

'I haven't fully understood – is shamanism religion or not?' Some reflections on the concepts of shamanism and religion in Soviet discourse

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Abstract

In this essay the Marxist-Leninist understanding of the concept 'religion' is analysed in relation to how it was applied to the so-called shamanism of the indigenous peoples of the Soviet North. The point of departure is the correspondence between the head of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in the Soviet Far East and his superior in Moscow. Further, the legal consequences of the somewhat varying Soviet understandings of 'religion' for people adhering to indigenous worldviews and ritual traditions in the Far East is presented. The essay aims to exemplify how definitions of 'religion', as well as the categorising of something as 'religion' or not, rely on social and political circumstances, and whether one finds 'religion', as well as the entities classified as such, to be positive or negative for the individual and society.

Keywords: concept of religion, concept of shamanism, Soviet policy on religion, Marxism-Leninism, indigenous religion, Nanai, Soviet Far East, Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults

It was not I who formulated the question in this article's title.¹ Nevertheless, I fully understand the bewilderment it expresses. It is not unreasonable that I should be expected to give a straight answer to the query. After all, I am a professional historian of religions, specialising in the study of so-called shamanism. Simple as it may seem, however, I must first – as part of my profession – pose a few counter-questions: What does 'shamanism' mean

1 This article is a revised and extended version of my article 'Jag har inte fått tillräckligt klart för mig – är schamanism religion eller inte?', published in Swedish in *Thule. Kungl. Skytteanska Samfundets Årsbok* (2013, 65–82). I thank the Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskapsrådet*) for its financial support for the project 'Repression of "shamans" in the Soviet North in the late 1920s through the 1950s: an archival study' (Dnr 2009-1992). But above all, with this article, I wish to express my gratitude for the many years of learning and encouragement that I have been given by Professor Håkan Rydving, University of Bergen, Norway.

in this context? What is meant by ‘religion’ here? And in what context is the question asked?

In the following I will present how the question of whether ‘shamanism’ might be considered ‘religion’ was discussed in the Soviet Union, and why this became an issue at all. For it was the head of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Khabarovsk, in the Soviet Far East, who expressed his confusion concerning whether shamanism was religion or not. His name was B. M. Grebennikov.

The Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults

The Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (*Совет по делам религиозных культов*) was established in May 1944 during the Second World War. In the previous September a corresponding council for the affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church had been founded by the Soviet government.² Grebennikov’s council’s task was therefore to handle issues related to all religious bodies except the Russian Orthodox Church. The creation of the two councils – which were under the direct supervision of the Council of Ministers of the USSR – was a consequence of the partial recognition that certain religious organisations received in the Soviet Union during the war. Before this, in the 1920s and 1930s, Bolshevik policy was directed at marginalising the influence on Soviet society and its citizens of the Orthodox Church and other religions. In the long term the goal was to eradicate religious organisations and beliefs, and develop the ideal, rationality-based society that the Marxist-Leninist ideology predicted. However, despite large-scale repressions, the Communist Party had not succeeded in completely expelling religions or religiosity. Faced with the threat from Nazi Germany, the Stalin regime needed national consolidation, and especially the moral support of the Russian Orthodox Church. Religions were therefore granted a reprieve, and anti-religious campaigns were called off. The newly inaugurated Patriarch of Moscow, Sergius, who had already declared the Church’s loyalty to the communist regime in 1927, encouraged all Christians to defend the Soviet Union from the attacking fascists (see Sundström 2007, 77–94).

Formally, freedom of conscience and religion prevailed in the Soviet Union. Admittedly, alongside the declaration of this right, in paragraph 124 of the constitution, a Bolshevik policy statement was interposed: ‘Freedom

² In December 1965 the two councils were fused into the Council for Religious Affairs (*Совет по делам религии*). This council was dissolved in November 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

of religious worship and *freedom of antireligious propaganda* is recognized for all citizens' (italics mine).³ According to the 1927 law on religious associations there were also several restrictions on religious practice. All public religious instruction and propaganda, including the dissemination of religious literature, were forbidden. Religious instruction was permitted only in private and to no more than three persons at a time. The only places where religious rituals, or 'prayers' (*молитвы*), were allowed were premises registered for this purpose by registered religious organisations. A religious association was allowed no more than one such building for services. To become a registered religious association, it was required to show that there was a permanent congregation with at least twenty members.⁴

It was the responsibility of the two councils to authorise or deny the registration applications of religious organisations, as well as of their leaders (priests, ministers, rabbis, imams, lamas) and houses of worship. The councils were also to gather information on and monitor religious associations and ensure that relations between these groups and governmental or local authorities were correct and ran smoothly. In reality much of the work of the councils consisted in dealing with complaints from congregations and their members, both concerning disagreements with the authorities and internal disputes within congregations. In handling the cases the councils should constantly be guided by both the constitutional freedom of religion, and the government's general goal outlined in its policy on religion. Since the underlying aim of the Communist Party was to combat religion, it also fell upon the councils' officials to support organisations and institutions that pursued anti-religious work (Luchterhand 1993; Serdiuk 2011). Thus, representatives of the councils had a rather ambiguous position: on the one hand they should satisfy the constitutionally legitimate demands of religious groups; on the other they should take measures to withhold the same groups' development potential (Serdiuk 2011, 100).

B. M. Grebennikov took office as head of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Khabarovsk Krai in 1948. He was a veteran of the last battles of the Civil War in the Russian Far East and had long been committed

3 This applies to the Soviet constitution of 1936 (see Konstitutsiia SSSR 1936: www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/cnst1936.htm; for an English translation, see 1936 Constitution of the USSR: www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/36cons04.html; accessed on 21st May 2018). It might be added that the right to pursue *religious* propaganda – which was declared in the first constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic – was thereafter omitted from the text.

4 For translations of the decrees and laws regarding religions and religious services in the Soviet Union 1918–1929, with the amendments of 1961, 1965 and 1975, see Pospelovsky (1987, 135–146). This legislation was in force until October 1990.

to the Communist Party. His work at the council was shared with assignments for the Regional Executive Committee of the Party – a situation which seems to have been common among heads of regional departments of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults. The council's tasks were simply insufficient for a full-time post. Indeed, in 1952 Grebennikov himself asked to be dismissed because of his light workload. There were then only three registered non-Orthodox congregations in Khabarovsk Krai, two Evangelical and one Jewish (Serdiuk 2011, 96f.).

If possible, security service personnel were recruited to leading positions in the councils for religious affairs. Failing this, experienced Party workers were selected. Grebennikov belonged to the second category, whereas his chief in Moscow, I. V. Polianskii, had a long career within the Soviet security agencies (from 1954 the KGB). In 1921 he had started working for the Cheka and from 1935 he held a leading position in the NKVD in the Leningrad Region, advancing to its central office in Moscow in 1942. Five years later, in 1947, he was installed as chair of the central Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in the Soviet Union.⁵

Grebennikov's area of responsibility was mainly Khabarovsk Krai (Khabarovsk Territory), the south-eastern region of the Soviet Far East. The territory was vast and sparsely populated: an area roughly the size of Sweden and Finland. The population in the 1959 census was just over one million (1,142,535), the majority of which (74%) was concentrated in urban areas.⁶ Although there were very few non-Orthodox *registered* religious associations in the territory in 1952, the area was relatively multi-religious as well as multi-ethnic. Many Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese lived in the southern areas, which had been conquered by tsarist Russia from China as late as the mid-nineteenth century. These groups had, however, been subjected to ethnic cleansing in the 1930s and 1940s and had consequently diminished.⁷ Grebennikov was also responsible for the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, which had been established by the Bolsheviks as the Jewish socialist

5 Information on Polianskii's career was obtained from the homepage of the Russian state archives: <http://guides.rusarchives.ru/browse/gbfond.html?bid=407&fund_id=1246204>, accessed on 25th February 2013.

6 See <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus59_reg1.php>, accessed on 5th February 2018. I consider the data from the census of 1959 to be the most relevant for the period described in this article. Besides, the preceding censuses in the Soviet Union were conducted in 1937 and 1939, before the Second World War, and have been criticised for containing several flaws.

7 The forced displacement of Koreans from the Soviet Far East to Soviet Central Asia in the autumn of 1937 is actually one of the first examples of forced population resettlements during Stalin's reign (see Pohl 1999, 9ff.).

homeland in the 1930s (see Åhlander 2010). Among the peoples of European descent there were groups of Orthodox Old Believers, Baptists, and several minor Christian sects. Besides, there were several indigenous peoples inhabiting the area: the Nanai, Negidals, Udege, Oroch, Ulch, Evenki, Eveni, and Nivkhi. Traditionally, these groups subsisted from hunting, fishing, and (in northern areas) reindeer husbandry. These peoples had their own traditional worldviews and ritual practices, collectively labelled 'shamanism' by the Russians. Even if certain varieties were noted by ethnographers specialising in the study of these groups, in the Soviet discourse 'shamanism' was considered more or less uniform among the indigenous peoples of the Soviet North, from the Sami on the Kola Peninsula in the North-West to the Chukchi in the North-East and the Nanai in the South-East.

The concepts 'shaman' and 'shamanism'

It is difficult to conclude what the common denominator among the many different so-called shamans and shamanisms in the Soviet North was, not to mention all the other instances of ritual practitioners and practices worldwide for which these concepts have been used by outside observers.⁸ I agree with H. Rydving that the concepts 'shaman' and 'shamanism' are, as a rule, too general in content to be useful as analytical tools and therefore ought to be abandoned in comparative research. By using these vaguely defined concepts in comparisons we create 'an illusion of (regional and global) homogeneity' and risk assuming similarities between different indigenous traditions that are simply not there (Rydving 2011, 27f.). For my purposes it is important to note that, as Rydving (2011, 9) states, "'the shaman" is not a person, but a concept'. As concepts 'shaman' and 'shamanism' are categorisations made by outsiders – in this case mainly Russians – who have used them to classify certain functionalities and cultural expressions among the indigenous peoples of the North. Not least, this is important to remember when dealing with information on the indigenous peoples of Khabarovsk Krai, who (with the exception of the Nivkhi) speak Manchu-Tungus languages. It is from these languages that the term *shaman* was borrowed by Russian and other European languages in the seventeenth century, eventually becoming a virtually universal category in the dictionaries of anthropologists and scholars of religion. The Manchu-Tungus-speaking peoples called some of their ritual specialists – classified as 'shamans' by outsiders – *sama*, *saman*,

8 For a further presentation of my views on the concepts 'shaman' and 'shamanism' in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, see Sundström 2012a.

or *šaman*. However, their category and their views on the ritual specialists in question should not be confused with the European-language category ‘shaman’. Ideas and expectations of a ‘shaman’ among proponents of Soviet ideology differed greatly from the ideas and expectations the Nanai, for example, traditionally had of a *sama*. In this article the concepts ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ are used in the Soviet-Russian sense.

Grebennikov’s confusion

In a letter of May 1949 Grebennikov turned questioningly to his superior in Moscow, Polianskii: ‘I haven’t fully understood – is shamanism religion or not?’ (*Я недостаточно уяснил – является шаманство религия или нет?*). The reason he was so puzzled and demanded an answer was that it seemed to him that shamans within his jurisdiction performed rituals quite openly, and that nothing – or at least too little – was being done by the local authorities to stop them. Furthermore, he had come across diametrically opposed reasons for not interrupting shamanic activities. Some officials refrained from taking measures against shamans because they did not consider shamanism to be religion at all. Others thought it impossible to bring action against shamans because the Soviet constitution granted freedom of religion (GAKhK, f. 1359, op. 3, no. 3).

In his letter Grebennikov reports an anecdote to exemplify the situation. A couple of weeks previously he had received an old acquaintance, a Nanai hunter by the name of Gekker, who was visiting the city of Khabarovsk for hospital treatment. Gekker told Grebennikov about the shaman Onenko⁹ from the nomad settlement of Tneivakh, who had come to the village of Koiminskii dressed in full shamanic regalia and in broad daylight started ‘shamanising’ with his drum. A large crowd, including several children, had witnessed the ritual. After drumming and dancing for a while the shaman had turned to the audience and contended that he was possessed by a ‘spirit’ who spoke through him. If the people did not sacrifice meat, fish, vodka, clothes, or money to the spirit, it would be offended and cause bad luck in hunting and fishing. A police officer was present, and he arrested

9 Only the surname is mentioned in the letter. Onenko is a Nanai family to which many famous shamans have belonged. In relation to this it could be mentioned that the only Nanai shaman who (by archival sources) has been confirmed as executed during the repressions of the 1930s was Bogdan Londonovich Onenko. He was arrested on 12th September 1937, sentenced by a special troika of the NKVD and shot on 22nd November the same year (*Khotelos’ by vsekh poim-meno nazvat’* 1999, 176). For further information on and an analysis of B. L. Onenko’s destiny, see Bulgakova & Sundström 2017, 249f.

Onenko, despite protests from the other spectators. The next day the police officer brought Onenko to the police station in Bogorodskoie.¹⁰ Once there the arresting officer had been loudly rebuked by the chief of police, who pointed out that 'the constitution permits religion'. The shaman had then been released (GAKhK, f. 1359, op. 3, no. 3).

From one of Grebennikov's earlier (June 1948) quarterly reports 'on the doings of religious cults in Khabarovsk Krai' we learn that when he took up his post as head of the council he had been instructed by Polianskii to investigate and report on the activities of shamans in the territory. Since Grebennikov himself did not have time to travel around the vast area, he had engaged a certain comrade Khodzher, who, besides being an instructor for the territory's executive committee, was himself Nanai and known for having many contacts among the indigenous population. Grebennikov asked Khodzher to gather information on how many shamans were active in the area, how often they performed rituals, the extent to which they had influence over the local population, and what the attitude of the locals was to them. After his trip Khodzher reported that he had identified several shamans, some of whom he had persuaded to give up shamanism and destroy their ritual equipment such as drums, masks, costumes, and bells. These shamans had promised no longer to call on the spirits since, as they themselves put it, 'this is illegal'. Regarding the attitude of the people, Khodzher noted that it was almost only the elderly who consulted shamans, and only when they needed a cure for some disease. When ill the older generation put their trust in these 'charlatans' and 'quacks', but in normal circumstances even the elderly, just like all the others, 'laugh at the shamans and do not put faith in their sorcery [колдовство]'. However, Khodzher said, no one actually forbade shamanic rituals, and the general attitude towards shamans was relatively tolerant. It was not until after Khodzher's visits to the villages, where he had arranged meetings and agitated against shamanism, that the locals had started preventing the shamans from performing their profession. Grebennikov concludes his quarterly report by informing his superiors that he had instructed all the local executive committees to prohibit shamanism and impose sanctions on active shamans (GAKhK, f. 1359, op. 3, no. 4).

Although Grebennikov, as head of an authority handling the affairs of *religious* cults, had the surveillance of shamans as one of his tasks, he was still uncertain whether shamanism was to be classified as religion. Yet another

10 Bogorodskoie is the district centre of the Ulchski District in Khabarovsk Krai, situated along the Amur River, some 820 kilometres downstream from Khabarovsk.

reason for his confusion was that shamanism appeared so disorganised and wild to him – or as he wrote to Polianskii:

[...] shamans do not perform any kind of religious rituals, they just jump, dance, beat the drum, roll around, and mumble incomprehensible words, [and] after the dance they throw themselves on the ground, screaming that they are possessed by a 'spirit' that needs meat, vodka, clothes, etc. and if people do not give any gifts to the 'spirit' it can get angry and cause bad hunting and fishing luck or disease. There are still those who believe in such stupidities (GAKhK, f. 1359, op. 3, no. 3).

To get an answer to his question – and thereby be able to determine how to appropriately handle these 'stupidities' – Grebennikov had studied what he understood to be the state-of-the-art research of his time, I. Kuskoie's book *К вопросу о шаманизме* ('On the question of shamanism'), L. Ia. Shternberg's *Первобытная религия* ('Primitive religion'), and J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. However, he had not come closer to an answer to his query through this reading (and he was probably not the first, nor the last, civil servant disappointed by not getting a straightforward and practically applicable answer from scholars). He therefore now wanted an answer from his boss in Moscow.

The question of 'shamanism' as 'religion' in earlier Russian and Soviet debate

Perhaps Grebennikov merely wished to be rid of a task that was difficult to handle – if shamanism was not considered a 'religious cult', cases concerning shamans and shamanism should not end up on his desk. But the question whether shamanism was religion or not had been a subject of discussion earlier in the Soviet Union. By the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s some academics felt it necessary to resolve this question in light of the new political winds.

In pre-revolutionary times many Russian Orthodox missionaries in the northern parts of Russia, Siberia, and the Far East had contended that the indigenous peoples of the North lacked religion. They interpreted the so-called shamanism they observed as either devil-worship or naive, ignorant nonsense. In this discourse shamanism was classified as 'paganism' (*язычество*) or 'superstition' (*суеверие*), something that was the absolute opposite of Christian (Orthodox) 'religion'. If the term *religion* was used for

indigenous worldviews and ritual systems, it was considered 'false religion' (for examples, see Znamenski 1999, 67–81; Znamenski 2003, 43–130). This dichotomy has its roots as far back as in classical antiquity, where Cicero posed the term *religio* in opposition to *superstitio*. *Religio* referred to the correct worship of the Roman gods, whereas *superstitio* denoted the (condemned) cult of foreign gods. Thus, when early Christianity appeared it was first classified as *superstitio* by the Romans. Later, *religio* would be conquered, so to speak, by the Christians, when the Church Father Lactantius defined Christianity as *vera religio*, in contrast to *falsa religio* (see Hellman 2011, 30–3). E. Hellman comments on this classical dichotomy that:

in both Cicero and Lactantius it is illustrated how *religio*, through the strategies of inclusion and exclusion, establishes and maintains theological and political authority. Constitutive for *religio* was loyalty to an external authority (the Roman state or the Church) [...]. Breach of this loyalty was denounced as *superstitio* or *falsa religio* (Hellman 2011, 32f.; my translation).

Lenin and the Bolsheviks opposed religion of any kind. But the Russian Orthodox Church was the religion they combatted above all during and immediately after the Revolution. This church was not merely a close ally of the tsarist regime the communists opposed – tsarism and Orthodoxy were seen as two aspects of the same oppressive system, together comprising worldly and spiritual power.

Shamanism, on the other hand, was not then identified as a religion or as a direct enemy by the revolutionaries. Since the anti-religious measures taken by the communist regime – the closing of churches, the circumscribing of church services, the arrest and even executions of religious leaders – at first targeted the Orthodox Church, and since this church had earlier persecuted so-called shamanism, traditional indigenous practices experienced a resurgence in the 1920s. In short, the practice of shamanism became more common, at least in the open (see Sundström 2007, 118–22; Bulgakova & Sundström 2017, 229–33 with further references). However, the situation changed when the indigenous peoples of the North were also to be integrated in the modern socialist state in the second half of the 1920s. Now, the traditional social structures and hierarchies among the indigenous peoples were to be overthrown. This followed the same pattern as the reshaping of Russian culture. Richer than average reindeer owners on the tundra were defined as 'kulaks', and the traditional spiritual and ritual leaders – the 'shamans' – were classified as the indigenous equivalents of Orthodox priests.

It was not until 1926 that ‘shamans’ were added to the list of ‘servants of religious cults’, together with priests, monks, pastors, mullahs, rabbis, etc., in Soviet legislation. Thereby, they also lost their civic rights to vote and be elected to local councils, to own property, and to join the new kolkhozes (Pospelovsky 1987, 137f.; see further Sundström 2007, 127ff.).

This change in the interpretation of shamanism is well illustrated by I. Kosokov, an ethnographer who published an anti-shamanic pamphlet for the League of Militant Atheists (*Союз воинствующих безбожников*), an organisation with close ties to the Communist Party with the mission of eradicating religion from the Soviet Union (see Peris 1998; Sundström 2007, 89f.). Kosokov argued as follows against those who claimed that shamanism was not a religion:

In our days to deny shamanism the character of religion means denying the necessity of a resolute struggle against shamanism, which serves as a major obstacle to the construction of socialism among the most backward peoples of the Soviet Union, and which serves as a direct instrument for the kulaks in their exploitation of the working masses among the indigenous peoples of Siberia (Kosokov 1930, 6; my translation).

V. G. Bogoraz-Tan, arguably the most prominent Soviet ethnographer of the time, who had extensive field experiences among the peoples of the extreme north-east of Asia, contributed to this debate. He argued that Christianity and shamanism were of the same kind and predicted that ‘neither the shaman nor the priest has a place in the socialist society, and they will both perish entirely’:

Icons must constantly be placed on a par with indigenous idols, priestly rituals with shamanic rituals, and Christ himself, his death and resurrection placed on a par with [...] the mysteries of the bear cult, which in the same way includes the death and resurrection of the powerful animal – god (Bogoraz-Tan 1932, 157; my translation).

Thus, in Stalin’s ‘revolution from above’ (1928–1932) shamanism was placed in the same category as Christianity – and *vice versa*, of course. This category was a fusion of the earlier categories ‘religion’ and ‘superstition’; and ‘religion’ (*qua* ‘superstition’) was the absolute opposite of Marxism-Leninism, the official worldview of the Communist Party ruling the Soviet Union.

Religion as a problem in the Soviet Union

Why then was it so important to combat religion in the Soviet Union? There were two basic reasons for the Marxist-Leninists' resentment of religion. The first could be called ideological – religion disseminated false consciousness and made people conform to destructive social relations. In short, the communists saw religion as untrue and harmful. The other reason was power-political. To implement the transformations of society they sought, the Bolsheviks thought it necessary to impose the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', with the Party in the vanguard. In the totalitarian system established under Stalin there was no room for competing ideologies and organisations disloyal to the communist cause. The Party claimed a monopoly on the beliefs and logic allowed to influence society.

Another question, much more difficult to solve, was how best to overcome religion. Put simply, there were two main strategies, which can be illustrated by Marx's well-known opium metaphor (Marx & Engels 1964, 378) and its two slightly different translations.

In the Soviet understanding comparing religion with opium meant that religion was a sedative, which, it was true, gave people comfort and a certain relief when facing hardship, suffering, and oppression. However, it was a false comfort and a false relief that merely paralysed the believer. Made passive by the comfort of religious beliefs, religious people were unable to see their actual needs and to strive to improve their situation.

The literal translation of Marx's phrase *das Opium des Volks* is 'the opium of the people/people's opium' (or in Russian *опиум народа*). This formulation indicates that religion is interpreted as having evolved among the people (or the individual) because of, and as a compensation for, suffering and want. Thus, if people's material needs were satisfied, and economic, political, and social injustices overcome, religion would wither away, because its cause would cease to exist.

In some Soviet publications, however, we find the translation *опиум для народа*, literally 'opium for the people'. This translation reveals the other Marxist-Leninist understanding of the origin and function of religion: that it is imposed on the people by the exploiting ruling class, and that priests and other 'servants of religious cults' use it as an instrument to keep the toiling class numb and maintain an unjust social order. 'Opium for the people' was appropriately counteracted by ousting the exploiters and their priests, who duped the working class with propaganda about a divine order and promises of awards for the sufferer in the afterlife. Only by eradicating religious institutions and their leaders could the people cast off the religious yoke.

Although in his writings Lenin used the first (and literal) translation (*опиум народа* 'opium of the people'),¹¹ both strategies belonged to his analysis of how best to come to terms with religion (Lenin 1954, 4, 6–9; Lenin 1968, 142f.). Both strategies are also detectable in the concrete religious policy pursued in his name in the Soviet Union.¹²

Concerning the Soviet policy towards the indigenous religions of the North, the two strategies were also discussed. In the article by Bogoraz-Tan cited above the author called for an intensified struggle against the indigenous religions, which he considered to be the strongest impediment to the implementation of socialism among the peoples of the Soviet North. However, he thought it important to distinguish between 'religious organisation' and 'religious ideology'. In the North the religious organisation was constituted, according to Bogoraz-Tan, by 'shamanism' and the religious ideology was 'animism'. The anti-religious work that had been undertaken and proposed by the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s – such as anti-religious propaganda, the expropriation of ritual and sacred objects, the expulsion of shamans from communities, and the prohibition of shamanic activities – had been focused only on shamanism, the religious organisation. However, these measures were ineffective in countering the religious ideology, animism, the very foundation of shamanism, wrote Bogoraz-Tan. The religious ideology was best fought through the total transformation of the traditional economies and social structures (Bogoraz-Tan 1932, 144–57). Bogoraz-Tan finally suggested the industrialisation of Siberia and the Far East, because: 'Factory workers [...] are materialists in their relation to production and they cannot accept a naive animism, which is tied to a primitive form of subsistence economy' (Bogoraz-Tan 1932, 150). Emphasising the significance of defining shamanism as a religion and distinguishing between the religious organisation and religious ideology, he concludes:

if the struggle against the shaman can and should be linked to the struggle against the kulaks, then the struggle against the shamanic religion, i.e. against shamanic animism, needs to be closely linked to the struggle against [Christian] Orthodoxy (Bogoraz-Tan 1932, 157; my translation).

11 In the English translation of Lenin's collected works, published in the Soviet Union, the translation 'opium for the people' has been chosen (Lenin 1965, 83). This has led some prominent British specialists in Marxism to believe that Lenin mistranslated Marx; and from this they have drawn somewhat inaccurate conclusions about Lenin's analysis of religion (see Thrower 1983, 350; McLellan 1987, 105; and my own discussion in Sundström 2007, 68f. footnote 153).

12 For a more exhaustive discussion on Marxist-Leninist theory on religion and Soviet religious policy, see Sundström 2007.

In terms of Marxist-Leninist doctrine one can understand Bogoraz-Tan's 'religious organisation', represented by shamans and priests, as corresponding to the 'opium *for* the people', while the 'religious ideology', animism and Christianity, is the 'opium *of* the people'. They were both undesirable in the socialist society under construction, but they could not be combatted in the same way.

Bogoraz-Tan published his article in 1932. The industrialisation and modernisation he had advocated followed – not because as an ethnographer he had suggested it, however, but because of larger political and economic processes. In the wake of these processes there were fierce campaigns against shamans and shamanism, informed by the general struggle against religion. Many shamans were persecuted one way or another during the 1930s in the somewhat chaotic intensified struggle against shamanism, but it should be mentioned that the evidence for general arrests and executions of shamans in the Far East is quite contradictory and uncertain. The new Soviet constitution of 1936 restored civic rights and rehabilitated shamans, together with all other 'servants of religious cults' (for more detailed investigations and discussions of these processes in the Far East see Bulgakova & Sundström 2017; and Ivashchenko 2017). Although shamans and shamanism became increasingly marginalised in the indigenous communities during the 1930s, shamans were still active at the end of the 1940s, and there is even evidence that shamanism thrived anew to an extent during the Second World War (Smoljak 1998, 227, 251). Grebennikov's reports confirm this observation.

Polianskii's reply

How did his superior in Moscow respond to Grebennikov's inquiry? Was shamanism religion or not? At first the reply was quite clear: 'Yes, it is'; shamanism was religion. Polianskii then explained what religion was, paraphrasing Engels' (for the Soviet context) normative definition of religion: 'every religion is a fantastic reflection [in humans' minds] which controls human beings, i.e. such a reflection in which terrestrial forces assume the shape of supernatural ones' (GAKhK, f. 1359, op.3, no. 3).¹³ Religion was thus an illusion, a chimera, and shamanism was no exception according to Polianskii:

13 The original quotation from Engels can be found in Marx & Engels 1962, 294f.

Like all other religion, the basis of shamanism is found in belief in the supernatural, and in belief in malevolent and benevolent spirits. The only difference between shamanism and other religious cults (Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, etc.) consists in that in [the former] there are remnants of primitive savagery and primitive magic. Shamans drive both themselves and those present to insanity with their acts [...] (GAKhK, f. 1359, op.3, no. 3; my translation).¹⁴

However, although Polianskii clearly saw shamanism as religion, it does not follow that he saw shamanic practices as falling under the freedom of conscience and religion. Without further explanation he declared that the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults could not register groups that practised shamanism. Shamanism was therefore forbidden, on a par with some minor (unregistered) Christian sects.

One conclusion to be drawn from Polianskii's reply is that the reasons for allowing a religion to be practised were mainly related to power politics. Those religious groups that were permitted (and consequently registered) were organised and institutionalised in a way familiar to the authorities: they resembled the Orthodox Church in their structure. Shamanism was too disorganised and wild – and it could therefore not be properly controlled.

One can discern a legacy from the Russian Orthodox missionaries in both Polianskii's and Grebennikov's attitudes towards shamanism. They saw it as 'primitive savagery' and 'stupidities' leading to 'insanity'. When Polianskii contrasts shamanism with Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, he seems to repeat the earlier division between 'superstition' and 'religion'.

Grebennikov also wanted to legally restrict shamanism on the grounds of its purported superstitious character – once it had been declared a 'religious cult', but not one that could register or be afforded the protection of the constitutional freedom of religion. In March 1950 he sent a draft of a letter to Polianskii. He intended that the letter be sent to all chairs of executive committees of the Communist Party in the Nanai District of Khabarovsk

14 Polianskii's definition of religion (derived from another text by Engels, obviously inspired by E. B. Tylor; see Sundström 2007, 55–9) as belief in the 'supernatural' and 'spirits' is a type of definition which is still current (see e.g. Jong 2017; Sutherland 2017). The crucial problem with this definition concerns the criteria for something to be classified as 'supernatural' or as 'spirits', and on what grounds such classifications are made. Traditionally, the practitioners of so-called shamanism did not use concepts such as 'religion', the 'supernatural', or 'spirits'. These are the classifications of outside observers. I have earlier discussed this problem (Sundström 2008; Sundström 2012b) and will return to it in a forthcoming publication.

Krai. Grebennikov wrote the draft, but the idea was that the sender should be the chair of the Party's central executive committee in the territory.

In the letter Grebennikov described the increasing activity of shamans in the district and said that they were now openly performing their rituals and attracting large audiences. The rituals were accompanied by drinking bouts for which people slaughtered pigs and chickens (at the expense of the *kolkhozes*). Four shamans were identified by name, and the villages in which they practised specified. Obviously, representatives of local authorities knew about these shamanic activities, but instead of taking steps to prevent them, they participated themselves in the rituals. Having paraphrased Polianskii's view that shamans drove both themselves and their audiences to insanity and that shamanism was forbidden, Grebennikov summarised the letter in elaborate bureaucratic style:

The executive committee [of Khabarovsk Krai] recommends you, who receive this letter, to take severe measures, with the help of the police organs and the village councils, in connection with the termination of shamans' activities, [and] on the disclosure of shamanising [*комлений*¹⁵] taking it as far as to destroy shamanic equipment and prosecute especially harmful shamans both on charges of deceiving the people and for fooling certain superstitious individuals (GAKhK, f. 1359, op. 3, d. 6; my translation).

The letter's conclusion requested the chairs of the executive committees to ensure that local authorities pursue 'undiminished surveillance' of identified shamans and continue to expose those yet to be identified.

In his covering letter to Polianskii Grebennikov stressed that he himself found it necessary to take the 'most severe measures' (*самые жесткие меры*) to end shamanism. To accomplish this one had to start arresting shamans and put them on trial according to paragraph 123 of the penal code (GAKhK, f. 1359, op. 3, d. 6). This paragraph criminalised 'deceitful acts with the purpose of rousing superstition among the masses for one's own benefit'. The penalty for breaking this law was up to one year in a corrective labour camp or a fine of five hundred roubles.

Polianskii may have feared that the proposed letter would instigate a large-scale persecution of shamans, reminiscent of the 'terror' which had characterised the 1930s and which was probably only too familiar to him as a former high-ranking official of the NKVD. Alternatively, he may simply

15 *Комлений* is Grebennikov's (mis)spelling of the common Russian word for 'shamanising' or 'shamanic ritual', *камлание*.

have thought that Grebennikov was wasting his own and the executive committee chairs' time on what from Moscow seemed a rather insignificant problem. In any event Polianskii advised against sending the letter to the executive committees. Instead, he declared that administrative and legal measures should be taken against shamans only when they were caught in the act of clearly breaking the law (GAKhK, f. 1359, op. 3, d. 6).

Concluding remarks

I have sought to illustrate with the above examples of the discussions in the Soviet Union that the question of whether a certain cultural expression is considered religion or not can only with difficulty be answered apart from social and political contexts – and the question is rarely raised outside such contexts. Perhaps one could imagine a completely detached investigation of the concepts of shamanism and religion in academia. However, current socio-political considerations tend to enter even the most secluded rooms of the ivory tower. This is one of the reasons 'religion' (like 'shamanism') is so difficult to handle as a scientific concept in comparative research.

The concept of religion is, and has been, imbued with varying connotations and values in different societies and contexts. Whether one classifies a certain entity as 'religion' depends on whether religion is understood as something positive or negative – edifying or harmless, or detrimental for the individual or society. As a matter of course, it also depends on whether the entity to be classified is understood as something positive or negative. This is hardly news – but it is still topical.

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