

Eleanor Peers

Through the looking glass: the politics of trance in north-east Siberia

Amanda Ravetz (AR): Eleanor Peers has spent most of her career investigating Siberia and she's pursued this research from the Departments of Journalism, Sociology and Social Anthropology at the London College of Printing, Cambridge University and Max Plank Institute of Social Anthropology, and the University of Aberdeen, which is where I met Eleanor a few years ago, and you're going to talk about shamanism.

Eleanor Peers (EP): Yes, I am. Thank you very much to Amanda and Tim and Tilo and Alison for organising this.

I'm very new to this discussion of reverie, I'm finding it all really, really exciting and a bit overwhelming, so what I'm going to do is present two field experiences which I think are relevant and I hope that sort of in the discussion, something sort of fruitful will come through.

I'm going to show you two examples of what nowadays is referred to as shamanic rituals. They both occur in Russia's indigenous Siberian Sakha community which is based in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in North East Siberia. Sakha faith has coexisted with Russian Orthodox Christianity for many centuries, followed by Soviet atheism. Russian and European explorers in the 18th and 19th centuries classed the Sakha community and its practices as shamanic.

The English and Russian term, shamanism and shaman, with all their baggage, have been incorporated into the way Sakha people describe their practice in Russian, although it is difficult to pinpoint the equivalence of these terms in Sakha language.

As this suggests, Sakha shamanic practice is woven into the ongoing colonial politics of the region, as is a key feature of shamanic action, a state which is now called Turuk. There are many parallels between Turuk and the reverie we've been discussing and in Sakha, Turuk has been described to me as the state a shaman or performer and their audience have to access in order for the healing and/or performance to take place successfully. It enables an encounter with semi-hidden dimensions and personalities, within which these personalities negotiate, inform and act.

Within this specific, shamanic healing is a form of creativity, like song, poetry and art, it takes place within a given community through the action of semi-hidden beings mediated by chosen humans. Shamanic action is sought and appreciated by those with a high awareness of their relational being, coupled with a diminished sense of themselves as unitary, controlling and self-sufficient, and yet shamanic creativity, with its corresponding practices of Turuk, have to take place within the parameters afforded by a political status quo and its systems of formation, education and communication which now are based on assumptions about reality that differ profoundly from the world pre-supposed by shamanism.

I'm hoping that these examples are going to help us think about the political framing of reverie and its practice and in particular, the Sakha example might, well help us, help me consider the way the difficulties and embarrassments we encounter as we discuss or experience reverie, are linked to the accordances and limitations our own political environment presents and in particular, the insistence on the unitary controlling human actor, that exerts such a huge influence over education, communication and every form of relationship.

Shamanic specialists in Turuk are quite at ease with the recognition that they and everyone else around them are profoundly influenced by semi hidden beings and worlds, in common with countless other communities down the centuries. Ecstatic states were and are an inevitable part of life for many people at many times, why then

do we find them so strange?

The first example of Turuk that I'm going to talk about has a direct connection to the forms of shamanic healing and creativity that pre-dated the Soviet period. The second example of Turuk has emerged out of the post-Soviet revival of the Sakha shamanic tradition, after several decades of state sponsored atheism and modernisation.

I'm going to prefigure my description of the first and older example with a reading from the Book of Exodus out of the Old Testament, it is a neat description of the movement that Shaman Anatoli – and here is Anatoli – makes as he enters into communication with forces much larger than himself and as such illustrates the countless parallel instances of this movement.

I quote from Exodus, "And the Lord said unto Moses, 'come up to me into the mount and be there and I will give thee tables of stone and a law and commandments which I have written, that thou may teach them' and Moses rose up and his minister, Joshua, and Moses went up into the mount of God and he said unto the elders, 'Tarry ye here for us until we come again unto you' and Moses went up into the mount and a cloud covered the mount, and the glory of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai and the cloud covered it six days, and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud and the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount, in the eyes of the children of Israel." That's the end of that quote.

So Anatoli currently lives and works in the Sakha capital which is called Yakutsk, and I am very, very indebted to him and his wife Mira, for the incredibly generous way they have shared their lives and experiences with me over several years. Anatoli comes from a remote village, remote enough to have retained pre-Soviet Sakha perspectives, despite Sovietisation. Nobody was surprised therefore, that Anatoli perceived and interacted with spirits, deities and ancestors from a very early age. As Anatoli has explained, his ancestors called him to be a mediator with deities and spirits, just as God called Moses up to the mount, so that Moses could communicate God's laws to the children of Israel for their own benefit.

In their own time, these ancestors caused Anatoli to become a shamanic healer, as God waited for the seventh day before calling Moses. These ancestors taught Anatoli how to interact with them, chiefly through sound and rhythm as you will hear, the Lord was to give Moses extensive and precise instructions about how prayers, sacrifices and worship were to be conducted and what his priests should wear. It seems that what we might now call Hebrew ritual art was created under the tutorage of God himself, just as in Sakha worship, poem prayers are seen to be bestowed by benevolent deities.

When Anatoli heals, he makes a journey into a dark and mysterious place, as Moses and Joshua ascended Mount Sinai. He positions himself carefully in relation to the person or people he is treating, before easing himself into Turuk, here's an example with me and so he has asked me to sit on the stool and shut my eyes and so that's the kind of initial positioning as he kind of moves off.

As Anatoli enters Turuk, his spirit helpers arrive to instruct his responses to his clients and the spirits surrounding them. He never knows what he is going to do in advance of the ritual. Turuk engenders a profound contact between all the people present, whether they are practitioners, patients or observers. It makes evident the ritual participant's position within an enormous interconnected community of deities, demons, animals, natural features and people, as the children of Israel were caught in their fundamental relationship through to their creator, through God's instructions to Moses on the mountain.

Hence Anatoli does not spend much time questioning his clients about their problems because the process of Turuk will show him everything he needs to know. The spirit helpers, along with demons and deities, speak through Anatoli as I hope you will hear in the sound recording. Sometimes he flies away to other dimensions, to bargain with various deities and Anatoli's practice does change the lives of his

clients, this is why he has been supporting his family through this shamanic healing for many years.

Finally, the state of Turuk is as dangerous as the presence of God as described in Exodus. Anatoli and Mira have explained that whilst in Turuk, you have to keep calm in the face of a magnitude of the worlds you experience or you might go mad and not everyone is capable of this. So as Moses and his helper, Joshua climb the mountain, leaving the rest of the community behind, Anatoli and sometimes other shamanic practitioners with him, are venturing deeper into a dimension the other participants experience dimly, the children of Israel were able to perceive the glory of the Lord from a distance, even if they were unable to hear what he said. So I will now play you a little bit of what this ritual sounds like.

[Plays audio]

Right, let's move on. And FYI, the rhythmic sound you heard is a Sakha jaw harp, or khomus, and I've got one with me so if you want, I can show you.

Shamanism has become quite fashionable in since the national revival started in the late 1980s, although it continues to generate a great deal of controversy. There are many people in Sakha (Yakutia) who might find Anatoli's rituals terrifying, senseless or distasteful.

Following Soviet era modernisation and post-Soviet urbanisation, most Sakha people inhabit secularised, mainstream Russian institutions and environments, within these institutions people are treated and act as unitary individuals, as consumers, experts, workers and competitors and Anatoli and his colleagues are acutely aware of the need to frame their activities in certain ways to certain classes of people, for example Sakha and non-Sakha or urban and village.

Shamanic practitioners will speak about energies or waves and will use terms adopted by popular esoteric academia such as the phrase, "altered state of consciousness" in Russian, *izmenyonnoe sostoyane soznaniya*, which seems to translate as Turuk.

The intensity of Anatoli's rituals requires a small intimate setting like his own flat and this is a distinct disadvantage in a setting where authority and popularity are generated through a prominent public persona, and ability to speak and an elaborate Sakha national costume. Instead, Anatoli's rituals have to occur within a supportive, friendly meeting, preceded and followed by many cups of tea and snacks. Clients become friends as Anatoli and Mira together foster the close relationship that will enable the individual to open themselves up to treatment. Significantly, much of Anatoli's practice consists of travelling to remote villages that have retained a pre Soviet experience of human ecology, like his own, to people who are better able instinctively to understand what he does.

He is self-consciously a specialist in the old fashioned Sakha tradition, a tradition conditioned by the need to remain out of sight of the Tsarist government officials and missionaries, as it adapted to the changes in perspective and lifestyle brought about by Russian colonisation, and Anatoli is able to produce markedly different effects from the next Shamanic ritual I will speak about, the greeting of the sun within the particular experience of Turuk, he and his fellow participants are able to access.

The greeting of the sun has become a key event within the two day Ysyakh

rituals held throughout Sakha (Yakutia) towards the end of June. The Ysyakh itself has undergone an extensive revitalisation since the 1980s, some contend that the greeting of the sun ritual is itself is an invented tradition, but the main author of the current ritual insists that he read about it in the pre- Soviet ethnographic literature.

As this indicates, identity politics exert a profound influence over both the Ysyakh and the greeting of the sun, along with their concurrent notions of Sakha ethnicity and nationalism.

People are encouraged to attend these events to express their Sakha pride and many thousands of Sakha people now do regard the Ysyakh as the key expression

of a profoundly important ethnic belonging. The greeting of the sun therefore has all the accoutrements of what in Russia is regarded as a beautiful and lavish folk festival.

In the videos I am about to play, you will see national costumes and the intricate choreography of large numbers of people. The ritual practitioner here, who's called Ivan, is miked up and projected on screens to those unable to get close enough to see him but despite all the choreography and amplification, Ivan performs his ritual in a state of Turuk and he hopes at least some of his audience will join him, to increase the effectiveness of his prayers.

The greeting of the sun takes place after 3am, usually on the second morning of the Ysyakh. As the sun comes up, Ivan sacrifices fermented mare's milk, horse hair and pancakes to the fire and the upper spirits descend to inspire him with a shamanic poem prayer he pronounces. The audience reaches forward to receive the benefit energy the sun will bring, which will recharge their health and prosperity for the coming year. Importantly, Ivan has total control over what he says and does when he reaches the sight of the fire, everything else in this event has been put together by professional theatrical directors and choreographers, so these are two short clips, very badly filmed, sorry, but I hope they'll give you a sense of what this event is like, so this is 3am on the second morning of the Ysyakh.

[Plays video]

Okay so that's the first one and then a few moments later, the first ...

[Plays video]

So as you can see from what I've just shown you, it's become very popular among young people, the very generation that generally is more attached to their iPhones than the Sakha shamanic tradition. These kind of young people, they might have to be dragged to one of Anatoli's rituals by their parents but they willingly abandon the Ysyakh's free disco tents to greet the sun. While Ivan and his colleagues are very aware of the need to create a crowd pleasing show, as they've done, they're also glad to report an increasing spiritual awareness among the audience, as they say, more and more people are able to take part in the rituals' deeper encounter.

In essence, Ivan and his colleagues are evangelising Turuk and a Turuk that differs from the state and action Anatoli produces in his rituals. The greeting of the sun is always spoken of in terms of a generalised good energy, rather than an encounter with specific deities to alleviate a particular problem. The practice and experience of Turuk in Sakha (Yakutia) are heavily embroiled in the changing identity politics of Russia and in the capacities for skill and experience generated by successive secularist political orders.

Thanks very much.