

ART LEETE

*University of Tartu*  
*Estonia*

## Religious Revival as Reaction to the Hegemonization of Power in Siberia in the 1920s to 1940s

### **Abstract**

This article tries to analyze the issues of religious reactions and cultural change among Siberian natives in the context of the Soviet state's increasing involvement in everyday lives of indigenous groups during the 1920s to 1940s. Although this practice of profound penetration of a colonial power into local life was not unique to the Soviet Union, it had specific features. In particular, Soviet ideology tried to avoid religious discourse altogether. Yet the imposed model of cultural change placed heavy pressure on the Siberian indigenous peoples' worldview. Rapid and cruel economic and social transformation—such as collectivization and repressions against shamans and clan elders—initiated by the Soviets directly provoked sharp but temporary intensification of indigenous sacrificial practices. Extensive holding of sacrificial ceremonies (massive sacrifices of reindeer, human sacrifice), which had been exceptional in ritual practices of Siberian natives, was forced upon them by the Soviet state.

**Keywords:** Western Siberia—shamans—sacrificial ceremonies—indigenous peoples—uprisings —Soviet state

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THERE IS A strong tendency in anthropology to consider sacred religious aspects of culture to be among the most important and completely different from profane, everyday, or “natural” realities (ELIADE 1987, 10–12). Discussing the role of ritual in peoples’ worldviews, Roy A. Rappaport wrote: “Religion’s major conceptual and experiential constituents, the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine, and their integration into the Holy, are creations of ritual” (RAPPAPOORT 2001, 3). According to Bronislaw Malinowski’s functionalist view clan solidarity is remarkably intensified in ritualistic situations:

The unity of the clan is a legal fiction in that it demands—in all native doctrine, that is in all their professions, and statements, sayings, overt rules and patterns of conduct—an absolute subordination of all other interests and ties to the claims of clan solidarity, while, in fact, this solidarity is almost constantly sinned against and practically non-existent in the daily run of ordinary life. On the other hand, at certain times, in the ceremonial phases of native life above all, the clan unity dominates everything and in cases of overt clash and open challenge it will overrule personal considerations and failings which under ordinary conditions would certainly determine the individual’s conduct (MALINOWSKI 1926, 119–20).

As we can see even by this quick overview of ideas of the representatives of different research traditions, the question of the role of sacred rituals is quite an important issue in the life of indigenous communities. And so was the case also with the Siberian indigenous peoples in the 1920s to 1940s.

The rapid infiltration by Soviet power into the political organization and everyday life of the Siberian indigenous peoples in the 1920s to 1940s provoked a number of reactions, which were often religious. The indigenous peoples felt that the Soviet attack was especially serious within the sphere of their worldview.

#### CASES OF INDIGENOUS RELIGIOUS RESISTANCE IN SIBERIA

According to official sources, a widely used method to resist the Soviets was the killing of domestic animals. Slaughtering of reindeer, horses, and cattle

occurred mainly during the period of massive collectivization campaigns among the Siberian indigenous peoples. Sometimes these killings were made in a ceremonial form of sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> For example, in remote regions of Western Siberia, such as the areas around the Kazym and Sosva Rivers, the Khanty and Mansi organized massive sacrifices of horses and reindeer. Hundreds of animals were killed, according to Soviet sources. The aim of these sacrificial ceremonies was to sabotage collectivization but also to elicit help from ancestors.<sup>2</sup>

Rapid and cruel economic and social transformations initiated by the Soviets directly provoked the temporary intensification of sacrificial practices. This kind of extensive holding of ceremonies was exceptional in ritual practices of Siberian natives and was forced upon them. But at the same time they tried to maintain the traditional elements of rituals as much as possible.

The Soviets considered shamans to be among their main enemies, because they took them to be insidious exploiters of small peoples of the North. Shamans resisted most Soviet reforms in economic, cultural, and medical fields. As a consequence, during the 1930s, shamans were forced to accept more marginal public positions.<sup>3</sup>

The Sakha case is one example. The Peoples' Commissariat of Justice of the Yakut ASSR (present-day Sakha Republic) sent an instruction to fight against shamanism to local courts and investigation officers in 1924. According to this document, shamans were not allowed to practice healing, tell fortunes, receive payment for their activities, and have sexual relationships with women (even if the latter volunteered). They faced criminal prosecution if they violated any of these injunctions (ILYAKHOV 1998, 91).

During the anti-shaman campaign, many shamans were punished. Some cases became legendary. The most distinctive among them was the prosecution of the Sakha shaman Chirkov:

In February 1932, the well-known shaman Konstantin Ivanovich Chirkov was arrested by the GPU operative deputy of the Yakut ASSR, Yepifanov. Chirkov was accused of providing food supplies and transportation to the whites during the Civil War, practicing shamanhood among indigenous population over many years, organizing anti-Soviet agitation, counteracting collectivization and other activities, and spreading rumors about the imminent downfall of the Soviet power and massive uprisings of Siberian peasants against the Soviet power (ILYAKHOV 1998, 94–95).<sup>4</sup>

It was possible for Chirkov to escape from Soviet repression due to an activity described by Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer as the “show off on demand” response. Shamans were sometimes forced to perform their séances under conditions designed for them to fail (in Soviet cultural halls or offices), but they

managed to be successful (BALZER 1999b, 129–31). Balzer refers to Chirkov's case cited in the monograph by Ilyakhov:

Before the accusation was (formally) declared, Chirkov was forced to shamanize in the NKVD club. He was given a shaman's costume and drum. The costume appeared to be too small for him and he asked for his own costume. He found it without difficulty among many others. During the shamanic séance snow and hail fell down in the club hall (it was during the summer of 1932) and when Konstantin Ivanovich asked for permission to summon a wolf or a bear, everybody cried "no! no!," as they were frightened of supernatural phenomena (ILYAKHOV 1998, 95).

Chirkov was subsequently released and he lived more than forty years peacefully in his village.

Uprisings in northern peoples' core areas always involved religious issues in the 1930s to 1940s. Shamans were among the leaders of all these uprisings. Sacrifices and other shamanic rituals were performed and actions against the Soviets were believed to be in accordance with the will of the gods.

Russian scholar Andrei Golovnev describes the course of the Yamal Nenets' uprising (*mandalada*<sup>5</sup>) of 1934 using information obtained from one of the Nenets participants, Esiko Laptander. Esiko stated that the reason why they resisted was because the Soviets ordered them to hand over reindeer and gold. The Soviets took away all shamans, and also desecrated the sledges of the dead. The Nenets gathered together and elected two chiefs—Yamna Serodeta and Hateva Hudi. Yamna Serodeta, a powerful shaman, went with five men to the sacred mountain Terenolva near To-tse-khe Lake in the Baidarat tundra. He performed a ritual on the Terenolva hill and said that people must be called to a "holy war" (*khebidya sayu*). Approximately five- to six hundred men gathered into the camp of *mandalada* (GOLOVNEV 1995, 186–89; GOLOVNEV & OSHERENKO 1999, 82–88).

There is no data available suggesting that any special activity had been carried out by the Yamal Nenets during the *mandalada* as a consequence of this declaration of holy war. But, in principle, the declaration probably gave some general moral support or spiritual strength to the Nenets in their resistance to Soviet intrusion.

Ogryzko writes that according to the lore of the Nenets, participants of the next *mandalada* in 1943 were warned by a shaman:

Maybe it is a paradox, but a shaman named Nyavo from the Yaptik clan resisted an armed rebellion.... He shamanized desperately every week during the year. He beat a drum, but when he fell down on the animal skins in

exhaustion, he did not fail to ask his fellow tribesmen to return peacefully to their camps. His six older brothers were angry. Ignoring all customs of the folk, they showed no mercy and beat the shaman after every ritual, to the extent that he was covered in blood (OGRYZKO 1996, 14).

Golovnev and Osherenko give a few examples of folklore related to that last *mandalada*. Most of the Nenets' leaders during the uprising had been from the Yaptik clan. The Nenets believe that a shaman named Satoku Yaptik, who had been killed in Salekhard, was later resurrected and reappeared in the tundra. According to another narrative, a shaman named Ngaivodiu Yaptik had been shot several times by more than one gun but survived, managing to escape by driving off with a white reindeer team that was mysteriously shaped from the snow. Another leader of the *mandalada*, Khasavamboi Yaptik, had been arrested four times, but he managed to escape each time. He spent his last days not far from Novyi Port, living in a pit dwelling. The Nenets now consider the place to be sacred (GOLOVNEV & OSHERENKO 1999, 94).

Ogryzko describes a miraculous story related to the Nenets shaman Nyavo from the Ngokadeta clan. According to eyewitness accounts, the commander of the group of security forces stood him up to be shot. "But a miracle happened. Despite being shot at, he did not fall. The commander's nerves were not strong enough for that. He ran to the Nenets, but the shaman suddenly appeared before him unharmed, holding the spent bullets in his hand, which was, of course, an impossible feat. After that the commander ordered his troops to drown the shaman into an ice hole" (OGRYZKO 1996, 14).

Revitalistic elements were more evident during the uprising of the Khanty and Forest Nenets, also known as the Kazym War (1931 to 1934). Most violent episodes during the Kazym War were provoked by the Soviets who damaged the religious feelings of these peoples. The more significant anti-Soviet actions of the natives during this uprising were always accompanied by shamanic rituals.

In November 1931, a Soviet culture base was opened close to the Kazym River. During the same autumn, fifty native children were forced into the boarding school of the culture base by Soviet officials (GAHMAO, ASTRAHANTSEVA 1934, 1. 5–6; LUKINA 1993, 62; KOLGA, TÖNURIST, VABA and VIKBERG 1993, 114; BARKALAJA 1999, 72; TAAGEPERA 1999, 359–60).

Khanty men started to gather together and plan the release of their children. The most important of these meetings, which had thirty to forty participants, was held at the mouth of the River Vozh-Yogan on the family lands of the Moldanovs, who were Khanty elders. They decided to gather together all Khanty men and deliver their demands to the Soviets. These demands included a reduction of taxes and services to the Soviets, the cessation of persecution of shamans and tribal elders, the liquidation of the culture base, and the sending home of all

children of the boarding school (GMPICH, LOSKUTOV 5, 1. 4; LOSKUTOV 6, 1. 1; GOLOVNEV 1995, 167–68; BALZER 1999a, 111).

At the end of the meeting, two shamans organized a reindeer sacrifice (*pory*) and fifteen animals were killed. After the ceremony the shamans announced that the spirits (*lunkhs*) approved the decisions of the meeting and ordered that nobody was allowed to cooperate with the Russians. Those who met the Russians' demands would be punished (GMPICH, LOSKUTOV 5, 1. 6; GOLOVNEV 1995, 168; BALZER 1999a, 111). There were several more similar sacrificial rituals held from 1932 to 1933.

In 1933, members of the fishing cooperative from the Kazym culture base began to fish on Lake Num-To. The local people informed them that this was taboo.<sup>6</sup> Russian agitbrigades were sent to the area (GAHMAO, ASTRAKHANTSEVA 1934, 7–8; BALZER 1999a, 112–13). One of the delegations reached Num-To in November 1933. A member of this group, a female communist named Shnaider, went to the sacred island in the middle of the Lake Num-To, ignoring the local peoples' beliefs concerning a taboo on women visiting this place. Her action deeply hurt the religious feelings of the local people. Then the Soviet delegation moved to the tundra belt, and on 3 December they met the Khanty and Nenets. On 4 December members of the agitbrigade were taken prisoner by the local people (GAHMAO, ASTRAKHANTSEVA 1934, 10; BALZER 1999a, 113–14). The Khanty and Nenets held a shamanic séance after which the shamans stated that gods had ordered them to offer the captured Russians as a sacrifice. The Russians were tied up and taken to a hill by reindeer sleds. They were throttled by long ropes tied around their necks. After the killings, the Khanty and Nenets sacrificed seven reindeer and held a traditional ceremony (BUDARIN 1968, 226; GAHMAO, ASTRAKHANTSEVA 1934, p 12–13; GMPICH, LOSKUTOV 1, p 24; LOSKUTOV 9, p 8; BALZER 1999a, 114).

It is possible that the Khanty believed that the White Czar and his troops would arrive with ships and the rule of the Bolsheviks would end. Soviet scholar Budarin wrote that the native leaders ("shamans and kulaks") bought photographs of Kliment Voroshilov, in which he wore a white navy uniform (behind him several warships), and then showed these images to other Khanty with an accompanying message that a white leader would soon come from the upper courses of the Ob and Irtysh Rivers, with twenty steamers full of soldiers and armaments, and that the Soviet domination of the area would not last much longer (BUDARIN 1968, 220–22). If Budarin's report about the photograph is true, the Kazym War can be interpreted as a revitalistic attempt to get rid of the Russians (see BALZER 1999a, 257).

## ANALYSIS

The above examples demonstrate that religious elements were firmly present during these uprisings and within the ad hoc protests of Siberian indigenous peoples against the Soviets during the 1920s to 1940s. The question remains: To what extent can we interpret these religious elements as revitalistic? Were these religiously expressed protests occasional, ad hoc choices, or can we see here the initial stages of some kind of potential religious change, a more systematic intensification of traditional beliefs of indigenous peoples of Siberia?

Anthony Wallace defines a revitalization movement as “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (WALLACE 1956, 265). He describes revitalization as a phenomenon of rapid cultural change, an effort to change an image and a structure of a society to permit more effective stress reduction (265–67).

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer challenges Wallace’s idea about systematic changes in a fixed body of culture. She criticizes Wallace because he “may overstate the degree of change that revitalization entails.” Balzer considers that for analyzing revitalization we need “a balance between understanding radical transformation of values and nostalgia for variously defined ‘traditions’ and concepts of ‘authenticity’” (BALZER 1999a, 97–98). Balzer has mentioned to me that the Kazym War was an aborted, semi-revitalistic attempt at resistance against the Soviets because during the protest the revitalistic potential of the uprising was not fully exploited (personal communication, 2001; see also BALZER 1999a, 98).

I suggest that revitalization in the Siberian case can be defined as the northern peoples’ organized religious responses to extreme survival problems. It is then also possible to apply the idea of revitalization to the northern peoples’ anti-Soviet uprisings. During the Yamal and Kazym uprisings shamans did not propose new or considerably modified religious ideas. But divine messages about the gods’ demands that they delivered to their peoples (such as declaring the Holy War and sacrificing Russian officials) were indeed extraordinary. Change in practices based on worldview is indicated also by the fact that natives decided in their own court that Russians should be killed. In the customary legal practices of the Khanty and Forest Nenets, such a decision is highly unusual. According to Khanty belief, a violator of important sacred rules should be punished by the gods, not directly by people (LAPINA 1998, 20).<sup>7</sup> However, it may also be that we do not have enough information about all revitalistic features of the Kazym War.

Under other circumstances, without such an overwhelmingly powerful and cruel opponent as the Soviet state from the 1930s onward, it may have been possible that new religious movements developed among the natives of Siberia.

These movements might appear to be more clearly revitalistic if we compared them with the fragmentary information currently available about religious intensification as a form of resistance among Siberian indigenous groups in the 1920 to 1940s. But in reality, all these initiatives of spiritual change were aborted by the repressive actions of the Soviet state.

In some sense, the failure of religious intensification among the Kazym River Khanty did not mean the end of the movement in the 1930s. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer has paid attention to the significant fact that a number of indigenous leaders of ethnic revivals in Western Siberia nowadays hail from the Kazym River area and they feel a special solidarity with each other because their kin participated in the Kazym protest (BALZER 1999a, 118–19).

Moreover, we can assume that data about the religious issues of the Kazym War are integrated into the present-day identity of the Kazym Khanty. Some Khanty scholars and writers have suggested a link between Kasum-imi (the Goddess of Kazym, the main guardian spirit of the Kazym Khanty, whose holy place was desecrated by a Russian female communist during the Kazym War) cult and the behavior of the Kazym Khanty. Kasum-imi is considered to be an aggressive goddess and the proud and aggressive identity of the Kazym natives is connected to her (MOLDANOV and MOLDANOVA 2000, 9, 11; AIPIN 2002, 41, 63; LEETE 2002, 149; EA, 92). Therefore, current ideas of indigenous scholars and writers about the worldview and identity of indigenous peoples of the Kazym River may have been influenced by the knowledge about certain events that took place during the Kazym War. The fact that Soviet officials have been sacrificed became an additional argument in the discussions about the religious essence of the Kazym Khanty culture.

Religious revival as a reaction to hegemonization of power is not a distinctive feature of developments in the lives of northern indigenous peoples in the early Soviet state. A similar situation has been reported, for example, concerning the capitalist intensive penetration into the life of African natives, in particular, and even in the Third World in general.<sup>8</sup>

An important fact about Siberian indigenous peoples' resistance against the Soviets is that these activities included a considerable number of collective sacrifice rituals. As with the case of the Kazym War, a human sacrifice was carried out. This is the only known act of collective human sacrifice among the Khanty. Moreover, this is, in fact, virtually the only evidence about the existence of human sacrifice among the Khanty throughout their history.<sup>9</sup>

In this article I tried to analyze the issues of religious reactions and cultural change among the Siberian natives in the context of the Soviet state's increasing involvement in the everyday life of indigenous groups during the 1920s to 1940s. This practice of profound penetration of the colonial power into local life was not unique to the Soviet Union, although it had specific features. In particular,



the Soviet ideology tried to avoid religious discourse altogether. Yet the imposed model of cultural change placed significant pressure on the Siberian natives' worldview.

## NOTES

1. See KOLARZ 1954, 71; LEVIN & VASIL'EV 1964, 682; FORSYTH 1992, 316, 333, 337, 357, 362; SUDBY 1994, 201; GRANT 1995, 91; BLOCH 1996, 114; BALZER 1999a, 108–110; KALISS 1999, 479, 494; ISTOMIN 2001, 51; LEETE 2002, 76–78. Massive slaughtering of domestic animals has been a form of reaction of colonized peoples against the colonizers elsewhere. For example, the Xhosas of Southern Africa also protested in the nineteenth century against the Protestant mission by organizing a cattle slaughtering movement (COMAROFF & COMAROFF 1997, 96).

2. We must take into account the possibility that these descriptions of the extensive and cruel killing of reindeer may be to a large extent fictitious. Soviet officials failed to organize effective collective reindeer herding and they usually blamed this on kulaks and shamans. The possibility remains that indigenous groups also used this strategy to resist the Soviets. It is just hard to estimate the real extent of these activities.

3. See SUSLOV 1931; KOLARZ 1954, 75–78; SERGEYEV 1964, 500; VDOVIN 1965, 291; BALZER 1983, 641–43, 647; FONDAHL 1998, 59; ILYAKHOV 1998, 90, 94; KALISS 1999, 451, 491–93; RETHMANN 2001, 38–39, 62.

4. All translations from Russian are my own.

5. *Mandalada* (“piled up”) means in this context “war-gathering” (in Nenets).

6. Lake Num-To is close to the upper courses of several tributaries of the Ob River (e.g. the Pim, Lyamin, Tromyugan, Nadym, and Kazym Rivers), and is a sacred site for local people. In the winter, the Khanty and Nenets of the neighboring regions used to go there and offer sacrifices.

7. As an important issue, Khanty scholar Maina Lapina emphasizes the following rule:

On the human level, persecution of violators of moral norms was not included in the system of punishments. According to the worldview of the Khanty, killing the violator of norms cannot solve the problem because a soul of the dead person is more dangerous than the person himself when he is alive (LAPINA 1998, 33).

8. Jean Comaroff writes about this in her study of Southern African natives' reactions against the Evangelical mission:

The widespread syncretistic movements that have accompanied capitalist penetration into the Third World are frequently also subversive bricolages; that is, they are motivated by an opposition to the dominant system.... Iconoclastic bricoleurs everywhere struggle to control key signs and to construct an order of practice that might domesticate the divisive forces that have come to pervade their environment. Such exercises do more than just express revolt; they are also more than mere acts of self-representation. Rather, they are both expressive and pragmatic at the same time, for they aim to change the real world by inducing transformations in the world of symbol and rite (COMAROFF 1985, 198).

One of the most essential features of these revitalistic developments has always been the ritualization of anti-hegemonic reactions which was certainly the case in Siberia. And for comparison, we can quote Jean Comaroff again:

Ritual is never merely univocal and conservative, papering over the cracks in the cause of

hegemonic social forces... It is always the product of a more or less conflicted social reality; a process within which an attempt is made to impress a dominant message upon a set of paradoxical or discordant representations. Indeed, the power of ritual may come to be used, under certain conditions, to objectify conflict in the everyday world, and to attempt to transcend it. This became particularly evident among the Tshidi when engagement with the colonial system began to alter the pre-colonial order in radical ways, to engender a discrepancy between dominant ideological forms and practical experience.... Also, as historical exigency introduced new contradictions and new orders of symbolic mediation, "traditional" ritual was to serve increasingly as a symbol of a lost world of order and control (COMAROFF 1985, 119).

9. There are several accounts about the existence of human sacrifice and cannibalism among the Nenets and Khanty peoples. But this data is not reliable. Travelers from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries who provided those descriptions used mainly local Russian or indigenous folklore and earlier accounts of other travelers. Even the descriptions of HERODOTUS (1999, 241, 243) about cannibalistic habits of the Androphages and Issedons, the savage neighbors of the Scythians, survived in the nineteenth-century diaries of Russian scholars and were simply applied to the Samoyeds (the Nenets).

With reference to Gerhard Friedrich Müller's "portfolios," Butsinskii has described a situation when in 1618 Mansi asked for a permission from the army leader of the Pelym River area to sacrifice a native person (BUTSINSKII 1889, 308–309). Balzer suggests that the native might have been a Khanty captive. The sacrifice was held in secret, after the permission to do so had been denied. She claims the strategy of holding a sacrifice in secret to have persisted through centuries (BALZER 1999a, 57). The account by Butsinskii (or by Müller) may be among the most reliable evidence available concerning the existence of human sacrifice in Western Siberia.

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