



# HOW SIBERIAN SHAMANISM IS SURVIVING THROUGH CENTURIES OF OPPRESSION

by TATIANA PARKHOMOVA

It is common to associate occult traditions in Russia with Slavic witchcraft, folk stories, and Pagan rituals which come primarily from the West of Russia. Being a multicultural country, Russia is inhabited by ethnic minorities that follow various spiritual paths, including Shamanism which is widespread in Siberia. Descended from Mongolians, tribes of Siberian natives have always lived in harmony with nature which is reflected through their magical rituals. Despite years of oppression, racism, and silencing by Russian invaders, indigenous practitioners continue to live and fight to preserve the sacred magic of their homeland.

## **What is Siberian Shamanism**

Although some scientists believe that it is an occult practice that defies evil spirits, some believe that it is a religion. In the book *Shamanism of Siberia*, it is assumed that Shamanism is an old form of Buddhism brought by Mongolian tribes. Shamanism assigns great significance to the practitioner, the shaman. Across all tribes, shamanism is believed to run in the bloodline or appear in the ones chosen by spirits. Shamanhood is not exclusive to any sex,

historically some regions had more female shamans.

Shamans typically wear eccentric costumes for ceremonies, consisting of sacred accessories, a cap, a coat, or a dress. Depending on the tribe, their costume can include feathers, horns, animal skin, and bells. Their drum has great ceremonial meaning and it is made of hide. It is used for ceremonial magic alongside singing and humming that allow the shaman to enter a trance.

Shamanism honors spirits, nature, and animals, striving to achieve a balance between all. For instance, Buryat shamans honor the sacred lake of Baikal. Most commonly shamans use their practice to heal, communicate with spirits and answer inquiries.

## **Discovering Siberian Aboriginals**

Russia annexed Siberia in the late 1500s, which marked an offset of the fight against aboriginal culture, languages, and religion. At first Russian settlers tried to adopt local customs, as they wanted Aboriginals to share their wisdom and knowledge about surviving in the cold climate of Siberia.

Despite being Christian, settlers believed they could seek guidance and spiritual protection from shamans.

Many years later, shamans would be banned from practicing rituals in townships, while indigenous Siberians were baptized as per newly issued laws. As native Siberians became “double believers”, shamans continued their rituals away from the Orthodox Church.

In the 1700s, the Church tried to limit shamanism by burning tools and totems, as well as banning shamans from practicing occult magic. These actions were often sporadic and did not put an end to the practice. However, Siberian shamanism was destined to face even more oppression in the beginning of the 20th century.

### **The Era of Soviet Repressions**

Being a religious practice, Shamanism was outlawed in the 1920s with the start of the Communist regime. The Soviets aimed to eradicate anyone who practiced different beliefs, leading to the execution and persecution of shamans. Shamans were banned from elections and stripped of any influence, as well as evicted from their homes.

In the years to come, occult items were confiscated and destroyed while shamans would be forced to hide in the woods of taiga. Until the end of the Soviet era, shamans practiced their magic in secret risking fines and jail.

Years of repression have led to significant losses: some shamans no longer use drums and bells or wear traditional costumes. It is believed that in some regions such as Khabarovsk, the practice disappeared altogether.

### **Siberian Shamans Today**

Although it is now legal to be a shaman and be a believer of Shamanism, the future is not all too bright for native Siberians. The media often reports on Shamanism being run like a business while practitioners admit to seeing many imposters who engage in rituals for show. The federal government denied official recognition of Shamanism as a religion, while indigenous languages and cultures do not receive enough attention or state-level support.

Some practitioners side with local governments to achieve political goals. One such shaman conducted rituals to protect Russian soldiers from bullets in Ukraine. Another shaman from Tyva acts as a spiritual leader for the region and successfully

convinces indigenous locals to join the army to fight in Ukraine. Some believe his war-centered ceremonies and rituals are contributing to a mass genocide of Tuvans, as ethnic communities bear a disproportionate share of deaths in the war.

Some shamans of Siberia carry family traditions and cultural heritage through solitary practice. Tatyana Kobezhikova is a female shaman from Khakassia (Southern Siberia) who devotes her work to guarding the Khakas culture. She collaborates with scientists, anthropologists, and other shamans to work on environmental projects and revitalize spiritual heritage.

It is not uncommon to see shamans become the spiritual leaders of their community. As ethnic minorities no longer hide their belief, shamans exercise public rituals of sacrifice, communication with the dead, healing, and protection.

This sacred practice continues to survive due to vigorous efforts of shamans and indigenous people, but the future of its cultural heritage remains uncertain due to continued attempts of the state to undermine and eradicate native Siberians.

*Tatiana is an ethical activist from Siberia, Russia. She has a great interest in preserving indigenous culture and spiritual traditions. Her written work helps to spread awareness about important social causes.*

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