

# Shamans Emerging From Repression in Siberia: Lightning Rods of Fear and Hope

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer

Georgetown University, USA

To honor the broad ranging legacy of Åke Hultkranz, this article focuses on the changing social and political ramifications of indigenous people's spiritual revitalization in Siberia. My approach balances Hultkranz's sensitivity to commonalities of shamanism throughout the circumpolar North with attention to more specific aspects of shamanistic practices and beliefs in Far Eastern Siberia, especially the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), over time. Shamans and shamanic prophets can be found in many kinds of communities, from rural Siberia to Native North America to urban Korea. Over-generalizations behind standard or "ideal type" distinctions among "shamans," "priests," and "prophets" limit our understanding of the richness of shamanic cultural traditions.

Research featured here is based on long-term fieldwork, many return trips to Siberia over the past thirty-five years, and work with the Sakha diaspora. It analyses the resurgence of post-Soviet shamanic healing practices, the organization of an Association of Folk Medicine, and shamanic leadership in an ecology activist movement. Shamans explain that their crucial imperative to heal and protect their clients and communities survived the Soviet period. Shamans and others, by adapting shamanic belief systems, can engage, if not soothe, the legacies of social as well as personal suffering. Yet many shamans were killed or repressed in the Soviet period, rituals were suppressed, and the reputations of shamans have long been ambiguous, depending on whom they protect and how. In socially fraught, crisis-ridden contexts, the personal becomes political. Shamans'

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## How to cite this book chapter:

Balzer, M. M. 2016. Shamans Emerging From Repression in Siberia: Lightning Rods of Fear and Hope. In: Jackson, P. (ed.) *Horizons of Shamanism: A Triangular Approach to the History and Anthropology of Ecstatic Techniques*. Pp. 1–34. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16993/bag.c>. License: CC-BY 4.0

motivations and authenticity are debated. A prophylactic against shamanic misuse of perceived spiritual power is the widespread belief that if shamans use their “helping spirits” for revenge or impure purposes, this can literally come back to haunt them, their families, and their descendants. Contemporary Siberian shamans, some of whom have suffered traumatic, validating spiritual initiations, often find themselves powerless to combat familiar “global” problems such as exploitation by outsiders and increasingly horrific environmental destruction. Shamans become lightening rods of both fear and hope for those who believe in them.

### **Introduction: Approaches of Åke Hultkranz and Other Classic Views**

My first contact with Åke was in 1993 at a conference on shamanism in Budapest, where he was the keynote speaker for the founding of the International Society of Shamanistic Research. He scolded me, as an American, for possibly being among those who do not pay enough attention to European scholarship, especially on Native American rituals and beliefs. I decided he was right, especially after reading the wonderful book he gave me: *Shamanic Healing and Ritual Drama: Health and Medicine in Native North American Religious Traditions* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Rereading Åke’s publications and those of his students, such as Joseph Epes Brown (2007), has deepened my understanding of the early commitment of the University of Stockholm’s Department of Religion to an open-minded approach to religious traditions in the broadest sense. That legacy continued with the November 8, 2013 workshop of shamanism.

A significant aspect of Åke’s work is brought out by remembering the tension between his search for Northern commonalities of shamanism, including “eschatological conceptions of soul beliefs” (Hultkranz 1953: 7; 1993), in juxtaposition with Jane Atkinson’s insistence on shamanisms and shamanship (1989; 1992). Åke was frank about his concern that if we narrowed our studies of shamans too far into emphasis on specific communities and individuals, we would lose sight of what gives us a common vocabulary to study religious traditions that have deep intertwined roots and fascinating philosophical convergences.

I try to balance these two major, competing concerns in shamanic studies, without reproducing Åke's main distinctions between the world views and practices of hunters versus agriculturalists (in the Native North American context). I also tend to "problematize" that slippery word "tradition," since as an anthropologist I have been trained to be very specific about historical context and periodization. Any romantic hope for revealing pristine "untouched" "pre-contact" Native traditions in the 21st-century, including in a place as seemingly remote as Siberia, should be abandoned.

In the anthropology literature, both classic (Max Weber, Victor Turner) and current (David Hicks, David Gellner) distinctions are often made between religious practitioners with charismatic, idiosyncratic sources of inspiration and those with more institutionalized, regularized and learned sources of authority. These become the "shamans" and "priests" of different kinds of societies, often posited in hierarchical or evolutionary relationships.<sup>1</sup> Shamans are relegated, in some such schemes, to the lowest rungs, to small traditional communities, while priests flourish in complex, urban societies with elaborate social roles to serve globalizing or "world" religions. Mediating these two extremes are the "prophets," who derive spiritual power from creative uses of authority: they are at once charismatic and socially significant. Prophets in such conceptions become those leaders known for energetically forcing their social groups out of seasoned patterns during times of crisis and cultural change, sometimes into new religious movements.<sup>2</sup>

I argue here against the over-generalizations behind these standard or "ideal type" definitions, since shamans and shamanic prophets can be found in many kinds of communities, from rural Siberia to Native North America to urban Korea (compare Kendall 2009; Hoppál 1992; Humphrey 1999). Further, the boundary defying roles of priestly prayer chanters, emergency spiritual healers and charismatic trickster shamans can sometimes be found in the same person. I make my case using data from the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), where I have done periodic fieldwork since 1986. Rather than privileging "outsider" definitions with rigid or "etic" distinctions, I attempt to use the flexible and subtle local "emic" distinctions that Sakha themselves make concerning

overlapping kinds of shamans. These are in part, although not entirely, based on various kinds of spirits associated with particular practitioners or actions. Shamans functioning as white-light purifying prayer leaders are described as “*aiyy oiun*,” to stress their connection with benevolent “*aiyy*” spirits of the sky (compare Eliade 2004). Shamans who summon other spirits, through drumming or jaw harp, are termed “*oiun*” if they are men and “*udagan*” if they are women. Their spirits include those of the earth, *ichchi[ler]*, and a more capricious or dangerous category, “*abaaghy*”. The complexities and debated meanings of the relevant terms, beyond healer specialization, are illustrated here by focus on several famed shamans, especially the Soviet period shaman Konstantin Chirkov, who predicted the demise of the Soviet Union; his surgeon daughter Alexandra; the currently revered É’dii (Elder Sister) Dora Kobiakova; and the recently deceased Vladimir Kondakov, founder of the Association of Folk Medicine. Before turning to featured shamans, I also provide narratives of shamanic power, in order to viscerally enable understanding of the ways historical shaman-related events remain salient yet re-worked in current conceptions and ritual behavior.

My conclusions stress the need to think beyond the simplistic dualism of “black” (sorcerer) and “white” (priestly) shamans, attributing general evil or benevolent intent to whole specific categories of people without sensitivity to context and change. One family’s sorcerer may be another’s healer-defender, particularly in situations of competition between shamans. Similarly, we need to transcend worn analytical habits of privileging European, Christian influenced, definitions over local logics. Nuanced local language and belief system complexities can then become the more prestigious analytical categories, opening up new ways to discuss cross-cultural comparisons (Lindquist and Coleman 2008). Rationality is relativized, while acknowledging the salience of mutual influences over multiple generations of post-colonial contacts (Handler 2004).

A more personal confession is perhaps appropriate here. In the post-Soviet milieu of struggling for indigenous people’s cultural revitalization, I have felt an ethical, fieldwork imperative to sympathize with narratives of shamans’ repressions during the Soviet

period and to affirm shamanic reputations for healing. In the Far East of Russia, Sakha Republic (Yakutia), it has been delightful to extol large-scale festivals that open with eloquent “white shaman” prayer-blessings. Yet no researcher with sensitivity to accounts of their interlocutors could fail to notice what has sometimes been called “the dark side” of shamanic power (compare M. Brown 1988; 1989; Whitehead and Wright 2004). I thus concede that it is misleading to dismiss as merely blackening due to the influence of Soviet and Christian propaganda certain indigenous narratives that are frankly chilling. However, listeners should not anticipate murder mystery intrigues. The accounts that follow must be placed within an indigenous cosmological and analytical framework that incorporates diverse shamanic powers and reputations. I claim, along with many Siberians, that reputations of shamans have long been ambiguous, depending on whom the shamans protect and how. For example, indigenous interlocutors circulate morale-building narratives of shamans able to defeat Soviet jailers and atheist propagandists in mystical, socially transcendent ways (Balzer 2012:46–56). Shamanic practices are situational, contingent on political context and community support. Their interpretation is intertwined with “eye of the beholder” issues of cultural relativism, natural relativism and “perspectivism”.

### **Narratives of Shamanic Power: When Spirits of the Past Remain Present**

At least in recent periods if not earlier, the chill effect of shamanic abuse of power has probably been outweighed by the beneficial effects of shamanic individual and community healing. Numerous accounts of shamanic initiations throughout Siberia and Central Asia vividly depict being “chosen by the spirits” against one’s will and without recourse once “spirit torture” or “spirit illness” begins (Basilov 1997 [1984]). This spiritual road is far too difficult to be chosen lightly. I have collected personal initiation narratives, including convincing post-Soviet accounts that depict healers’ resulting abilities to have “radical empathy” with their future supplicants (Balzer 2012; compare Koss-Chioino 2006). For example, the village shaman Vitaly, known for curing alcoholics, and supported by his local government with a special curing hut in the

forest, explained in 1997: “Since childhood I have had dreams, horrible nightmares, as I at first thought them. First a bear came to me. With a *stuk, stuk, stuk*, advancing on me. I was terrified. I would lie awake at night and not be able to sleep, in a sweat... Then other stages followed. I felt I was being torn apart, and then put into a horrible press, with pressure on all sides coming down at me.” A thong on Vitaly’s neck holds a bear tooth talisman, since the bear has become his *ie kyl*, “mother animal spirit,” his main guide into multiple worlds of the Sakha cosmology. In a familiar pattern, Vitaly was healed only after he promised to heal others.

A contrasting sunset-of-life account of shamanic power was confided in 2012 by an elderly woman originally from the Niurba area of Sakha republic about her grandmother:

“You know that they say when people are dying, toward their end, they lose their shamanic talents? My grandmother had been bed-ridden and blind for several years. She was really sinking and out of it. However, toward the end something very different happened. She got back her spiritual gift, her singing. But it happened in a very scary way. The family could not predict when she was going to die. It was duck hunting season. And my father, my brother and my brother-in-law, three generations, set out for a specific hunting site pretty far away. They had three guns. Grandmother was aware they were gone. She started to sing, a kind of descriptive chant. And my mother’s hair nearly stood on end. She was terrified – for what grandmother sang was that three men, of three generations, had shot each other by accident while they were hunting. It was in the same general place that our family had gone, only it turned out to be across the river, this incident. It really happened – but it turned out it the killing was not in our family but another family. We still wonder – had grandmother seen this whole thing, visualized it somehow in simultaneous time, and described it so vividly, as if she were there? Had she perhaps averted the tragedy from our family to someone else’s? Was she describing or actually influencing events? We never found out. She died soon after. I am very scared of this kind of [spirit] power, and do not want it for myself, do not like talking about it...”

We are plunged into a realm of thought and action here that is beyond the experience of most, and not easily reducible to generalizations about special cognitive talents of “clear seeing” shamans.

Memories concerning this grandmother, and other frightening aspects of the speaker's life history, caused her to turn away from shamans to the New Apostolic church in 1998. Yet her so-called "conversion" has not stopped her faith in shamanic powers, particularly in the Cassandra-like abilities of certain shamans to see, warn of, and sometimes help divert, disasters. Thus her narrative, and many others, can provoke us into thinking more deeply about why and how individuals and communities retain powerful, circulating memories about frightening spiritual worlds, even when they insist they would rather live without such memories and such spirituality. These are far more significant than titillating "ghost stories" (in Sakha *yuer*) told around a campfire. In culturally mixed contexts, especially times of socio-economic crisis, political upheaval, and shifting religious values, spiritual conflicts become exacerbated, as data from across the North and from Mongolia and Nepal, amply reveal.<sup>3</sup> They are too unpredictable and politically contingent to enable generalizations about the decline of violence or the advance of humanism (compare Pinker 2011).

Another blatantly predictive "Cassandra" narrative reinforces my claim that accounts of shamans and spirits are widespread and maintained through indigenous community fascination well into post-Soviet times. Such narratives often depict violent events of the Soviet period. Their current circulation perhaps serves as an ongoing processing of the ramifications of Soviet repression of shamans, given their significance as exemplars and leaders of folk religiosity. I heard this one in 2012 from an interlocutor who prefers to remain anonymous:

"Zina had special talents from a very early age. She died young and had a very rough life. They [Soviet doctors] said she was schizophrenic, and they gave her drugs to "cure" her. At one point she actually broke a window trying to escape. She died relatively young, in a hospital, age 52, many years ago. Her own mother was an *udagan* [female shaman] or at least a *menerik* [spirit message receiver]. Zina sang... and when she did she could predict trouble, but no one appreciated her. [MMB: As if she was out of Greek tragedy?] Yes, she was like Cassandra. Here is an example. Zina envisioned ahead an accident involving a truck and a motorcycle. She saw that a construction vehicle lost a chain that flew back at a

young man riding a motorcycle behind it, and he was thrown off and killed. She knew that young man, who was handsome, had a good potential future and was just out of the army. So she decided to warn him to be careful on his motorcycle, and she told him what she had seen. But he laughed it off and about a week later he was killed, just as she had envisioned. This was such a freak accident it is hard to imagine it being made up ahead of time. Incidentally, Zina was not a pure Sakha. Her mama was Sakha, and her papa was some sort of Russian/ Polish mix. But the gift for clear-seeing runs especially in the maternal line, and she had it, to her despair.”

Zina’s tragedy was compounded by Soviet contempt for all who exhibited shamanic tendencies, such as visions. Psychiatric treatment was usually a form of psychiatric imprisonment, with pseudo-doctors in white coats using a debilitating cocktail of drugs to suppress perceived abnormality. They often diagnosed as “schizophrenic” those who defied the Soviet system. Political and religious dissidents were predominant among their victims, throughout the Soviet Union (Grigoryants 1989). The Siberian variation on this theme is that some of the “best and brightest” potential shamans were thwarted in their ability to fulfill what many saw as their destiny. Instead, they became unloved and mocked by their own communities. In hindsight, we might say that not only the young man, but others around Zina would have done well to heed her visions. But they were powerless to do so in the social milieu of the time, and thus they also were condemned to localize the Cassandra legend that literally has resonance from other times and places. Note too that my literate interlocutor named the Cassandra pattern, by definition featuring unloved, thwarted seers. In the Sakha language, a clear-seer is called *keubecheu*, a clear hearer is *yeustachi*, and the idea of telepathy is encompassed in the term *aharas eteei kibi*, glossed as “person with an open body”.

A more positive outcome of shamanic power contestation in the Soviet period fits into a set of narratives that valorize shamans. These are legend-like accounts of certain secretly revered shamans who had the ability to transcend and defeat Soviet authorities. For example, this narrative was gifted to me by the ethnographer Semen Ivanovich Nikolaev (penname Somogotto, July 1991) about one of the most famed shamans of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, Nikon:

“The young Komsomol activists who were supposed to be arresting shamans were themselves scared of them.... The great shaman Nikon was invited to a club by some Komsomol. They were trying to expose charlatans, and to catch and jail them, confiscating cloaks and drums. So they invited Nikon, and he threatened them... He came onto the stage at the club and said, “If I scare you, will you promise not to arrest or punish me?” They promised. And he raised his arm. There appeared, to the whole crowd, a whole group of bears. There was panic in the hall, but he closed the curtains and smiled: “Remember, you promised, and you said you would not be scared.”

Similar stories were told about Konstantin *oiuun*, who also brought bears to a contest with Komsomol workers. But ultimately both shamans were arrested. Konstantin turned himself into a bird in the jail, and could easily have flown away, according to another account. But instead, so as not to get his family in trouble, he just sat outside the jail, returned to human form, reading a book. This was to show he could escape if he wanted to.

Helplessness when caught between political and spiritual powers is a recurring theme. Some narratives reveal direct conflicts between the old and new or between Sakha and Russian values. Examples include the tensions between values of ecological preservation versus development. Impossible choices result, and are sometimes processed as nightmares. This 2012 narrative comes from a Suntar Sakha family, who wish anonymity:

“One aunt was in a line of seers... She was beautiful and married a man who became one of the first Sakha executives at the Mirny diamond mine, in the Soviet period. She had a dream soon after they moved there. An old man, dressed all in white, a white bearded sage spirit of the local region (*doidu ichchitê*), came to her and said the diamonds are not for human exploitation. People are not supposed to be digging up the wealth of the earth. This is not for you to just grab. He spoke in a rich Sakha language, filled with poetry. She wrote his archaic words down and showed them to me later. They were beautiful words but he also threatened: anyone taking these diamonds will come to harm.”

After I asked whether Russians too were targeted, my interlocutor explained that the spirit “does not distinguish nationality.” She grimly added that a Russian woman geologist, who had helped

find the Mirny vein, had died an early death and that others also came to bad ends, mostly Russians and Poles, since they were predominant. The frightened aunt had told her husband about the dream, but they could do nothing about it. Indeed, “they had trouble, first with having children, and then with premature death in the family.” Her own son died young and they attributed it to the threat. They eventually were able to move away.

Sakha guilt and grief at the devastation caused by open pit mining should not be underestimated. It is reflected in this amazing dream, where the relevant spirit is far from “evil,” but rather is the ancient “white” elder-keeper of the whole region (*doidu ichchité*, literally glossed as homeland middle-earth spirit). Recently a daughter in the family unexpectedly married an engineer, who was assigned back to Mirny. Her mother, thinking “oh no, not again,” gave her daughter strict instructions to “feed” the local spirit of Mirny, through a fire, an offering of nearly an entire bottle of vodka. Since the daughter’s Sakha language was poor and colloquial, her mother wrote a suggested model prayer (*algys*) with appropriate words. The gist of the prayer, to be improvised in the daughter’s own words when she was fully, spiritually ready and humble, was that the couple had moved to Mirny against their will, were planning no harm to the earth and its local spirit-keeper, and that they wished to have a fertile, successful family. Several months later, the anxious mother confirmed that her educated, Russified daughter had indeed appealed to the local spirit, although she had never done anything like it before.

While the open diamond pit at Mirny, one of the world’s largest, is exhausted, other veins nearby have been discovered, and industrialization continues at an alarming pace, as far as many Sakha are concerned. They have become a minority in their own local region of Mirny, and are in danger of becoming politically powerless. Many resent recentralized federal relations, exemplified by Russians taking over the Sakha diamond company ALROSA as President Putin came to power. At a partially compensatory spiritual level, bridging Soviet and post-Soviet periods, Sakha have for many years told stories of early deaths coming to mostly Russian developers, especially of roads that disturbed Sakha graveyards. All this, as well as a recent pipeline perilously close to the Lena River, provides context for a major ecology movement in the

Sakha Republic, partially led by a shaman-turned-activist Éd'ii Dora, discussed ahead.

A lesson some of my interlocutors derive from emerging spiritualities is that one does not have to be a shaman to use shamanic powers. Indeed it said that those who do not know how to use the powers properly, to show appropriate spirit respect, are those who most often get burned. This is one reason why Afanasy Fedorov, an actor-turned-healer, stopped using the exact wording of certain trance-inducing seance prayers. He confided to me that he did not want to go beyond his perceived ability to control his spirituality. He sensed his own limits, at the threshold of the spirit world, beyond which he feared falling into a trance and never waking up. His account relates to a well known Sakha saying, that words themselves have “spirit,” *ichchi*.

In sum, many shamanic narratives have become “morality plays,” reinforcing belief systems and community behavior or norms. A strong, probably archaic belief, sometimes reinforced by whispered rumor to this day, is that when shamans use their powers to cause harm, those ill deeds can literally come back to haunt them in the form of harm to themselves or deaths among their loved ones. This is a powerful deterrent against abuse of spiritual power. But community-based defensive morality leaves room for shamanic revenge against those perceived to have become enemy others, including “ethnic others”. Thus shamanic narratives have become a valorizing, compensatory way of interpreting memories of Soviet repression. Contemporary fears of alcoholism at personal levels, and ecological destruction at community levels, are relatively recent forms of pollution that shamanic spiritual prowess, oriented toward purification and social-ecological balance, can potentially address, if not fully heal.

## Shamans and their Legacies

Konstantin and Alexandra: Adapting “the healing gift” to fit the times

One of the most celebrated shamans of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Siberia was Konstantin *oiuum*. His masterful cures, personal integrity, and quiet community leadership centered on his ability to tap into what the

Sakha term *kut-siur*, or a combination of heart-mind-soul-spirit. Accounts of his secret healing practice in the Soviet period have become popular in the post-Soviet period among his many grateful patients, and through the memoirs of his daughter, Alexandra, with whom I have worked periodically since 1992. Like many trickster shamans throughout the circumpolar North and beyond, he used healing humor during his seances and he shrewdly knew who among his supplicants would respond well to his efforts. In 1993, one of his assistants, Maria Ivanovna Rebrova, then in her eighties but a young (pre-menstrual) girl when she helped him, regaled me and her close family with descriptions she had kept secret for decades:

“In Arlakh, one woman had a psychological illness. Konstantin was invited. She had been sick for a long time... Again I warmed the drum by the fire, and his clothes, and got everything ready, especially the *dépsé* (white horse skin). He started to dance. Well this sick woman had on a red dress and was completely bedridden. He was dancing furiously. All of the sudden, the red dress was outside – not on her body but walking outside along by itself, without any person in it. So the *abaaghy* [capricious spirit possessing the woman] was sent away in the dress. And Konstantin kept dancing.”

Maria’s family (and I) dissolved into laughter at this story, which was, according to Maria, even funnier at the time. The woman was discretely slipped a new dress by the end of the seance, at which time she had “completely recovered”. Laughter therapy as well as Konstantin’s dialogue with the *abaaghy* was undoubtedly part of the benefit of this seance.

Whether they used momentary inspiration, bawdiness or “speaking in tongues,” shamans could not produce a fully effective or satisfying seance event unless they were known for spiritual depth and humbleness. Within their own cosmological-philosophical systems, shamans were and are respected as wise spiritual advisors and keepers of a huge range of sacred knowledge, not just religious ballet masters, crazed prophets or charlatan actors. In Sakha reasoning, a truly powerful and effective seance performance is the mark of spirituality, revealing the ability to bend flexible levels of reality to one’s needs. In other words, the medium gives the message of spirituality and power.<sup>4</sup>

Konstantin's daughter, Alexandra Chirkova, at his urging became a Moscow-credentialed European-style medical surgeon, and the head doctor of her northern region. After age fifty, she returned to the shamanic healing traditions of her father, incorporating spirituality into her therapies selectively and creatively, depending on the patient. In the past decade, Alexandra has commuted between her home in the town of Belaia Gora, and the capital of Sakha Republic, Yakutsk. In Yakutsk, she has worked in several "traditional" healing centers, usually without using her father's inherited cloak or drum. She briefly treated the former Sakha Republic president, Mikhail E. Nikolaev, before he left the presidency, enhancing her reputation.

In childhood, Alexandra had notorious symptoms of shamanic illness, called in the Sakha language *éttétén* and "the Sakha sickness" [*Sakha yld'ybyt*]. A form of "spirit torture," it often results in painful feelings of being "sick all over," of being torn apart and remade from the inside out by snakes and other animal-like spirits. One goal of this "initiation" is to feel a variety of pains that one's future patients are likely to feel, to gain enough empathy to become a true intuitive healer, tapping into the spiritual potency of oneself and one's patients in a synergistic way. To recover, a potential healer must promise to cure others, in a literally and figuratively enlightening bargain with spirits who become one's helpers.<sup>5</sup> Alexandra explained to me: "I was young when I first felt the strength. I had visions, forebodings. But I was also headstrong and emotional... Father tried to tell me this was not how to be. I had a dream that I was thrown into a pit with snakes. I heard a voice that said "She will see it through. She will win."

Alexandra, confirming that various stages of transformation are typical of Sakha shamans, describes a later episode in her memoir (2002:100–106):

"In 1985, something happened with me that is beyond explanation. It began with a headache and unstoppable vomiting. For three days, I was not able to get up from bed, and then I revived. The whole time I wanted fish... My body was covered with red hives. I had a terrible skin itch, as if worms were crawling all over my body... A woman came to me and said that I was not curing myself correctly, that what I had was well known... After feeling

better, I decided to take the smell of [her incense] from my body. But again the headaches began, and I realized that I must put on my father's cloak... I put it on and immediately ... felt a tranquilizing of the soul; with a great yawn I lost my footing, and fell into a deep dream...."

After taking sick leave, Alexandra continued to use her father's cloak to cure herself, as she gradually realized that what was happening was "the ritual of tearing apart". She explains this as "a ritual of suffering through which one is taught". Among the teachers were animal spirit guides, including a bear. Significantly, one of Konstantin's most famed forms was as a bear, his "mother animal spirit". Her suffering was far from over. She would sing ancient Sakha songs with abandon in her sleep, awakening her confused husband. And after three years, a trauma occurred that led her away from being "the kind of doctor who cuts and sews," as her father used to say. After performing a brain surgery, she reeled from the operating room, vomited, was unconscious for three days. Fearing inappropriate drug treatment, she landed in several hospitals, including in the republic capital, Yakutsk. Gradually, she realized: "I had acquired a new gift, the ability to see through a person into their illness." She saved one woman from a kidney stone operation by willing the stones into sand. Another, who was to have a leg amputated, was saved when Alexandra "by thought, with intense gaze, cured her. Soon she stood, felt warmth, and itching in the leg." As she cured others, she improved herself, and was finally released, still wobbly, with the diagnosis "sickness uncertain".

Back home, donning Konstantin's cloak, Alexandra finally felt relief and calm that led to her spiritual transference from a surgeon to a healer, guided by the spirit of her father, who sometimes sent messages through an elderly mediator fondly named "Aunt Shura". Within ten years, Alexandra resigned as head doctor, and began receiving selected patients in her home, including those she helped occasionally by donning Konstantin's cloak and drumming by a fire, in a special healing hut in her back yard. Alexandra is well loved for dealing with emergencies, with the traumas of hunting accidents, as well as for curing nervous system disorders and alcoholism. Nikolai, a patient with cancer, and several others, have

said that they see a man standing behind her while she chants, as she evokes the beauty of the Northern mountains.

### **Éd'ii Dora and Vladimir Kondakov: Emerging Spiritual Leadership**

In 1999, the famous mummy of a Sakha woman-*udagan*, who had spent the Soviet period in the Yaroslavsky museum of Yakutsk, was ceremonially reburied in the Megino-Kangalask region. Acting as a psychopomp (escort of spirits) and prayer leader, Fedora Innokentievna Kobiakova, respectfully called Éd'ii Dora, led the ritual. Dora's ritual included a cow sacrifice, with parts of its meat scattered to ravens. Dora implored local Sakha not to hunt or trespass near the grave, but one man shot a goose nearby and his daughter died soon after. Dora had warned that the awakened spirit, unsettled and readjusting, might take small or even large sacrifices. Several other deaths, including a child of five with cancer and a boy of nineteen who committed suicide, were attributed locally to the reburial. Later that same year, on the day I passed a full two kilometers from the burial, a small bird (chickadee) died before my eyes, and a horse was killed, bizarrely caught in downed telephone wires. Friends with whom I witnessed these deaths correlated them to Dora's warning about possible sacrifices.

The lesson was double-edged: stirring up dead souls (*kut*), especially of shamans, can bring disaster; but appealing to shamanic ancestors with proper ritual respect can bring rewards. Sakha today often are afraid to literally unearth a grave or uncover a tree-platform *aranghas* where dead shamans reside. But metaphorically, they are searching for buried affirmation of many possible identities. While some are grateful to be free of shamanic heritage, others selectively rejoice in it. Shamans, curers, artists and scholars today sometimes return to the resting places of particular famed deceased shamans when in critical need of spiritual guidance.

The historical shamans they appeal to had many functions, characteristics and personalities. They were rarely seen as solely "white" or "black" in their motives or their communication with a range of spirits. Rather, like Dora, their trouble-shooting actions were appropriately based on particular tasks, whether leading a

life-crisis ritual, purifying during a seasonal ceremony, putting out a forest fire, calming the waters of a flood, negotiating disputes, curing the ill with myriad techniques, and much more. In each case, the fire spirit (*iot ichchi*) was and continues to be the crucial entrée into other cosmological worlds, whether during summer solstice *yhyakh* ceremonies or small private seances involving travel to the spirit world.<sup>6</sup>

Both male and female shamans were and are said to move through different levels of skill over their lifetime. Local scholars debate whether one or the other genders was stronger historically (compare Balzer 1996; Tedlock 2005). Shamans usually begin as *kuturukhsut*, helpers, but if this is not possible their apprenticeships can be guided by the spirits who have called them to service. Shamans then progress through various informal ranks. In Sakha social expectations, lesser *oiuun* or *udagan* are likely to practice blood letting, bone setting and predictions of the future. At this stage, they should have at least one helping spirit. Middle level *oiuun* or *udagan* have a greater range of skills, and a greater number of helping spirits, acquired through spirit journey trances to both upper and lower worlds of the complex Sakha cosmology. Great *oiuun* or *udagan*, who have always been rare, have wide reputations for knowing myriad techniques and controlling numerous animal and other helper spirits.

Dora (born in 1959) has told the Sakha ethnographer Ekaterina Romanova (2008: 315) that she has been passing through the stages mentioned above, growing in her spiritual strength, since age 12. A crucial year for experiencing intense bouts of the “shamanic illness” was age 30. As with other spiritual leaders in Sakha conceptions, her strength was further enhanced after age 40, when people feel freer to reveal their full creative potential. By numerous accounts, she has reached levels of success beyond her abilities to cure individuals, becoming a leader in a contemporary, fledgling movement for the moral, spiritual, and ecological healing of the Sakha people and lands. Tall and imposing, with a round, kind face and long hair, Dora looks the part of an Earth Mother-Priestess. She has acquired numerous mediator spirits for different purposes and different kinds of cosmological contacts, including birds (swan, crane, cuckoo, loon, woodpecker) for the

upper world, elk and bull for the middle earth (*ortu doidu*), and bass and duck for the watery underworld. She is a real mother, a widow with shamanic heritage from the Kobei region, whose curing “miracles,” celebrated anomalies, have become as renowned as her impassioned speeches and mass rituals using lovely archaic Sakha prayer-blessings. Her clients and admirers are legion, including the former President of the Republic, Mikhail E. Nikolaev. Dora has become so well known that few healer-purification leaders in the republic are considered her equal.<sup>7</sup>

Dora has described how she heals in revealing interviews with an admirer, Nina I. Protopopova ([2003] 2006), although Dora also has said that she has trouble explaining in words her techniques and the requirements of being “chosen by Nature” to heal people.<sup>8</sup> Dora’s helper-spirits, especially the “mediating birds” swan and crane, reveal who will visit her and whose bones she should use to suck out illness. She also trouble-shoots through dreams and intuitive perceptions at dawn. More profoundly, she taps into the natural interconnectivity of humans, flora and fauna. Each human when born is linked in spirit to a gendered tree and an animal, often a bird, living in that person’s homeland. “This is my system. Those who come to me for cures have a special protection that derives from their land and their kin [ancestors].” Dora empathetically uses the “energy” of that connection to restore health, if necessary by flying:

“When I raise myself, I stand straight and go where I am needed. What is traveling is my energy. My vision along the way depends on natural circumstances. Across destroyed earth, I can fly as wind or fog. Over more calm rivers and lakes, I reacquire my own self. I can go anywhere, whether Viliuisk, Japan, America... my body is at home, but my energy is moving [like smoke from a cigarette] to where it is needed, and then returns.”

One family took their daughter out of the best Yakutsk hospital when doctors said they could do nothing for her brain tumor without a risky operation. The girl was fading, hardly able to lift her head or to see. They traveled far to Kobei, where Dora used a hollow bird bone to suck out the illness (*sullerdeen*) and gradually return her to health.<sup>9</sup> The girl later attended a university. Dora

also uses six drums (*dungur*) of three sizes, with the two largest reserved for special natural or human emergencies. She more often uses three consecrated wooden spoons (*khamyiiakh*) of birch, pine and larch, decorated with special symbols, for predictions and help with purification of patients. In addition, she has sacred jaw harps (*khomus*), three for curing and one for communing in nature.

Individual shamanic cures, no matter how sensational, constitute neither a movement nor proof of what Edith Turner (1999) calls the collective subliminal, revising Jung (1926), and playing on Victor Turner's (1977) concept of ritual "liminality". But Dora's language, her claims, and her recent rituals suggest correlations of her philosophy of Sakha cultural renewal with major Sakha shamans of the past and with other Native prophetic spiritual leaders who founded new religious movements for their struggling peoples.<sup>10</sup> After flooding of the Lena River in 1998, Dora proclaimed in mass meetings: "The spirit of the earth warns us with fires and floods that we must embrace Nature, that we must not forget that we are Sakha. Nature is giving a signal that each *ulus*, each *nasleg* (subdistrict) should not appeal to others for help but should themselves generate their own beneficial renewal." Although some Sakha have blamed Dora for not predicting the Lena River floods, she in retrospect looked on the flooding as punishing purification of Sakha sins:

"Nature has eyes, a bellybutton, and roots, veins. The spirit of our great earth has east, west, north and south sides, with a strong foundation. We, the Uranghai Sakha, created strong, were born on that very place that the spirit of Nature built his hearth. We are designated to live in harmony with Nature... yet we, despite considering ourselves a wise people in preserving our language and history, have violated the behests of Nature, and for that sin are being punished. Nature, insulted, has responded with the bitter tears of a flood."<sup>11</sup>

Like many Sakha, Dora considers that a key to healing the Sakha people and their land is the reverent summer celebration of *yhyakh*, preferably on the bank of a river or lake, or on a rise with a great vista. While the republic declared June 21 an official holiday soon after it declared sovereignty within the Russian

Federation in 1991, debate continues over the profanation of the festival in Soviet and post-Soviet times. Dora urges return to the original meaning of *yhyakh*, as a ritual stimulating fertility of people and land, as well as seasonal, cyclical balances of Nature. The summer solstice, when people are closest to Nature, is Nature's day of peak flourishing and purification potential. "One should go to the soil of one's homeland on that day, take horse meat shashlik and fish, milk products and pancakes, or even just tea, and sit on the green grass in the circle of one's own kin and friends at the sacred *yhyakh* place (*tyuhyul'ge*)."<sup>12</sup> As Dora explained to Ekaterina Romanova (2008:320), "We must always honor the sun, and during *yhyakh* we must be especially thankful, for in the summer all nature is awakened and all spirits are alert."

Contemporary young Sakha women sometimes fault Dora for being too "traditional," too worried about sexual "sins," and too oriented toward women's roles as wives and mothers, encouraging large families. But Dora advocates higher education for all, including her own daughters. Her advice to young parents stresses the need to stimulate all children to study well, as well as to be proud of traditions of cattle and horse breeding. Scolding, cursing, and disharmony, she reminds, were always discouraged in Sakha families. To avoid the scourges of alcoholism and poverty, so rife in Sakha villages, she suggests trying to help children find value in any kind of labor, whether paid or not. Sakha were once self-sufficient, without money, and need not today find meaning in life only through outsider- or state- driven employment.

Dora is no revolutionary, but she does have social messages that she repeats in meetings and interviews, addressed to her own people. Others should not be blamed for Sakha problems, she suggests, even though as a people Sakha may be as much as fifty years behind where they might have been, both morally and economically, without Soviet rule. "With other peoples one should have an open heart and good will. But at the same time, one should not allow inconsiderate behavior." She adds: "It is not in the nature of the Sakha people to protest, demonstrate and act out." For survival, Sakha have become cautious. Elders who participated in war and experienced starvation should teach young people the perils of interethnic and inter-community disharmony.

Dora's messages jive well with her times, and she is popular in villages as well as in some corridors of power. Through Andrei Savich Borisov, the Minister of Culture, she has been hired to bless major *yhyakh* ceremonies, as well as the openings of new theaters and sports stadiums. Dora does not call herself either an *oiuun* (reserved for men) or an *udagan* (a female shaman) but rather lets her admirers do that for her. She openly describes flying to other worlds, and her lovely, archaic blessings help validate her powers and the very existence of spirits for her followers. Her strong poetic prayers, kindness and obvious commitment to ecological activism have made her an enduring presence in the republic. And yet Dora herself has been frustrated in translating her ecology movement into a new level of intelligent, sustained development. She continues to plan a substantial community center/clinic on the outskirts of Yakutsk, but she has thus far been functioning without a major infrastructure to support her curing practice and larger purification program. Her campaigns to save particular sacred places, such as the whole Tuimaada Valley where Yakutsk is located, have been unable to withstand government plans for development of gas and oil pipelines and the first rail line into Yakutsk. They have been unable to prevent gas pipeline accidents that have occurred at the Lena River near Olekminsk. Political and economic forces "higher" than Dora, or the Ministry for Protection of Nature (Ytyk Kéré Sirér in Sakha), or any other ecology activists, have stymied the possibility that shamanic connection with Nature could make an important contribution to the health of all the republic's peoples on the scale that is needed.

Dora is a contemporary example of a combined shaman-priest-prophet. She is "priestly" when she leads purification prayers, shamanic when curing the ill, and prophetic when foreseeing the trouble that comes from reconnecting with spirits of dead shamans. Significantly, she considers herself the reincarnation of one of the most revered and legendary shamans of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the beautiful Alykhardaakh (also called Alykhyrdaakh), whose spirit helper-avatars were a bass and a loon. Sakha who know her well and revere her poetic language believe in her reincarnation identity. Thus she bridges worlds of contemporary and past Sakha spirit mediation at a crucial moment of crisis and hope for her people.<sup>13</sup>

Vladimir Alekseevich Kondakov was a tall, heavy-set, lightly-bearded man of fifty one when I met him in 1991. He was already well known as a curer and a prayer-singer, having moved from his home region of Viliuisk to the capital, Yakutsk. He had dropped an official career as an historian and school teacher to pursue his shamanic, spirit-guided destiny (*d'ylgha*) with an openness that had not been possible in the Soviet period. When he died in 2009, an outpouring of respect and sorrow for his passing was evident in the circles of curers, artists and patients who had relied on his wisdom and healing talent. In the broader, government-controlled Sakha press, his legacy was mentioned in a more muted way. While this may have derived from the complexities of his personality, it probably had more to do with visible retrenchment of enthusiasm for shamanic healing in the past decade. However, his Association has survived his death, and his own life, in retrospect, seems to illustrate my arguments concerning the overlapping and situational nature of shamanic roles and significance.

Over the years from 1991–2007, I periodically visited the Association's several clean, sparsely decorated clinics. Vladimir's office was adorned with portraits of shamans, including the famed Nikon of Viliuisk, and his shaman-mentor Igor Gerasimov. I also saw displays in huge bottles of "passed" kidney stones, and observed use of acupuncture as well as shamanic therapies. Patients seemed pleased, although interviewing them on the spot was awkward. By 2009, the Association's website listed many successes, although problems persisted concerning payment for services and members' dues to the Association.

Vladimir, in the last decade of his life, consolidated his Association of Folk Medicine into 75 members including 5 shamans, moved its headquarters, wrote many books and novels featuring shamanic healing, and performed in concerts with his wonderful, sonorous, booming voice. Some joked that one ancestor may have been a Russian Orthodox priest, since his singing persona seemed to evoke Christian spiritual style. He was proud that an ancestor, the *aiyy oiunun* "white shaman" Tumus Mékhélé (Mikhail Pavlov), had in 1897 blessed a new Orthodox church in the Viliuisk village of Khampa. His last interviews, and his Association website, constantly stressed his "benevolent spirit shaman" identity, as did

his obituaries, for example one mixing Sakha and Russian in its title: “Vladimir Kondakov Aiyy Shaman has Left Life”. He had a degree in psychology and was a licensed hypnotist, to help legitimize his Association. Through the Association, he also promoted respect for nature, for Sakha “ancient spiritual traditions,” and for Sakha family values. The Association’s long list of curing services continues to include “incantations for phases of the planet,” and enlistment of help from “the cosmic strength of [Sky God] Aar Aiyy and benevolent earth spirits [*ichchiler*]”. In a 2004 interview, he rather sensationally implied that he, as a true *aiyy* shaman, could go beyond the 9<sup>th</sup> Sky level (where branches of shamanic trees end) to reach the “tenth, eleventh and twelfth heavens” in an emergency.<sup>14</sup>

Vladimir, at my urging in 1991, discussed the basic goals of his Association: “to establish, study, and put into practice the best traditions and methods of Sakha curing”. He stressed that a wide range of traditional Sakha specialists had operated before the Russian revolution, and that as many as 14 different kinds of doctors, or more accurately categories of doctoring, had existed in Sakha communities before the arrival of the Russians in the 17th-century. They included the purifying *algyschit*, or prayer and incantation specialist; the *otobut*, or bone-setter and herbal specialist, from the root *ot*, meaning grasses; the *kuturukhsut*, or shaman’s assistant, who literally helped the shaman not to fall into the fire during trance; the *ilbiihut*, or massage ritualist; and the *obko keurteurkheueuchchu*, or elderly midwife, from the phrase “lifting the child out”. Each had continued practice secretly in Soviet times, but often in losing competition to Soviet doctors.<sup>15</sup>

For Vladimir, the goal of the rich Sakha shamanic “philosophical system” was to try “to balance forces of the three worlds, and of evil and good.” To help people live in proper balance within the middle world, our earth, powerful shaman-mediators must be able to communicate with spirits in nine levels each of the upper and lower worlds. The directions East and West also represent a balance between middle world forces of good and evil. Thus, the West may be where relatively dark forces (*abaaghy*) emerge from the underworld and the East correlates with relatively benign forces (*aiyy*). Vladimir perceptively claimed: “The danger today

is that the middle world is destroying itself, and the balances are out of kilter.” Shamans must therefore creatively use the *abaaghy* and *aiyy* to reset the balance, to correct local ecological problems, find lost objects, predict the future, see into the past, or to cure an ill patient.

On the debate over whether shamans can be divided into “white” (benevolent) and “black” (malevolent) categories, Vladimir wisely taught that “few shamans are purely white or black, today or in history.” He insisted purely black shamans were especially rare: “Most shamans are mixed in the forces they use and in their purposes. They themselves must feel the balance. If they do evil, they will be punished themselves. An evil shaman will be judged at death. This is not only in Christianity. All of nature punishes people who are evil. The Sakha person has always tried hard not to do evil or truck with evil. Sakha are frightened of *sét* [retribution]. This was not their Christianity; this was before Christianity” (cf. Troshansky 1903).

Vladimir nonetheless considered the “white shaman” a key to the history of the Sakha people, and a legacy of their roots in Turkic and Mongolic cultures farther south. In this, he was following popular Sakha ethnographers (compare Alekseev 1984; Romanova 1997), who claim that the Sakha originally had only white shamans, but gained more evil-doing “black” shamans from neighboring Evenk (Tungus) influences, after Sakha ancestors traveled north. Vladimir’s view of black shamans was more complex and personal, but he too speculated:

“The white shaman was governmental. He was the leader of his tribe. He opened the *ybyakh* festival with *alys*. He performed white shamanic rituals in service of the cult of the Sky God Uluu Aiyy Toyon, and he was the messenger of this greatest of Sky Gods. He cured, but this was not the main issue. He advocated when to go to war. He was skilled in diplomacy. He predicted the weather; he knew how to save his tribe in emergencies. He was the main advisor to whomever was the main tribal leader, if he was not this leader himself. The first shaman was probably white. His power was from Uluu Aiyy Toyon. But the black shaman was local. Not because he was evil did he become a black shaman, but perhaps because of tragedies and suffering in his life that he

tried to counteract. Perhaps a white shaman had hurt him, and he turned to darker powers for help.”

In the last twenty years of his life, Vladimir became known and in demand for his dramatic leadership of summer solstice ceremonies, chanting his own prayer-blessings based on a combination of ancient formulae and improvised poetry. He told me in 1991 that his connection to nature was affirmed for him in a magic moment during a Namsk region *yhyakh*, when he led a large, enthusiastic post-Soviet crowd with the opening *algys*:

“I addressed the spirits, by chanting with prayers, without my drum, as a white shaman would. I was connecting with the Earth by pouring *kumiss* to her, by a fire. Then I connected with the spirits of the sky, by tossing *kumiss* to the Great Upper Sky God. And suddenly rain came, just in the area where we were, gentle and not for long. We brought rain to the village. Nature, all of Nature, listened. I saw this. I felt this.”

Vladimir compensated for the pain and sacrifices that he made as a Sakha shaman, including the rumor-producing death of a talented daughter, with a sense of mission and balance with multi-dimensional nature. One of his *alygs* was broadcast when he died in 2009:

Supreme God Urun Aar Toyon looking with magnanimous eyes,  
 Always protect; with clemency, good calling,  
 Our Body-blood strengthen, cure, brains educate,  
 Heads, our brain’s every “fiber”, long veins of blood vessels clear,  
 Protect my soul filled with light, preserve my dark breath,  
 Award with a long life, with opened opportunities  
 Let life in our Homeland-Middle world be long lasting,  
 Breath endure! Happiness-well-being come to us!  
 Generations continue in posterity! Domm! Domm! Domm!

Here, protection of multiple generations by the benevolent Highest Supreme God is accessible through eloquent respectful pleading of the *aiyy oiuum*. In Vladimir’s published book of *algys*, he distinguishes prayer-blessings exclusively for the *aiyy oiuum* to speak and those for ordinary people. The *aiyy oiuum* addresses the Supreme God again in the following *algys*, this time acknowledging (as in many of the major monotheistic religions) that His true name can only be said in metaphor (Kondakov 2005: 12–13):

First we praise your great name.  
 We call you, though your true name is hidden from us!  
 We see that our families, our ancestors stand behind you!  
 We beseech you: Bless our young  
 Bring the power of the Aiyy to bless our people (*aimakhtaryn*) Sakha  
 May the bright sun shine and protect us, Give us life  
 May the souls of our life-force (*kut-siur yhyllan*) not fail  
 May we be protected, so that the lies coming from the breath of  
 the lower world spirits be not raised to us, in the Middle World!  
 May we be protected, so that our *Iié Kut* (mother-soul) in each of  
 us be well and strong,  
 May we be protected, so that we fall not into ill will or illness,  
 May we be protected, so that all that is evil or capricious passes us by,  
 May we be protected, so that the *Buor Kut* (earth-soul, material-soul)  
 may be strong as an epic hero and may grow,  
 May we be protected, so that the *Salgyn Kut* (breath-soul) can  
 brightly flourish,  
 like the sun,  
 like a beautiful sunrise,  
 like copper, glowing and sparkling in the light,  
 Let it cover [us] in protection,  
 ... Let not the strong words of an enemy reach out to discourage us,  
 Let no such evil words reach their mark,  
 Do not let those who curse come near,  
 So that no one can offend,  
 So that the kind breath of understanding, of the *Aiyy*, will be  
 everywhere.  
 Let Our Great People Live and Be fertile in the Middle World!

This world-view revealing *algys* is notable for its lovely convergence of individual and group health, protection and purification. The three major souls of the Sakha person are explicitly named, as Åke Hultkrantz would have appreciated. The concept of “our people” (*aimak*), using a word that connotes both community and kinship, is significantly emphasized. Potential threats are named, but so is the calming grace of a beautiful sunrise.

Courting personal spiritual experience is not typical of standard portrayals of Siberian shamanism, in which a shaman resists the call of the spirits until given little choice. Rather, it is closer to the vision quests of North America. Kondakov’s exhortations represent his democratization of shamanic sensitivity and worldviews

for contemporary Sakha cultural values. He tapped into a yearning for spiritual fulfillment prevalent in post-Soviet Siberia by reaching deep into what he perceived to be past traditions. When he urged followers to fly to upper worlds, it was meant to be more than metaphor, becoming also a means toward the goal of helping his people out of a spiritual void and physical-ecological devastation. He continued this trend by publishing his easy-to-carry guide to *algys* that included prayer-blessings for ordinary Sakha to say to one another, invoking *aiyy* but not the Supreme Deity, for example before traveling (Kondakov 2005: 16–17).

In sum, Vladimir Kondakov managed to balance between institutionalizing shamanic practice with his Association of Folk Medicine and creating space for personal, creative spirituality. His democratizing of spiritual practice had roots in Sakha rituals of familial prayers to the fire spirit in home hearths and around hunters' campfires. But in the post-Soviet context, his imposing presence and his own charisma provided credibility for shamanic spirituality on a new, Sakha-nation-wide scale. He thus joined Éd'ii Dora in being an exemplar of a combined priest-shaman-prophet.

### **Black, White and Grey: Shamanic Power, Morality and Multiple Beholders**

These narratives and cases of recent shamanic charisma should convince most skeptics that shamans and shamanic concepts are alive if not well in Siberia. Russian developers have died prematurely. Interlocutors who have “converted” to Christianity are convinced their grandmothers were psychic and might exert influence from beyond the grave. Some have attempted to escape shamanic heritage or curses to no avail, despite emigration. Theorists of memory remind us that it is as much about forgetting as remembering, but here are cases where attempts to forget are unsuccessful.<sup>16</sup>

What is it about shamanic worldviews and spirituality that are so lasting yet pliable? They are probably lasting because they are pliable. The sweeping and audacious comparisons of Carlo Ginsburg (1991: 14–18, 136) show potential structural and symbolic correlations of Eurasian shamanic communities across vast swaths of time and space, but they also reveal the importance of

understanding the social contexts behind witchcraft accusations against those who thought they were protecting their communities. Definitions of shamans and shamanism continue to be pliable into the twenty first century. My working definition is that shamans are mediators of spirit worlds for a purpose. In its creative folk wisdom, Kondakov's depiction of a balanced cosmological multiverse, where doing ill can backfire onto one's loved ones, is a shamanic variation on significant 20<sup>th</sup>-century psychological insights, especially those developed by Carl Jung, Otto Rank, and William James, as well as others associated with transpersonal psychology. Correlations between shamanism and expanded understandings of human potential or flexible realities have been made by others.<sup>17</sup>

Particularly analytically challenging are correlations of shamanic abilities and actions with Friedrich Nietzsche-like "perspectivism," in the sense Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro uses it (1998) and Danish anthropologist Morten Pedersen (2011), working in Mongolia, has developed it with the concept of natural relativism. If shamans have the ability to harness or become one with their spirit being "helpers," then they can shift in their cognitive perspectives from hunter to hunted, curer to supplicant, human to animal, human to god. Their multinatural horizons are theoretically infinite, and potentially empathy-based, as is their far-from-simplistic philosophy, long caricatured as "animism".

We can relate this philosophy back to issues of historiography, and the theme of shamanic morality. Despite the literature, we should probably stop imagining early European-contact Siberian and Amazonian shamans as among the most vicious on earth. Christian authorities, missionaries and shamans slandered each other, and this was reflected in our historical records of shamans, filtered through the eyes of missionaries and colonists.<sup>18</sup> Analyzing ramifications of changing social dynamics shed further light. Far from being capriciously amoral, or chameleon in their behaviors, shamans have long lived within socio-political communities in constant flux, subject to great risks, and coping with the consequences of their indigenous groups frequently being driven from their original homelands. This included Mongolic-Turkic ancestors of

Sakha shamans, who probably traveled North with their ragged and devastated families from an original homeland around Lake Baikal before European contact (Gogolev 1993). As leaders who were among the most intelligent and prescient in their communities, shamans of each succeeding generation often became the first fulcrums bearing the brunt of change, including pressures from other communities (warfare), against the environment (development) and against their worldviews (missionaries). This is why Michael Taussig (1987:237) called shamans the “shock absorbers of history”. But as their reputations have become tarnished, their ability to engage, negotiate and mitigate change is compromised, and they are plunged into crises of internal dissent and authenticity. Returning to contemporary Siberia, this is precisely what happened to Vladimir Kondakov as he fought in the past two decades to establish his Association of Folk Medicine. It is, however, an institution that has survived his death, probably because the credibility of spirituality and shamanic empathy has begun to be accepted again openly in Sakha society.

This credibility can be seen as socially and politically grounded, defying easy generalizations like “shamans are the poor-person’s psychologists”. One pioneer of Siberian shamanism-as-group-therapy was Sergei Shirokogoroff (1935). But during his pre-Soviet fieldwork living with Évenki, shamanic nomadic communities were relatively in-tact, albeit under Russian Orthodox siege. Communities that have lived through the Soviet period are in an exponentially different level of chaos and debate over what “traditional values” to preserve, and how to handle spiritual resurgence, seen from human points of view as both situationally welcome and unwelcome (voluntary and involuntary). Some curers have grown into their “called by the spirits” shamanic illness initiations with grace and creativity, such as my friend the accredited doctor and shamanic healer Alexandra Konstantinovna Chirkova. Some seers reputedly have managed to influence juries in court cases or find lost bodies for police departments. But others, especially those who are not shamans but retain some shamanic perspectives, have experienced social, political and economic insecurity along with intensified fears of uncontrolled shamanic heritage, ancestral cursing and revenge that can span generations.

The hallmark of current Sakha spirituality is a chaotic experimentation, an eclectic grasping for meaning in post-Soviet times of trouble and transformation. Myriad ways are being discovered or rediscovered to express Sakha-ness or to go beyond conceptual borders of ethnonational identity into global identities, including literal emigration. But the fieldwork I have been doing with members of the Sakha diaspora in comparison with Sakha remaining in their homeland-republic reveals ongoing, not diminished, shamanic worldviews. More accurate would be to depict a layering of beliefs and practices, situational and filled with disconnects, as is typical for so many 21st century humans struggling to re-find and re-define communities. If we do not have rationality or consistency in our own faith practices (Wuthnow 2007), why should we expect it in others? The intertwined, systematic aspects of shamanic cosmologies and moralities may be fraying, making it perhaps more appropriate to discuss diverse “faiths” rather than full-blown systematic beliefs or coherent epistemologies. Just as theorists have “unpacked” and dissolved the idea of holistic culture and ethnic group psychological cohesion, we can do the same for holistic religiosity, including shamanism.

Along with this eclecticism comes the need to analyze ideas of competing “authenticity” (Brown 2003; Handler 2004; Marcus, Clifford 1988). Believing in ancestral and other spirits is no more a “badge” or requirement for self-identifying Sakha than is believing in the main God, Aiyg Urung Toyon, of the Sakha Turkic hierarchical cosmology. But when Sakha wish to say with pride that their shamanic philosophies are just as sophisticated as those of ancient Greece or modern Europe, and just as worthy of being called a Religion as Christianity, then they evoke that complex cosmology. Some insist that their elaborate “functional” system of Gods is relevant to their lives today, especially the moral framework that gives those Gods enforcement “teeth”. Significantly, Sakha linguists have been active in the revival of Sakha shamanism as a system of spirit and God enforced morality by legitimizing ancient Sakha terms and concepts long discarded. Their “new/old” system has a label, *aiyy yoreghé* (white spirit teaching), taught in republic post-Soviet schools until recently (Afnas’ev 1993). And they have established a center, called *Aiyy Diété*

(Spirit House) on the outskirts of Yakutsk. As anthropologists, historians, or ethnographers, who are we to question newly reconstructed relevancies?

Further implications of valorizing the “white shamans” bring us to inter-indigenous politics. While I can understand the motivations of Sakha scholars and others for differentiating their kind of shamanism from that of other Northern peoples (such as the Éven, Évenki and Yukaghir), we do not have the kind of archeological record that can confirm sharp “ethnic based” differences in sacred ideologies and social organization. Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic and other peoples mixed over long periods in Northeastern Siberia (Gogolev 1993). Thus it is likely that their cosmologies (pantheons of gods and spirits) and beliefs (ideas of the soul and concepts of reincarnation) have become mutually reinforcing, combined chaotically if not integrated syncretically. For me, a Christianity-derived, “outsider” term like “priest” is an unwarranted imposition onto early Sakha society, although the Russian term *zhrech* may come closer (compare Kharitonova 2006: 328). While it may be prestigious for some to view the *aiyy oiunn* as a kind of priest, it also may hint at a neo-colonial, social hierarchy habit of mind.

For Sakha spiritual legacy, I prefer to stress the freer, creative, flexible, wise trickster-cultural hero shamans, some of whom happened also to have priestly learning and prophetic talent (compare Hyde 1998). Indeed, it is often more useful to analyze changing, contextual relationships over time rather than social roles with sharp “social organizational” definitions. This also may help us worry less about sharp distinctions between “belief systems” and “religions” (compare Siikala and Hoppál 1992). The theology implied in Sakha terms is complex: for example to predict something from observance of patterns (*bilgésit bilgé*) is different from foresight derived from a deeper intuition (*but tangha*), or from being able to prophecy destiny (*keubiue’chuu d’ylgha*).

Sakha may compare themselves to ancient Greece or modern Europe, or to other indigenous groups. Some anthropologists of Latin America, including those attuned to indigenous worldviews, epistemologies and ontologies, have termed new indigenous activism plus self-awareness “emerging indigenities” (Fortun et al

2010; de la Cadena and Starn 2007). They celebrate the perspectivism and multinaturalism mentioned above, and this has been adapted by French iconoclast Bruno Latour, famed for his recognition of internal dissents captured in the concept of “iconoclash” (Latour 2002; 2009). Without becoming caught in their distinctions between “epistemological” and “ontological” thinking, I see the greatest relevance for any reborn valorization of shamanic credibility to be in constantly asserting that responsible indigenous caretakers should have legal rights to their homelands and subsurface minerals on a human rights basis. We can then entertain the possibility that shamans and their followers may have special ways of seeing the natural-human connectivity nexus that further validates those rights and renders especially urgent our understanding of human potential, community orientations, and deep ecological knowledge. This is what makes the Native American spiritual rights activism of George Tinker (2004) and the synthetic, engaged approaches of Canadian scholar Paul Nadasdy (2007) enormously appropriate. As indigenous authorities, they epitomize new generations of what Åke Hultkrantz (1983: 107) meant when he wrote: “It is most urgent that those involved in religious research among American Indians evince *Einfühlung*, respect the Sacred, and try to read its meaning. In so doing, they enhance the importance of their research as a contribution to the history of religions”.

Throughout their turbulent histories, empathetic shamans, using all the senses they could muster, have perceived and tried to sooth the messy, changing legacies of intertwined personal and social suffering. In the process, shamans have become lightning rods of fear and hope for those who believe in them.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the University of Stockholm’s Department of Ethnology, History of Religions, and Gender Studies, and especially to the organizers and participants of the symposium “Horizons of Shamanism: A Triangular Approach” November 8, 2013. This article also owes much to the generosity of Sakha (Yakut) friends and colleagues, to Georgetown University, and to the U. S. National Endowment for Humanities.

## Notes

1. Compare Weber ([1922]1963), V. Turner (1972), Hicks (2010), and D. Gellner (1994). Victor Turner (1972: 437–444), influenced by Max Weber, William Lessa and Evon Vogt, differentiated priests and shamans: “a shaman’s powers come by ‘divine stroke,’ a priest’s power is inherited or is derived from the body of codified and standardized knowledge that he [sic] learns from older priests... Shamanistic rites are ‘noncalendrical,’ or contingent upon occasions of mishap and illness. The priest and priestly cult organization are characteristically found in the more structurally elaborated food-producing – usually agricultural – societies, where the more common ceremonial is a public rite performed for the benefit of a whole village or community”. David Hicks (2010: 133), in his reader on religion, continues this traditional interpretation: “Like priests, shamans mediate between spirits and human beings. Unlike priests, though, shamans usually require to a pronounced degree that personal quality known as ‘charisma’ in their personality.” However, our Western “folk conceptions” of the best priests also include the idea that they should be both “charismatic” and have “a calling”. See also Narby and Huxley (2001).

2. Literature on new religious movements is vast. See for example Daschke and Ashcraft (2005); and Rob Nanninga’s bibliography (2002) [www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/rel/nanninga.htm](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/rel/nanninga.htm). For Native American revitalization, see especially Hultkrantz (1997) on the Peyote “cult,” Mooney (1991) on the “Ghost Dance,” and Wallace (1972) on the “Handsome Lake movement”.

3. See, for example, Carpenter (1961); Buyandelger (2013); Pedersen (2010); Riboli and Torri (2013).

4. This is similar to the “reality of spirits” argument that William Lyon (2012) makes in his controversial book *Spirit Talkers* on Native American medicine powers and their correlation to theories of quantum physics.

5. Compare Basilov (1997); J. Brown (2007); J. Brown and Cousins (2001); Hultkrantz (1992); Mehl-Madrona (1997).

6. For perspective on Sakha cosmology, see Afanas’ev [Téris] (1993); Alekseev (1984); Bravina (2005); Gogolev (2002); Kolodesnikov (2000); Ksenofontov (1992); Kulakovsky (1979); Romanova (1994, 1997); Yakovlev (2000). On repressions, see Vasil’eva (2000).

7. I met Dora in 2000 and 2004, and talked with her without formal interviews, including one memorable exchange at a summer solstice ceremony in the Taata region when I made the mistake of gesturing toward a large cricket-like bug that had landed on her chest, to the horror of a mutual friend. My friend was concerned that the bug was Dora's and my gesture was disrespectful. Dora seemed more amused than annoyed. I have been collecting stories about her for years, and hope to work more closely with her.

8. Quotes are mostly from Nina I. Protopopova's interviews. I am also grateful to the National Institute of Health doctor Lev Goldfarb, who gave me a film that he made of Dora's healing techniques with her commentary.

9. This "sucking cure" is similar to techniques of Native Americans, for example as featured in the California Indian films "Sucking Doctor," and "Pomo Shaman," produced by William Hieck, 1964, available through University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, catalogue numbers 37454 (original), 37439 (edited).

10. Especially relevant is the Native American (Handsome Lake) spiritual revitalization that Anthony Wallace (1956, 1972) long ago called "goal culture". Compare Wallace (1956: 265); Nagel (1997); Balzer (1999); E. Turner (2006).

11. Compare Protopopova (1999: 177–178) and the more generalized Russian translation of Protopopova (2006: 59–60).

12. The passage acknowledges that each community may celebrate *ybyakh* in its own way (Protopopova 1999: 186–7). This alleviates pressures that some indigenous ethnographers have put on communities planning the celebrations to follow specific ritual details.

13. On Native American reincarnation, compare Hultkrantz (1953); Mills and Slobodin (1994).

14. For this interview with Irina Efimova "Belyi Shaman Vladimir Kondakov" see [www.dvmusic.ru/index/articles/one/full/1517](http://www.dvmusic.ru/index/articles/one/full/1517) (accessed 7/20/09). See the Association's website [www.aaraiyyitegele.ru/index\\_rus.php?id=1&ci=56](http://www.aaraiyyitegele.ru/index_rus.php?id=1&ci=56) (accessed 7/20/09). An obituary also appeared in the Sakha parliament's online journal "Vladimir Kondakov Aiy Shamana has Left Life" at [www.v-yakutia.ru/?id=11984](http://www.v-yakutia.ru/?id=11984) (accessed 7/20/09).

15. See Kondakov (1992, 1993, 1997, 1999). See also Senkina (1991).

16. See for example, Criukshank and Argunova (2000) on the Sakha Republic; Grant (2009); Ricoeur (2004).

17. The thesis that shamans use their own full range of psychological potential while stimulating individual and community health has been stressed particularly well by Krippner (2000), Csordas (2002), and Tedlock (2008). Romanucci-Ross (1977) pioneered in correlating interrelationships between body/mind healing and the “body politic”. Practitioner-scholars Lyon (2012) and Harner (2013) emphasize the flexibility of non-ordinary reality.

18. See also Balzer (1999; 2012); Flaherty (1992); Znamenskii (2003); Narby and Huxley (2001); and Tedlock (2005). Compare Willerslav (2007).