



Udegei Shamans in the Russian Far East

Marilyn Walker, Ph.D.

The interview and introduction to it that follow reveal the complex relationship between people, plants and shamans in one indigenous culture of northern Siberia.

Nadezhda Efimovna Kimonko and Valentina Tunsyanovna Kyalundz-yuga are *Udegei* from the Amur River /Khabarovsk territory of the Russian Far East. Although they are not shamans themselves, they grew up with shamans in their community and have ancestors who were shamans. They are also both knowledgeable about plants, although neither considers herself a specialist in plant medicine.

Nadezhda and Valentina are friends of Kira Van Deusen,¹ whom I had met in Russia at a shamanic studies conference. Kira knew of my interest in plants and their uses in circumpolar shamanic cultures and invited me to Vancouver to meet her friends who were on their way back to Siberia after participating in the Vancouver and Yukon Storytelling Festivals.

Valentina and Nadezhda didn't always agree about the answers to my questions, or sometimes they had to think about their responses, going far back in their memories to revive events that happened long ago. Occasionally the exchange between them became quite animated and Kira had to stop translating and wait until everyone stopped talking

at once! I have left our conversation in an interview format as an illustration of how memory is revitalized in ethnographic inquiry. I think the interview demonstrates how storying is a creative process between storytellers and story-listeners.

The *Udegei* homeland is the *taiga* or boreal forest, a wide band of primarily coniferous forest that encircles the globe, merging into arctic tundra to the north and to the south into mixed forest and grasslands. While I hadn't visited Amur River region, I had met their neighbors from the Amur region – Nanai, Ul'chi, and Nivkh – at an ethnomusicology conference organized by the Russian Academy of Sciences. And the landscape they described was very familiar to me

from my fieldwork in northern Canada, Alaska, other parts of Siberia, and more recently, Mongolia.

Common to the *taiga* that sustains Subarctic cultures globally are trees such as cedar (nuts from the cones are eaten and they are delicious!), willow, and birch. Endemic species such as Labrador tea and ginseng have been tested for their medicinal properties. Though there are many varieties of mushrooms in the *taiga*, the *Udegei* did not typically eat them, according to Nadezhda and Valentina, but they learned to eat them from the Russians. Bear, moose, salmon and sturgeon, crow, raven, swan, eagle, and roe deer (whose hide is commonly used to make the skin of the shaman's



Valentina (left) and Nadezhda. Photo by Marilyn Walker.

drum) supported the *Udegei* and other *taiga* peoples, who were hunting cultures traditionally. The Siberian tiger, on the other hand, is unique to the Amur region and is now critically endangered – and was almost wiped out in the early years of the Russian Civil War by armies based in Vladivostok.

Under Soviet socialism, the *Udegei's* nomadism was replaced with wage labor, taxation, and boarding schools, which separated children from their families. All Siberian indigenous peoples were required to learn Russian, and the wearing of traditional clothing was prohibited. As "enemies of the people", shamans were especially persecuted, killed or imprisoned in the notorious Gulag, and many drums and other ritual paraphernalia were confiscated or destroyed. By 1998, when this interview took place, the *Udegei* numbered about 2000 people with only about one third retaining their native language; the majority and especially the youth speak only Russian today.

The official dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought cultural and religious freedom, but also economic hardship. Since then, the *Udegei* have been struggling against the cutting of their forests by foreign multi-nationals, pollution (the Amur River is highly polluted), alcoholism and other problems faced by many indigenous peoples worldwide.

But the *Udegei* drew worldwide attention by their refusal to surrender tribal lands to a Russian-Korean logging venture. In 2008, two new national parks were created in the Russian Far East – "Call of the *Taiga*" and "*Udegei* Legend." Both are tiger sanctuaries.

While the changes they have faced in a short period of time have been massive and perhaps irreversible, I am always touched by the generosity of spirit of Siberians, and of their deep love for the land and the plants and animals that sup-

port them. They are also engaging storytellers and I hope that this article will be a chronicle of and tribute to a value system and way of life that is still very vital and sustaining.

Today, the *Udegei* live north of Vladivostok, Russia's largest port city on the Pacific Ocean, in three villages created under Communist collectivization. They rely on fishing, and on their home gardens for flowers and vegetables such as potatoes. Berries are home grown or gathered wild from the *taiga*. Some people, they told me, are planting wild plants gathered from the *taiga* into their home gardens so that they will be available when needed for food and medicine, as they were in the past.



Valentina's and Nadezhda's drum (inside). Photo by Marilyn Walker.

Over tea and biscuits, we began by discussing common plants such as Labrador tea (considered a sacred plant and used in shamanic ritual), and *Artemisia*. Both of these plants have similar uses in all the circumpolar traditions in which I've worked. They are used medicinally, though "medicine" has much broader connotations in shamanic traditions than in western biomedicine. Thus, our conversation about *Udegei* use of plants for healing shifted to the uses of plants by and for shamans, and then into stories about shamans themselves.

Their description of the *Udegei* "hay figures" reminded me of the "worry dolls" found in Guatemala, and the "spirit dolls" made in eastern Canada.

Using a long, thin beater that is curved like a rib bone, they also played their unusual drum for me. The construction and use of the shaman's frame drum is similar throughout the Arctic and Subarctic, but their drum is teardrop shaped and very large. We ended with a story about Grandmother Gounya sending a soul (which she transferred into a hay figure) off to the next world. Gounya is remembered as the last "very strong" *Udegei* shaman. She died in 1965.

Marilyn (M): Labrador Tea (Ledum species) grows throughout the northern regions. In Canada, indigenous peoples made a tea from the leaves and the flowers – for use as a beverage and also as medicine.

How did you use it?

Valentina (V) and Nadezhda (N): Labrador Tea, with its white flowers, was used to treat colds and coughs. You soak it in warm water and put either the leaves or the water up your nose. Burning it and breathing in its smoke is also good for opening the sinuses.

V: *Ledum* is also used for hair loss. You make a tea from it and use the tea to wash the head. This helps to strengthen the roots of the hair.

M: Do the shamans give Ledum as medicine?

V: No, others do. Everybody knows the plants. They burn it themselves and also give it to the shaman. They give it to the shaman to drink after the shaman plays and plays [the drum] and is having a rest. They also put it on the shaman's temples; it has a calming effect when the shaman is shaking during or after the kamlanie [shamanic ritual].

M: How is the Ledum prepared for burning?

N.&V: They dry it in the summer but if there isn't any dried *Ledum* around, you

can also pick it in winter and it is effective. When a person dies, people gather for the funeral and burn *Ledum* while the body is lying at home to dispel the odors from the body. It is burned in a saucer or scattered onto hot coals, but it's not burned as a stick of incense.

V: *Ledum* is a disinfectant, that's why it is used for the dead.

M: So it's for the physical realm?



Valentina. Photo by Marilyn Walker.

V: Yes, and it also helps the shaman get into an altered state of consciousness (ASC). It works in the realm of thoughts.

M: How does it work?

V: Adikhini (the *Udegei* shaman who died this year), she closes her eyes. I asked her, "What do you see?" She said, "I see before me a stone." She divines. Someone asks a question, maybe about an illness, perhaps about a child, to determine where the illness is. When the stone moves one way, it means she has guessed correctly; the other way, wrong.

M: Similar to using a pendulum?

N: But this is in thought.

M: Would any smoke help, or does it need to be the smoke of a particular plant?

V: We may think that the smoke helps her get into that state, but she herself says it calls her spirit. She is not like us. When

the spirit comes into her, she really is in a different state.

M: I have some stems of *Artemesia* I'd like to show you to see if you recognize this plant. There are more than three hundred varieties of this plant spread around the globe, some of which are used medicinally and spiritually so you may not recognize this particular variety. [There is some discussion about the variety of the plant which Kira eventually translates as mugwort.]

N: We use it for food. The *Udegei* don't eat it, just the Nanai.

Kira (K): Smolyak² says the Nanai used it at funerals.

N: The Nanai did, yes, at the *kasa* ceremony accompanying the dead. Our people would gather it when it was young and use it for food in the winter but I'm not sure it's exactly the same plant. We like the taste with potatoes, or fish, or a dish like noodles made of dough strips and boiled.

M: Now, what about birch? I've used the bark to make a tea? Can you tell me about how you use birch?

V: People make an ointment out of the black growth on the birch tree. And we made cups out of the growth on a birch tree when I lived on the *taiga* as a child.
N: They drink birch sap [which flows in the spring] and use the wood and bark for boats and containers. They would make a pot out of birch bark that you could put on the fire to boil water. As long as there was water in it, the bark would not burn. These baskets were four-sided with a handle and were sewn with bird-cherry around the top. You can put the bark in the fire to soften it so it can be folded like paper.

V: The birch bark is covered with clay, and then you can cook on the fire, too.

M: And spruce?

V: We used pitch on wounds and cuts.

Once, our dog was wounded by a bear. Papa took some of that spruce pitch and put it right in the wound. Then he wrapped it up. In about twenty days, he opened it up and the dog was healed. We also use it for chewing gum and use it to fix holes in a boat. Mixed with vegetable oil, it also heals eczema. People who had sores for years were healed. From the pitch of a fir tree!

M: Can you tell me something about the drum you have with you. The oval shape is different from many of the drums I've seen. How is it made?

V&N: There is fish glue on the surface – the fish glue is made from pike – so the drum doesn't take up moisture. The frame is made from young bird-cherry which bends well, and it is hollowed out so that the sound resonates when the beater hits it. The drum belonged to Adikhini.

M: What about treatments of illnesses or problems? You've told me that shamans don't use plants medicinally although other people know about plant medicines.

V: To treat my stomach, I would drink the tea and concentrate the healing energy there. I know it is going to my stomach.



Birch Bark Fungus. Photo by Marilyn Walker.

Grandma Dusia (Evdokia Batovna Kimonko) put a knife in the threshold at night to keep evil away and branches over the door. She also cleansed the house using a branch of a wild rose or sweetbriar. She would shake the branch and say certain words. Dusia is not really a shaman but she does have something – she can do things for herself. And she can pray if someone is sick. Myself, I don't know how to say the prayers, but she does.

And everybody does divination with sticks. We hold them and they move. One time Dusia lost her money and couldn't remember where she put it. She asked, "Did someone steal it?" and she got the answer, "No." "Did I hide it?" she asked, "Yes," was the answer. "On the shelves?" No. "In the mattress?" Yes. She looked and looked and couldn't find it and so she asked again. At last she found it in a little hole in the mattress!

M: What about plants that shamans use? Are there any plants that shamans make particular use of?

V&N: No...

M: Do shamans keep any plants as amulets?

N: They make dolls of hay – the spirit is in the figure. These are made for temporary use; they throw them out later. The Nanai use a plant from a swamp hummock instead of hay to make these figures. The dolls are used to take away an illness which is put into the figure and then discarded; or they're used for hunting luck. A permanent figure, called a *seveñ*,³ is made of wood. (*Seveñs* are made from alder which is easy to carve.)

These helping spirits have their own ranks and functions. My grandmother told me, "Don't approach them. Don't touch them!" She had many of them – large and small – with eyes and a mouth. The best of them wore sable or other fur (Valentina interjected here – with squirrel or bear). She kept all the *seveñs* in a special box. I remember how she said, "Don't touch!" So the spirit was in the image, not in the plant.

K: How do you say "trance" in *Udeger*?

V: (thinks before she answers) There are different words... I'm trying to remember. I haven't used those words for a long time. Like when they shot the shaman in the chest with an arrow – that's one word. If a person was unconscious from being sick – that's another word, swoon. Now, about the arrow – they shot an arrow, not

always but sometimes. Then the shaman knows he must shamanize. People gather. They ask him. He walks on coals. Then a man who is a good shot takes a bow and arrow and shoots him right in the chest. He falls, suddenly and lies without moving. Then he begins some new movements.

N: The word "trance" is almost right.

Then he sees the other world and travels. Spirits help.

V: He would shamanize to a certain point and then say, "Now is the time to shoot."

N: What the shaman does depends on the purpose, like healing or sending someone off to *Buni* (the next world)...



When a shaman was taking someone to Buni (the next world), they would tie a strap around the shaman's waist. A strong person holds on tight so that the spirits of the dead won't hold the shaman there in the next world.

V: They didn't shoot for sending someone off to *Buni*...

N: That's not what I meant. It's a different state of consciousness for different purposes.

V: When a shaman was taking someone to *Buni*, they would tie a strap around the shaman's waist and hold on tight. Tight! A strong person holds on tight so that the spirits of the dead won't hold the shaman there in the next world. Only when she has returned to this world do they let go of the strap – a leather strap. How I know this is that the shaman Gounya said, "Pull

me back, pull back." She was the one who was shot. Gounya gave the signal and they shot her. She lay there on the ground, and then began to move around. Then Gounya said to pull the arrow out and there was no scar. I asked how it was that she didn't die and they said, "That is her power. She told them when and how to shoot."

N: One woman told how in the 1930s, when shamans were being persecuted by the Russians, a red guard shot a shaman and the bullets went right through or past the shaman.

V: A shaman has a very strong bio-energy. A Tuvan shaman came to Pereyaslavka, a nearby town, and told how he became a shaman. He had a round drum, not an oval drum like ours. He put on his shaman's costume. He said he was a herder and that he had no shamanic ancestors. He told about a stone in the *taiga* – not a simple stone but a very big one. He found a hunter's knife there, liked it and took it. When he arrived back home, he started to feel badly and fell down unconscious. Everyone came. For seven days he lay there.

Then, an older shaman arrived and said, "You should not have taken the knife. A great shaman left it there. That is why you got sick. If the shaman had said during his lifetime that you may take it, or if he had said who to give it to, then you could have taken it." But the Tuvan shaman became sick because he took it. Then the elder shaman healed him and said to him that if he didn't become a shaman, he would be sick all the time.

The Tuvan shaman got better and later traveled all over the world, including Israel. Other shamans checked to see what spirits he had... This was 6 or 7 years ago that this happened.

M: What kind of spirits would a shaman have? Would the spirits ever be plants?

V&N: (emphatically) No! They might be lizards, birds, butterflies, animals, but not plants [meaning that they have to be mobile].

N: All the same, everything has a soul, including the plants. For example, people would say to trees, even to rotted wood, "Take away your hands and feet so I won't cut you." One man didn't say this and his hands and legs swelled up. It meant he had cut the arms and legs of the tree.

V: The little people, *Bagze*, live in rotted wood.

N: *Bagze* live in caves.

V: In old trees. And so people call to the *Bagze* and say to them, "Take away your hands and feet."

V: Would you like to hear about sending a soul off to the next world?

I will tell you about Jansi Kimonko who was the first *Udegei* writer, and about his death in 1949 when I was in about 4th or 5th grade. This was the year that a bear wounded him, and the bear was also wounded.

Jansi Kimonko followed the tracks, the blood of the bear. The bear was hiding and attacked him from its hiding place,

pulling his scalp off. Both Jansi Kimonko and the bear died.

People found Jansi Kimonko and they buried him. In 20 days, they gathered; again in a month, they gathered. This was in summer. They went out on a spit beyond the village. The shaman was Gounya. She had to take the spirit of Jansi Kimonko to the world beyond the grave. Because he had been wounded by the bear and died a violent death that was not "his own," he would not be able to get to that world on his own; he needed a shaman to accompany him.

People gathered. Someone got the job of making figures of hay... I went with Papa as he and Jansi Kimonko were great friends and always went hunting together, for bear and everything. So we went to be present as Jansi Kimonko was accompanied to the next world.

So shamanka babushka Gounya is

shamanizing and they find his spirit and put it in the hay figure. Everyone says goodbye. Jansi Kimonko speaks to his wife and says some kind of parting words. He says goodbye to his brothers and other relatives. They eat and pour some for him and prepare a little bag for him. Everyone puts something in – coins, little pieces of material. Tiny bits of things, even a kopeck, as if they need money in the other world! He must carry it with him to his relatives as gifts. Everyone speaks and the shaman passes the conversation on, just as we are speaking now through Kira as translator.

Then they tied the shaman tightly with that leather rope with a man holding on to the end – the man wound the cord around his wrist.

Then the shaman gets up and dances and plays the drum – she goes and goes. There's a hole in the place where there are mountains, in a cliff. She dives in. It's dark there. She goes and goes and they hold on tight. She dives in and says to that man, "Hold on tight. Don't let go!"

She arrives in the other world and before she arrives at the village where the deceased live, the very oldest man comes out to meet her. She says, "Coming to meet me is a stocky man with gray hair. Who remembers such a man?" She's asking his relatives in this world. They try to recall him and somebody who was young then says it was such and such a grandfather.

Then Gounya hands over Jansi Kimonko to the old man who takes him to his village. Then the shaman returns to the hole. When she got back to this world (she could tell because it became light), the man let go of the strap and

untied her. Then she put aside her drum and rested.

The same shaman saw off my papa when I was still small. My papa was met by his own father.

M: You told me stories about Gounya. What about other women shamans?

N: Today, all the shamans in the Khabarovsk territory are women. The last male shaman was Misha Duvan, who died a couple of years ago in his nineties.

M: Thank you so much for meeting with me. And thank you to Kira for introducing us and for translating. I hope to see you both on the taiga someday. ☞

Notes

1. See Kira Van Deusen's *The Flying Tiger: Women Shamans and Story-Tellers of the Amur*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.
2. Kira is referring here to researcher Amma Smolyak who has published in Russian on shamanism.
3. Wooden figures, spirit figures usually belonging to shamans (Van Deusen 2001:15); spirits of the ancestors, earthly representations of spirits (ibid:115); understood to be a living thing (ibid:161); are fed with vodka (ibid:219).

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