

Shamanism: Soviet Studies of Traditional Religion in Siberia and Central Asia. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer. London: Routledge. 2015. 240 pp. (ISBN-13: 9781138179295)

Shamanism: Soviet Studies of Traditional Religion in Siberia and Central Asia by Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer aims to familiarize the English-speaking public with the basic conceptual approaches of Soviet ethnography to one of the most important phenomena and components of the traditional spiritual life of the indigenous peoples of Siberia and Central Asia – shamanism. The topic is so significant because being constrained by certain ideological frames of official Marxist-Leninist atheism, Soviet ethnography represented by its most brilliant representatives was, nevertheless, distinguished by a thoughtful and respectful approach to the phenomenon, which was generally regarded as an early form of religion. The collection contains some of the most significant works of Soviet scholars who specialized in the study of the shamanism of Turkic, Mongolian and other indigenous peoples of Siberia and Central Asia – those by V.N. Basilov, N.A. Alekseev, T.M. Mikhailov, and E.S. Novik. The choice of these academics by the author and the compiler of the book is fully justified, since their fundamental works represent the conceptual diversity and in-depth assessment of shamanism, which distinguished the Soviet ethnography and represented the Soviet scholarly thought on traditional religious life. They also provide the views of the intellectuals of the indigenous peoples of Siberia on their own culture and history. For example, N.A. Alekseyev, who was a well-known and respected scholar representing the Yakut Turkic people of Siberia, devoted his life to the study of Yakut shamanism, while the Buryat ethnographer T.M. Mikhailov made a significant contribution to the study of shamanism among the Buryats.

Significant achievements of Soviet ethnography in the study of shamanism were based on a solid foundation of a rich layer of knowledge accumulated by previous generations of Russian scholars over years of observations and field research. The settlement of the Russian population in Siberia began in the late 16th century after the defeat of the Siberian Khanate, and the inclusion of these expanded the lands in the Russian state, and actively continued in subsequent centuries. In fact, the subjugation of the vast expanses beyond the Ural mountains to the Russian central authorities was the result of colonization, which experienced several typological stages, as mentioned by the well-known explorer of Siberia and Central Asia and the discoverer of ancient Turkic runic inscriptions in Mongolia N.M. Yadrintsev: “Siberia has experienced all

periods that are characteristic for all newly discovered countries. It was a hunting colony, a mining colony, a gold prospecting place, and finally a place of exile.”¹ Yadrintsev did not mention in this passage, devoted to the 300th anniversary of the Russian conquest of Siberia, a cultural colonization that had no less far-reaching consequences for the local traditional society. An important part of cultural colonization was the activity of Orthodox missionaries who made a significant contribution to the Christianization of the Siberian population, although for a long time observers reported the “dual belief” of baptized natives who during hunting or ancient festivities continued to practice their ancient traditional rituals.

Having faced the different culture of the indigenous peoples of Siberia, Russian settlers were the first to record their customs and monuments of traditional culture, including those associated with shamanism. Over time, since the 19th century, the study of shamanic practices and worldview has been put on a scientific basis, and specialized ethnographic expeditions and studies have been organized in Siberia and the Far East.

At the beginning of the 20th century, thanks to the efforts of a number of researchers (V. G. Bogoraz, V. F. Troshchansky, V. M. Mikhailovsky and others), the accumulation of ethnographic material was systematized, and the first concepts of the cultural and psychological essence of shamanism were put forward. In particular, Bogoraz developed a psychological concept that focused on the technique of personal immersion in immediate mystical experiences as the most essential sign of shamanism.

Already in the Soviet era, especially in the second half of the 20th century, great attention was paid to the development of concepts of shamanism, determining its place in the structure of the early forms of religion. In particular, in the theoretical writings of the leading Soviet historian S. A. Tokarev, the assertion is found that just as ancient primitive relations give way to private ownership, so the democratic generic principle of performing religious rituals gives way to the hereditary transition of ownership, which later on, with the emergence of early class society, grows into a characteristic priesthood estate, which was typical for the evolution of shamanism.

¹ N.M. Yadrintsev, *Sibir' kak koloniya: Kyubileyu tryokhsotletiya. Sovremennoye polozheniye Sibiri. Yeyo nuzhdy i potrebnost'*, (St. Petersburg, 1882,) 324.

In the same years, the Soviet ethnography paid special attention to the further deeper study of regional and ethnic aspects of shamanism. In particular, the traditions of shamanism among the Turkic and Mongolian peoples of Siberia and Central Asia – the Yakuts, Altaians, Tuvinians, Khakas, Buryats and others – were subjects of detailed analysis.

In her introduction, Balzer briefly analyzes the dynamics of approaches and views of Soviet researchers on the cultural and psychological essence of shamanism and the figure of shaman – from assessments of shamanism as a form of mental pathology or “neuropsychological illness” (Alekseev) to a device invented by prehistoric men “to maintain their spiritual equilibrium in the difficult struggle with nature” (Basilov). It is important for the compiler of the book to feature the insight of the most advanced Soviet scholars on the historical and cultural core of shamanism, which led them beyond traditional Marxist clichés in the assessment of religion. Although such representatives of the local intelligentsia as Alekseev and Mikhailov with their works on shamanism pursued both an academic and activist role, trying to prove that “people should not be chained by their religious consciousness,” Mikhailov, according to Balzer, attributed shamanism to the status of a complicated religious system that played an important role in human development, rather than a haphazard series of primitive magical beliefs.

Novik approached the problem of integrating indigenous meanings with academic theory in a different way, using the methods of structural analysis. The most significant aspects of Novik’s academic attitude to shamanism were determined by the appeal to communication and exchange aspects of myth, folklore and ritual in archaic Siberian traditions. Analyzing the parallelism of the structure of shamanic ritual and the morphological scheme of folklore narrative, she came to the conclusion that the exchange dialogical structure underlay both the oral traditional narrative and the ritual plot.

Turning to the works of Soviet ethnographers, Balzer enquires about the significance of shamanism and asks whether shamanism is merely an outdated and quaint backwater of religious history. Or does it exist because some spiritual and supernatural dimension of the universe is more real than scientists admit? Can shamans and shamanism teach us anything? Does the remarkable persistence of shamanism indicate some human need to reach deep, mythic, spiritual levels within ourselves? Arguing with an excessively materialistic perception of this phenomenon, the author calls into question Basilov’s terminology about the “twilight of shamanism” and speaks of the too protracted character of the historical “twilight” of this phenomenon, which lasted over a long time, despite Christian, Lamaist, and Soviet pressure against it.

In general, Balzer's book is a qualitative and useful reader of prominent Soviet ethnographers' works on shamanism. The wide coverage of various aspects of the theory and practice of shamanism, presented in the writings of both Moscow and vernacular scholars, allows the English-speaking reader not only to get an idea of the specifics of this significant phenomenon of spiritual life and traditional culture of Siberian peoples, but also about the theoretical approaches of Soviet ethnography to its study. At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize that all the empirical and theoretical wealth of the Soviet legacy in this area is far from exhausted by the works cited in the book, which allows us to hope that this successful experience in translating works on shamanism into English will continue in the future.

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