

SHAMANISM UNDER THE PRESSURE OF THE UNIVERSAL
RELIGIONS
An Historical Outlook

ШАМАНИЗМ В ОКРУЖЕНИИ МИРОВЫХ РЕЛИГИЙ
Исторический аспект

EVRENSEL DİNLERİN CENDERESİNDEKİ ŞAMANİZM
Tarihsel Bir Bakış

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ABSTRACT

When Shamanism or with its other calling *kamçılık* was in its process of being institutionalization ages in terms of taking rites and ritual forms regarding to its historical and cultural milieu, was/has been regarded as open enemy and brutally prosecuted by those countries who were representing Far and Middle Eastern religions i.e. Buddhism, Christianity and Islam for their political interests in fact, for centuries. Although heavy campaigns of the religions in question against the shamans/shamanism, it resembled itself to the dominant religion in which it had tried to be live, in a new form which is called as popular religion by sociology. While the shamanism is seen as para-religious phenomenon in a new syncretic form, high religions have continuously been prosecuting them.

In this paper, Christian, Islamic and Buddhistic attitudes towards Shamanic beliefs and practices will be handled from the theoretic and phenomenological points of view.

Key Words: Religious and Political Prosecution, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Shamanism (Kamçılık).

АННОТАЦИЯ

Шаманизм или как называют по другому Камы, институционально себя сформировали и развивали в течении нескольких столетий. Позже завершившие этап формирования религиозные миссионеры Среднего и Дальнего Востока, столетиями открыто противопоставлялись существующим традициям шаманства. Тем самым, старались нивелировать морально-религиозные взгляды Шаманов. Несмотря на все трудности Шаманы старались практиковать свои убеждения подражая доминирующей религии. И это, как термин в социологии определяется *народной религией*. Несмотря на то, что Шаманы продолжали практиковать свои убеждения,

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приверженцы доминирующих религий, все так же упорно пытались вести политику неприятия.

Ключевые слова: Религиозные и Политические Преследования, Христианство, Будизм, Ислам, Шаманизм (Камы)

ÖZET

Şamanizm ya da diğ er adıyla kamcılık, kurumsal olarak kendini şek illendirip gelişmeye başladığı yüzyıllarda, daha önden kurumsallaşmasını tamamlayan Orta ve Uzak Doğu dinlerinin temsilcileri konumundaki devletler tarafından açık bir düşman olarak görülmüş ve üzerlerine yüzyıllarca vahşi bir biçimde giderek hem şamanları hem de şamanik inanç ve uygulamaları ortadan kaldırmaya çalışmışlardır. Bütün bunlara rağmen, içinde buldukları bölgenin dominant dini içinde yaşama imkanı arayan şamanlık, kendini o dine benzeterek söz konusu din ile iç içe yaşama ortamı oluşturmuştur. Sosyolojide bu duruma *halk dini* adı verilmiştir. Şamanlık yeni din içinde dinimsi olarak devam ettirmesine rağmen, üst dinler hala bunlara karşı savaşını sürdürmektedir.

Bu bildiride şamanik inanç ve uygulamalarına Semitik dinlerin tavrını tarihsel bakış açısından ele almaya çalışacağız.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dini ve Siyasi Takibat, Hıristiyanlık, Budizm, İslam, Şamanlık (Kamcılık).

Introduction

According to some scholars the Shamanism that affected Zoroastrianism in the Middle East (Nyberg, 1966), antique Greek thought and beliefs in Europe through the Scythians (Cornford, 1952, Dodds 1951, Burkent, 1983) ¹ is a technique of special person who is called shaman for warning the tribe for future dangers, bringing good news from the god or spirits, redeeming of psychical and physical illnesses of members of the tribe, solving some daily incidents of them such as foundling or stealing by using some techniques to coordinate and communicate to assistant and protective invisible spirits, lead their prayers such as sacrifice and prays (Hultkrantz 1991, pp. 9-27).

Regarding to its whole peculiarities shamanism is accepted as mother of all religions. As a system that has such a rich and wide field, shamanism has been performed by the societies those have either primitive cultures or to high cultures all over the world. But, it is a general opinion that its motherland and cradle is Central and Northern Asia. Although it is spread to all over the world, Shamanism had/have been tried to annihilate by the dominant representatives of universal religions in question.

¹ British researcher Francis M. Cornford compared classical poems of antique Greece and poems and sayings of shamans in 1952 (*Principium Sapientiae*, Cambridge). Again British Eric R. Dodds writes that belief and understanding of spirit among the Greeks was effected from Shamanism carried out by the Scythians, and he goes on that thinkers such as Pisagores and Empedokles, and Orpheus the hero were shamans of their time (*The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley 1951). German Walter Burkent also added Heracles to the list, and he analyzed figures and motifs in the sources of classical times (*Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, Berkeley 1983).

Campaigns Against Shamanism

a- Literal Campaigns

Although Shamanism started to be seen in literature in the nineteenth century, in fact Central Asian shamanistic information goes back to earlier sources, that is to reports or books of travellers in the middle age. Travellers or servicemen those who visited Asia, described shamans and their fulfilments with pre-judge and diminishing.

We can easily find this kind of biased descriptions first in the books of Marco Polo who talks about persons to be later called as shamans who heal ill persons by accompanying music and song by playing shaman drum, and importing demon into his/her body, and then diagnose the illness.

Travellers such as Franciscan monk William of Rubruck described shamans and shamanism as insane, insanity, calling demon or spirits, British traveller Richard Johnson who explored North-West Siberia in 1557 described them devilish rites, Nicholas Witsen in 1692 calls shamans as the devil himself and monk of devil, Gloria Flaherty and Scottish surgeon John Bell also describe shamans as illusionist and juggler in 1700's. There are also more travellers who describe shaman and shamanism in negative such as Doctor Daniel Messerschmidt, Johann Gmelin, Petrus Pallas, Johann Georgi, Mathiew de Lesseps, Eva Felinska, G. N. Potanin, Gavril Vasilyevič Ksenefontov and so on (Hutton, 29-34; Ksenefontov, 22-36, 306-315).

All these travellers and explorers described and reported about shamanism in a subjective and biased side, I think, regarding to their own cultural milieu, that is Christian point of view. They offended and insulted them by their prejudged descriptions, so that for similar rites and rituals in their own beliefs they could have use some theosophical terms, but for the shamanism they have used insulting terms shown above. Those kind of attitudes show that Christian Western travellers and scholars had launched literal campaigns against shamanism.

b-Political and Military Campaigns

A group of representing countries of universal religions have launched a lot of political and military campaigns while based on religion in question, against beliefs and practices related to shamanism. Countries that launched campaigns aimed at suppressing traditional beliefs and practices in order to protect and then to spread their own official or common religion. These kinds of campaigns were seen all over the world.

b.a. Campaigns In Europe

The most intense, violent and planned campaigns against native beliefs and practices were launched in Europe in the name of Christianity. For instance, in the 8th and 9th centuries the Saxons used Christianity as a means of torture and pressure over traditional societies, and prohibited their beliefs and practices until securing their authority, and forced people to be baptised, or punished to death those who rejected orders and followed traditional ways. Similar hostile attitudes were launched by the Norwegian kings Olaf Tryggvasson (996-1080) and Olof (1015-1030). The Russians, too, when they gained sovereignty in the European and Asian parts in 1500's have launched very severe campaigns against traditional beliefs and cultures. They all suppressed shamanistic practices in the empire period in the form of religious oppose, but in the Soviet period they at the same time suppressed them in accordance with the policy of equality and unity of peoples.

When the Russia gained imperial understanding and power in the 15th century, they mostly occupied Turkic peoples' lands and settled Russian people there in order to turn demographic situation against the native Turkic people. Further, the Russians used the Christianity as a means of authority of their imperial power, so that they imposed native people to convert to the Christianity in 1700's. In that case, people were divided between following traditional way and regarding to be baptised, then they became far away from each other. The Russians also activated different cultural peoples by under the canopy of a calling name, so that hatred groups unified around the russification policy, or they oppressed and persecuted shamans and peoples those who insisted on traditional way, by burning alive in the houses such as in Çuvan, Horomo, Çukçi and Koryak regions. Such campaign of Afanassy Shestakoff in 1730 is well-known (Hutton, 9-15). Beyond the military campaigns, the Imperial Russians also launched social torment against the shaman groups. For this purpose, they disfavoured and high ranked persons in the shaman performances or in different occupations and social status in general, by using state supported economical competition. As a result they were externalized from the common life, so that traditional chain in the society was broken.

In 1700's the Russians supported the Christian and Buddhist institutions in order to make passive the shamans by beating them, burning their ritual and individual utensils and destroyed sacred places. Those who were against the campaigns by sayings or activity were imprisoned or persecuted. Even those who were baptised but followed some earlier beliefs or practised were sentenced with three years imprisonment and almost they were left to hunger strike. On the other hand some passive groups were also individually exiled to far Russian regions in order to break their own cultural chains in native land. This policy were continued until 1900's (Hutton 16-17).

The Imperial Russian campaigns of persecution of shamans and shamanism were, as if, ceased in the earlier years of the Soviet Republics in accordance with the policy of equality of the peoples and Siberian native peoples too, were some relieved and reassured. For this freedom policy, tax of fur and other debts were cancelled, prohibition of alcohols was removed, right of election and to study of culture and history of native people were given. Even in order to improve social and educational position of native people The Council of Northern Peoples was established in 1924.

However this relative freedom policy was paused after 1935, and changed to hostility, despotism, pressure, atrocity and russification, as seen in the imperial times, by rejecting traditional and cultural life, but imposing material life style, all traditional elements of daily life were prohibited. Firstly and strongly, shamans and shamanism were oppressed and persecuted again by propagating that they were the symbol of superstition, social inequality, enemy of communist party, reactionary and ignorance. In order to gain public support Soviet administrators propagating that the shamans had prevented people to go to schools and hospitals to protect their own so called social and economical benefits. Campaigns against the shamans were so multiplied, so that in order to show the shamans did not have protective and helping spirits, they were thrown down from the helicopters. However, saving shamans from this kind of torture and persecution were exiled to far regions or working camps. Until the 1980's with this policy, shamans and shamanism in Siberia and other regions were almost annihilated (Levin and Potapov, 24-25).

In other side of Europe, that is in the West and Northern Europe dominant and imperial countries as well, launched several campaigns against shamanism in favour of Christianity in order to protect their sovereignty.

b.b. Campaigns in Asia

In Asia too, for maintaining their authority and sovereignty the powerful countries such as Byzantines, Muslim Arabs and Sasanians planned a lot of campaigns in order to annihilate local shamanic beliefs and practices by using means of their own dominant religions. For this purpose, the Byzantines have launched several campaigns against Caucasian Turks who had persisted not to accept to be baptised or accepted but at the same time followed their traditional life style.

Baça Han the princess of the Arsakian Turks who converted to the Christianity under the pressure of the Byzantine, forbade all performances particularly related to the traditional Turkic Celestial Supreme God religion, beyond the Christian thought, and declared that anyone who follows would be persecuted while s/he was handcuffed before the king, and cut off a sacred tree that people pray and present sacrifice to God under it (Seyidov, 343-348).

In the imperial period the Chinese also applied similar policy against traditional groups by exiling them to far regions and settled Chinese people or *vice versa* in order to change demographic situation in favour of dominant Chinese community (Hutton 12).

Similar but stronger and more violent campaigns were launched by the Muslim Arabs against native religions and cultures in Central Asia and Caucasia. Although it is common saying that the Muslim Arabs struggled in this region for the name of Islam, it is in fact that they launched for the sake of military, political and economical authority in the region. When the Muslim Arabs gained military, political and economical power in the 7th and 8th centuries they started to occupy countries in the East and North by persecuting people who follow traditional beliefs of Gök Tengri legitimizing with Islamic thought.

c- Religious Campaigns Against Shamanism

Powerful countries those who see shamanism as an obstacle for their own official or dominant religions, organised religious campaigns over it by sending missionaries in order to convert native people utilising sovereignty of dominant country in question.

c.a. Christian Campaigns

Christian Western countries naturally legitimised their religious campaigns against the others by utilising basic Christian thoughts regarding to the Bible: the unique way of salvation is the way of Jesus Christ. Beyond this all beliefs and faiths are false, paganism is itself devilish (Bible, New Testament).

The most severe and brutal lasting campaigns were launched by the Orthodox Russian Christians during the 18th century by getting imperial power. As was described above in the part of political campaigns they destroyed and annihilated sacred places and forms of spirits, they burnt ritual clothes and other utensils of shamans, and imprisoned themselves, and cut off their hair in front of people in order to humiliate them.

The aim of the Russians in these fights was to convert people to Russian Orthodox Christianity and to become devoted people to the emporium.

They have continued these campaigns in different regions and countries, such as in Kamchatka against the Itelmans, in the South Western steppes against the Nenets, Hants, Mansis, and so on..

In the 19th century the tsars aimed at building a new nationalism based on Russian Orthodox Christianity, that is why common people were enforced to convert to the Christianity by giving tax exemption. In the villages they assembled people and preached them Christianity. By the 1850's as a result of archbishop of Eastern Siberia Ioann Veniaminov's preaches almost all population of Saha region were baptised.

In the Northern Europe, too, similar activities were performed in the 17th century in Denmark and Sweden. Kings of these countries shared the Scandinavia and in order to convert Saami societies and shamans to the Christianity organised campaigns by torturing and enforcing to leave their earlier beliefs and practices. In 1671 and 1724 they prohibited all shamanistic rites and rituals, or followers were sentenced to death. During this campaigns they killed hundreds of thousand people for the sake of Christianity (Czaplicka, 20).

As seen in our few examples, Christian countries have attached on the traditional life, that is on shamanism for centuries in the name of their official religions. As a result of these campaigns plenty of elements of shamanism were most probably lost or annihilated.

c.b. Campaigns of the Muslim Arabs

Similar activities were launched in the Islamic side as well. According to two main sources of the Islam the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, people could only be saved by the way of Islam. For Allah, there is no saving way but unique religion is Islam. He prohibits as well as other Semitic religions, to pray for icons and idols, otherwise there is punishment in the hereafter (Qur'an).

By getting power in the region from the points of military and political understanding the Muslim Arabs enforced other peoples to leave earlier beliefs and practices in the name of Islam, but their main aim was to gain economical benefits of the region. For this sake, Arab commanders such as Ubeydullah b. Ziyad in 674, Aslam b. Zura in 676, Salm b. Ziyad in 680, Mesleme b. Abdülmelik in 709, 711, 726, and 728, Cerrah b. Abdullah el-Hakemi in 730 and Kuteybe bin Müslim in 700's have launched several campaigns over traditional and native peoples in the North and east sides and killed hundreds of thousands people. Therefore very small account of the shamanistic elements was only survived today.

c.c. Buddhist Campaigns

Another religion that launched campaigns against the shamanism in Siberia among the Buryats was Buddhism. Representatives of this religion fought against shamanism in Korea and Japan, as well as in Siberia. In 1700's the Russians used and supported Buddhist priests against Shamans. At the beginning the Buddhist priests were tolerant of native cultures and beliefs, but after the Russian co-ordination with them, they changed their attitudes towards the shamans and shamanistic beliefs and practices, intolerantly and brutally. They propagated that shamanistic life was oppose to their own moral values, so that all traditional sacred places and spiritual persons should be removed out, stupas and other Buddhist values should be established, instead. Therefore they assaulted on and beaten shamans, burnt their ceremonial clothes, and occupied sacred places for building Buddhist temples (Hutton, 17-18).

Conclusion

Shamanism used to include all kind of elements seen in all cultures all over the world, but the powerful representatives of universal religions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, time to time but severely have launched innumerable campaigns against shamanistic beliefs and practices in order to remove out.

These campaigns were relatively literal and religious but the main target was to maintain political, economical and military sovereignty of the state in question. The similar campaigns have been continued by the dominant countries in the name of the religions, in fact.

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