In classical Evenki ethnographies, "people of the other world" (*khargil*, from *khargi*, "below") included the relatives and the dead from "this" world,³ but, as in the narrative that I quoted above, they were not always "relatives" or "dead." In the ethnographic materials of the 1920s and 1930s, to deal with them was a task of an expert healer (*saman*) who should be "great" enough to help. On the contrary, in the interviews that I collected in the 1980s and 1990s, the *buhadyl* explicitly marked the boundary of "relatives" and "non-relatives"; and, in the healing that I witnessed, the strength of the healer consisted in being related to the *buhadyl* that caused the illness. "I should do it, because my wife caught the *buhadyl* in our tent, and they are most likely my father's," commented the husband who did the healing. Finally, another important difference is visible in how feverishly this man denied that what he had done could be called shamanizing:

I am not a shaman; I never shamanize; in fact, I don't like these *buhadyl*, and I want to know as little as possible about them. I just have to put some fat on fire coals sometimes—you know how to do it, it's simple: basically, you pour some fat on the fire coals, circle them in the tent, and see if it works.

Now I have met an old Evenki woman whose rendition of the *buhadyl* was consistent with earlier ethnographies, in that they live "far away" and "in the forest" (*goro* and *dylö*). She also told me stories which happened "long time ago" (*goro*, which is the same word as for the "far away") with sometimes one person, at other times whole convoys of people and reindeer, falling through the ground to the "lower world" (*khargi buha*) while migrating to a new camp. She hardly ever speaks, however, about this meaning of the *buha* and the *buhadyl* with the younger Evenki such as the husband who performed the healing. She lives in the forest quite far away from the Katonga village, and she practically does not speak any Russian—while

most of the younger Evenki barely speak the Evenki language (particularly the ones who grew up in the 1980s and who, ironically, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, are more openly religious). These young Evenki, in turn, cannot communicate well with the old woman, and they are hesitant to speak with her anyway as she occupies the very center of the social space of "tradition" of the *buhadyl* in *their* sense of the word.

The silence of this old woman, as well as the reluctance of the person who performed the healing to call himself a shaman, invokes yet another Evenki word for "shamanizing"—*nimgan* or *nimgala*—which Vasilevich renders as both "to shamanize" and "to narrate"—"to retell" a piece of folklore about a former life... a myth, legend, tale, story," "to 'report' ideas accumulated by generations, and historical facts" (Vasilevich 1963:46, 1972:40). These ritual and healing practices, I argue, are embedded in the politics of narration and avoidance of narration—in the politics of silence, secrecy and invisibility which predate the 20th-century contexts but were nonetheless exacerbated by Soviet political and ethnographic surveillance of indigenous ritual practices and identities.

In this section I emphasized the contrast between older and more recent meanings of the *buhadyl*. Undoubtedly, however, these differences form a relationship, if not an elaboration, of each other. For instance, both fields of meaning of the *buhadyl* can be related, in a Levi-Straussian manner, through the interpretation of "burial ground" as being simultaneously "far away in the forest" and "inside" the milieu of relatives, as gates to "the other world" which are both very far and very close to the world of "us." Indeed, in classical anthropology to uncover such a relationship was a way to explain the multiplicity of meaning in a cultural "system." The question is if, for the people that I interviewed, there is such a "system" to begin with, and, if so, what are social conditions of such a "system" that are formed in the context of my and other ethnographers' search for one. In other words, it is not enough here to point out that Evenki understandings of the *buhadyl* form a flow of partial and historically fluid usage. This usage is complicated by the fact that searching for indigenous systems of meaning was one of the functions of state ethnography and one of the forms of state presence in places like Katonga. I will now turn to the cultural categories and meanings of *this* (ethnographic) practice. But before I do so, let me provide some background on Evenki society and the Russian administration of Siberia.

Tributary and Religious Identity Regimes in Tsarist Siberia

Sub-Arctic hunters and herders who call themselves Evenki, also known under an older colonial name of Tungus, hardly constituted "stateless societies" or "isolated communities" in the sense of classical modern anthropology. Before Cossack bands exerted Muscovite rule over Central Siberia in the 17th century, these peoples were integrated into tributary conglomerates of the Inner Asia which thrived on sable fur—the Sub-Arctic currency that still remains valuable. The water and sleigh routes of these tributary allegiances gravitated to the south, and, in the Yenisei river basin where I worked, towards the upper part of this basin and Lake Baikal. The Cossacks switched these allegiances westward—along a thin line of fortresses and winter blockhouses that connected Yeniseisk, Turukhansk and other Russian posts

in the Yenisei basin to Moscow and to the European market. Like other indigenous groups of the Sub-Arctic, under Russian rule Evenki formed a social estate of "tributized subjects" (*iasashnye*)—suppliers of fur tribute to the coffers of the Tsar.

The Russian Empire, as well as the earlier tributary conglomerates in the Sub-Arctic which Russia replaced, spoke the language of religious differences. The meanings of *iasak* ("tribute") as "law" and "punishment" had both military and religious connotations: its Turkic root signified "law," "state" as well as "sin" (Bakhrushin 1955); Siberian aborigines paid tribute rather than regular taxes to Moscow not simply because they were conquered but also because they were not Christian (at least for some time); and in the 17th century they swore their tributary allegiances "according to their faith" (Slezkine 1994). After the 18th century the Russian Orthodox missions are increasingly present in Siberian North (Znamenski 1999), and, after Count Speranskii's 1822 reform of the imperial regime of differences, the Russian subjects of "different faith" (*inovertsy*) became "people of different birth" (*inorodtsy*; see Slocum 1998). Yet as late as the 1920s the terms "our law" and "our faith" were used synonymously in the Evenki/Russian encounters in the Yenisei river basin.⁴

Religious differences provided this tributary regime with opportunities to expand, but also with some obstacles. Taxation was based on the fixed locality of "tributary districts" (*iasashnye volosti*) or "administrative clans" (*administrativnye rody*) as they were called after 1822. Yet, the Evenki prohibitions to settle or wander near burial grounds, and the fear of the ancestor spirits, which led one anthropologist to call this belief a "black [negative] ancestor cult" (Rytchkov 1922), put "administrative clan" territories into the state of constant drift. A good example of such a drift can be found in Evenki genealogies collected in 1926 by statistician Nikolai Sushilin on the Podkamennaia Tunguska river. One of these narratives speaks of Dzhangoul', a leader of the "Shaniagir clan." "Before the Russians came," he waged successful wars with other "clans." He accepted, however, "the power of the Russians without resistance and was recorded into the [taxation] book of the First Kurkogir Clan." The narrative describes him as a great warrior and a great shaman who welded the broken feet of a man with copper which he melted in his mouth, adding some fire coals, and having two people blow stokers into his ears. Subsequent history of the Shaniagir clan is visible in what Sushilin calls "clan cemeteries." These cemeteries do not form, compact localities but are, rather, individual burials spread over a vast territory between the Nizhnaia Tunguska and Angara rivers.⁵

The social geography of this region was constituted, therefore, through closely inter-related tributary and ritual frameworks, which formed mechanisms of both social gravitation and distancing. The Evenki social groups of the Tsarist period were not clans but loose "neighborhoods" (Karlova 1982), which carried "clan" identities in a limited number of contexts. "Administrative clans" such as the "First Kurkogir" united people of diverse origins and of different migration areas, and only for tax purposes (Okladnikov 1968); and ancestral burial grounds were subjects of "negative" gravitation to such an extent that, according to a 19th-century observer, "after a burial, the camp takes off, covering their tracks in the snow or blocking them with trees so that the dead person does not get up and follow them."⁶

Political Economy of Shamanism in Soviet Ethnography and Reforms

According to Vasilevich, in the 1930s Evenki worked "for the first time" in collective-farm reindeer "brigades" yet they largely retained "their former living conditions" and ideology: "As of old, the brigades of one or two families lived with the reindeer in the forest...; [a]s formerly, a hunter was alone all day in the taiga..." and the Soviet "[p]olitical agents attached to the brigades often were not sufficiently well prepared to give convincing explanations of the origin of the universe, man, and the animals" (1963:48).

Like some of the elders whom I knew in the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of these political agents were locals hastily accepted into the Young Communist League, sent for a year-long study of Marx's *Capital*, and then appointed as heads of reindeer brigades and hunting teams. The key reformers, however, were outsiders who frequently combined their reform practices with ethnographic research. In fact, most detailed accounts of Evenki shamanistic practices in the Podkamennaia Tunguska river basin were authored by three persons who were also involved in Soviet construction: Suslov, who created local councils ("Soviets") on the Podkamennaia Tunguska river in 1926; Sushilin, who conducted there the census of 1926-27; and Anisimov, who worked in the Baikit boarding school in 1928-31. For these men, state reforms provided fieldwork opportunities; their fieldwork, in turn, was also a means to extend the Soviet project further into forest and tundra.

This situation of "power and knowledge" was clearly articulated in a set of instructions that were circulated in the Soviet "acculturation bases" established in the mid-1920s. According to these instructions, the tasks of "final liquidation of capitalist elements and classes in general, destruction of causes of class differentiation and exploitation, overcoming of the survivals of the capitalist economy and consciousness, and turning all the country's population into active agents of construction of classless society" was to be carried out by the local Soviets "in conjunction with the studies of local lore and customs" (*zadachi kraevedcheskikh organizatsii*) vested in local museums.⁷ During collectivization the students of local customs (*kraevedy*) were urged to "make a significant contribution...[particularly] in the sphere of exchange and supplies," and the museum in Tura, north of Katonga, received an assignment from the Provincial Executive Committee "to collect materials on...distribution of wealth within the Evenki families."⁸ This brought up a question of ideological forms which naturalized this wealth distribution, and led to the compilation of data on local ritual experts. These files on "social stratification" among indigenous hunters and herders actually constituted "the state" before the 1950s (Ssorin-Chaikov 1998); and the political economy approach of these scholars/reformers formed, at the same time, discursive and political structures of new collectives.

It is in this "power and knowledge" situation that the distinction between "pre-shamanistic" and "shamanistic" rituals and world-views, which I mentioned regarding Vasilevich's analysis of *buha*, came to the forefront. This distinction was widely discussed in Siberianist ethnography, and perhaps was best articulated in a well-known article by I. S. Vdovin "Social Foundations of the Ancestor Cult." It had to do with what George Marcus and Dick Cushman (1982) call "ethnographic realism"—with the search for socio-economic structure that, in the words of

Frederick Engels, “constitutes the *real* foundation...of religious, philosophical and other views of [a given]...historical epoch” (cited in Vdovin 1978:405; my emphasis). In this “real foundation,” Siberianists distinguished “primitive communal” clans or “patriarchal families” on the one hand and, on the other, “neighborly (territorial) communities” which connect “isolated” individual families in “entirely different [from primitive-communist clan] relations.” The latter was based on a greater division of labor and on private property over products of fur hunting and reindeer herding (Vdovin 1978:413, 416; Dolgikh and Levin 1951).

The former “stage” was expressed ideologically in the form of an “ancestor cult,” which led, according to Vdovin, to “the combination in one person” of the social position “of clan leader and ‘the guardian of faith.’” The shaman and the Shaniagir clan leader Dzhangoul’, whom I mentioned in the previous section, offers an illustration of this. “It would be better,” argues Vdovin (1978:408-9), however, “to call this [clan’s] representative not a shaman, but an elder, head of a clan or sub-group or a clan, who himself held also the functions of ‘guardian of faith.’” In contrast, Vdovin defines shaman as a specialized healer, and argues that the appearance of such healers in Northern Siberia occurred during the Russian colonial period—between the 17th and 19th centuries in different parts of Siberia—as relatively “egalitarian” indigenous “patriarchal family” systems were integrated into more “hierarchical” colonial ones, and as clan-based organization gave way to administrative and territorial, based on a greater division of labor and the Russian tax collection. In this context, the argument goes, the ritual leader’s “function of clan headman has ceased to exist,” since “by that time the character of production had radically changed, the clan’s communal foundation had been destroyed, [and] the shamanist functions had apparently been isolated.” As the disappearance of the “ancestor cult” was completed by Christianization, “shamans...have lost their clan links and have become ordinarily professional shamans...whose main function is the healing of the sick...” (Vdovin 1978:409).

Mention should be made that only one part of this argument dealt with the disappearance of “genealogical” clan in the sense used by Morgan and Engels. The other part, which was equally important, elaborated on the question of why, in the Russian colonial context, clan *ideology* didn’t disappear but, on the contrary, was reified and reinforced. This had to do with understanding, first, the structure of taxation and the Russian indirect rule and, secondly, super-structural (ideological) forms of inequalities in the context of state and mercantile capitalism.

As A. P. Okladnikov puts this, “clans among the Tungus, similar to [Russian] peasant and suburban communities, bounded their members into a system of mutual obligations in relations with the state” (1968: 101). Kinship and clan identities in this contexts, the argument goes, had nothing in common with what he calls “real” (“genealogical”) clans. They were simply ways to register indigenous tributary obligations. Yet, as Dobrova-Iadrintseva argued in the 1920s, this “clan” had “features of a mere overt...legislated...unit only at the beginning...Over a long period of time and due to the bond that naturally developed [*estestvenno slozhivsheisia spaiiki*], based on tradition, on the foundations of economic character, and on the practices of everyday life,” this unit became “a newly established form of clan community [*zanovo slozhivsheisia formoi rodovoi upravly*].”⁹⁹

At its socio-economic base, this “newly established form of clan community” had been already divided into “isolated families” and, in fact, class-like groups of richer and poorer herders and hunters. “If to draw lines of kinship connections” in such a community, however, these class-like divisions are not visible and “all nomadic group appears as schematic web of these lines” (Bilibin 1933:44). Kinship and clan identities in this context not merely created tributary subjects but also masked social inequalities. And just as the tributary relations were forms of extraction of surplus—the surplus product (fur) which then entered market and which made the Russian order in Siberia a “feudal-military” yet ultimately “capitalist” formation (see Lenin 1956 for a similar argument with respect to peasantry)—the existence of a “clan-based community” indicated “not the primitive-communist foundations with harmonic [social] interests and lack of [class] contradictions but semi-feudal relationships” (Maslov 1934:53).

According to this argument, large-scale reindeer herders were “supported by their... ‘clansmen’ (relatives)” in a relationships of mutual aid and gift exchange. In these relationships, therefore, the labor of poorer hunters and herders does not take the form of wage labor. The “exploitation of man by man is expressed here in naked form... rather than in mystified commodity form.” As the serf of classical feudalism, from the point of view of the Marxian analysis, “does not receive payment from the proprietor, but, on the contrary, the proprietor receives tribute from the serf,” poorer herders support the richer ones with their labor in exchange for the use of the reindeer gifted to them by the rich for hunting and maintaining their own households (Bilibin 1933:44-6). Gift and help appear here as a form of lease.

Being a “relative” in these transactions was perhaps the only “fetishized” political-economic meaning of these relationships. Hence the deconstructivist zeal of early Soviet ethnographers and reformers took aim at “kinship” as an ideology which was maintained both from the “outside”—by the Russian system of indirect rule—and from the “inside” by local elites and their ideologues (shamans). With the “decomposition of the patriarchal communal system,” the old “communal ancestor no longer made sense” and it was replaced “by the exercises of shamans who gradually assumed the functions of advisors in occupational and spiritual affairs, like the elders of the patriarchal family communities... The isolated (small) family gradually became spiritually enslaved by shamans” (Vdovin 1978:414; my emphasis). The deconstruction of kinship ideology involved, therefore, the deconstruction of the power of shamans. Consider, for example, an encounter of a Soviet reformer with Evenki shamans in the late 1920s:

At the meeting... there were a plenty of faithful shamanists who proposed to me to test the power of shamans. They assured us that they can make us unable to move and asked me to guarantee that they would not be held responsible if anything happens with me... I decided to take up the challenge... The shamans got together, and put a table and a bench in the middle of the room. We were seated in the bench, and for two hours they shamanized over us, with fire and without fire. Then they walked around us with a shawl, pronounced an incantation, and then, on a command of the shamans, all the Tungus left the room, and we were left in alone. We were told that not all if finished yet. We waited for some time and then sent the owner of the

apartment to ask the shamans if it was all over. The owner came back and said that we can go join them [the shamans] or go to sleep. In the entrance to the house we found the shawl hung across the door, and we learned that it should have blocked our way. We took the shawl and brought it over to the shamanness. How disappointed they were when we showed up healthy. The spark of the disbelief is lit, and we need now to engage in cultural and enlightenment work.¹⁰

This "enlightenment work" constituted new structures of citizenship in rural and northern Russia until the mid-1950s. Village household registrars carried "class identity" entries, and from the time of Polar Census of 1926-27, regional authorities accumulated systematic files on local "social stratification" to which Suslov and other ethnographers duly contributed. These files describe dozens of "malicious shamans," who—"until the present time"—were not merely "actively engaged in shamanism" but for whom shamanism was the "main occupation." They were reported to shamanize "only for payment" and in fact having "an unearned income of 1920 rubles as a result."¹¹

After 1928, local rich came under fire as the main obstacle in collectivizing rural and indigenous areas of the Soviet Union. They were deprived of voting rights and taxed for the "excessive" and, in the light of the labor theory of value, "unearned" wealth. In Siberia, however, this concerned not merely richer herders—the *kulaki*—and "former princes, traders, and speculators," but also shamans. Instructions about the deprivation of the voting rights that were circulated in the area concerned "all individuals practicing shamanism at the present moment"; they specify that "notwithstanding who [in the family] shamanizes—husband or wife—the deprivation affects both of them," as well as "the members of his family whose age makes them eligible to vote"; and they consider particularly suspect the types who "formally abandoned the shamanistic practice but in fact continue to shamanize, though without gaining any income from it."¹² On the basis of such information, in 1938 the majority of local shamans were purged, and, for the remaining population of Katonga area, shamanistic gatherings prohibited.

Ritual Practices in Soviet Present and Ethnographic Present-Perfect

I have argued that early Soviet shamanistic studies looked at the role of indigenous ritual practices in the context of the Tsarist "old regime." This research was embedded in state policies whose purpose was to construct the periphery of the Soviet social order as islands of the Tsarist old regime which then could be reformed. Ethnographic materials should be read, therefore, as part of a larger semiotic field, and in the context of other repositories of data, such as, for example, this Inferior Ministry file:

His shamanistic labor did not stop until the present time [i.e. until the 1930s], and in doing so he exploited the surrounding population, demanding money, best produce and valuable fur for his shamanizing. Active enemy of the people and supporter of the neighboring *kulaki* [the rich]. During his shamanistic seances he conducted agitation that the *kulaki* are hard-working people, that they gifted commodities away all their lives, and that they should be elected to the board of the collective farm and the Nomadic Soviet. At

the same time, he agitated against building the hospital and the school—at the very same time when the enemies of the people set fire to the school [in Baikit] and burned the Evenki children. All the shamans have close liaisons with each other, in particular, Maidar Gildeev, Alexander Tasachi, Damid Topochenok, and others who, in an equally well-organized manner, agitated for dissolving the collective farms and for disrupting economic and other cultural measures of the Soviet power.¹³

These files were generated in a social situation where shamans confessed to their “past” practice and pledged their allegiances to the new secular political order. One Evenki shaman admitted “that shamanism is deceit and that it does not bring about any good.” He promised “to stop shamanizing, . . . lash and report to the Native Soviet anyone who asks me to shamanize.”¹⁴ Another confessed that,

At the time of organization of Soviet power, I was a shaman, until 1927 when I abandoned shamanism, and was rehabilitated in my rights and elected as a head of the Agata Nomadic Soviet. . . . On the way to Bol'shoi Porog [“the Big Rapids” trading post], I met three tents whose members asked me to conduct the [shamanistic] ritual. . . . I agreed, and I think that in doing so I cheated the Soviet power, as well as the poor and the *batraki* of Agata who voted me out of the board of the Native Soviet and want to deprive me of the voting rights. I hereby ask you to rehabilitate me in voting rights and I promise to answer in front of the proletarian court if I ever repeat such wrongdoing.¹⁵

Another petition to restore membership of “former shamans” in local Soviets submit that the petitioner “stopped shamanizing for the last four years” and “surrendered [*sdal*] shamanistic costume and drum.”¹⁶ Many of these “surrendered” costumes and drums ended up in District and Provincial Museums. These museum collections, both material and textual, form another repository of the “old regime.” The social process under consideration here is, therefore, not merely one of political suppression of indigenous ritual practices but also one of the making of the Soviet ethnographic perspective. The politics of the Soviet construction in Siberia made it, on the one hand, virtually impossible for Soviet and East-European ethnographers to study “actually existing” ritual practices in Soviet-type societies. This silence helped to sustain, however, taken-for-granted assumptions of both Soviet construction and Soviet ethnography—namely, that indigenous ritual practices were moribund on the one hand, and, on the other, that they “still” existed underneath or in the backwoods of the Soviet society, and, thus, could be used in “traditional” reconstructions.

By the 1980s, the treatment of the “traditional” social contexts became in the Soviet anthropology more Durkheimian than Marxist. The texts of shamanistic folklore were treated as “a prism of a whole complex of social institutions” (Novik 1990:181). Yet these institutions were nonetheless projected to the “other” time of tradition (e.g., Gemuev 1990; Funk 1997; Smoliak 1992). The state and ethnographic accounts of Evenki ritual experts put them simultaneously inside the state political regime and at a distance—the Evenki inhabited, in Soviet society, a chronotope of modes of production or a landscape of cultural ecology. Yet because these people entered Soviet society as objects of reforms, their formational identity was altered at

the same time that it was ethnographically fixed. The arrival of Soviet reformers and ethnographers signaled the arrival of Soviet "modernity" among Evenki and other indigenous groups. Members of Evenki communities were made, as a result of these descriptions, not into primitive communists or peripheral capitalists but into "modern" Soviet subjects—Soviet subjects with a primitive-communist or peripheral-capitalist "past," contained in archival and museum depositories. Therefore, the Soviet ethnographic genre was cast not so much in the "ethnographic present" as in "ethnographic present perfect"—describing an ethnographic present that became a museum-like residue at the very point of its visibility.

This does not mean that people stopped shamanizing. It seems in fact that healing practices proliferated together with the progress of the Soviet construction. As a result of Soviet reforms, about half of the Katonga Evenki don't live in the forest all year long. Like many other northern villages, Katonga started to accumulate graves, and people started to live on graves. (In the forest, you should not just migrate away from the grave as soon as you finished the funeral, you also should not bury several people at the same place; big cemeteries accumulate spirits of the dead and multiply their harmful energy.) In the village that was built on graves, there were a lot of dead souls around that were not taken proper care of; the dead started to haunt people even more, people started to fall ill more frequently, and, hence, shamanize. "Katonga became an unhealthy place," commented one Evenki woman, "there are too many *buhadyl* around."

As the Soviet state expanded in the Sub-Arctic through management of indigenous bodies and populations, ethnographers were collecting the last of the shamanistic attributes that remained in the forest, and museum perspectives on rituals of the "past" gradually became a new site of indigenous traditions and identities, centered in urban and intellectual contexts. This suggests a route for analysis that would follow cultural reification of indigenous ritual practices, and focus on sites for indigenous identity politics—museums, "houses of culture," ethnic festivals, and so on—that were produced through such reification (Balzer 1993, 1996; Grant 1995). I would like here to suggest, in a preliminary outline, another research direction. Rather than focusing on the reifying effects of the Soviet religious policies and post-Soviet "invention of tradition," I would like to emphasize the disappearance of "shamanism" as a fixed signifier in ritual contexts at the same time as it appeared in the museum and ethnographic ones—a process that was neatly captured by a remark made in the 1960s by a Buriat school-teacher to anthropologist Caroline Humphrey: "It is true what they told you: there are no shamans. But we are all a little bit shamans" (1996:2).

I started this article with a contrast between older and more recent meanings of the *buhadyl*. I conclude it by returning to this contrast, and making several observations concerning a social condition constituted by these avoidance practices. First, I argue that, in the context of the *buhadyl* in the "new" sense of the word, there happens an inscription kinship anew as a basis of identity. Older shamanistic practices were of course also sites where kinship was imagined. But this imagination concerned primarily the identity of patients as opposed to healers (Vdovin 1978), or the identity healers in relationship to one another. The example of the latter is possession by spirits called *hovonil* (singular *hovon*) which enabled a person to

shamanize. Sushilin reports, for example, that "after a shaman's death, the spirit goes free for some time, usually for about two years, looking for a worthy successor. Ordinarily, it passes between people of the same clan, most likely, among close relatives"¹⁷ (see also Vasilevich 1968).

In contrast to the *hovonil* which construct a kinship identity between healers, the *buhadyl* provide a ritual framework for kinship as an identity between the healer and the patient as well as a principle to classify and sort out reality in search for possible causes of the illness. "I fell ill, the side of my stomach started to ache in a particular way," one Evenki told me, "I started to think why this was so, and then I suddenly remembered: the boots! they must be the old man's—...I touched a pair of old rubber boots when we were passing through an abandoned camp." This Evenki was a relative of the old man whose boots were a source of the *buhadyl*, but he never caught his family's *buhadyl* before, and, as he went on to say, the healing had to be performed by the old man's daughter. In Katonga in the 1980s and 1990s there were no "strong shamans" in a sense discussed by Soviet ethnographers. Everyone took care, however, of the *buhadyl* of their own families and elders.

My second point concerns the sense of the unavoidability in relationship with the spirits, visible in the "rubber boots" episode but also in materials like Sushilin's on *hovon* possessions. There is an important distinction between the two, however, as in avoidance of the *buhadyl* it is not shamanism but kinship itself appears as an inescapable disease. As the Evenki man who caught the *buhadyl* from the old man's boots commented, "No matter how hard you try to avoid them, they catch you sooner or later." Evenki relationships to the *buhadyl* resemble the "negative ancestor cult" which was expressed in the flight of the burial grounds. However, this flight that inevitably fails took a very different form and occurred in a very different context. It was not merely a flight from spaces which had already been occupied by burial grounds and old camps. It also happened in the context of Stalinist rhetoric of confession about "wrong" social origin and "activities," and of the systematic transfers of pre-Soviet material culture to ethnographers and museums. Within these different transaction frameworks, which nonetheless had a common goal of replacing the "traditional" with the "Soviet," these tasks were simultaneously achieved and unachievable, and in performing them Evenki simultaneously inscribed themselves in and out of the dominant social order. "I thought what to do with the old man's pike," told me another Evenki, and added with irony in his voice: "but when we were filmed by journalists, I gave it away. For the museum."

As a common identity between elders and younger Evenki is constituted here as a disease which should be avoided, it does not appear as a "real" social group underneath ritual forms, as Soviet ethnography interprets it (see previous section), but as a flight from this "real." It is ironic that the Soviet ethnographic and administrative attempts to fix and control this "real" helped to constitute social contexts of this flight. The District Museum's collection of Evenki "old things" makes it a dangerous place to visit. Yet this museum is a repository not merely of dangerous old things, but also of the "real" (that is, material) signifiers of the Evenki traditions. In other words, these ritual practices, in their flight from the "real," were not merely constituted by the Soviet pursuit of the "real" but also mirrored this pursuit's textual strategy. I argued above that, in searching for the "real" socio-

economic foundation of indigenous religion in the sense of Engels, the Soviet ethnography looked not at the immediate social contexts of these practices but at the "other" chronotope of tradition. In doing so they literally relocated to museums most of the Evenki pre-Soviet artifacts; furthermore, they *conceptually* displaced the "real" into the imaginary space of the "ethnographic present perfect" at the very point of its visibility, and introduced to Soviet *reality* the split of into "Soviet present" and "ethnographic present perfect" in which the *buhadyl* operate. Avoidance of the *buhadyl* created structures where void constitutes a positive signifier; and this void appears as a social continuation of the invisibility of the *buhadyl* that these ritual practices deal with.

My final observation concerns people for whom the practice of the avoidance of the *buhadyl* appears to be most important. These are young men and women. Their tense and ambivalent relationships with the elders make them attempt both to abandon "the old tradition" and to engage in its intense imagination. I have shown in this article that this imagination operates as a sequence of ruptures. The *buhadyl* "condense," in the sense of Victor Turner (1967), much of the Evenki cosmological ideas without, however, "representing" them. In fact, avoidance of the *buhadyl* could be read as the avoidance of detailed cosmological knowledge whose bearers are the elders. The younger Evenki have a vague understanding that there are three worlds (the upper, the middle, and the lower ones) but nothing more elaborate; and, in the recollection of gods and spirits, the Russian words for devil (*chert*) and angel (*angel*) figure as synonymous to the *buhadyl*. In Katonga, the boarding school was built in the place of an old cemetery; and, ironically, boarding-school folklore and children's horror stories became discursive means of reinventing local ideas about dead people and spirits. This imagination quickly absorbs and transforms the Russian/Soviet public culture. But then, as I argued, it always was part of it.

Notes

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¹*Krasnoiariskii Kraevedcheskii Musei* ("The archive of the Krasnoiarisk Provincial Studies Museum," thereafter KKM), f. PI(r)8392/380, l. 86. This article uses the Russian abbreviations for archival references, such as "f." for *fond* ("collection"), "op." for *opis'* ("inventory"), "d." for *delo* ("file") and "l." or "ll" for *list* or *listy* ("page" or "pages").

²The only exception that I was able to find was usage of the word *buha* as a name of a small tent that a shaman built as a model of the "world" (Anisimov 1958:28).

³For example, "two men died while elk-hunting, ... turned up in the other side... that is, in the world of the dead... [and] found their deceased older sister" (Vasilevich 1963:56), and *khargil* sometimes signified "dead relatives" (Vasilevich 1972:36; Anisimov 1963:101).

⁴*Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Evenkiiskogo Avtonomnogo Okruga* ("The State Archive of the Evenki autonomous District," thereafter GAEAO), f. 6, op. 1, d. 1, l. 7; GAEAO, f. 2, op. 1, d. 554, l. 140-43

⁵KKM, f. 7886/188, ll. 3-7; KKM, f. 7886/189, ll. 67-8.

⁶KKM, f. 7886/179, l. 46.

⁷GAEAO, f. 27, op. 1, d. 15, l. 64.

⁸*Ibid.*, l. 44.

⁹*Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, ("The State Archive of Russian Federation," thereafter

GARF), f. 3977, d. 81, ll. 143-44.

¹⁰*Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Krasnoarskogo Kraia* ("The State Archive of the Krasnoarsk Province," thereafter GAKK), f. 1845, op. 1, d. 165, l. 130.

¹¹GAEAO, f. 3, op. 1, d. 3, ll. 122; 65; 61; 120, 123; 45, 109.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*, ll. 66.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, f. 2, op. 1, d. 4, l. 20.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, l. 14.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, ll. 16, 20.

¹⁷KKM, f. 7886/189, l. 69; on the inheritance of the *havon*, see also KKM, f. PI(r)8392/380 and f. PI(r)8392/381.

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